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The Mistress's Clothes, the Skeletons in Her Wardrobe, and the Servant Who Tends to Them

The Private Sphere in Victorian Fiction

Master's thesis in English Literature

Supervisor: Yuri Cowan

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Abstract

In light of three selected novels, and their historical context, this thesis uses material culture to argue that objects contribute in changing roles and relationships within the Victorian household. Namely, between the mistress, the servants and the estate. In addition, the thesis also shows how objects contribute in turning the private sphere of the home public.

Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, Wood's *East Lynne* and Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, have all been chosen because they feature households that fail. In these novels, the mistress's clothes are examined, showing how the public meaning of clothes could turn the mistress into an object on display, affecting her role in household management and how people treated her. When looking at the servants, expected by the family to be invisible, the thesis turns to colours – or lack of colours – to show the effect such tints have on the mistress-servant relationship. Lastly, this thesis turns to the architectural features of the home and how they physically impacted on roles and relationships. The thesis particularly focuses on doors, windows and walls to show what they give access to and what they deny, and the consequences that follow. This thesis therefore looks at both the object's metaphysical and physical attributes, relying on semiotic and phenomenological approaches. In the question of the object's role in changing the household's dynamic, what becomes clear, is that the object's impact in changing spheres, relationships and roles depends just as much on the people who experience and assign meaning to the object as the object itself.

Sammendrag

I lys av tre utvalgte romaner, og deres historiske kontekst, bruker denne masteroppgaven materiell kultur til å argumentere for at objekter bidrar til å endre roller og forhold i den viktorianske husholdningen. Nærmere bestemt, mellom husfruen, tjenerne og herskapshuset. I tillegg viser masteroppgaven også hvordan objekter bidrar til å gjøre hjemmets private sfære offentlig. Braddons *Lady Audley's Secret*, Woods *East Lynne* og Brontës *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, har alle blitt valgt fordi de omhandler husholdninger som ender opp med å feile. I disse romanene undersøkes husfruens klær for å vise hvordan klærs offentlige betydning kan gjøre husfruen om til et utstillingsobjekt og påvirke hennes rolle i husholdningen og hvordan folk behandler henne. Når det kommer til tjenerne, som familien forventet skulle være usynlige, fokuserer masteroppgaven på farger – eller mangel på farger – for å vise effekten slike nyanser hadde på husfrue-tjenerforholdet. Sist men ikke minst, ser denne masteroppgaven på husets arkitektoniske egenskaper og hvordan disse, fysisk, påvirker roller og forhold. Oppgaven fokuserer spesielt på dører, vinduer og vegger for å vise hva de gir tilgang til og hva de stenger ute, og konsekvensene dette medfører. Denne masteroppgaven ser derfor på både objektets metafysiske og fysiske attributter gjennom semiotiske og fenomenologiske tilnærminger. Det som blir tydelig i spørsmålet om objektets rolle i endringen av husholdningsdynamikken, er at objektets innflytelse i endringen av sfære, forhold og roller avhenger like mye av menneskene som opplever og tilegner objektet en betydning som objektet selv.

Acknowledgements

I had barely settled in as a student at Aberystwyth University when I discovered the old country houses. An excursion for new students took me to Llanerchaeron, a relatively small historical house with a walled garden and an elaborate service courtyard. As a creative writing student, fascinated by the nineteenth century, such a place sparked an interest as a potential setting for stories; a place where the history is sensed and experienced rather than just read from a book. By the time I left Britain three years later, I had visited close to a dozen different National Trust properties. Grand ones, with a multitude of rooms of different functions, like Erddig and Lanhydrock; quaint and peculiar ones like A La Ronde; or a fusion of old and new as Tyntesfield. What all these places have in common, is that they are remnants of the past. The decorations, the furniture, the very architecture of the rooms – tell something about the lives that lived there. The type of hierarchy that existed under the same roof is also very visible: The hard flagstones of the kitchen floor or the narrowness of the servant’s stairs stands in stark contrast to the spacious dining room or the soft carpet of the family’s grand staircase. This thesis will revisit the historical house through novels. Places where these houses are still lived in; where the dress laid out on the bed was worn yesterday, not two hundred years ago; and where the inhabitants’ movements within the house follow set hierarchical patterns unlike the all-encompassing route set up for museum guests.

As this thesis draws to an end and the last words are put down on paper, I would like to acknowledge the people who have helped me get to where I am. First of all, I especially want to thank my supervisor, Yuri Cowan, for all his help and encouragement. Particularly for suggesting material culture to me, which I am actually quite interested in but did not consider. His feedback has been truly valuable and has helped shape this thesis into becoming the best version of itself.

I also want to thank my family for their continued love and support, and for being a positive force in my life. In addition, as my brother is also about to finish his master thesis, it has been nice to have someone in the same boat to share this journey with. Last but not least, to my partner and best friend, Qays, who made me a motivation calendar when I struggled the most. Thank you for always being there for me despite the long distance.

Marte Fæster Klaussen
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Chapter 1: Introductory Chapter

Things are everywhere. All around us, all the time. They make up our clothes, our homes, our possessions, tools and transportations. Not a single day goes by where we are not interacting with objects. Objects play major parts in our lives, and yet, they are often not taken notice of. It is their constant presence in our lives and their faithful participation in our habits, that result in us dismissing objects and the extent to which they influence our lives. As Christopher Tilley says, “How we think, and how we act, depend as much on the objects we surround ourselves with, and encounter, as on the languages we may use, or the intentions we may have” (10). This is particularly the case with the home: a space filled with one’s own possessions, a space one grows older in, one spends significant time in and one always retires to at the end of the day. The room itself is a space created by materials. Its proximity to other rooms, the access or hindrance one experiences in getting from one place to the next, is also an effect of materials. Everything from furniture and trinkets to walls and windows aid in creating a certain atmosphere, a certain identity. Clothes, as well, can have a great impact on our lives, as objects that are carried on the body and which signal something to others about who we are.

This thesis will focus on the Victorian household in three chosen novels: *East Lynne* (1861), *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862) and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848). In these stories, I am not interested in the objects themselves, but rather, how the objects influence the identity of and the relationship between the household components – the mistress¹, the servants and the estate. If there is one thing these novels have in common, it is that they all take place in the domestic sphere, in households that fail. *East Lynne*, by Ellen Wood, features Lady Isabel who falsely believes her husband, Carlyle, is being unfaithful with his childhood friend Barbara. The assumption is based on servants’ gossip and bad coincidences as Carlyle is helping Barbara’s brother clear his name from murder accusations. In addition, Isabel feels unhappy at home as Carlyle’s sister has taken charge of the household. Isabel eventually experiences a moment of bad judgement and takes off with another man. She later returns, full of remorse, in disguise as a governess to tend for her own children in the household of her ex-husband, and Barbara, who has become his new wife. As Isabel’s son

¹ As the next section will explain, the mistress played a greater part in the household than the master. Therefore, my focus will be on her and less so on her husband.

dies, the emotional toll it has on Isabel is too strong, and she falls terminally ill. On her deathbed, her true identity is finally exposed.

Mary E. Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* concerns Lady Audley who tries to conceal that she was already married when she said yes to Sir Michael. When her first husband, George, finds her, she gets an even greater scandal to cover up after choosing to do away with him (or rather, she thinks she has, unaware he survived and fled). Robert, the relative of her current husband and friend of her first husband, starts investigating the strange disappearance of George. As time passes, he becomes increasingly suspicious of Lady Audley. When it reaches the point where Robert no longer doubts that Lady Audley is the villain, and knows how to prove it, Lady Audley tries to murder him. After failing to kill him, Robert tells Sir Michael the truth about his wife, and Lady Audley is sent away to be locked up in an institution to conceal the scandal.

The last novel is *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* by Anne Brontë. Here we find Helen, who, together with her son and her most trusted servant, flees from Helen's alcoholic and mentally abusive husband. They start a new life at Wildfell Hall, but it does not take long before harmful gossip flourishes in the neighbourhood as a consequence of Helen's lack of interest in socialising with her new neighbours. Gilbert tries to befriend her despite the gossip and her reclusiveness and is eventually informed about Helen's past. After this, Helen returns to her husband as he has fallen ill, and she tends to him until he passes away. This makes Helen free to marry Gilbert, which she does.

The households of these novels are not independent of the history of the Victorian household and the values that shaped it. The Victorian household is a certain type of space, a place where the mistress, the servants and the house find themselves intrinsically connected. One can compare the Victorian household with a clock, where the moving clock hands symbolise a functioning household. The mistress makes up the clock face; the gilded and decorative façade that enhances the clock hands and contribute to the important task of telling time: she was a visual representation of her household, but also the one running it. Behind the clock face, there is the servant clockwork, where each cog plays a vital role in making the hands move: they kept the house clean and gratified the family's wishes, yet were expected to stay in the back, unseen. These clock components are also surrounded by an encasement. The encasement, like the built home, creates a safe environment that shields the inside from outside disturbances: it was expected to be private, and keep the inhabitants to their assigned spaces. All the components are, in one way or another, contributing to making things go around. But as the next section will show, and the subsequent chapters will follow up on,

what lies behind the estate's exterior façade is a complicated and multifarious system at work, where even the smallest gear could potentially arrest the flow of household regularity.

This thesis is divided into four chapters. This introductory chapter will turn to history to explain the expected roles of the mistress, the servant and the estate, and how they affected each other. It will also introduce material culture theory, which is a theory that focuses on a variation of objects and things (e.g. dirt, food, windows, clothes) and their various relations to people (e.g. tools, gifts, commodities, mementos, shelter). Chapter 2 will look at the impact clothes and hair have on the mistress's sense of identity within the house and her role in household management. This will be done by looking at the meanings attached to objects. Chapter 4 turns to the architecture of domestic space and how it, physically, affects the inhabitants' relationships and roles. These two chapters also challenge the role and identity of the home as a private sphere. Chapter 3 is somewhere in between, reflecting on rather in-between roles: the servant who lives with the family but is not part of the family, and the mistress who is no longer mistress. It also partly takes in use an in-between theory – thing theory – which bridges the gap between meanings and materiality.

Together, the chapters take apart the walls of the Victorian country home to expose two things: that objects bring a sense of publicness into the home, and that those objects, whether through their meanings or their materiality, contribute to changing relationships, roles and identities within the home.

Life in the Victorian Home According to History

By understanding the sociohistorical context that the novels were written in, one might unlock significations in the books that would otherwise remain hidden, which is why this thesis is consulting several sources that concern history. Of these, most notably, are Mrs Beeton's *Book of Household Management* and Robert Kerr's *The Gentleman's House*. Both were contemporary works, published respectively in 1861 and 1864, and were guides that aimed to lead the path to successful homes. While Kerr's book focuses on how to plan and build a home, Beeton's book focuses on how to manage it. Together, they complement each other and cover both aspects of the home that I wish to investigate.

A common idea that prevailed in the Victorian Era was that the gentleman was the head of the household while the lady ran it. By looking at the two non-fictional works we can see a trace of this. The very title of *The Gentleman's House* signifies it, and, as Deborah Cohen points out about the book's content, "the 'views of the ladies' were accorded a paltry

one out of 470-odd pages” (92). Mrs Beeton’s *Book of Household Management* likewise directs itself to only one half of the couple: the mistress. The mistress has her own chapter, listing crucial qualities she should possess and features as the very first chapter, marking its importance.

If one thing is certain, it is that the Victorians were fond of divisions. The nineteenth century saw a gendered division of everyday life, with the “public sphere [...] seen as male, the private as female” (Trodd 9). Here, the public and the private concerned “the male sphere of work and the female sphere of the home” (Purchase 87). The home was therefore seen as a predominantly private and feminine space.

The Victorians did not only segregate on this level. There was also segregation *within* the home itself as they divided their rooms according to function and gender². Most strikingly, the husband and wife often had their own separate bedrooms and dressing-rooms. When it came to their day rooms, both the master and the mistress could occupy them, but these were also gendered. The drawing room was predominantly a female space and so was the boudoir and morning room, while the library and the dining room were more masculine.

However, just as the home could have female *and* male spaces, so too could the private sphere have a degree of publicness. Judith Flanders argued against the simplicity of the public/private division, as she says, “both home and work contained an aspect of both a public and a private sphere” (xxv). This was indeed true. Not only in the sense that the house had servants in addition to family members, but in that the home was frequently open to visitors – with specific reception rooms meant for receiving guests. The drawing room was one of the standard reception rooms to be found in a house. It did, however, function as both a public and private room. It was a public room in the sense that it was where visiting guests were led to be received. It was also a private room in the sense that it was a room that women could retire to. We can see this aspect lingering in its name, as “drawing-room” is a derivative of the earlier “withdrawing-room” (Kerr 107). The reception rooms were decorated with objects that would leave a positive impression on the visitors. The drawing room, in other words, reflected the family living at the estate – making this room’s décor more important than any décor found, for instance, in the private bedrooms. As with fashion, a topic which this thesis will go more in-depth in later, the decorations showed status, and it

² It should be mentioned that the homes in question are the upper-class and the upper-middle-class homes. Lower-middle-class, and particularly working-class, people could not afford houses that were big enough with rooms enough to segregate. Working-class people were also seen as people of low morale, so they might not have wanted to segregate their rooms to such an extreme, had they been given the option.

was looked down upon to decorate one's rooms beyond one's means. As Flanders notes about a middle-class house, which is also true about the upper-class homes they mimicked, "household possessions, types of furnishing, elegance of entertaining and dress, all these 'home' aspects were a reflection of success at work. Therefore the public rooms, as an expression of achievement and worldly success, often took up far more of the space in the house than we today consider convenient" (xxviii).

A mistress was expected to be social with the respectable families in her community by frequently welcoming visitors into her home, while also frequently going on visits in return. She was to be charming, graceful and virtuous, showing the same degree of elegance that her attire and her drawing room would. She was also to be a role model that the servants would have no problem respecting. The social duties of a mistress were essential in upholding a sense of status in society, a way of reflecting the successes of the family to the outside world. However, when it came to the actual successes *inside* the home, other qualities marked themselves as more important. Indeed, more than anything, Mrs Beeton stresses that the mistress had to be capable:

AS WITH THE COMMANDER OF AN ARMY, or the leader of any enterprise, so is it with the mistress of a house. Her spirit will be seen through the whole establishment; and just in proportion as she performs her duties intelligently and thoroughly, so will her domestics follow in her path (1).

As Mrs Beeton compares the mistress to a commander, it becomes clear that the focus is moved from virtue to vigour. If one considers the nature of the Victorian home, one understands why it was so. The fact that servants reside there, makes the Victorian upper-class home a complicated one. Indeed, the home is more than a home – it is a workplace. The title "head of the household," therefore, does not simply constitute the role as father or mother, husband or wife, but employer. Jessica Gerard distinguishes between three types of employers: the "liberal, [the] authoritarian and [the] remote" (239). The liberal master or mistress was "kind and considerate." They showed more human interest in their staff and could occasionally treat their servants "as equals" (243). There was, however, no doubt about their superior position. The authoritarian master and mistress, on the other hand, would see it as their moral duty to make sure servants behaved righteously, because "With their superior wealth, birth, and education, they were convinced, they knew what was best for their child-like dependants" (243). The remote family heads wanted to distance themselves as much as

possible from their servants. Measures would then be taken to ensure as little contact as possible between servants and master, giving the sense of having invisible servants, and a house that cleaned itself. This was more likely to be the case at grand, upper-class estates where upper-servants would be responsible for the only contact between the staff and their employers. When it came to the servants that had to be seen, their task was to suppress their humanity: “Well-trained servants preserved an impassive demeanour in front of the family, never expressing their own emotions or reactions” (245). In *Lady Audley’s Secret*, the servants of George’s father is an example of this as the servant opening the door is described to have “outlived every emotion to which humanity is subject” (148). In other words, the servants had to blend in with the walls and the vases, as a thing amongst things.

How many servants one would engage depended on what types of servants one needed, house size and family income. A family with an annual income of £500 would usually only employ a “cook, housemaid, and nursemaid” (Beeton 8). In contrast, according to Mrs Beeton, a wealthy establishment would have more than 20 different vacancies to fill, including outdoor staff. Indeed, the bigger the house, the more rooms to tend to, the more servants were needed. A servant staff of a similar size is likely to be working behind the scenes in *Lady Audley’s Secret* as Audley Court is said to have seventeen bedrooms.

The bigger households would follow a rigid hierarchy of upper- and lower-servants. Among the highest positions to fill, and also the most respected, one would find the butler, cook, housekeeper, valet and lady’s maid. Lower servants consisted of the footmen, housemaids, kitchen-, laundry-, dairy- and scullery maids (Evans 17). These were divided vertically as well into three departments, where the butler was in charge of the menservants, the cook in charge of the maids connected with the kitchen, and the housekeeper in charge of the female servants working in the rest of the house (Franklin 213-4). At smaller estates, where there was no housekeeper, the mistress herself would be in charge of engaging new servants, keeping track of the household’s financial expenditure and to superintend the servant staff. The size of one’s staff actively mattered when building a home. As Kerr says, “It is manifest that the amount of accommodation must be regulated directly by the list of servants to be kept” (201). However, this is not the case in any of the three novels as the estates came first. Audley Court is very old, as it is described to have had Plantagenet, Tudor, Saxon, Norman and Hanoverian elements added and removed from it over the course of eleven centuries. Wildfell Hall, as it harbours a runaway wife with a humble income, only has one servant to tend to it. Similarly, but not as extreme, East Lynne is an upper-class estate owned by a middle-class man and therefore contains a modest servant staff.

In addition to segregating their houses according to function, gender and grade of public exposure, there was yet another division taking place: one between the family and their servants. Kerr stresses that “It is a first principle with the better classes of English people that the Family Rooms shall be essentially private, and as much as possible the Family Thoroughfares” (67). The fact that privacy is deemed the “first principle” shows that it carried some weight in the minds of the architects planning a home. As Kerr continues, “It becomes the foremost of all maxims, therefore, however small the establishment, that the Servants’ Department shall be separated from the Main House, so that what passes on either side of the boundary shall be both invisible and inaudible on the other” (67). The servants were to be neither heard nor seen, in other words, they were supposed to be invisible. There is plenty of evidence in Kerr’s architectural advice that shows that this was the desired effect. In addition to separate spheres and not sharing corridors, Kerr advises that the reception rooms should not look out on the servants’ workspace. This was also true concerning the look of the house itself. The “exterior architectural design [...] ought to be exhibited with due discrimination; that there may be seen at a glance the one part of the edifice as the superior and the other as inferior” (203). Indeed, this was efficiently executed by placing the servants’ offices either in the basement or adjacent to the main house, in which case they were typically of a lower height. There was, all in all, an attempt to hide them away, as “one was not meant to see the servants’ wing or working part of the house” (Franklin 211).

While it was important to consider qualities like privacy, comfort, aspect, prospect, elegance and salubrity in the family rooms – in the servants’ offices, qualities first and foremost tied to work efficiency: “As respects *Privacy*, in the place of that seclusion which is the privilege of the family, what we have to provide for the servants is that freedom from interruption which is essential to the efficient performance of their work” (Kerr 199). The family’s wish for privacy and the servants’ need for an efficient work environment (which indirectly was in the interest of the family as servants worked to serve the family’s needs) were two interests that were likely to clash. While the family desired to be as far away from their servants as possible, the servants needed to be close by in order to do their job. It meant, for instance, that the kitchen could not be too far away from the dining room, as carrying food would take longer, making the food go cold before it reached the table. It also meant that, while the other servants preferably had their sleeping quarters in the attic, basement or outdoor buildings, a lady’s maid would preferably have her room on the first floor, “to be advantageously disposed for attendance, which is best done by placing [her] on the same floor-level as [her mistress], and at hand” (251).

Unlike family members, servants came into the house as strangers, they could resign or be dismissed, and many a person could enter and depart from the home within the family's lifespan. To keep good servants was therefore very important since they worked where someone else lived and could potentially – whether it was overhearing a private conversation or emptying a lady's chamber pot – be prone to witness very personal matters. Not all servants were trustworthy, and so they could easily be “perceived as the weak link in the maintenance of the privacy of the home, both as internal intruders and as publicists to the outside world” (Trodd 8). Indeed, if there was one common role all servants were expected to perform, it was the role of a trusted household member; one that was faithful to the family being served. It was, however, clear that “the servant was *in* the home but not *of* it,” meaning they were not deemed part of the family despite being so closely connected (Lynch 67). But as Gerard points out, this had not always been the case:

In medieval and early modern households, servants were indeed part of the family. The master and mistress were obliged to protect, guide, discipline, educate, and provide for servants as if they were their own children, exacting the same obedience and respect in return. Servants were expected to identify with the family, and to serve its interests with loyalty and devotion (241).

The separation of the family apartments and the servants' quarter, then, is a clear indication that the servants were no longer deemed part of the family. This also correlates with the need for privacy. Several critics point out that the need for privacy had not always been as strong as it was in the nineteenth century. Flanders mentions that “In the eighteenth century and before, servants and apprentices had often slept in the same rooms as family members” (xxv). Kerr supports this notion of development as he points out that, in the eleventh century, “The ordinary Saxon Hall constituted the sole dwelling-room and eating-room, for lord and lady, guest and serf alike [and] was the one universal sleeping-room of the household, who disposed themselves according to their rank upon the floor” (4). What this shows, is that the relationship between the family and their servants changed massively over the centuries. Sian Evans suggests that new technology could be a reason why this change happened:

the long-distance bellboard obliterated at a stroke the centuries-old practice of servants ‘waiting’ in attendance. [...] in former times they spent their days observing the family, listening to gossip, enjoying the comfort, warmth, daylight and luxurious

amenities of some of the best rooms in the house. Now they were banished to their own communal quarters, far less salubrious, and summoned as required (15).

It is, in other words, the switch from handbells to a bellboard system that allowed the development of separation to happen. Without the long-distance bellboard, the servants would have had to be close by in order to respond to the family's summons. But this, as we know, was something the family members no longer desired.

Mrs Beeton, in her chapter on domestic servants, relates that society is complaining “that the race of good servants has died out” and “that there is neither honesty, conscientiousness, nor the careful and industrious habits which distinguished the servants of our grandmothers and great-grandmothers” (917). However, she does not agree with this notion and is instead pointing a finger at the mistress and the master, saying it is their own poor judgement that is at fault: “when the lady of fashion chooses her footman without any other consideration than his height, shape, and tournure of his calf, it is not surprising that she should find a domestic who has no attachment for the family” (917). Her advice was that the more sensible masters and mistresses would know that “with a proper amount of care in choosing servants, and treating them like reasonable beings, and making slight excuses for the shortcomings of human nature, they will, save in some exceptional case, be tolerably well served, and, in most instances, surround themselves with attached domestics” (917). What this shows, is that the treatment of the servants mattered in the question of loyalty. In addition, servants, too, reflected the status of the family – just like the objects they would dust and polish. This was especially the case with footmen, who were more expensive to keep than maids and who were hired for their good looks. In a way, Mrs Beeton is criticizing the master and mistress for choosing servants like one would choose new furniture, having to remind them of the human quality they naturally possess. This again ties to the “banishing” of the servants to their own quarters. By wanting the servants out of sight, the mistress and master are not forming strong attachments to their servants, which could lead to the servants not feeling any loyalty.

The Victorian house, the family members and their servants are therefore interconnected. The family treasured trustworthy and efficient servants, but their attitude towards their staff, and the architectural measures that manifested this attitude, could potentially distance them further from each other. Not all people would function as good servants, but those that had potential would perform their duties better if the architecture allowed for it. They were also more likely to stay loyal if the family treated them well. In

addition, the house was built a certain way, shaped by the family's values and the number of servants they were to keep.

Last but not least, the household performed both private and public roles: The mistress, albeit tucked away in the privacy of the home, is also performing a public role in the house as a host to guests. The servants were expected to be invisible but could potentially give private matters a public audience, and the supposedly private home had public rooms.

Material Culture Theory

It has been a common practice to understand material culture through a Marxist perspective; to focus on the production of things and where they originate from, and to see things as commodities, where they are measured up against each other within a system of monetary value. Considering that the nineteenth century witnessed the start of capitalism and “the mass production and consumption of things,” there is certainly a lot that could be discussed about the Victorian home through a Marxist perspective (Kingstone and Lister 1). However, as Tilley points out, “there is not, and can never be, one ‘correct’ or ‘right’ theoretical position” (10). Different theoretical approaches highlight different things. As this thesis is focusing more on how objects affect identity, relationships and social roles, I believe the Marxist approach would not fully cover what I am trying to achieve and would take the thesis in an entirely different direction than I intend it to go. Instead, this thesis falls more into semiotic and phenomenological approaches. The semiotic approach is one that delves into the meanings people assign to objects – into intangible signs and symbols. The phenomenological approach focuses more on the tangible experience of objects through the objects' materiality. This thesis will therefore go within objects to discover the underlying cultural meanings of things, but would also “return [...] to the ‘surface,’ [to how] we directly experience and perceive them, from a distinctively human and sensuous perspective” (Tilley 8). When it comes to how the mistress, the servants and the estate affect each other, the role objects play must not be forgotten. Objects take part in every aspect of the household – in clothes, architecture and furniture. It is what the estate is made up of, and what the inhabitants of the house cover themselves with, and which they might sometimes be mistaken for being.

Chapter 2: The Public Meaning of Curls and Clothes

Elizabeth Wilson describes how there is something uncanny with discarded clothes, that it is “as if a snake had shed its skin” (2). Clothes are made solely to dress bodies, and bodies are not expected to be seen without clothes. The way a piece of clothing can be cut and stitched together – creating perhaps a hole for the head to fit through, narrowed around the waist, expanded across the chest, and with sleeves attached for the arms – works as a mould reminding us of the body it is shaped after. That clothes look a certain way, is because they are made to cover the material body and to accommodate it. But this is not the only factor determining how clothes are to be designed. Had it been the only criteria, clothes would not differ much. But instead, clothes are found in a multitude of shapes, fabrics and colours. Sometimes they are uncomfortable to wear and prevent the body from functioning optimally – like for instance the Victorian corset. Such clothes do the exact opposite of accommodating the body. The reason for this, and which Wilson claims is “part of this strangeness of dress,” is that a garment “links the biological body to the social being, and public to private” (2). That the garment links the public to the private is a consequence of the social quality of clothes. Clothes communicate social values and cues, and this ability is a world phenomenon; not just present in one culture. As Wilson reminds us, in “all societies the body is ‘dressed’, and everywhere dress and adornment play symbolic, communicative and aesthetic roles” (3). The visual quality that clothes possess, tied to their social potential, is so powerful that it can immediately signify something about a person before a conversation or any type of action has a chance to take place. Clothes also allow us to distinguish what part of the world or social class the wearer comes from and would give the gazer a (possibly prejudiced and mistaken) sense of a person’s personality or interests. Alison Lurie puts this into perspective by comparing clothes to languages. Clothes like languages have vocabularies where garments, as words, form sentences that state something. Just like there are different languages all over the world, there are also different modes of dressing. And just like any language can contain foreign words, vulgar words and archaic words, so too can a garment be deemed exotic, improper or dated. Clothes allow their wearers the means to express themselves: who they are and what they value. But as it is each society that determines the meaning behind a certain style of clothing, it opens up for the possibility that meanings in the meeting between two cultures are lost in translation.

It is, however, not only between two cultures that meaning can be lost. Jean Arnold argues that our relationship to jewellery (which also holds true about other objects, like

clothing) consists of a dual interpretation: “An object like a piece of jewelry opens itself to a double reading—it is an object with personal meaning for the individual, and with an established meaning for the culture at large; therefore, its reading is located in the space between private and public domains” (20). Judy Attfield claims something similar as she says that “Clothing and textiles have a particularly intimate quality because they lie next to the skin and inhabit the spaces of private life helping to negotiate the inner self with the outside world” (121). Similar to Wilson, Arnold and Attfield focus on the meeting point between the private and the public, but Attfield, here, turns the lens particularly to the private: although there is something immensely social with clothes, there is at the same time something very personal. Indeed, objects on the body strongly tie to a person’s identity, which could be because of their close proximity to the self. That there is an individual meaning to clothes, in addition to a public one, complicates things. An individual’s understanding of meaning will always be measured up against the culture’s meaning. Likewise, individuals understand their own identity within a societal construct. In the case where individual meaning opposes rather than aligns with the public opinion, the individual would be forced to make a choice, a choice to show the world their true identity or to hide it. Even if the individual is ignorant of the public meaning, onlookers would not be and would form their own judgement of the individual regardless of what the individual thinks.

Clothes and their meanings become even more intricate if one also considers the social concept of fashion. The ruling fashion in a particular moment in time could be something completely new and shocking, making it true that “a new way of dress is also a new fashioning of the self, a biographic process of changing the inner person to fit new outer garments” (Hoskins 81). But as Lurie says, “it is not true that the public will wear anything suggested to it, nor has it ever been true” (11). The reason for this is that, what is in vogue, is to a certain extent always rooted in societal values. At least, fashion would not oppose norms that are highly approved of. This is precisely because the meanings that clothes harbour tie to the self. We see this for instance in the case of the corset. Despite fashion being known for its ephemeral quality, which is seen in the nineteenth century’s flickering fashions of crinolines and bustles, and the craze for the new colour mauve – the corset still remained such a valued garment that “throughout the Victorian period the vast majority of women of all classes wore corsets” (Kortsch 56). Christine Kortsch mentions how the corset started, at the beginning of the century, as a clothing article that implied respectability, and ended up being heavily criticized towards the end of the era: “It came to signify excess, not decorum; captivity, not beauty; romance, not reality” (104). Although the corset eventually became outdated, it was a

slow change in an otherwise rapidly changing industry. One thing that could explain this slow development is that, if one strayed too far from the expected standard of clothing, it would have implications for how others viewed one as a person. As Kortsch says, “choosing not to wear a corset, depending on the decade and one’s class and social circle, identified a woman as a prostitute, dress reformer, aesthete, or feminist” (56). There is no doubt that it would be harder to depart from the expected dress code in a decade that deemed the deviator a prostitute than it was in a decade where the person would be deemed a feminist.

To add to this, clothes and their meanings played a heavy role as representations of status in the Victorian era. Because of the link between clothes and status, clothes mattered, and dressing above one’s status was looked strongly down upon. Mrs Beeton comments on this, stressing that a good wife, instead of appearing in “a variety of suits every day new, [...] sets up a sail according to the keel of her husband’s estate; and, if of high parentage, she doth not so remember what she was by birth, that she forgets what she is by match” (4). What made dressing above one’s status particularly bad, was the fear that “someone might actually succeed through dress in tricking the public into believing she is of a higher rank than she is” (Langland 35-6). If one also considers that clothing reflected something of a person’s identity, such a transgression would make a person come off as vain and pretentious.

Gender also played a part in fashion. Leonore Davidoff draws attention to the “variety and complexity of [women’s and girls’] clothes as opposed to the almost uniform drab ‘workman-like or business-like’ look of men’s clothing after the 1840s,” pointing out that “Every cap, bow, streamer, ruffle, fringe, bustle, glove or other elaboration symbolised some status category for the female wearer” (93). That the female attire was more elaborate than the male attire, means that there was more clothing to read and interpret. Not only was female fashion more elaborate, but fashion in itself was mostly directed towards women – and so was the fear of dressing above one’s status. One reason for this could be that women, through marriage, were “best able to cross social, familial, and class boundaries” (Steere 4). Women were also more generally scrutinized than men. Even though the degree of exposure varied in accordance with class, which I will come back to in the next section, all women were to a higher degree subject to being evaluated according to their attire than men. As Reynolds and Humble note, “Whether the woman’s body is tastefully erased, or made vulgarly visible by her dress, she is constructed as a spectacle for a putatively male observer” (59). Although their statement is made concerning women in novels, it does also apply beyond the pages of the book. The only difference is that one should also include the female gazer, as women, too, would evaluate each other through appearance. Kortsch goes as far as to argue that women

were more skilled at reading clothes than men, which was due to their experience working with fabrics and producing clothes (4-5).

Another theory why men's attires were less elaborate is of a practical reason. Before the French Revolution, "prosperous merchants and professional men" would be wearing "lace, ruffles, embroidered waistcoats, tight-fitting silk breeches, and powdered wigs" (Gordon 285). This, as Davidoff has pointed out, was no longer the case in the nineteenth century³. Sean Purchase argues that the drastic change from extravagance to a more subdued and sombre appearance is connected with the polarisation of the public and the private sphere. He says that "Victorian clothes matched this division: dark, sober and functional for the men, leisurely and cumbersome, often extravagantly colourful, for the women" (25). Indeed, men in the public sphere needed more practical clothes as they moved about more, while women could wear impractical clothes due to their more leisurely situation in the home. In addition, Gordon states that since the men's outfits signalled status to a lesser degree than before, the signalling of status became the responsibility of women: "they now demonstrated the prosperity that the men they were associated with had achieved" (285). This could also explain why women were more scrutinized than men and why their fashion transgressions were more in focus. As the bearer of the family status, the mistress had an important role to play.

Public Impact on Household Management

Nancy Armstrong has investigated the domestic woman through conduct books and notices that over the centuries leading up to the Victorian era, a favourable leaning towards the middle-class woman began to show. The ideals connected to the aristocratic class, of virtues and high standing, became second-rate to the industrious and skilled middle-class woman who was rising in importance. Armstrong notes, for instance, that some of the eighteenth century conduct books saw aristocratic wives as a bad investment, because "the woman who feels so obliged to display signs of status—in the manner of aristocratic women—will soon prove too expensive to keep" (73). Armstrong also mentions that

³ The upper-class man could still be wearing some degree of extravagant clothing. For instance, Thorn aka Levison in *East Lynne* is known for wearing diamond rings. He is, however, said to be vain and have bad taste – which goes to show that society does not approve.

A woman was deficient in female qualities if she, like the aristocratic woman, spent her time in idle amusements. As the conduct books represent them, such activities always aimed at putting the body on display, a carry-over from the Renaissance display of aristocratic power. For a woman to display herself in such a manner was the same as saying that she was supposed to be valued for her body and its adornments, not for the virtues she might possess as a woman and wife (75).

The aristocratic woman was, in other words, objectified. She was more ornamental than functional; the jewel in the crown rather than the diamond in the drill. As Armstrong goes on to mention that the working-class woman was disfavoured as well due to her also “[locating] value in the material body,” it becomes clear that the middle-class woman was the golden mean (76). The middle-class woman was not reduced to a mere “hand,” nor was she only on display. Her work was the respectable kind, and far from rough and all-consuming, and her socialising was of a humbler character. Both the aristocratic lady and the working-class woman were performing public roles: one being an object on display at social events, the other toiling away in the public sphere away from home. The middle-class woman, with her domestic responsibilities, was to a greater extent tucked away in the private home.

Mrs Beeton’s *Household Management* was written during a time when middle-class values peaked and is a reflection of those values. One could see household management as a predominantly private function as it happened within the estate’s four walls and only concerned the domestics. But although Mrs Beeton mostly focuses on the duties connected to management, she also dedicates space for social expectations, thereby showing that also the middle-class woman had a social role to perform in addition to a private one. Mrs Beeton’s example of a good mistress is one that finds a good balance between her administrative role in household management, making certain that the house runs well on the inside, and her social role as guest or host, ensuring the good condition of the house in the public’s mind.

In *East Lynne*, there is a collision between middle- and upper-class values. Middle-class Cornelia Carlyle is described to be “an exceedingly active housekeeper in her own house, a great deal more so than the servants liked” (38). After learning that her brother has married above his station and has chosen to uphold some of the glamour his new wife is used to through taking up residence at East Lynne, Cornelia decides to move herself and her servants to the estate, firing her brother’s servants in the process. Her reasoning is founded on the economic benefit of a shared household, which she deems an obligation. This is a consequence of her always having had “all the authority of a mother” over Carlyle, coupled

with her “love of saving money” (37-8). Cornelia seems to share Mrs Beeton’s opinion that “FRUGALITY AND ECONOMY ARE HOME VIRTUES, without which no household can prosper” (2). But as one is bound to witness, frugality taken to an extreme does not make the household prosper. East Lynne ends up with two mistresses, resulting in counter-orders being given. This, despite Cornelia stating that Lady Isabel “will be mistress: I do not intend to take her honours from her; but I shall save her a world of trouble in management, and be as useful to her as a housekeeper” (*East Lynne* 144). The housekeeper was, indeed, expected to bring “to the management of the household, all those qualities of honesty, industry, and vigilance, in the same degree as if she were at the head of her own family” – yet, there was to be no doubt that she was “second in command” to her mistress (Beeton 21). Here, Cornelia fails; with her strong opinions and authority, she constantly overrules Lady Isabel’s commands, turning Isabel into “little more than an automaton” in her own house (*East Lynne* 167).

Bill Brown says that “Our habitual interactions with objects both bring them to life and impose order on that life” (*Sense* 64). As Lady Isabel is made mistress of East Lynne, she is forced to change the way she understands and interacts with things. This we can see in the instance when the butcher wants to know how much meat the household needs: “Totally ignorant was she of the requirements of a household; and did not know whether to suggest a few pounds of meat, or a whole cow” (*East Lynne* 147). Cornelia already has the knowledge of things and the habits connected to them, and she cannot stand to watch things being handled the wrong way. To her, Isabel’s incompetency is a threat to order. At the same time, it is exactly because of Cornelia that Isabel fails: “It was the presence of that grim Miss Corny which put her out: alone with her husband, she would have said ‘What ought I to order, Archibald? Tell me’” (147). As this suggests, had Lady Isabel been allowed to try and fail in a non-hostile environment she would perhaps with time have found her role. Mrs Beeton shows that this was a common occurrence, and not limited to Isabel’s social class: “If the mistress be a young wife, and not accustomed to order ‘things for the house,’ a little practice and experience will soon teach her who are the best tradespeople to deal with, and what are the best provisions to buy” (5).

Although it is pointed out that Cornelia would be disagreeable towards any wife of Carlyle, whether “it was a royal princess, or a peasant’s daughter,” there is no doubt she is extra stern towards Isabel (*East Lynne* 372). It is particularly Isabel’s status and the types of objects that define her class, which Cornelia makes herself an enemy of. Before Isabel has as much as sat foot at East Lynne as its mistress, Cornelia has envisioned the consequence: “Expenses will be high enough with *her* extravagant habits, too high to keep on two

households. And a fine sort of household Archibald would have of it at East Lynne, with that ignorant baby, befrilled, and bejewelled, and becurled, to direct it” (135). This becomes the lingering image Cornelia has of Isabel, and which guides her in her treatment towards her. When Cornelia countermands Isabel’s requests, it is often the same argument that lingers behind it. When Isabel wants to take her children with her to the seaside, Cornelia will not allow it “on account of the expense,” as two servants “will cost enough [...] without taking a van-load of nurses and children.” In addition, Cornelia does not fail to add that “with one expense and another, your husband will soon be on the road to ruin” (200). When Isabel wants to buy herself and her daughter new dresses, Cornelia tells Isabel that her daughter “no more requires a new frock than that table requires one, or than you require the one you are longing for” (259). When Isabel wants to defy her, Cornelia knows the right thing to say to get her own way: “You will be sorry for not listening to me, ma’am, when your husband shall be brought to poverty. He works like a horse now; and, with all his slaving, can scarcely, I fear, keep expenses down (260).” Isabel, indeed, is constantly being told that she is an expense as the “same tale had been dinned into her ear ever since she married [Carlyle]” (260).

Although Lady Isabel seems to be a typical idle upper-class lady in the sense that she finds herself at times bored and waiting by the window for her husband’s return in lack of other things to do, and that she “Sings a bit, and plays a bit, and reads a bit, and receives her visitors, and idles away her days in that manner” – Isabel does not entirely fit the stereotype (159). As a matter of fact, Cornelia’s claim that Isabel is a financial burden is wrong, and Cornelia is treating Lady Isabel unfairly. Because, albeit an aristocratic daughter, Lady Isabel is not trying to uphold any extravagance through clothes and jewels. When Isabel understands that her marriage means she must live more sparingly, Isabel “far from rebelling at or despising the small establishment [...] felt thankful to [Carlyle] for it” (169). In addition, when the maid, Joyce, calls Cornelia out on her treatment of Isabel after the latter flees from the estate, she expresses that Isabel “never was extravagant: that none were less inclined to go beyond proper limits than she” (280). Indeed, Isabel is modest, and it shows through the way she dresses and her relationship to her things.

One scene where one can see this is in the one with Isabel’s cross. Isabel is wearing the cross purely due to its sentimental value: “It was given me by my dear mamma just before she died. [...] I only wear it upon great occasions” (15). Mrs Vane, Isabel’s relative, is astonished when she realises Isabel has “nothing on, but that cross and some rubbishing pearl bracelets!” When Isabel defends herself by claiming the bracelets, too, were her mother’s,

Mrs Vane reprimands Isabel: “You old-fashioned child! Because your mamma wore those bracelets, years ago, is that a reason for your doing so? [...] Why did you not put on your diamonds?” (15). What this incident shows, is a clash of values: Mrs Vane, valuing things based on their money’s worth and their reflection on her status, cannot comprehend why Isabel would wear something so simple as a cross. Lady Isabel, on the other hand, does not have the same mindset. To her, the cross holds value because it connects her to her mother. When Isabel, later on, changes her identity to Madame Vine and is forced to rid herself of everything that can tie her to Lady Isabel, the cross and a miniature of her mother become the only items she cannot part with.

As Lady Isabel is an aristocratic daughter, the public expects her to dress in a fashion that shows off her high standing. Because there is a public meaning to clothes and because clothes tie so strongly to status and class, the public thinks it can anticipate Lady Isabel’s style of dress. One can see this, for instance, when Barbara is pending Lady Isabel’s first appearance in church. Barbara expects Lady Isabel to dress lavishly as the aristocratic daughter she is. She, therefore, feels an urge to put on her best as well, and the result is comical: “As [Cornelia] and Archibald were leaving their house, they saw something looming up the street, flashing and gleaming in the sun. A pink parasol came first, a pink bonnet and feather came behind it, a grey brocaded dress, and white gloves” (*East Lynne* 64). In this example, it is as if the clothes have become animated – the presence of Barbara wearing them, non-existent. When in church, Barbara is eagerly looking around but does not immediately recognize Lady Isabel as she is scanning for flashy clothes: “they could not be the expected strangers, the young lady’s dress was too plain” (65). Barbara faces a struggle in combining her assumed image of Lady Isabel with the reality: “Why—she has no silks, and no feathers, and no anything!” (65). What the incidents with Barbara shows, is that through garments’ public meaning, one could be anticipating a certain clothed identity, making the person unrecognizable when clothes do not harbour the expected meaning.

A time when Lady Isabel deliberately dresses to impress is when she is attending a musical event in support of the struggling music-master, Mr Kane. Lady Isabel reasons with her father that their attendance is important because “If you and I promise to be present, all the families round West Lynne will attend, and he will have the room full” (69-70). She, therefore, shows up in a “rich white dress” and “glittering diamonds” – diamonds she on an earlier occasion did not want to wear to a party because “I did not like to be too fine [...]. They glittered so!” (79, 16). However, in this instance, she does not overdress to show off her own importance, but rather, to show off the importance of the event which she is the

honoured guest of. But Lady Isabel's personal reason for overdressing is misunderstood by other guests who find her attire tasteless and claim the "ridiculous decking out must have been [her maid] Marvel's idea" (79). Because there is a strict societal rule for not overdressing, and because the public does not know Isabel's personal motivation for dressing this way, Isabel mistakenly appears vain in their eyes.

Nancy Armstrong claims that it "is a woman's participation in public spectacle that injures her, for as an object of display, she always loses value as a subject" (77). But if one considers that Cornelia treats Isabel in accordance with the public assumption of extravagance, as an object on display, it shows that the public factor also is present in the privacy of the home. Isabel, indeed, loses her value as a subject in her own home, and it has an effect as it "struck a complete chill to Isabel's heart, and she became painfully imbued with the incubus she must be to Mr Carlyle—so far as his pocket was concerned" (*East Lynne* 168). Falsely believing herself an object of expense, Lady Isabel becomes further ostracized from her husband and her place in the house as a mistress and a wife.

Although Isabel later claims that Cornelia's treatment of her has nothing to do with her abandoning her husband, there is a link. The main reason for Isabel leaving is that she falsely believes her husband is in love with Barbara. When Isabel overhears one of the servants share her opinion on Carlyle and Barbara's relationship, she hears her state that Carlyle "couldn't resist [Isabel's] rank and her beauty, and the old love [for Barbara] was cast over" (178). This – while in a feverish haze – leaves an impression on Isabel: "she hastily took up the idea that Archibald Carlyle had never loved her, that he had admired her and made her his wife in his ambition, but that his heart had been given to Barbara Hare" (180). Although Carlyle reassures Isabel that she is the only person he has loved, Isabel never truly lets go of the idea that he used to love Barbara. It should not be disregarded that Isabel being told she is an expense, in combination with the suggestion that her husband married her for her rank, could fuel her belief that Carlyle loves Barbara and thereby contribute in the choice she makes in leaving him.

In the two other novels, the public also finds its way inside the home, causing interruptions in the mistress's private roles, albeit in alternative ways. Reynolds and Humble have noticed that in "the course of the nineteenth century, novelistic descriptions of heroines undergo some significant transformations. Departing from the vagueness of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century fictional descriptions [...], later nineteenth-century novelists employ increasingly detailed and encoded taxonomies of the physical features of their

heroines” (51-2). That there is some truth to this, one can see in the chosen novels of this thesis, particularly when it comes to adornments and attires. While *Lady Audley’s Secret* and *East Lynne* are packed with detailed descriptions, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, published twenty years prior, pales in comparison in the portrayals it offers. There are a few instances where Helen’s clothes are described, but these are rare and far apart.

One such instance is when Helen has recently married Huntingdon, and it is directly linked to the idea of the woman on display. On her honeymoon, Helen experiences that her husband does not like her to be in the public eye: “He wanted to get me home, he said, to have me all to himself, and to see me safely installed as the mistress of Grassdale Manor, [...] as if I had been some frail butterfly, he expressed himself fearful of rubbing the silver off my wings by bringing me into contact with society” (212). That the “silver” would be rubbed off her “wings” is in line with Armstrong’s argument, of the woman losing her value as a subject while in the public gaze.

When Helen later on, after having settled at Grassdale, joins her husband in going to London for the social Season, their opinion on this matter seems to have reversed. While Huntingdon is gladly showing her off, Helen finds her role as an object on display a disagreeable one:

He seemed bent upon displaying me to his friends and acquaintances in particular, and the public in general, on every possible occasion, and to the greatest possible advantage. [...] I paid dear for the gratification, [...] to please him, I had to violate my cherished predilections – my almost rooted principles in favour of a plain, dark, sober style of dress; I must sparkle in costly jewels and deck myself out like a painted butterfly, just as I had, long since, determined I would never do (*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* 227).

What this shows, is that Helen is not someone who likes to deck herself out with clothes and jewels to catch people’s attention. She is rather like the middle-class woman in Armstrong’s example: a woman who is valued for her qualities as wife and mistress and not for her outer appearance. Helen’s personality and skills match this value well, which is seen in Helen’s account of her time as mistress at Grassdale Manor where there is minimal focus on Helen’s appearance, but where a good portion is devoted to her industriousness and private occupation in keeping the cogs in the household running.

Despite Helen being a very capable mistress, her attempt to implement order and good management in the household fails. The issue – which also leads to a destructive household – is that she has married a debauched rogue. While Lady Isabel’s husband was a passive presence in the house, Helen’s husband is an antagonistic one. Helen married Huntingdon well-knowing of his vices, thinking that she would be able to change him. Unfortunately, it soon becomes clear that he “won’t be dictated to by a woman, though she be [his] wife” (*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* 247). That Huntingdon does not fit within the home sphere quickly becomes obvious. While Helen’s day is busy; “The reading and answering of my letters, and the direction of household concerns, afforded me ample employment for the morning; after lunch I got my drawing, and from dinner till bed-time, I read,” her husband finds himself “sadly at a loss for something to amuse him or to occupy his time” (220). Their married years follow a familiar pattern; in spring, the husband goes to London for the amusements and social sphere of the London Season. In autumn, he brings his friends to his own estate for the hunting season. The idea of separate spheres is therefore very clear in this novel, as the husband finds himself bored and out of place in the home, he goes to London for longer and longer periods in spring. This, while Helen throughout her time as a mistress at her husband’s estate, is very much tucked away in the domestic sphere. Just as the couple drifts apart, their roles in their respective spheres – Helen in the private sphere, Huntingdon in the public – grow stronger. Huntingdon brings an increased sense of the public into the home, the effect of which will be explored in a later chapter. Helen, on the other hand, changes her sentiments, from yearning for her husband to come home from London sooner to wishing him to stay away for longer. When it reaches the point where Huntingdon relatively openly begins an affair with the wife of his friend, Helen relinquishes her role as a wife, stating, “I am your child’s mother, and *your* housekeeper – nothing more” (323). Considering that the husband is the main culprit, one would think Helen would enjoy privacy as she takes up occupancy at Wildfell Hall. This, unfortunately, is not the case. Before Gilbert or the reader has had a chance to become acquainted with Helen, Gilbert’s sister relates about Helen’s “appearance, manners, and dress, and the very furniture of the room she inhabited [...] with rather more clearness and precision than [Gilbert] cared to see them” (11). When Gilbert gets to see Helen for the first time, which is during a public appearance in church, he studies her in detail. Helen’s dress is barely taken notice of, as the only reference to it is that she is “clad in black” (11). Despite the dress being deemed insignificant, Helen is on display as Gilbert studies her facial features, complexion and hair in detail. What this shows, is that it is not only the elaborate and extravagant dress that could make a woman victim to the public gaze. It aligns

with Reynolds and Humble's argument that, whether the woman's body is on display or erased, she is victim to the gaze.

As an opposition to the more modest Lady Isabel and Helen, there is the rather flamboyant Lady Audley. Lady Audley, as we learn from the first few pages of *Lady Audley's Secret*, is a woman that married into a higher status than she was born into, and who is happily flaunting her husband's status through her clothes, jewels and possessions. In the question of her capability as a mistress, Anthea Trodd notes that "she is playful and childlike but [...] highly capable at household management" (105). Indeed, if Lady Audley did not have an unforgivable secret to cover up, she would very likely have continued being a charming mistress with a doting husband and succeeded in her role. However, it should be said that everything in her new role as mistress seems to cater to her needs:

Pleased with her high position and her handsome house; with every caprice gratified, every whim indulged; admired and caressed wherever she went; fond of her generous husband; rich in a noble allowance of pin-money; [...] it would have been hard to find in the county of Essex a more fortunate creature than Lucy, Lady Audley (*Lady Audley's Secret* 43).

What this suggests, is that her prime responsibilities in the home centres around her putting herself on display, entertaining guests and being a comfort to her husband. The issues that Lady Isabel face in *East Lynne* are not issues Lady Audley has to deal with: the household economy is barely spoken of, and Lady Audley's "noble allowance of pin-money" suggests she is given enough money to satisfy her personal indulgences. Unlike Helen who actively wanted to avoid being on display, and Lady Isabel, who was looked down on due to the association of upper-class with extravagance – Lady Audley seems to be encouraged to dress up and indulge in the spotlight. As a matter of fact, that Sir Michael at all chose Lucy to be his Lady Audley is a consequence of her positive public display:

Everyone loved, admired, and praised her. [...] The verger at the church who ushered her into the surgeon's pew; the vicar who saw the soft blue eyes uplifted to his face as he preached his simple sermon; [...] her employer; his visitors; her pupils; the servants; everybody, high and low, united in declaring that Lucy Graham was the sweetest girl that ever lived.

Perhaps it was this cry which penetrated into the quiet chambers of Audley Court; or perhaps it was the sight of her pretty face, looking over the surgeon's high pew every Sunday morning. However it was, it was certain that Sir Michael Audley suddenly experienced a strong desire to be better acquainted with Mr Dawson's governess (*Lady Audley's Secret* 7).

What this shows, first of all, is that Lucy had a charm to her even as a modestly dressed governess, and that information concerning this charm is quickly spreading in the vicinity. As in the other two novels, the church becomes a social arena for spectating. Lucy, like Helen, finds herself victim to the gaze despite wearing insignificant clothes. In this case, however, the maid, Phoebe, offers an answer as she says that, despite Lucy's clothes being in a poor state, they were "always looking nice upon her, somehow" (24). What this suggests, is that qualities like beauty, grace and hair could potentially influence or block the signification connected to clothes. In the reading of Lucy, qualities like her hair and beauty are highlighted, making the rather simple clothes and the lesser status the clothes are associated with, fall into the background. Considering that her hair is often described as "golden," it gives the hair the heightened value of a luxury item (Hind 185).

As Sir Michael's wife, Lucy is showered with luxurious fabrics and jewellery – which only aids to enhance the qualities she already possesses. Not to mention, Phoebe witnessed Lady Audley while they "were abroad, with a crowd of gentlemen always hanging about her; Sir Michael not jealous of them, only proud to see her so much admired" (*Lady Audley's Secret* 24). This makes it clear that Sir Michael enjoys how his young wife reflects positively on himself and his wealth. All in all, considering that Lady Audley is a social person who thrives on being admired, the public role she is given in the home is not hard to fill.

However, one should be careful in calling her "highly capable" at household management. That Lady Audley succeeds as a mistress is not synonymous with being good at management. Indeed, Lady Audley barely deals with household concerns, and when she does, her conduct is questionable. Like when she makes the tasteless choice – for a mistress of high standing – to befriend her maid, which causes her step-daughter, Alicia, "who was never familiar with her servants, [to withdraw] in disgust at my lady's frivolity (48). In the balance between public and private duties, Lady Audley's public role is heavily tipping the scales. Mrs Beeton sees this as a bad trait, as she says, "care must be taken that the love of company, for its own sake, does not become a prevailing passion; for then the habit is no longer hospitality, but dissipation" (3). It is precisely a love of company that makes Lady Audley

befriend her maid in the first place: “She hated reading, or study of any kind, and loved society; rather than be alone she would admit Phoebe Marks into her confidence” (*Lady Audley's Secret* 43). The grim consequence of this friendship is that Lady Audley is taken advantage of.

To perform more of a social role than a private role would not in itself negatively impact the household as Lady Audley is not required to take a more active part in the management. Rather, what does have a negative effect is the driving force behind the social role. It is the yearning for admiration and the indulgence of luxurious clothes and trinkets that become the culprits. As Reynolds and Humble argue, “Those women who do take pleasure in their dress are at best infantile, at worst morally debased” (60). This is indeed one of the reasons why women were encouraged to dress modestly and within the limits of their station, as a modest attire reflected on their supposedly selfless and pure nature. Lady Audley is, in contrast, extremely occupied with her own appearance; not only her dress – but her hair, her jewels and the objects that decorate her rooms. She wants to keep it all in her possession at whatever cost. When the moment arrives and she learns she must let go of it all, it is revealed that “there was not one tender recollection in her mind of the man who had caused the furnishing of the chamber, and who in every precious toy [...] had laid before her a mute evidence of his love” (*Lady Audley's Secret* 296). This goes to show that Lady Audley never loved her husband, only the things he showered her with.

It is, in addition, the threat of losing her high status and her many riches that makes Lady Audley push George down the well and set fire to the Inn that Robert sleeps in. These actions, which also deviate from the expected behaviour of a mistress and the sweet and innocent lady she has portrayed herself to be, eventually lead the way to Lady Audley's downfall. Trodd goes as far as to say that “Lady Audley's real secret is not bigamy or attempted murder, or even the hereditary insanity to which she eventually confesses, but the fact that she is not a lady at all, but really rather common like Phoebe” (64). There is a certain truth to this claim. Lady Audley was not born into aristocracy, she married into it. Because of that, she would have more to prove as any deviating behaviour or appearance could potentially be ascribed to her low birth. It should also be taken into account, that no matter how well Lady Audley is performing her role as a mistress, the fact that she is already married means she has taken on a role that was never hers to take. One could, therefore, wonder if she ever truly was successful as a mistress or whether it was simply an act bound to be exposed. It certainly takes a long time for Lady Audley's malicious streak to be exposed.

This could be due to the public meaning attached to the objects on her body – a meaning Lady Audley wields to work in her favour.

Fashioning new identities

As the narratives of *East Lynne*, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and *Lady Audley's Secret* progress, there comes a point in each novel when the female main character chooses to take on a new identity. She puts on new clothes, assigns herself a new name⁴ and acts in accordance with her new character. The question then is, knowing the impact of public meaning, is she able to bend its power in her favour?

Elizabeth Steere says that Lady Audley's "successes at climbing the rungs of the social ladder and impersonating a lady suggest that a woman's class rank is merely a matter of perception; with the right costuming, makeup and acting talent, a lady's maid can become a lady" (90). This seems to follow what Bill Brown discovers in his interpretation of *The Prince and the Pauper*: "just as a pauper understood by the court to be a prince becomes every inch a prince, so too a seal understood by a boy to be a nutcracker becomes every inch a nutcracker, and no more than that" (*Sense* 38). This interpretation is based on the idea that identity depends more on "recognition and use" rather than "authorized value and function" (38). Lady Audley in *Lady Audley's Secret* seems to share this opinion, believing that the clothes and ornaments she wears make her a mistress.

Before she became Lady Audley, while she was only a governess, Lucy is described to be wearing "a narrow black ribbon round her neck, with a locket or a cross, or a miniature, perhaps, attached to it; but whatever the trinket was, she always kept it hidden under her dress" (9). The trinket turns out to be her wedding ring from her first marriage. The true significance of the ring's meaning is so unmistakably materialized in the item, that she cannot keep it in plain sight. That the ring is on the inside of her dress places it closest to the skin, preserving that intimate quality Attfield mentioned. Instead of walking the line between the public and private expression that the rest of her attire does, open to be interpreted by everyone, the ring is entirely private; shielded by her dress. Lady Audley admits the vital role the ring plays as she says, "every trace of the old life melted away – every clue to identity buried and forgotten – except these, except these" (12). After she marries Sir Michael, the

⁴ Helen Talboys takes on the identity of Lucy Graham before she becomes Lady Audley and Helen Huntingdon takes on the name Helen Graham. Because of the repetition of certain names and the confusion it causes, Helen is only used in connection with Helen Huntingdon and Graham is omitted entirely.

ring is no longer mentioned, suggesting it is no longer on her body. It seems that by the removal of the ring, Lady Audley believes herself successfully detached from the identity as George's wife.

In her new role as Sir Michael's wife, Lady Audley loves to dress her "fragile figure [...] in heavy velvets and stiff rustling silks, till she looked like a child tricked out for a masquerade" (43). Not only is the description suggesting that the clothes do not quite fit as her fragile build must carry heavy fabrics, but masquerade is also connected with the act of putting on a disguise. Similar instances are when Robert is helping Lady Audley into a carriage, "arranging the huge velvet mantle in which her slender little figure was almost hidden" or when she "carried a muff that [...] seemed almost as big as herself," rendering her "a childish, helpless, babyfied little creature" in Robert's eyes (116, 111). Again, the clothes do not seem to entirely fit her, hinting, perhaps, that her style is too elaborate, too excessive. Considering that dressing too fine was deemed a bad quality, one would think that Lady Audley would be judged for displaying herself in that manner – but that is not the case. There is particularly one reason behind this, and it has to do with her immaturity. Indeed, Reynolds and Humble's suggestion that she could be "morally debased" by her interest in dress, is entirely overshadowed by her childish streak. It also becomes physically apparent as her extravagant dress puts her body on display, yet also hides it. The result is, that despite flaunting wealth, Lady Audley remains innocent and frail in the public eye. She is in other words rendered harmless.

If there is one thing Lady Audley promotes more than her clothes and her jewels, it is her golden curls. Lady Audley has reason to feel proud about her locks as they "were the most wonderful curls in the world – soft and feathery" (*Lady Audley's Secret* 9). In addition, her hair, like her beauty, is all-natural and contribute to making her appear worthy of becoming an upper-class lady. Hair, albeit being a product of the body, has a similar function to clothes. It can have different colours and textures, and it can be styled into different fashions. As Lurie states, the "vocabulary of dress includes not only items of clothing, but also hair styles, accessories, jewelry, make-up and body decoration" (4). Indeed, these things contribute in expressing certain meanings and can also say something about both class and identity.

Lady Audley's curls tell a particular story – and because they are natural, the story they tell appears authentic. Both George and Robert, before even having met Lady Audley, describe her as a "fair-haired paragon" (*Lady Audley's Secret* 42, 45). That her fair hair is the choice of words coupled with the virtuous description of paragon, goes to show the weight

that is put on the hair as being a virtuous quality. In a way, her hair, and the positive qualities attached to it, precedes her reputation. In addition, there are at least three instances where her curls are described to be “making a pale halo around her head,” emphasising the virtuous quality her hair beholds (9, 207, 235). That the society attaches a stereotypical innocence to a set of golden curls is evident, and Lady Audley is actively using this public meaning to her own advantage; hiding her secret vices behind a beautiful appearance, using her assets to promote her fake innocence, all the while knowing that her true identity does not match.

After learning that her first husband has seen her portrait and thereby discovered who she truly is, Lady Audley is restless and is, among other things, having “her curls rearranged for the third or fourth time; for the ringlets were always getting into disorder, and gave no little trouble to Lady Audley’s maid” (63). Lady Audley, it seems, finds comfort in making sure her curls are as perfect as possible; as if they would act as a shield against the accusations that are bound to come from George. This becomes even more clear after Lady Audley attempts to kill Robert, as the narrator acknowledges, that “she looked upon that beauty as a weapon, and she felt that she had now double need to be well armed,” and so she “dressed herself in her most gorgeous silk; a voluminous robe of silvery, shimmering blue, that made her look as if she had been arrayed in moonbeams. She shook out her hair into feathery showers of glittering gold; and with a cloak of white cashmere about her shoulders, went downstairs” (268). Because of the gravity of her gruesome act, Lady Audley does not only rely on the significance of her hair; she also relies on wearing her best clothes.

Her outfit is not only used as a weapon, it also conceals her emotions: “the brightness of her dress and of her feathery golden ringlets distracted an observer’s eyes from her pallid face” (268). Again, it shows that Lady Audley is well aware of the public meaning behind her appearance. The argument is supported by the narrator’s claim that all “mental distress is, with some show of reason, associated in our minds with loose disordered garments, and dishevelled hair, and an appearance in every way the reverse of my lady’s” (268). Lady Audley is, therefore, using every trick in her book to uphold her “innocence” through clothes and hair. Nonetheless, Lady Audley’s faith in her assets, and their stereotype of innocence, is not strong enough to stand against the actual truth that Robert brings on the table. No more than when she, as an “amber-haired siren,” let her “fair head [drop] upon her husband’s knee, her rippling yellow curls [falling] over her face,” attempted to convince her husband that Robert was mad, which could only bring her so far (224).

Lady Audley also becomes aware of another person that could expose her gilded lie; namely the lady’s maid. In *Dress Culture in Late Victorian Women’s Fiction*, Kortsch argues

that Victorian women were participating in dual literacy. Not in the sense of practising two languages, which is the standard meaning of the phrase, but in being able to read both text and textile. Kortsch defines this “dress culture” as “any activity that includes not only wearing, producing, purchasing, or embellishing of clothing and textiles, but also the regulating and interpreting of both women’s and men’s garments” (4). Sewing was a common skill that all women, whether of low or high birth, were expected to master – and it was a predominantly female activity. Therefore, one could see the language of cloth as a feminine language; one that could be “utilized as an alternative to mainstream, patriarchal discourse [and] offer women a private language and culture, understood to be traditionally feminine” (4-5). If the knowledge of working with fabric made women more skilled in reading dress than men, I would argue that the lady’s maid outdid the ordinary woman. The lady’s maid’s job was to attend to her mistress and her needs. This also included keeping a watchful eye on her mistress’s attire. Mrs Beeton says that the lady’s maid’s duties

are more numerous, and perhaps more onerous, than those of the valet; for while the latter is aided by the tailor, the hatter, the linen-draper, and the perfumer, the lady’s-maid has to originate many parts of the mistress’s dress herself: she should, indeed, be a tolerably expert milliner and dressmaker, a good hairdresser, and possess some chemical knowledge of the cosmetics with which the toilet-table is supplied, in order to use them with safety and effect (939).

This suggests that the lady’s maid was not only an expert on reading clothes but that she also read hair and make-up. Lady Audley, when fearing that her crimes would be detected, refuses to let her new maid into her room to dress her. Lady Audley’s argument is that

Amongst all privileged spies, a lady’s-maid has the highest privileges. [...] She has a hundred methods for the finding out of her mistress’s secrets. She knows by the manner in which her victim jerks her head from under the hairbrush, or chafes at the gentlest administration of the comb, what hidden tortures are racking her breast – what secret perplexities are bewildering her brain (*Lady Audley’s Secret* 267).

This could potentially be a reference to when Lady Audley was troubled over possibly being exposed by her first husband. When her hair seemed to mirror her state of mind as it gave “no little trouble” to Phoebe (63).

In general, there is certainly truth to Lady Audley's statement, as the lady's maid's "first duty in the morning, after having performed her own toilet, is to examine the clothes put off by her mistress the evening before, either to put them away, or to see that they are all in order to put on again" (Beeton 939). Having trained her eye to be able to notice flaws in dress, she would also be trained in the skill of making such flaws go away, either through cleaning, concealing or repairing; the method depending on what type of fabric and what type of blemish. That she, in addition, would always dress, style and attend to the same woman suggests that she would also gain insight into the person underneath the fashioning. As Lady Audley continues, the lady's maid

knows when the ivory complexion is bought and paid for – when the pearly teeth are foreign substances fashioned by the dentist – when the glossy plaits are the relics of the dead, rather than the property of the living; and she knows other and more sacred secrets than these. She knows when the sweet smile is more false than Madame Levison's enamel, and far less enduring – *when the words that issue from between gates of borrowed pearl are more disguised and painted than the lips which help to shape them.* (*Lady Audley's Secret* 267, my italics).

What this shows, is that not only will the lady's maid know which beauty tricks the mistress uses are fake, she can also detect fake sentiments and opinions and therefore, ultimately, fake identities. The fact that the speech is described to be "more disguised and painted" than the lips it emerges from, goes to show that it requires extreme skills to be able to detect such falsehoods. Not to mention, it shows that the lady's maid is able to look through the public meaning, to the actual state of the matter. The borrowed pearls can be read as a parallel to Lady Audley's hair, which albeit authentic, is used to shield a grimmer truth. Phoebe does indeed seem to have some skill in detecting falsity. Phoebe was never swayed by Lady Audley's charm and pretty ringlets as her private opinion is that her mistress is "selfish and extravagant" (341). And although Lucy became mistress of Audley Court, wearing silks and jewels, Phoebe never forgot what she used to wear: "What was she but a servant like me? Taking wages and working for them as hard, or harder than I did. You should have seen her shabby clothes, Luke – worn and patched, and darned, and turned and twisted" (23-4). Because Phoebe is not under Lady Audley's charm, Phoebe's loyalty to her mistress is wavering; she does Lady Audley's bidding but is at the same time blackmailing her.

Three cut-off locks of hair also feature in *Lady Audley's Secret*. One, that of a baby, reveals to Phoebe that Lady Audley has a child. A second one, taken from the head of a dying stranger is given to George, told to be his wife's, as proof that she is dead. The third one, the real wife's hair, is found by Robert inside George's book.

In her article, Heather Hind investigates these locks and their role in the narrative. She explains that the locks, like text, can be read, and argues that "locks of hair separated from their body of origin become verbally workable, capable of being made to tell a lie, crafty in both senses of the word" (180). It is, then, precisely because the locks are detached from the body that they can tell stories that deviate from the truth. Aviva Briefel has discovered something similar by looking into paste jewels, which towards the end of the Victorian era "pervaded the fashion market and became viable substitutes for the real thing" (147). She states that a "woman can deploy a fake jewel to deceive others without exposing herself: she can remove it, sell it, and lie about it while keeping her identity intact" (149). This corresponds with Brown's idea of identity depending on recognition and use. As long as these fake jewels are recognised as the real thing, the wearer is deemed respectable. However, as mentioned above in the example of Lady Audley, the hair that remained attached to her head also held the ability to uphold a lie. The difference lies in *how* it is used. Lady Audley's attached hair can tell a lie because the identity she has constructed also tells a lie. When facing people that know her past identity, like her first husband, her hair loses the ability to trick. It can only fool George by being detached.

After Lady Audley is exposed and placed in what she finds to be a madhouse, Lady Audley "plucked at the feathery golden curls as if she would have torn them from her head. It had served her so little after all, that gloriously glittering hair; that beautiful nimbus of yellow light" (*Lady Audley's Secret* 311). It is not until this moment, that it finally dawns on Lady Audley that the public's understanding of the innocent identity that her hair and her beauty signalled, is not strong enough to keep giving her advantages in life.

When Helen leaves her husband and becomes, like the title says, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, she does so with a new identity in mind. Considering that she comes to a place where no one, except her brother, knows her – Helen is free to construct her identity in whatever manner she wants within the scope of her means. During her flight from her husband, Helen reveals that, as "I intend to be taken for a widow, I thought it advisable to enter my new abode in mourning" (414). In Victorian culture, wearing mourning clothes after a loved one's death was normal. There was an order to what types of mourning one would wear and for what duration. As with fashion in general, mourning too was predominantly

worn by women. According to Judith Flanders, “Black dresses alone were not enough for those with the luxury of choice in mourning wear: the fabric had to be bombazine or crape [...]. Silks or any other fabric with a shine or gloss was considered vulgar for the first period of mourning” (343). For a widow, the first period of mourning would last a full year. It was followed by second mourning, ordinary mourning, and half-mourning – lasting six months each – where the heavy black of the attire would gradually lessen (378-9). With the cycles of mourning, there were social rules to follow. One such rule was that in “the twelve months after a husband’s death, his widow did not go out at all, and accepted visits only from relations and very close friends” (338). For someone like Helen Huntington, widowhood, then, appears as the perfect disguise. By appearing at Wildfell Hall in first mourning, she would keep curious neighbours at bay, giving her the privacy she so dearly craved. However, as Helen goes on to explain her choice of attire, “a plain black *silk* dress and mantle, a black veil [...] and a black *silk* bonnet,” it becomes clear that she is not wearing first mourning (*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* 414, my italics). This is quickly picked up on by the neighbourhood as Gilbert’s sister passes on the information to her family that the new tenant “is in mourning – not widow’s weeds, but slightish mourning” (8). Although Helen’s status as a widow is not questioned, her bad choice of mourning attire affects what people expect of her. In a society where it was a lady’s duty to be social, first mourning would have allowed Helen to be private without it rising alarm in the community. But as she does not have that excuse, it does not take long before gossip circulates about the reason for her reclusiveness.

In *East Lynne*, when Isabel has disgraced herself by running off with another man, she takes on the identity of Madame Vine, a widow turned governess. When she returns to her ex-husband’s home in the guise of a governess, she is lightly disfigured with a limp and a lisp, a facial scar, teeth missing and greying hair – all due to a train accident. She is described wearing

disfiguring green spectacles [...] going round the eyes, and a broad band of grey velvet coming down low upon her forehead. Her dress, too, is equally disfiguring. Never is she seen in one that fits her person, but in those frightful ‘loose jackets,’ which must surely have been invented by somebody envious of a pretty shape. As to her bonnet, it would put to shame those masquerade things tilted on to the back of the head, for it actually shaded her face; and she was never seen out of doors without a thick veil (389).

There is no doubt that Madame Vine is dressing unfashionably in her new character. The interesting thing, however, is that although she is described by others to be “the oddest-looking person,” it is still stressed that “she is a *gentlewoman* with it all; and looks one” (398). This might seem contradictory, especially as she is also wearing a “loose jacket” which would be hiding the shape that the corset would have pronounced. Not only this, but Madame Vine’s odd style is very similar to a certain other character: “[Madame Vine’s] caps, save that they were simple, and fitted closely to the face, nearly rivalled those of Miss Carlyle” (399). Indeed, Cornelia’s style is even further from fashion as she follows her own style. For instance, at one point, “her shoes and her white stockings [were] in full view: for Miss Corny disdained long dresses as much as she disdained crinoline” (45). When it comes to her hair, it is described to be “going grey now” and is worn “in curls which were rarely smooth, fastened back by combs which were rarely in their places” (47). For a woman to show her calves during the Victorian period was seen as scandalous and suggestive, yet, Cornelia gets away with it. She is only seen as odd-looking, and Madame Vine follows the trend. Why they both are still deemed respectable women could have a very simple explanation. As Lurie says, “Women whose personality and physical attributes fit the prevailing mode [of fashion] adopted it gladly [...]. Those who did not want to look girlish and helpless, or were physically ill-equipped for the part, might prefer to be out of fashion” (65). This suggests that there is a nuance to attires; bad styles did not necessarily mean the person had a bad personality. Women could be odd and yet be respectable. What it seems to suggest, is that it is particularly less attractive women who got away with a bad sense of fashion. Just like Lady Audley’s childishness cancelled out the pretentiousness in her style, so too, does unattractiveness cancel out the hints of promiscuousness.

Despite the many bodily disfigurements that have robbed Isabel of her beauty and made her almost unrecognisable, Madame Vine is using her clothes to the best of her ability to conceal her real identity. As she does not trust that her new self would be enough to keep people from suspecting the truth, Madame Vine uses clothing and accessories as a means to cover herself, to hide herself away. Basically, to make herself invisible. In one sense, she succeeds. As Steere says, “when she plays the role of ‘Madame Vine’ the governess, Isabel is paradoxically allowed more mobility within her home and is less subject to surveillance than she was as a lady” (117). This is to a certain degree true as she goes undetected for a long time. However, going under the radar might have more to do with her position as a servant in the house rather than her choice of clothes. Indeed, her clothes do the opposite of what she intends them to do. For instance, when she goes to church, she “scarcely raised her head; she

tightened her thick veil over her face; she kept her spectacles bent towards the ground” (*East Lynne* 433). Here, Madame Vine is actively trying to make herself invisible by using her attire as a shield. However, because she is so odd-looking, the opposite happens: “The congregation did not forget to stare at her: what an extraordinary looking governess Mrs Carlyle had picked up!” (433). What this ultimately shows, is that Madame Vine, in trying to erase her material body, puts her social body on display.

It is not only her identity she hides with her clothes. It is also her emotions. When Joyce’s half-sister tells Madame Vine the news of Mr Carlyle having remarried, Madame Vine “laid her hand upon her beating heart. But for that delectable ‘loose jacket,’ Afy might have detected her bosom’s rise and fall” (394). There are also several times during Madame Vine’s stay at East Lynne where she has to hide her many and strong feelings. When she is forced to face Barbara, as the new wife, Barbara takes notice of Madame Vine’s “intensely pale face—as much as could be seen of it for the cap and the spectacles” (404). Isabel’s son also reveals to Barbara that he knows Madame Vine has been crying over his illness as he says, “she wipes her eyes under her spectacles, and thinks I don’t see her” (482). Considering that she is working in the house of her ex-husband, whom she regrets leaving; his new wife, whom she used to feel jealous of; and her own children, one of whom is being terminally ill; all the while having to pretend she does not know them, and hearing the tales of her own actions in a negative light – there is no wonder the emotions Isabel go through are intense, and that her clothes can only do so much in hiding them.

But despite not being able to conceal all her emotions and remain entirely invisible, it is nonetheless important for her to wear the glasses and the veil. For example, when the wind “flew away with the veil” and “she contrived to knock off her blue spectacles” in front of Cornelia, the latter mutters, “what an extraordinary likeness!” (464). And when Joyce acknowledges that she knows Madame Vine is Lady Isabel she relates that she recognised her because her “face was not disguised then” (588). When Madame Vine at last lies on her deathbed and all her disfiguring garments and accessories have been removed, it is stated that it “was the face of Lady Isabel: changed, certainly, very very much; but still hers” (611). It goes to show that it is ultimately the clothes that shield the true identity, despite her many bodily disfigurements.

Indeed, clothes and other objects on the body play a very significant part in these women’s new identities, and so do the objects’ public meanings. These meanings say something about a person’s identity, their status in society, their sense of fashion and their degree of respectability. If identity depends on recognition and use, as Brown claims, it adds

a temporal quality to identity as it opens up for the possibility that other recognitions could interfere in how someone or something is identified and treated. What distinguishes people from objects in this theory, is that people are conscious beings that are aware of the identities they had in the past. The emotions that haunt Madame Vine and almost exposes her, stem from a confrontation with her previous identity as Lady Isabel. Likewise, Lady Audley is trying to discard her old self through a change of clothes but finds that her behaviour is still that of her past identity. Lady Audley is aware of this herself, as she claims, “the hidden taint” was “sucked in with my mother’s milk” (*Lady Audley's Secret* 312). Helen, as well, is not able to cut all ties to her old self as she feels a moral responsibility to return to her husband when he falls terminally ill.

It is one thing to dress a certain way, another to understand the social implications and make them work in one’s favour. Helen, for instance, failed to consider that wearing first mourning would have made her reclusiveness less suspicious to the hungry gossipers. Madame Vine, using layers of clothing to hide herself, failed to consider the social potential such clothes had in making her stand out. Lady Audley, on the other hand, knew exactly how to wield the public meanings to benefit her. Her error was rather to believe that such meanings could withstand the allocations of her bad conduct. When people enter their homes, they do not shed their clothes, nor do they shed the public meanings attached to their clothes. It is, therefore, an inevitable fact that the public meanings clothes signal are also found within the home, interfering with private management by turning one woman into an object of expense, another, the victim of devastating gossip, and a third, into a wolf in sheep’s clothing.

Chapter 3: Objects in Transition

The invisible Servant

Eve Lynch shows the impact of servants' invisibility by making a comparison with the supernatural: "like the apparition appearing out of nowhere, the silent housemaid appeared from out of nowhere at the pull of the cord" (67). The housemaid would also be "furnishing the home with a ghostly agency that moved the tables and chairs, emptied the grates and chamber pots, and disappeared around corners and through passages to the 'other side' of the green baize door" (68). Indeed, in many houses, this was the case: the family was to enjoy the fruits of their servants' labour but wanted to be ignorant of the process. Servants were almost one with their surroundings, "occupying a position tied to the workings of the house itself" (67-8). Because of this, it is possible to apply Bill Brown's "Thing Theory" to servants. Brown makes a distinction between things and objects:⁵

As they circulate through our lives, we look *through* objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture—above all, what they disclose about *us*), but we only catch a glimpse of things. [...] We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily (4).

What Brown seems to suggest, is that people become so enwrapped in the meanings attached to objects, and how the objects are used through habit, that they do not notice the thing itself. When there is a break of the habit and the object no longer works as it is supposed to, that is when the attention is drawn to the thing's sheer materiality.

To apply this theory to servants might be deemed a stretch, considering servants were people not objects with the ability to interact in the world in a more intricate and complex way, having the aptitude to think and behave of their own accord. However, some lines can be drawn. On the one hand, servants were regarded almost as objects themselves, objects that were not supposed to draw attention to themselves. They also had to appear in good condition and would receive negative attention if they did not. On the other hand, servants were

⁵ I will not be making any such distinction in this thesis, except for when I am discussing Brown's "Thing Theory."

handling, making, cleaning, improving and upholding the good condition of the household objects. This made the servants the protectors and keepers of these objects. Indeed, it was the entire servant staff's goal to make certain everything was in good shape and worked the way it was supposed to work, without anything or anyone drawing unnecessary attention to themselves. The family members were also anticipating that everything would work as it ought, and if it did not, the servants would often be blamed and duly reprimanded.

Sabine Schülting looks at dirt in Victorian literature and points out that her aim, like with Brown's "Thing Theory," is to "look for those shock moments when dirt arrests the flow of language and 'asserts' itself as matter" (9). Dirt is barely mentioned in the chosen novels. This is precisely why I believe dirt *should* be mentioned here. The reason why dirt is not mentioned is because the servants have successfully removed it from the many household objects, and therefore stopped the objects from arresting any attention. In this way, the absence of dirt, and the quiet process of removing it, witness to a well-functioning group of servants, one that efficiently got the chores done without asserting their presence on the printed page.

The Victorian middle- and upper-class home was not supposed to be dirty. Cleanliness pervades Mrs Beeton's *Household Management*, turning dirt into one of its biggest enemies. It was highly important to keep the house spotless; as Mrs Beeton says, "every establishment has some customs peculiar to itself, on which we need not dwell; the general duties are the same in all, perfect cleanliness and order being the object" (948). Cleanliness and order, it seems, go hand in hand, making it true that "dirt is essentially disorder" (qtd. in Schülting 6). The housemaid's job particularly concerned cleaning, but it was not only limited to her; the footman, butler, lady's maid, cook, kitchen maid – all had some type and degree of cleaning incorporated into their daily routines.

Although Mrs Beeton's focus on cleanliness has mostly to do with health, it is nonetheless implicitly also about status. This is because dirt was often accumulating among the poor, and so by expelling dirt from their homes and their persons, middle- and upper-class people "sought to set themselves apart from the working classes" (Schülting 6). When dirt is mentioned in *Lady Audley's Secret*, it is in places like the home of Lucy's poverty-stricken father, or the cramped and bustling London sphere – never at the stately country mansion Audley Court. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* also positioned the "clean" country as an opposition to the grimy city as Gilbert ends the novel by anticipating the addressee, Halford's visit, "when you must leave your dusty, smoky, noisy, toiling, striving city for a season of invigorating relaxation and social retirement with us" (524). When Cornelia finds dust in her

home in *East Lynne*, it is not because the house is dirty, but rather because Cornelia's standard of cleanliness is unreasonably high. Joyce, indeed, has just cleaned the room in question thoroughly, and puts focus on the fact that the dust settled there afterwards: "You insist upon having the windows thrown up, and of course the dust will fly in" (62). This gives off the idea that dirt is not something naturally found inside the home, that the threat of a dirtied home comes from outside.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall gives an example of when servants are significantly invisible until the moment something goes wrong. The cook is only mentioned when Huntingdon, the day after returning from London, "was finding fault with everything on the table and declaring we must change our cook" (266). He blames Helen's housekeeping, as he says, "You must have been letting her get into slovenly habits then, while I was away. It is enough to poison one – eating such a disgusting mess!" There is a certain irony to Huntingdon's comment as he is the one who was "breakfasting at twelve" and "lunching at two on another bottle of soda-water mingled with brandy" (266). It is not only the cook that is under fire in this scene. Huntingdon, who one could only wonder might be suffering the after-effect of too much festivities in London, is highly sensitive to sensations. As a result of his low tolerance, he tells the butler who has turned up to clear the table to "Be quick Benson – do have done with that infernal clatter!" (266). A surprised Benson "did his best to effect a quiet and speedy clearance of the rest, but, unfortunately, there was a rumple in the carpet, caused by the hasty pushing back of his master's chair, at which he tripped and stumbled, causing a rather alarming concussion with the trayful of crockery in his hands" (267). Benson, who has gone unnoticed until this point in the book, makes himself known with commotion. Huntingdon blames the incident on Benson and showers him with anger and curses. It is, however, Huntingdon's order to "be quick" which breaks the butler's habit of handling objects with ease, causing the pushing back of the chair to be "hasty" which in its turn creates a rumple that leads to Benson's fall. A rumpled carpet becomes, like the straw that broke the camel's back, an insignificant thing causing large damage. What arrests most attention here is not the rumpled carpet or the broken sauce-tureen, however, it is the butler himself. He is like an object that has stopped functioning as it ought, a man turned thing, and treated as such by his master.

Helen faces protests from her husband when she chooses to dismiss Benson from the room. She defends herself by saying "the poor man was quite frightened and hurt at your sudden explosion" (267). Helen, unlike Huntingdon, who refuses "to consider the feelings of an insensate brute like that," treats the butler as a human being (267). Her more humane

treatment of the staff comes to benefit her in the long run as Benson, onwards, shows that his real loyalty lies with Helen and not Huntingdon. When Huntingdon discovers that Helen plans to leave him, he orders the butler to destroy her painting materials. In this moment, “Benson paused aghast and looked at [Helen]” and it is not before Helen reinforces her husband’s command by saying “Take them away, Benson” that Benson follows the command (387). Undoubtedly, Benson finds himself in a tricky situation as he holds true loyalty for Helen but must listen to the commands of her husband, the head of the house. That is why Helen repeats her husband’s command, so that the butler would not be faced with the dilemma of who to show loyalty to. Benson, in the end, shows the ultimate loyalty when he helps Helen escape, by standing “ready with a light to open the door and fasten it after us” (413).

East Lynne shows an example of what the absence of servants can do to a room. When Isabel and Carlyle return to East Lynne as husband and wife, they do not fail to notice that Isabel’s room is not in the state it is supposed to be in: “The branches were not lighted, and the room looked cold and comfortless” (142). Carlyle, not knowing yet that his sister fired his servants, remarks that things “seem all at sixes and sevens in the house” (142). The absence of the servants draws attention to things that would normally not be noticed. The servants’ absence does not only show their importance in keeping everything working smoothly. It also shows that they could play a vital part in making family members feel at home. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* shows something similar. As Helen returns to Grassdale to tend to her dying husband, she “found the house in sad confusion: Mrs Greaves, Benson, every decent servant had left” (452). In this example it becomes clear that everything is connected: the sad state of the estate is a result of a lack of decent servants taking care of it, and the lack of decent servants is a result of bad management on the part of the master.

In general, Victorian fiction seems to mirror the tendency to keep servants invisible as fictional servants tend to be either absent or perform minor roles in narratives. Anthea Trodd speaks of a genre that deviates from this norm, as she says, “Servant characters, often nearly invisible in Victorian fiction, assume high visibility in crime plots” (8). This, she points out, particularly concerns sensation fiction which often centred around the domestic sphere and the hidden crimes which could take place within. Trodd deems the servants to be household spies because of their “ability to see but remain unseen” (105). That the servant becomes more visible in plots like these, goes to show the crucial role that servants kept in either witnessing and exposing crime, or being the instigators of crime.

Lady Audley's Secret is a novel where the servant becomes very visible. Phoebe is a character who is allowed a lot of page space, first as Lady Audley's lady's maid and confidante, then as an innkeeper's wife at Castle Inn, but most significantly, as the keeper and exploiter of Lady Audley's secrets. But despite Phoebe's high visibility, there is yet something that gives her a factor of invisibility – and it concerns colour. Diana Young argues that colours have been neglected in material culture, and goes on to portray the various ways colours are important:

Colours may be harnessed to accomplish work that no other quality of things can [...]. Colours animate things in a variety of ways, evoking space, emitting brilliance, endowing things with an aura of energy or light. Conversely colours are also able to camouflage things amidst their context. Colours constitute badges of identity and connect otherwise disparate categories of things – red buses, red birds, red fruit, say – in expanding analogical networks. Colours can transform things and sequences of colour transformations employed to represent temporality. Colours are also linked with emotional expression (173).

The topic of colour is particularly important in Lady Audley's relationship with Phoebe, and the comparison between the two. Phoebe is explained to be very similar in looks to Lady Audley. As Lady Audley admits, "you *are* like me, and your features are very nice; it is only colour that you want" (*Lady Audley's Secret* 47). It is, in other words, the degree of colour that is the prime distinction between the two women. This is a crucial difference; while Lady Audley is described as being very beautiful, it is precisely the lack of colour that makes Phoebe unattractive: "She might have been pretty, I think, but for the one fault in her small oval face. This fault was an absence of colour" (22). Lady Audley has colours and thereby beauty on her side, with her "pink and rosy" complexion, her "pale yellow [hair] shot with gold" and "dark brown [eyebrows and eyelashes]" (47). In contrast, there is no "tinge of crimson" in the "waxen whiteness of [Phoebe's] cheeks," no "shadow of brown" in her brows or lashes, or "glimmer of gold or auburn" in her hair (22). Lady Audley, unlike Phoebe, has all the advantage that colour can give her.

However, although colour works to Lady Audley's advantage in the shape of beauty, it also works against her in other areas. One instance is when Robert is admiring "her jewelled white hands," and notices a "bruise upon her delicate skin," one that she tries to hide under a golden bracelet (71). When Lady Audley explains what caused the bruise, it becomes

clear to Robert that the discoloured skin tells a different story: “My lady tells little childish white lies; the bruise is of a more recent date than a few days ago; the skin has only just begun to change colour” (72). What the colour reveals, here, is something more complex than Lady Audley believes it capable of. Not only does it tell that she must have done something that damaged her skin, it also gives off a temporal clue. Because Lady Audley does not take into account the full extent of what the bruise reveals and incorporates it into her answer, her explanation is exposed as a lie.

As Young mentioned, emotions can also be expressed through colour. We see it in George as “colour had faded from his cheek” when he considered the frightening thought that his wife might not be waiting for him on his return from Australia – and in how Lady Audley’s father, who partakes in deceiving George, “started and coloured violently, with something of a frightened look, as he recognised his son-in-law” (*Lady Audley’s Secret* 16, 36). Phoebe, as a contrast, “seemed to hold herself within herself, and take no colour from the outer world,” something that leads Robert to conclude that she “is a woman who could keep a secret” (106). Indeed, that Phoebe’s emotions are not easy to interpret through colours, makes her harder to read and a somewhat unreliable character. Steere comments on how earlier critics have mostly discredited Phoebe’s agency by having “largely overlooked the fact that although [the blackmailing] provided a livelihood for Luke, the initial scheme was masterminded by Phoebe” (96). Steere argues that Phoebe is “less overtly malicious” due to her feeling “sympathy for her mistress and shares a certain intimacy with her” but also because she “readily gets what she wants” (96). Here, I would like to add that her lack of colour also plays a part. Since people often stereotype based on looks, as discussed in the section on Lady Audley’s hair, it is quite possible that the blandness of Phoebe’s features aids in making her appear as a transparent and plain person. This could also be why Lady Audley makes her a confidante; Phoebe is similar enough to be someone she can sympathise with, but her lack of colour makes her no threat as a rival beauty to Lady Audley, nor does it make her seem capable of betrayal.

To put Phoebe’s lack of colour in perspective, Lady Audley’s portrait shows us an example of when the opposite happens. The portrait is described to be “so like and yet so unlike” Lady Audley to make her appear as a “beautiful fiend” (*Lady Audley’s Secret* 57). And the cause of this is none other than colours: “it was as if you had burned strange-coloured fires before my lady’s face, and by their influence brought out new lines and new expressions never seen in it before” (57). As the narrator goes on to describe the “crimson dress [...] that looked like flames, her fair head peeping out of the lurid mass of colour, as if

out of a raging furnace” and “the ripe scarlet of the pouting lips,” it becomes clear that it is the excess of colour, the vividness of the hue, that brings out the devilish character (57-8). Alicia’s argument that a painter can see “another expression that is equally a part of [the face], though not to be perceived by common eyes,” turns out to be correct (58). Because, when Lady Audley in her wicked scheme to frame Robert as a madman, has a violent emotional outburst, it is mentioned that “the lines about her pretty rosy mouth, those hard and cruel lines which Robert Audley had observed in the pre-Raphaelite portrait, were plainly visible in the firelight” (226). Colours therefore matter: while the lack of colour in Phoebe’s face aids in making her invisible, the strength of colour in the painting of the mistress renders her someone to be suspicious of. Although this example is predominantly about the painting of a woman, one can also draw a comparison to the so-called “painted women” – real women wearing make-up. What make-up basically is, is colour. Colour used to enhance the best features of the face or to camouflage imperfections. Rouge made cheeks rosy, lip balm enhanced the redness of lips and powder whitened the skin.

While during the eighteenth century it was normal for women to wear heavy make-up, the Victorians saw excessive make-up as a sign of promiscuousness. Attfield points out that the “anxiety over women’s use of cosmetics that arose in the nineteenth century was derived from the belief that the application of make-up constituted a form of deception and that true beauty emanated from within, reflecting the inherent goodness and purity of the character through the appearance” (162). In reference to the previous chapter, this meant that, just like the extravagant dress and the humbler dress found themselves on opposite ends of a personality spectrum, so did the use of cosmetics versus natural beauty.

Jane Eastoe points out, however, that “Preserving the complexion was acceptable, but wearing visible make-up was frowned upon” (153). Make-up was, in other words, accepted as long as one could not see that it was used – as long as it was invisible. This brings us back to the discovery made in Phoebe and Lady Audley’s colours; that the stronger the colour, the more conspicuous and prone to suspicion would the person be. Colour also fits into Brown’s thing theory, as too much powder on the skin, for instance, draws attention to the very materiality of the powder.

While discussing their similar looks, Lady Audley advises Phoebe that “with a bottle of hair dye, such as we see advertised in the papers, and a pot of rouge, you’d be as good-looking as I any day, Phoebe” (*Lady Audley’s Secret* 47). She is, in other words, advising Phoebe to use fake means to achieve beauty. But as Phoebe is so deprived of colour, it is

likely that adding some colour would only compensate for what is lacking, and thereby still make her remain within the acceptable limit.

Colours can also be suspicious when found in clothes. When the maid that replaces Phoebe is first described, she is portrayed to be “a very showy damsel, who wore a black satin gown, and rose-coloured ribbons in her cap” (91). Lady Audley does not trust this maid at all, and one could wonder if it has anything to do with the choice of colours. In later mentions of the maid, she is described as the “girl with the rose-coloured ribbons” and as a “smart lady’s-maid, who wore rose-coloured ribbons and black silk gowns, and other adornments” (266, 248). As the colour “rose” is repeated, it becomes clear that – unlike Phoebe – the new maid is more visible due to her use of pink. The descriptions also show that we do not get to know much about the maid herself except for her clothes and their colours. More than anything, it is her rose-coloured ribbons that are mentioned, and they feature as something one recognises her by. While the rose-ribbons make the maid visible, their prominence makes the rest of the maid fade. She is visible, but invisible at once – and her identity becomes tied to her attire.

On the other hand, there is Phoebe. Even on her wedding day, while wearing Lady Audley’s cast-off silk dress, she does not seem to evoke as much attention as one would expect of a servant bride dressing above her station. Instead, Phoebe is portrayed as a “very dim and shadowy lady; vague of outline, and faint of colouring; with eyes, hair, complexion, and dress all melting into such pale and uncertain shades that, in the obscure light of the foggy November morning, a superstitious stranger might have mistaken the bride for the ghost of some other bride, dead and buried in the vaults below the church” (90). In a way, Phoebe’s “extravagant” dress seems to have made her fade even further away from the public eye. Braddon, here, does the same as Lynch and compares the maid with a ghost, drawing focus to the trait they both share; invisibility.

That the new maid poses a threat to Lady Audley is not only a consequence of colour but also of the clothes themselves. Lady Audley’s new maid is contrasted with the servants of the “good old days” when silk, ribbons and adornments “were unknown to the humble people who sat below the salt,” a time “when servants wore linsey-woolsey” (248). This seems to suggest that also the servants, to a certain extent, could elevate themselves in status through clothing, something they could not do before. The new maid, therefore, seems pretentious, even though her actions appear neutral – not showing her to be either a good or a bad maid. Although it is possible to ascribe this to Lady Audley having started to get an inkling that she

cannot trust Phoebe, her confidante, and that she has major crimes to hide, one should not disregard the significance of the “rose-coloured ribbons.”

Generally speaking, servants that become very visible due to their clothes are not painted in a positive light. In *East Lynne*, during the music master’s concert, Lord Mount Severn’s footmen are sent to tell Isabel that her father is ill. The business is a grave one, and judged solely on the men’s actions, their performance is neutral. However, their appearance is far from neutral. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, footmen were often hired for their good looks. They were supposed to show, publicly, the family’s wealth and status. Footmen were more expensive to keep than maids but would still be hired by the aristocracy as it was thought that “no person of rank could be seen without footmen to serve at dinner” (Evans 64). Their liveries were also of considerable expense and were “based upon the fashions of the late eighteenth century, when gentlemen passed on their old clothes to their servants” (65). When the footmen interrupt the concert looking for Isabel the scene is portrayed thus:

a powdered head, larger than any cauliflower ever grown, was discerned ascending the stairs behind the group of gentlemen; which head, when it brought its body in full view, was discovered to belong to one of the footmen of Lord Mount Severn. The calves alone, cased in their silk stockings, were a sight to be seen; and these calves betook themselves inside the concert-room, with a deprecatory bow for permission to the gentlemen they had to steer through, and there they came to a stand-still, the cauliflower extending forward, and turning itself about from right to left (*East Lynne* 80).

This scene brings two qualities of the footman into view: the powdered hair and the strong calves. That the footman wears “silk stockings” implies that the calves also show in their full prominence as the stockings, following the shape of the legs, would enhance the calves instead of hiding them as trousers would. Mrs Beeton, as we know, reprimanded the mistresses who hired a footman only based on “his height, shape, and tournure of his calf,” thereby pointing out that good calves were an attractive feature that it was possible to get distracted by when searching for a good servant (917). In this scene, the calves are indeed a distraction as the focus is on them and not what the footman came there to do.

To powder one’s hair was also something expected by the footman, and this was not effortless. As Evans mentions, “The powder irritated the scalp, and had to be washed out at night, or else it would turn the footman’s hair ginger in colour.” Due to this, “Footmen

embraced the use of horsehair wigs with relief; at least they could remove them at the end of the day” (65). Whether or not the footman at the concert is wearing a wig, one thing is certain; the hair is big and full of powder. The focus that is put on the hair and the calves in this scene is so dominant, it erases the man whom the hair and calves are attached to. In addition, there is a certain ridicule to the pompous extravagance the servant presents when his hair is compared to a large cauliflower, and it distracts from the serious business at hand. The footman ends up standing out, as a sign of excess and absurdity, and due to his connection to the family, his appearance directly reflects on Isabel. If one also takes into consideration that Isabel’s father is penniless, the footmen present a lie; upholding a sense of wealth the family no longer has.

It is precisely because of the servants’ showiness, reflected in their clothes, that Cornelia decides to interfere with Carlyle’s staff: “I go to East Lynne to-morrow, and discharge those five dandies of servants. I was up there on Saturday, and there were all three of my damsels cocketed up in fine mousseline-de-laine gowns, with peach bows in their caps, and the men in striped jackets, playing at footmen” (*East Lynne* 135). The pomp and splendour these servants show, go against Cornelia’s values. To her, in addition to an expense, fancy dress equals incompetence and vanity.

Marvel, the maid Isabel brings with her to East Lynne, is described to be “very stylish, with five flounces to her dress, a veil and a parasol” (142). That a certain standard accommodates her elaborate dress becomes clear when she decides to resign after Lady Isabel marries Carlyle. Marvel has high expectations as an upper-servant, anticipating certain perks: “Marvel deemed herself worse used than any lady’s-maid ever had been yet. From the very hour of the wedding her anger had been gathering, for there had been no gentleman-valet to take care of *her* during the wedding journey. Bad enough! but she had come home to find that there was no staff of upper servants at all” (143). Marvel, upon arriving, tries to call out for someone to carry her things but is instead met with Cornelia telling her to carry them herself. As Marvel resigns, she admits that the small establishment is not the worst part: “perhaps I could put up with that” (149). Rather, the nail in the coffin to her employment at East Lynne is Cornelia: “we have both got tempers that would clash, and might be flying at each other: I could not stop, my lady, for untold gold” (149). What this shows, is that Marvel sees herself as of high status, and the pride she attaches to it far outdoes Isabel’s. Isabel, too, sensed the effect of fewer servants in the household. She also finds herself the object of Cornelia’s critique, but she is accepting it. In a way, Marvel is expecting higher privileges

than the mistress she serves, which makes her appear pretentious. In addition, to resign so abruptly is an act of disloyalty to Isabel.

When Marvel leaves, Isabel gets Joyce temporarily as a maid. However, the two of them bond, and so the situation becomes permanent. Joyce used to be Cornelia's maid but is free to become Isabel's lady's maid as long as she "could still make [Cornelia's] gowns" (154). When discussing how Joyce should be dressed, Joyce says she would like to "wear plain white net [caps], [...] neat and close, with a little quilled white ribbon." Isabel agrees that "They are the best that you can wear. I do not wish you to be fine, like Marvel," to which Joyce agrees; "Oh, my lady! I shall never be fine" (154). Considering that Cornelia "only allows muslin caps to her servants," Joyce and Isabel's agreement on net caps becomes a middle ground between Cornelia's stingy habits and Marvel's extravagant expectations (154). Joyce's more modest way of dressing reflects on her modest character. Indeed, Joyce turns out to be a very decent and trustworthy servant. When the maid, Wilson, is at her worst with gossiping, Joyce warns her that "if you think to pursue these sort of topics at East Lynne, I shall inform my lady that you are unsuitable for the situation" (179). After Isabel makes the error of leaving her husband, it is said that "There's one person who never will hear a word breathed against her, and that's Joyce" (395). Joyce is the stark contrast to her half-sister, Afy, who, "If not a lady, she was attired as one: a flounced dress, and a stylish looking shawl, and a white veil" (327). Her love for flashy clothes mirrors a superficial personality. She actively participates in gossip and lies, courts two men at the same time and uses dirty tricks in her hunt for the best match in marriage to advance herself.

Colour, dress and things that stop working as they ought, are all things that can make the seemingly invisible servant visible. Whether it is objects on their bodies or objects the servants tend to, does not matter; the attention is drawn to the servant. As the servants were often objectified, this particularly becomes true. The episode with the footman at the concert is a good example of it. The focus is drawn to his big hair and well-shaped calves, so much so, the man himself is erased. But at the same time, the servants' humanness is not entirely forgotten. Because they are people with independent behaviour and agendas, they pose as threats, someone to be suspicious of. This is what distinguishes servants from mere objects. When their clothes or their colours arrest attention, the focus is drawn to social meanings. Like with the mistress, objects on the body reflect status and says something about a person's personality.

The House and Feminine Identity

Beverly Gordon argues that “Body and interior space were often seen and treated as if they were the same thing, so much so that they became almost interchangeable” (281). The body Gordon alludes to is the female body, and Gordon builds her argument on a comparison between the woman’s dress and the decorations of the home. Considering that the home was seen as a feminine space and that the drawing room, in particular, reflected the good qualities of the mistress and her family to every visitor, this theory is not so far-fetched. Gordon bases her argument on comparisons between the mistress and her room, drawing on evidence such as the fact that light morning room curtains matched the lady’s lighter morning attire, while the heavier dinner room curtains matched the more elaborate evening dress. We can see this mirrored in *East Lynne* where the “room looked on to the street, and the windows were up, their handsome white curtains, spotless as Miss Carlyle’s head-dress, waving gently in the summer breeze” (61). Just like *Dirt in Victorian Literature* mentions that “metaphorical dirt is metonymically linked to material dirt,” so too, is the materially clean linked to the metaphorically clean (3). The windows of Cornelia’s house face the streets, making the curtains visible for anyone who walks by. The curtains, therefore, reflect something of the state inside the home to the passers-by, signalling that Cornelia is a respectable woman who is, indeed, “spotless” like her curtains⁶.

That there was a link between the mistress and her room was not a coincidence on the part of the interior design. As Kerr says: “The character to be always aimed at in a Drawing-room is especial cheerfulness, refinement of elegance, and [...] lightness as opposed to massiveness. Decoration and furniture ought therefore to be comparatively delicate; in short, [...] to be entirely ladylike” (107). The drawing room was therefore consciously moulded after the lady. Mrs Beeton also offers comments on this linkage as, on the topic of engaging new servants, she advised the mistress to visit the servant’s previous employer to judge “the appearance of the lady and the state of her house,” stating, “Negligence and want of cleanliness in her and her household generally, will naturally lead you to the conclusion, that her servant has suffered from the influence of the bad example” (6). In other words, the mistress must turn to the room and its objects to form an opinion of its inhabitants. Not only will the objects allow her to form an opinion of the qualities of the lady, it will also give her

⁶ As an interesting contrast, *Lady Audley’s Secret* offers an example of when a man is compared to his house. George’s father is described to be “like his own square-built, northern-fronted, shelterless house” (144). His daughter, when she marries Robert, seems to compensate for her upbringing in a male-dominated home by moving into an idyllic “fairy cottage” – a stark contrast to her father’s comfortless estate (353).

an indication of the quality of the servant's work, and whether they had a functioning professional relationship. The room, therefore, shows more than the mistress's identity, but also something of the servant working behind the scene to uphold this identity. Indeed, it is not only things on the body that tie to identity. Rooms as well, with all their things, could perform this function. But while objects on the body could give any passer-by a sense of a mistress's identity, the mistress's room would be restricted to only show people invited to the home a glimpse of this identity.

Cohen mentions that "Until at least the 1880s, the business of furnishing was almost entirely a man's world. The earliest home decoration manuals were written by married men for married men. Decorators were men; the cause of design reform was led by men; upholsterers were men, as were the clerks on the shop floor" (90). Interestingly this means that women's identities in the home were, at the core, potentially constructed by their husbands. The result is, that instead of decorating her home to fit her identity, the mistress might have been forced to fit her identity to the home.

As Lady Audley has already shown, she is more than happy to fit her identity into the rich garments of an aristocratic mistress. This also includes objects not on the body, like furniture, ornaments and the rooms themselves. The person to construct Lady Audley's surroundings is none other than her husband: "the generous baronet had transformed the interior of the grey old mansion into a little palace for his young wife" and her rooms feature "all pictures and gildings, and great looking-glasses that stretch from the ceiling to the floor. Painted ceilings, too, that cost hundreds of pounds [...] and all done for her" (*Lady Audley's Secret* 43, 24). From the moment she took occupancy in the house as its mistress, the rooms were ready for her, filled with things she could claim her own. When Lady Audley has to leave Audley Court, it becomes evident that she sees the splendid rooms as part of herself, and struggles to leave it all behind:

Her mercenary soul hankered greedily after the costly and beautiful things of which she had been mistress. She had hidden away fragile teacups and covered vases of Sèvres and Dresden among the folds of her silken dinner dresses. She had secreted jewelled and golden drinking cups amongst her delicate linen. She would have taken the pictures from the walls, and the Gobelin tapestry from the chairs, had it been possible for her to do so (304).

That Lady Audley puts the possessions amidst her clothing⁷ makes the possessions materialistically become part of the clothes, thereby merging the two means Lady Audley shaped her identity after: the objects adorning her person and the objects adorning her personal rooms. However, as the wishing to tear pictures from the wall and tapestry from chairs show, there is more complexity when identity is tied to rooms. First of all, the room consists of many components that, not only express identity separately, but also as a gestalt. As identity also ties to the room's entirety, it renders it immobile; locked to a specific space. Lady Audley – banished from the estate – has no choice but to forget that the Gobelin tapestry and pictures were ever in her possession.

One can see an even more intricate example of this in *East Lynne*. The interesting thing with Lady Isabel is that within the course of the novel, she has had three different identities at East Lynne. The first one was as an aristocratic daughter, the second as a middle-class wife and the third as a governess. Arjun Appadurai argues that “commodities, like persons, have social lives” and that “the commodity is not one kind of thing rather than another, but one phase in the life of some things” (3, 17). What this means, is that objects are dynamic things, as the object's value, use, and meaning can change throughout the object's lifetime. In the case of Isabel, *East Lynne* and its objects stay mostly the same, it is rather her own identity which changes – and therefore also her relationship to the objects.

In a way, Isabel is like an object, going through different phases of identity. Indeed, as Reynolds and Humble state, women were objectified as an “erotic commodity for a male market – either that of prostitution or of marriage – allowing little space for the naming of women's own desires and pleasures” (60-1). In the case of Lady Isabel, her father sells the house in secret to Carlyle before he dies and leaves her penniless. Feeling unhappy, having no choice but to live with the relatives who inherit her father's title, Carlyle's marriage proposal seems like the only way out for Isabel. It does not matter that Carlyle is a good man. The fact that Isabel is not given a proper choice, renders her slightly at loss in her new role.

Like Reynolds and Humble, Kortsch also offers a comparison of the mistress to an object as she says,

We must [...] remember that textiles, along with other ‘movables’ such as china, silver, and furniture, were traditionally part of a girl's inheritance. They would ‘move’ with her when she left her father's household to join her husband's. As historian

⁷ “Linen,” here, could be a euphemism for “underwear” (Flanders 122).

Laurel Ulrich Thatcher points out, ‘In such a system, women themselves became “movables,” changing their names and presumably their identities as they moved from one male-headed household to another.’ (8).

That the woman of the house is so easily objectified, as an object among objects, makes it easy to understand that she would be, as Gordon argued, interchanged with her rooms.

In Lady Isabel’s case, her father’s household and her husband’s household are one and the same. Yet, when returning to the estate as a wife Isabel bursts into tears because “it did not seem like coming home to East Lynne” (*East Lynne* 142). Following her outburst, Isabel expresses to her husband that “I should like to go to my rooms, Archibald, but I don’t know which they are” (142). What this shows, is that her return to the house as wife and mistress has rendered the place vastly unfamiliar. This unfamiliarity is particularly epitomized in the bell, which “had been moved in some late alterations to the house” (146). Isabel, after having been left alone in her new room, says that “I could not find the bell, and that made me worse; so I came back to the chair and covered my head over, hoping somebody would come up” (145). The absence of the bell, and therefore, the absence of a possibility to summon help, cuts Isabel off from the rest of the house and increases her sense of hopelessness. Just as she must now adapt to the new identity in the house, she must also readapt to the house and its objects.

When Isabel later returns to the estate as a governess, and secretly, as an ex-wife – her reaction to the house is in great contrast to her return as a wife. While passing through the corridors, Isabel notes that the “doors of her old bed and dressing-rooms stood open, and she glanced in with a yearning look. No, never more, never more could they be hers: [...] they had passed into another’s occupancy. [...] there were the little ornaments on the large dressing-table, as they used to be in *her* time” (401). Her reaction at seeing the drawing room is similar: “The old familiar drawing-room; its large, handsome proportions, its well-arranged furniture, its bright chandelier! It all came back to her with a heart-sickness. No longer *her* drawing-room, that she should take pride in it: she had flung it away from her when she flung away the rest” (404). Although Isabel’s years at East Lynne as Carlyle’s wife, and her regrets for leaving, play a heavy part in her changed sentiments, one should not underestimate the influence the place and its atmosphere have in this changed perspective. When Isabel entered the house for the first time as a wife, she did not know which rooms were hers, Cornelia refused her request for tea, her room had no fire lighted and she could not find the bell to summon her maid. Returning as a governess, the treatment Isabel receives is much better. Not

only does she have her very own sitting room, the grey parlour, with a fire “burning in the grate, looking cheerful on the autumn night,” she is also told that a maid would be tending to her needs: “Hannah [...] is the maid who waits upon the grey parlour, and will do anything you like up here” (400, 402). Last but not least, she is not refused her tea: “Everything was ready in the grey parlour; the tea-tray on the table, the small urn hissing away, the tea-caddy in proximity to it. A silver rack of dry toast, butter, and a hot muffin covered with a small silver cover” (402). Madame Vine receives the welcome Lady Isabel never received upon entering the house, and the comfort, reliance and cheer it brings makes the house appear much more inviting the second time around. Considering that servants were part of the house and responsible for many of the house’s comforts, it must be pointed out that their role in creating this atmosphere is crucial. Without them, there would be no tea or cosy fire to improve the quality of the room and make Madame Vine feel so at home.

While the “movables” Kortsch mentioned could follow a person in changing locations, a room cannot. In such a situation, it is more likely for the room to change ownership than it is for a movable object to do so. Considering that Carlyle continues to live at East Lynne, it is therefore not strange that the rooms that were once Isabel’s pass over to Barbara when she became his wife. Stranger is it that this also concerns the smaller items of the room. Barbara has in her possession “a beautiful toilette ornament, set in gold” (*East Lynne* 551). The ornament is broken, and Madame Vine offers to fix it. Barbara then says that the ornament has been broken before when it was in the possession of Lady Isabel. While Barbara expresses a failure to discover where it was previously broken, Isabel thinks to herself that “It was broken here, where the stem joins the flower” (551). Brown’s thing theory states that, when an object fails to work as it is supposed to, the focus is drawn to its materiality. This is not the case when Isabel handles the object. As the object has been broken before, instead of seeing its “thingness,” she unlocks old memories she has attached to the object: “Next, came up the past vision of the place and hour when the accident occurred. Her sleeve had swept it off the table; Mr Carlyle was in the room, this very room, and he had soothed her sorrow, her almost childish sorrow, with kisses sweet” (*East Lynne* 551-2). Although it is true that Isabel momentarily focuses her attention on the object’s thingness, the ideas quickly take over the focus and erase the thing itself. To Isabel, the broken object brings out the memory of Carlyle’s love for her. Although the object is movable, the memory ties it to the room. Because the strong emotions the object is harbouring do not match the object’s current role, Isabel’s hands begin to shake: “The ornament and the kisses were Barbara’s now” (552).

When it comes to the biography of the object itself, it has changed and not changed at the same time: it has passed from Isabel's possession to Barbara's, but it has always remained in the possession of the mistress of East Lynne. Indeed, as Barbara inherits not only the rooms but the ornaments in the rooms, it strengthens the idea of the husband's role in creating the identity of the room. Had Isabel been more in charge of decorating according to her own identity – surely, Barbara would have wanted to fill the rooms with things that suited her own taste, and Carlyle would have been eager to erase Isabel's memory from the rooms. To Barbara and Carlyle, Isabel is easy to erase because the objects are more tied to the position of the mistress rather than the individual carrying the title. Isabel is the only one struggling to come to terms with the objects' new phase. Particularly Carlyle's reaction to the object is evidence of this, as the memory Isabel endows the object with is one that he shared. When Barbara mentions to Carlyle that she broke the ornament, Carlyle only “glanced carelessly at the trinket” (552). It goes to show that any recollection of his former wife, or the memories the broken ornament triggered in Isabel, are lost on Carlyle.

Helen in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* does not face any particular scruples over abandoning Grassdale, the estate she was the mistress of for several years, as her husband turned it into a “scene of so much guilt and misery” (413). Wildfell Hall, on the other hand, is Helen's to make her own. One time, when Gilbert and his sister come to visit her, Gilbert relates that “To our surprise, we were ushered into a room where the first object that met the eye was a painter's easel.” His further observances harmonize with the first: “a table [...] with rolls of canvas, bottles of oil and varnish, palette, brushes, paints, [...] several sketches in various stages of progression, and a few finished paintings” (42). Helen's painting, which was no more than a pastime at her aunt's house, has become a full occupation at Wildfell Hall. The heavy presence of painting materials reflects on Helen's new identity as an artist. In addition, Helen's identity is further materialized in her paintings. When Gilbert asks why she has given the painting of Wildfell Hall a fake name, Helen answers that some people “might see the picture, and might possibly recognize the style in spite of the false initials I have put in the corner” (43). What this suggests, is that Helen can be recognised based on her painting strokes alone. Helen claims that the reason why Gilbert and Rose are shown into her studio instead of the sitting room is due to there not being a fire lighted in the sitting room. But if rooms truly were to reflect on the family living at an estate, then showing the guests into the studio turns out to be the truest statement of identity.

When it comes to the lady identifying with her home, it was the natural development that followed after she found herself a husband. Just as they had to conform to their new

identities as wives, they had to conform to the rooms their men provided them with. However altering this was, marriage was expected to last for life, thereby solidifying the links between the wife and her rooms. In the three novels, the unusual case of separation from husbands takes place. If not legally, then at least physically and emotionally. What becomes clear is that, how difficult it is for these wives to separate from their rooms, depends in part on their emotional attachments. While Isabel struggles with the changed relationship with her old rooms due to her still having affections for her ex-husband, Helen has no issues leaving the rooms of Grassdale behind. Lady Audley, on the other hand, struggles as well, but not because there is any fond attachment between herself and her husband; rather, her attachment is purely tied to the material rooms. One could therefore say, that for a mistress to fully feel as one with her rooms, there has to be an emotional tie present – either with the rooms themselves, or with the man who provides them for her.

Chapter 4: Built Environments and Their Material Impact on Life and Relationships

Furniture, wallpapers, ornaments and whatever other objects found within a room, make up the room's personality. Whether the room is filled with cooking utensils, bookcases or beds determine what type of room it is, who it is meant for and what its use will be. Walls, on the other hand, *create* the space in the first place. Without walls, there would be no house, no rooms, no inside or outside. When it comes to the separate spheres of the home that the Victorians were actively pursuing – the private and the public, the masculine and the feminine, the superior and the inferior – these were all created and upheld by walls. As Chase and Levenson say, “The wall represents a barrier that separates privilege from dispossession, and privacy from public life. It converts free space into a series of domestic parcels, and while it stands within a complex array of social meanings—legal, economic, symbolic—it also stands as a conspicuous physical object, which signifies through its heavy materiality” (143). Indeed, the physical and the metaphysical connect in the wall as it acts both as a physical and a social barrier.

Walls and the space they create would not mean much if it was not for doors and windows giving access. If walls did not have doors or windows, everyone would be equally excluded from gazing or stepping beyond. As Simmel says, “Precisely because [the door] can also be opened, its closure provides the feeling of a stronger isolation against everything outside this space than the mere unstructured wall” (qtd. in Zieleniec 57). Keys take this a step further. By locking the door, the feeling of isolation becomes even stronger. Not only is the door closed, but it is physically impossible to open it without breaking it. The person holding the keys to a house or a room holds power; power to lock or unlock, to choose whom to exclude or include into a space. This could influence relationships, as the carrier of the key is seen as holding authority over other people – and the space itself.

The window has a property that doors and walls lack; it welcomes vision. Isobel Armstrong argues that “Glass is an antithetical material. It holds contrary states within itself as barrier and medium” (11). The window is a medium because it allows the vision to be extended, giving access to the outside while one is still inside. The window is at the same time a barrier because its glass has to be either moved or broken for someone to physically go through it; it can also hinder rain and fresh air to pass through, and vision could also be obscured if, for instance, damp covered it. That being said, walls, although predominantly seen as barriers, could also be mediums in the sense that sound could carry.

In the Victorian home, it was the walls that separated the family from their servants, and which were there particularly to keep the servants ignorant of the family secrets. As the introductory chapter pointed out, this was something architects like Kerr actively implemented into the architecture. Attfield, however, mentions that there are “inconsistencies between designers’ utopian plans and the realities of living in human spaces” (155). These inconsistencies, she claims, “are often revealed through the boundaries that separate public from private domains. Thus transitional boundaries between personal and common spaces such as the threshold, the door, and the window can be seen as areas of containment or places of negotiation” (155). Victoria Rosner also sees these boundaries as conflicting: “Thresholds of rooms, or junctures between different areas of the house were a particularly sensitive concern, since these architectural transitions also distinguished different household constituencies” (64). Indeed, thresholds are not strongly enforced barriers. Rooms of different spheres can lie back to back and the threshold between them separates them by only a thin and crossable line. This is also the case with the interior and the exterior, as the outside tightly wraps around the inside. For the inhabitants within the Victorian home, it makes it so that there is always a possibility for something, or someone, to permeate the boundaries.

Audley Court and the Illusion of Privacy

Audley Court is by far the most disordered space of the estates that the novels take place in. That the estate is asymmetrical, one gets a sense of from the exteriors before the narrator even begins to venture indoors. The estate is “very irregular and rambling,” with “windows [that] were uneven” and with “Great piles of chimneys [that] rose up here and there” (*Lady Audley's Secret* 3). The inside turns out to be no better as “no one room had any sympathy with another, every chamber running off at a tangent into an inner chamber, and through that down some narrow staircase leading to a door which, in its turn, led back into that very part of the house from which you thought yourself the farthest” (4). That “every chamber” can run “off at a tangent into an inner chamber” and that doors disorient one’s logical sense of place, gives the house an unpredictable character that allows people to get lost, and to hide or conceal secrets. In short, it gives Audley Court an aura of privacy. This quality is seen as a matter-of-fact by the narrator who adds that “Of course, in such a house, there were secret chambers” (4-5). In addition, the “principal door” of the estate is “squeezed into a corner [...] as if it was in hiding from dangerous visitors, and wished to keep itself a secret.” This door is so thick, that it needs to be accompanied with a bell “lest the noise of the knocking should

never penetrate the stronghold” (4). That the estate is described as a stronghold, and that the door’s thickness prevents the sound of a knock to carry through, suggest that the place is very secure: what stays on the inside stays private. The role of the bell in this matter mirrors the role the bell has in the whole establishment. With the great separation of space, visuals and sound – bells are necessary to carry signals across spaces.

The surrounding gardens appear no less private as the lime-tree walk is described to be “an avenue so shaded from the sun and sky, so screened from observation by the thick shelter of the over-arching trees, that it seemed a chosen place for secret meetings” (5). Audley Court is also located at a place where there were “no thoroughfare” so that “unless you were going to the Court you had no business there at all” (3). Lady Audley’s rooms also offer a sense of privacy. Her rooms are described to open “one out of another and terminated in an octagon antechamber [...] This door, once locked, cut off all access to my lady’s apartments” (49). That there is only one door that gives and refuses admission, creates a sense of control. As Lady Audley, in addition, holds the keys and does not share these rooms with her husband, it makes her the supreme ruler of the rooms. Together, the estate, its location, rooms and gardens, seem to offer the perfect sheltered space where one’s secrets would be safe. This, however, is only an illusion. As it turns out, Audley Court is not such a private place after all; at least, the people in it, do not hold much power in deciding it to be.

At the end of the private lime-walk, “there was the shrubbery, where, half buried amongst the tangled branches and the neglected weeds, stood the [...] old well” (5). It is into this well Lady Audley pushes her first husband. As the narrator so heavily focuses on the secluded quality of the place it gives the idea that the act would have gone by unnoticed. However, this is not the case. As it turns out, the well is “visible from the garret windows at the back of the west wing,” a window that Phoebe admits is her “bedroom window” (22). This is in stark contrast to Kerr’s advice: “It is a matter also for the architect’s care that the outdoor work of the domestics shall not be visible from the house or grounds, or the windows of their Offices overlooked. At the same time, it is equally important that the walks of the family shall not be open to view from the Servants’ Department” (68). Here, at once, is an issue where the architecture of Audley Court fails. The window of Phoebe’s room is overlooking the family’s leisure space, and it is precisely this that allows Phoebe to witness Lady Audley’s crime. The chain of events that follows – of Phoebe telling Luke, and Luke keeping the secret of the surviving husband to himself, allowing them to blackmail Lady Audley, and for Robert to start investigating – makes Isobel Armstrong’s argument true: **“Take away windows, and some fictions would not exist”** (129).

Armstrong also notes that “The gazer from within claims ownership of the space not only in the room behind but also of the optical field of the street or park beyond the window” (7). By allowing a servant to gaze out on the leisure space of the family, the window permits the maid to have the upper hand. In other words, to claim visual ownership over a space that was never hers to claim.

Although the shrubbery failed to shield Lady Audley from view when she pushed George down the well, it offers the perfect solitude for Luke who finds the injured man. Luke as a consequence holds most of the knowledge, and therefore, the greatest power. Throughout the novel, he seems to be quite an insignificant character and only features as one of Lady Audley’s blackmailers and the scapegoat for Phoebe’s involvement. As the story plays out, with Lady Audley believing she killed her first husband, Robert suspecting she did, and Phoebe witnessing it happening – Luke is the only one who knows, not only what Lady Audley did, but that George survived and fled. The knowledge that Luke possesses is so powerful, he could have changed the whole course of the story. This makes Luke a key figure. Although Luke needs the truth to be subdued in order to blackmail Lady Audley, he admits that “if [Lady Audley] acted liberal by me, and gave me the money I wanted, free like, I’d tell her everything and make her mind easy. But she didn’t. Whatever she give me she throwed me as if I’d been a dog. [...] There was no toss as she could give her head that was too proud and scornful for me; and my blood biled agen her, and I kep’ my secret” (*Lady Audley’s Secret* 343). Lady Audley sees Luke as someone beneath herself, and this could only have been enhanced by the materialistic aspect of their meeting: “Everywhere around her were the evidences of wealth and splendour; while in strange contrast to all this, and to her own beauty, the awkward groom stood rubbing his bullet head” (88). That Luke is visually standing out in Lady Audley’s luxurious rooms only contribute to the illusion that she is above him. But Lady Audley’s actions have put her at the same level as Luke, if not lower – as a criminal servant – and Luke is perfectly aware of it.

Considering that Kerr stressed that the windows of the servant’s quarter should not overlook the family walks, it would make sense that it also meant that servants were not supposed to be occupying the family gardens. Had such rules been enforced at Audley Court, Luke would not have been in the garden to receive the intelligence he did. Also, that Luke at all was able to get George away from Audley Court unseen, was due to a key Luke knew “was mostly left in the wooden gate in the garden wall” (*Lady Audley’s Secret* 337). That the key is in the gate, permitting people to freely pass in and out of the gardens unnoticed, allows

a secret, literally, to escape out of the gardens' confining walls. George leaves, and the secret surrounding the offence and his survival with him.

The garden key is not the only key that holds significance in *Lady Audley's Secret*. Keys feature several times in the novel, and they create a false sense of power. Before Lucy became Lady Audley, Alicia had a clear idea about her own role in the house, and it is seen through her relationship with her keys:

Miss Alicia had reigned supreme in her father's house since her earliest childhood, and had carried the keys, and jingled them in the pockets of her silk aprons, and lost them in the shrubbery, and dropped them into the pond, and given all manner of trouble about them from the hour in which she entered her teens, and had on that account deluded herself into the sincere belief that for the whole of that period she had been keeping house (6).

Alicia believed that by carrying the keys, the house was under her control, something which made her identify as mistress of the house. Trodd suggests that Alicia's careless handling of the keys signifies her failure as a mistress. Although it is possible to read the failure to keep the keys as a failure in keeping house, it is not necessarily the case. On the one hand, one could read Alicia's tendency to lose the keys as Alicia taking her role in the house as a matter-of-fact, not knowing it could at any moment be taken away from her. One could also read it as a sign of the importance they held to her as she was bringing them with her everywhere – and always retrieving them after having lost them. The example also suggests Alicia was younger when the incidents happened, which would excuse some of the more careless treatment of the keys. Alicia learns the hard way that the keys do not signify what she thought they did. Because, whether or not she is still holding on to the keys, Lady Audley is the mistress. The keys, therefore, lose their value.

Trodd contrasts Alicia's "failure successfully to represent domestic management" to "the household expert, Lady Audley" (106). As Chapter 2 showed, Lady Audley cannot fully be deemed a household expert. Although most of the evidence of this is seen in her deviant behaviour, it can also be seen in the way she handles keys. Lady Audley also believes that the keys give her authority, and she as well, discovers that the keys do not work for her. When Robert and George are planning to visit, Lady Audley does everything in her power to keep them away. Alicia says in a letter to Robert that "There are seventeen spare bedrooms, [...] but for all that, my dear Robert, you can't come: for my lady has taken it into her silly head

that she is too ill to entertain visitors” (*Lady Audley's Secret* 42). Lady Audley’s attempt is futile as Robert and George stay at an Inn instead and are invited to the Court for dinner. Lady Audley, then, finds an excuse to go to London so that the dinner plans with Robert and George get cancelled. When she leaves for London, Lady Audley makes sure to lock the door to her apartments. Having not only locked the door but double-locked it, Lady Audley is confident she has secured her rooms’ privacy. However, the key turns out to be a useless object as Alicia knows about a secret entrance through which she allows Robert and George to gain access to Lady Audley’s rooms. Lyn Pykett describes this mode of entrance as being “presented as a stealthy, illicit, masculine invasion of a feminine domain” (91). There is a certain truth to it. Because, as Lady Audley never expected any visitors in her own private sphere, her clothes are scattered everywhere – and become “erotic traces of femininity” (Pykett 91-2). The result of the men’s invasion is fatal: George sees the portrait of Lady Audley and recognises his “deceased” wife.

Lady Audley is tampering with keys several times throughout the book in her quest to hide her secrets. The most notable one is when she goes to the Castle Inn to make sure Robert cannot pass on her secrets. Knowing that she is about to set fire to the Inn, she double locks the room Robert is renting. But despite this measure, it fails because Robert was absent from the room when she locked it. Again, the key gave her a pretended power.

Keys were important also in the dynamic between servant and mistress. Langland says, “Keys, of course keeps things locked up, and all those keys to interior drawers, closets, and doors helped to secure household goods from servants, presumed to have an interest in stealing them” (53). The housekeeper, as the most trusted female servant in the house, would be keeping her own set of keys. Indeed, keys were a strong part of the housekeeper’s identity: “The housekeeper wore no uniform; her quiet authority, sober appearance and enormous bunch of keys, known as a *châtelaine*, was enough to make her instantly recognisable” (Evans 45). When it came to management, it was often the housekeeper’s task to lock up the house at night. This was to secure the house from intruders but could also prevent servants from illicitly sneaking off at night to meet love interests. Mrs Beeton mentions that “no servants should, on any account, be allowed to remain up after the heads of the house have retired” (18). All such measures were to prevent immoral actions and to ensure that the servants behaved well. When Lady Audley determines to sneak out of the house to set fire to the Inn, these rules, meant to keep servants in their places, become a hindrance to the mistress herself. Lady Audley makes sure to wait until all the servants have gone to sleep. She also notes that her own maid “sleeps at the top of the house, [...] ever so far away from this room”

(*Lady Audley's Secret* 249). There is no denying that, had her maid been sleeping next door, which Kerr mentioned was most convenient, Lady Audley would have had a harder time getting out. Lady Audley's biggest obstacle is getting past the secure doors, as it is described that "the housekeeper herself superintended the barricading of the great doors, back and front" (250). Nonetheless, Lady Audley knows about another door that is very poorly secured, one with "a wooden shutter and a slender iron bar, light enough to be lifted by a child" (250). If one considers that the heads of the family could be running the house in an authoritarian style, seeing their staff as "child-like dependants," then this scene shows that the roles have reversed (Gerard 243). The housekeeper becomes the moral head of the household, while Lady Audley, like a child, becomes the lowly servant that the locked doors are trying to keep in place.

There is also another instance where the housekeeper seems to be above the mistress. While Lady Audley expects her rooms to be private, other occurrences suggest that they were not necessarily supposed to be. For instance, Phoebe asks the housekeeper if she can show Luke around in her lady's rooms, which she is permitted to do. Lady Audley is not at all consulted on the topic. Another instance is the moment when Alicia wanted to show George and Robert around in Lady Audley's apartments. Alicia does not even attempt to enquire whether Lady Audley would mind and is shocked to learn that Lady Audley has brought the keys with her to London. Both of these instances imply that the mistress's rooms were not expected to always be private. Susie Steinbach notes something which could explain why this was the case, as she claims that people "frequently visited stately homes and their grounds, which were open to the public for tours and recreation" (15). In other words, it was a norm for the very rich to open their home to curious inquisitors as if it was a museum. One famous example of this is when Lizzie Bennet, in *Pride and Prejudice*, gets a tour around the rooms of Pemberley. In *Lady Audley's Secret*, Lady Audley is perhaps not aware of this expectation of publicness, and so she utterly detests that anyone would get access to her rooms. More than anything, it is because of her dirty secrets. Had she truly been an honourable lady, she would not have anything to hide. The irony, then, is that after her secrets are exposed, the fate of her rooms is indeed to be public. The estate itself is abandoned by everyone except for a "grim old housekeeper [who] reigns paramount in the mansion which my lady's ringing laughter once made musical" (354). Lady Audley's presence in the room seems to be manifested materially as her portrait, curtained, still hangs there, "[representing] the body itself as sign" (Pykett 92). As the "house is often shown to inquisitive visitors [...] and people admire my lady's rooms, and ask many questions about the pretty, fair-haired woman, who

died abroad,” it becomes clear that Lady Audley continues to be on display, albeit in a different way than when she ruled supreme (*Lady Audley's Secret* 354). Since it is a housekeeper that “reigns” at Audley Court, it suggests that Lady Audley again finds herself under the housekeeper’s command.

Escaping Publicness: From Grassdale Manor to Wildfell Hall

At Grassdale Manor, the corruption of the public sphere is found within the home’s four walls. Helen has no chance of keeping it out as it is her husband who brings it inside. One such thing is Huntingdon’s affair with Annabella, the wife of a friend. Their affair is ill-concealed and continues despite Helen’s knowledge. That Helen is powerless in the matter becomes clear as Annabella grows “audacious and insolent” and “does not scruple to speak to my husband with affectionate familiarity in my presence” (*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* 332). Huntingdon and Annabella do not care about boundaries; neither physical nor social ones. Helen is still forced to “keep up an appearance of civility and respect towards one for whom I have not the most distant shadow of esteem” because Annabella’s husband is oblivious in the matter (330).

Another way Huntingdon is making the house a public space is by getting drunk with his friends and causing scandal. There is particularly one incident where the publicness gets completely out of hand. After dinner, it was customary for women to retire from the dining room to the drawing room to allow the men to freely talk and enjoy their wine. Mrs Beeton remarks that the times when ladies had to leave the table early due to men’s failure to conduct themselves in their presence was a thing of the past as “temperance is, in these happy days, a striking feature in the character of a gentleman” (14). Unfortunately, Huntingdon and his company lack this temperance. Even before they come to join the ladies in the drawing room, Helen “was sick at heart, – especially when loud bursts of laughter and incoherent songs, [pealed] through the triple doors of hall and ante-room” (*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* 288). Despite two rooms and three doors between them, the walls and doors fail to keep out the public, male energy. Worse than this, the men, supposed to enter the drawing room at a set time, did not show until “after ten, when tea, which had been delayed for more than half an hour, was nearly over” (288). Their arrival is described as a “riotous uproar” with one of the friends “burst[ing] into the room with a clamorous volley of oaths in his mouth” (288). Another friend, claiming not to be affected by drink, is exposed by how he handles his tea. Not only is he “pouring the cream into [his] saucer,” but instead of his “usual complement of

one lump” of sugar, he “put in six” (289, 290). When he decides to turn it “into the slop-basin” he turns it into the sugar-basin, thereby “spoil[ing] the sugar too” (290). Not only the material tea but the whole ritual of taking tea, is spoiled. As the men’s behaviour worsens over the course of the evening with scuffles, objects thrown, swearing and mistreatments of the wives – the drawing room, supposed to be a social and feminine sphere, becomes public to an extreme and finds itself entirely male-dominated.

As Huntingdon makes the home more reminiscent of a public scene than a private home, Helen seeks the library for solitude. It is a place where she can go in order “to pass as little of the day as possible in company with [Annabella],” or “snatch a few minutes’ respite from forced cheerfulness and wearisome discourse” (334, 360). The library stands as a contrast to the extremely public drawing room; as a refuge and private place. Kerr describes the library as a predominantly male space: “It is primarily a sort of Morning-room for gentlemen rather than anything else. Their correspondence is done here, their reading, and, in some measure, their lounging” (116). But at Grassdale, the library is not of interest to the men: “None of our gentlemen had the smallest pretensions to a literary taste,” and it is this that allows Helen to regard the library as “entirely my own, a secure retreat at all hours of the day” (*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* 374). That Helen so easily makes the library her own and does not shy away from this “male” space when the rest of the house is teeming with male energy, shows that the room in itself is not heavily gendered. But at the same time, Helen could have easily fit the male role as head of the house, as she is far more sensible and capable than her partner. One example of this is, while Huntingdon is degrading himself in London, Helen is said to, not only attend to the domestic affairs but also “the welfare and comfort of [Huntingdon’s] poor tenants and labourers” – a concern residing outside the home and which would originally be her husband’s responsibility (258). This is further strengthened when Helen determines to leave her husband, as she turns the library into a working space: “Here, then, I set up my easel, and here I worked at my canvas from daylight till dusk” (374). Dedicating her time to painting, she is preparing herself to become a breadwinner – a role that, in the Victorian era, was assigned men only.

At a point when the female guests have left, but the male ones remain, Helen abandons the drawing room entirely: “they gave a loose to all their innate madness, folly, and brutality, and made the house night after night one scene of riot, uproar, and confusion. [...] I formed the resolution of retreating upstairs or locking myself into the library the instant I withdrew from the dining-room, and not coming near them again till breakfast” (369-70). The situation is so bad, that Helen would have to enforce the solitude of the library by locking the

door. At this stage, the whole house has become too public – and it is vastly a negative publicness.

After Huntingdon reads Helen's journal and discovers her plan to leave him, the first thing he does is to ask for her keys: "The keys of your cabinet, desk, drawers, and whatever else you possess" (387). Helen is reluctant to give him her keys because she knows that it will have a destructive effect on her plans of freedom, and so she attempts to hide the keys from him. Unfortunately, Huntingdon notices and forces them from her by "seizing my closed hand and rudely abstracting them from it" (387). Helen might have felt a certain authority over the possessions she kept locked away, having been the keeper of the keys and the owner of the things, but Huntingdon seizing the keys shows how easily this authority is taken away. Huntingdon takes her keys to carry out "a confiscation of property" and goes on to remove her money and her jewels, leaving her only with "a few sovereigns" to last her "through the month" (387, 388). He also destroys all her painting materials, and thereby, her chance at being her own breadwinner.

That the keys are returned to Helen barely matters; the things they were supposed to keep locked away safely have been extracted and so the keys hold little value. The temporary confiscation of the keys, and the permanent confiscation of the possessions, mark a turning point. Before this moment, Helen was free to perform her duties as a household manager and could do so without her husband's supervision. After this point, Helen is no longer trusted with the household economy as Huntingdon wants accounts of how the money is spent and vows to employ a steward to take over the tasks involving his own comfort. Just as the key is stripped of its power, so too is Helen.

As the story progresses, Helen's freedom and authority are limited even more as she is no longer allowed to teach her son. Not only does Huntingdon demand that their son should get a governess, he also takes it upon himself to employ her – a job that would normally be Helen's. Helen as a consequence frets, not only over being deprived of "the only pleasure and business of my life" but also over not knowing "by whom [the governess] had been recommended" which was important in order to know if the governess was a respectable person to let in charge of their son (405). Considering that Huntingdon employs a governess based on his personal interests, Helen has all the reason to worry.

Back when Helen confronted Annabella about the affair with Huntingdon, she told Annabella that "your conduct cannot possibly remain concealed much longer from the only two persons in the house who do not know it already" (330). As the two people alluded to are

Annabella's cousin and husband, it implicitly means that the whole servant staff knew about the affair.

Rachel is the most prominent servant in the novel. As she has worked for Helen's family since Helen was a child, she is very loyal to her mistress. She is, nonetheless, very absent in the pages concerning the beginning of Helen's marriage. Despite this, it quickly becomes clear that Rachel sits on vital information. Rachel learns about Huntingdon's affair before Helen does, as Helen notices that "when Rachel came to dress me for dinner, I saw that she had been crying" (313). Rachel, then, hints to Helen that "to tell you the truth, ma'am, I don't like master's ways of going on" and that "if I was you, I wouldn't have that [Annabella] in the house another minute" (314). Although Helen also needs to hear it from others, as well as see it with her own eyes, to fully believe it – Rachel is the first to warn her about her husband's transgression.

As things progress, Rachel becomes Helen's protectress. After Hargrave, one of Huntingdon's friends, begins pestering Helen with his desire for her, Rachel is said to have "soon guessed how matters stood" between them and began "descrying the enemy's movements from her elevation at the nursery window" so that she could alert Helen if he was about (352). In contrast to Phoebe and her window, Rachel taking ownership of the visual field outside is in the mistress's favour.

When Helen plans to flee from her husband, she decides that "Rachel should be my only confidante" (373). The devotion is mutual, as Rachel admits "I have no home, ma'm, but with you" and declares that she would join her mistress, despite knowing that they would be living on meagre means (408). During their flight, it is mentioned that "Rachel was muffled in a grey cloak and hood that had seen better days, and gave her more the appearance of an ordinary, though decent old woman, than of a lady's maid" (414). The clothes reflect their relationship, as they are about to enter Wildfell Hall more as friends than maid and mistress.

Arriving at Wildfell Hall, the estate shows signs of neglect after years of not being tended to. The surrounding landscape of the estate is described to be wild and untouched by people for years. It is also remote, with the "nearest neighbours two miles distant," which means Helen "might sit watching at these windows all day long, and never see so much as an old woman carrying her eggs to market" (58). Wildfell Hall therefore seems perfectly private. In addition, Rachel is the Hall's only servant and an entirely loyal one. There is no chance, therefore, that Helen's secret would escape from within the house. Instead, the threat comes from outside. Indeed, the ladies in the neighbourhood love to gossip, basing their theories on

mere suspicion rather than truth. That Helen is not so eager to socialize, valuing her privacy, only puts fuel to the fire. Helen is perfectly aware of the dilemma: “if I gratify [their curiosity], it may lead to the ruin of my son, and if I am too mysterious, it will only excite their suspicions” (419).

Gilbert, the person who shuns the neighbours for gossiping about Helen, is no better himself. Although he does not participate or trust in the gossip, the gossip stems from a curiosity surrounding Helen which Gilbert also shares. As he in addition is falling for her, he struggles with keeping away and would find excuses to visit her despite knowing she values her solitude. At one point, he crosses a line: “I could see the red firelight dimly gleaming from her parlour window. I went up to the garden wall, and stood leaning over it [...]. I vaulted over the barrier, unable to resist the temptation of taking one glance through the window, just to see if she were more composed than when we parted” (106-7). When Isobel Armstrong talks about the window as a medium and a barrier, she talks about “mismatched relations,” where the “isolated figure at the window [...] gazes from a hidden interior” and claims ownership over the visual space outside (7). However, it should be remembered that when it is lighter on the inside than the outside, the reverse is possible. This is indeed the case when Gilbert looks through the window; he gazes from a hidden exterior and claims ownership over the visual space inside.

Helen’s stroll in the garden with her brother becomes a continuation of this. Because Gilbert hides, he is seeing while remaining unseen, thereby maintaining the type of “mismatched relation” that a window creates. The result is that Gilbert reaches the wrong conclusions: that Helen and her brother are lovers. And that Helen, being ignorant of Gilbert’s presence, has no idea that she has a misunderstanding to clear up.

Due to there not being any other servants at Wildfell Hall, Rachel is always the one to answer the door. Rachel becomes, in a sense, the keeper of the gates. Her role is given more impact than the typical setting with the servant opening the door due to her closeness to her mistress and what they together have been through. Indeed, because of this, it becomes personal for Rachel to protect her mistress from preying men and to keep them out if she can. Gilbert recognises this when he wants to see Helen after having learned the truth, but is prevented entrance by Rachel: “The old virgin had constituted herself the guardian of her lady’s honour, I suppose, and doubtless she saw in me another Mr Hargrave, only the more dangerous in being more esteemed and trusted by her mistress” (*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* 423). Three times does Rachel tell him he cannot come inside. Gilbert, in his eccentric manner, contemplates “taking the citadel by storm, and pushing forward unannounced” but

does not have to as Helen sends her son to tell Gilbert he can come inside (423). This is not the only time Gilbert feels like pushing past a servant. When Gilbert wants to speak to Lawrence, Helen's brother, to apologize for assaulting him when he thought Lawrence was Helen's lover, he is denied entrance by a footman. Instead of respecting this, Gilbert finds himself "stepping past the astonished footman." He then "boldly rapped at the door, entered, and closed it behind [him]" (434). What this makes clear, is that if Gilbert does not heed the social barriers, making it possible for him to successfully push past the footman and force his entrance on Lawrence – then Rachel, and old woman, would not stand a chance in keeping Gilbert out had he seen it fit to "storm the citadel."

Due to the increased publicness surrounding herself, Helen determines that "I shall leave this place, as soon as I have means to seek another asylum" (425). The decision comes before Helen learns about Huntingdon's illness which changes her plans. Wildfell Hall, with its more controlled private interior, stands no chance against publicness. Even though it is coming entirely from the outside, the scandal of things easily crosses the estate's thresholds. It affects the household to such a degree that Wildfell Hall must be abandoned.

East Lynne and the Crossing of Thresholds

If keys give a sense of authority, Isabel's position in the house is not to be mistaken, as she admits, "I don't know anything about the keys, [...] I never keep them" (*East Lynne* 150). When Cornelia acts as the mistress of East Lynne, it is acknowledged that she "deferred outwardly to Lady Isabel as the mistress; but the real mistress was herself" (167). This means that Cornelia's true role in the house is not publicly known outside of the house. The only people who know what is going on inside the house's four walls are Cornelia, Isabel and the servants. For Isabel, the latter knowing is a great humiliation: "Her heart felt bursting with indignation and despair: [...] Pitied by her own servants!" (260). The servants are at the same time making the situation worse for Isabel as she overhears their gossip about Barbara and Carlyle. Indeed, it was the housemaid Susan's comment which first made Isabel aware that Barbara loved Carlyle.

There is one servant in particular that relates damaging intel. Wilson starts working at East Lynne as a nursemaid when Isabel has her first child. Cornelia describes her to be "steady and respectable; but she has got a tongue as long as from here to Lynneborough" (175). She is therefore a good servant in the sense that she performs her tasks well, but a disagreeable one in the sense that she would be a threat to the privacy of the house. Isabel,

ignorant of the potential harm of Wilson's gossip, is not fazed by the information and agrees to hire Wilson as the long tongue "won't hurt the baby" (175). Wilson, however, is a trojan horse: as a gossip-prone servant, she brings the secrets of the former household she worked at into the heart of the new one. Since Wilson used to work for Barbara's family, the gossip she brings with her is particularly harmful to Isabel. Wilson does not intentionally tell Isabel about Barbara and Carlyle's wrongly interpreted meetings. The information is given to Joyce, and Isabel only hears it because the door is ajar. The gossip is therefore not contained within one room; it leaps across the threshold, from servant to mistress.

It was also through an open door that Isabel overheard the housemaid's talk about Barbara's affections. Open doors, therefore, bring Isabel in closer proximity to her servants. At the same time, it leads to doors closing between Isabel and her husband. One can see this happen, literally, as Isabel at the beginning of her marriage, wanted to enter Carlyle's room "but the door was shut, and, scarcely at home yet as a wife, she did not like to open it" (151). This carefulness in crossing physical thresholds mirrors her carefulness in breaching tough social topics. Isabel barely ever voices her concerns to Carlyle, and when she does, she only touches the surface of the issue. As a result, Carlyle's answers do not satisfy her for long because they never reach the root of the problem. When at one point, an "impulse rose within [Isabel] that she would tell him all, the few words dropped by Susan and Joyce twelve months before, the conversation [Wilson's] she had just overheard" – it is precisely because the concerns stem from her close proximity to servants that she does not: "it appeared to her [...] that a sort of humiliation, in listening to the converse of servants, was reflected on her; and she remained silent" (182). The consequence is that a mental wall is forming between Isabel and her husband.

Carlyle, on the other hand, is entirely clueless of the situation at home. Lyn Pykett states that "the novel implies that men's position within the family simply does not equip them to read the signs of the domestic sphere" (120). In Carlyle case, it is particularly because he is more often out of the house than in it. That there are physical walls between them only strengthens the mental wall. Carlyle is often on the outside dealing with matters that do not concern his own household. The secret he shares with Barbara is one that revolves around Barbara's family; a different household.

Windows make the matter worse. While discussing the secret surrounding Barbara's brother, Carlyle "strolled down the park by [Barbara's] side, deep in the subject; and quite unconscious that Lady Isabel's jealous eyes were watching them from her dressing-room window" (*East Lynne* 190). There are several instances where this happens. In these cases,

the double quality of the window that Isobel Armstrong mentioned, creates an issue. It is the window as a medium that allows Lady Isabel to watch her husband and Barbara meet, but it is the window as a barrier that blocks her from hearing that the meetings concern Richard, and not some hidden love affair. The window, as a barrier and a medium, has an unmistakably social effect: Isabel is aware there is a secret between Barbara and Carlyle, and that she is excluded from it. That Carlyle excludes his wife from the secret, forces her to reach her own, wrong conclusions. Because the window is also a barrier, and victim of the “mismatched relations,” Carlyle and Barbara do not understand that they are being watched as closely as they are. Despite being on the inside, Isabel is the one left out.

At the same moment, Carlyle is excluded from the matters happening within his own house. He is entirely unaware of how Cornelia is treating his wife. He also has no clue that the servants believe he has shared romantic moments with Barbara, and he does not know that Isabel, unintentionally, has been invited to share their opinions. Many times, Isabel is on the brink of telling her husband what concerns her, suggesting the wall between them could easily be destroyed. But instead, she lets it remain. The narrator reveals that “had [Carlyle] but gained the faintest inkling of the truth, he would not have lost a moment in emancipating his wife from the thralldom of Miss Corny” (*East Lynne* 168). This gives the idea that the wall that is created between them could have been very easily torn down if only the first step at a proper conversation had been taken.

When, a while after Isabel has made the fatal error of leaving her husband, Richard visits East Lynne – his visit must remain a secret due to his status as a murder suspect. This is when the true nature of relationships becomes clear. Carlyle tries to keep the visit a secret from Cornelia, but Cornelia, with her keen ear, can hear sounds through the wall that no one else can. She eventually goes down and bangs on the door, demanding to be let in. Despite having locked the door, Carlyle decides to let Cornelia in on the secret because he claims he cannot stop her “if she has a mind to come in” (346). Cornelia, it seems, is someone who does not accept being left out, neither physically nor socially – a stark contrast to Isabel who hesitated when faced with Carlyle’s unlocked door.

When they decide to let Richard stay the night, they conclude that “it will be impossible for [Richard] to sleep here without its being known to Joyce” (352). This not only suggests how easily such a secret could be discovered by servants, but it also reflects on how dependent they were on servants, as it would be impossible to have a secret guest unless someone tended to him; bringing him food and cleaning his room after his departure. The choice of telling Joyce is significant; this is because Richard is accused of killing Joyce’s

father. That they choose to tell her shows how much they trust her, particularly as they are trying to convince her that Richard did not kill her father without any solid proof.

The secret that Isabel was not trusted with, becomes one that both Joyce and Cornelia are let in on. Most controversial of all is it that Barbara, after becoming Carlyle's wife, tells Madame Vine about her brother. Madame Vine too, therefore, is easily included in the secret, simply because Barbara claims "I look upon you as one of ourselves" (496). Considering that Madame Vine is only a governess, one that is hiding her true identity and whom Barbara has barely gotten to know – it is strange that Isabel was never considered as "one of ourselves."

Several relationships change over the course of these novels. Lady Audley finds herself beneath her servants, Rachel becomes Helen's friend and protector, and Isabel ends up distanced from her husband. Aspects of the home change as well, as spheres, supposed to be private become public. When it comes to keeping servants ignorant, the architecture fails in every novel. Luke and Phoebe know about Lady Audley's crimes long before Robert. Rachel and the rest of the servants know all about their master's conduct before Helen catches on to it, and it is through servants that Isabel learns about Barbara's love for Carlyle. The very presence of servants in the home, then, contribute to creating a sense of publicness – and the walls cannot contain it. What this makes evident, is that the relationship between people and the home is not a one-way influence. As Andrzej Zieleniec says, "Space is shaped by human relations, but conversely human relations are also shaped by space" (xiii). This could be why there are inconsistencies between planned space and lived space. It is because, when a space is inhabited, there are always human elements at play as well. Rooms, with their furniture, walls, windows and doors are inhabited by people who understand the built home through their senses and their emotions. The built environment could make a person feel a certain way, but it is also possible for feelings emanating from elsewhere to influence how a person feels about the space. Even though the inhabitants of the house do not actively think of these material things, or seem aware of their existence, the built environment still could have an impact on their lives.

Conclusion

The Victorian home is commonly described to be a female and private domain, but to call it that is to simplify the home. As Judy Attfield says, the “separate spheres ideology [...], if taken too literally – makes it impossible to venture beyond the boundaries that define the geographical parameters of the home” (156). As mentioned in the introductory chapter, there were assigned roles in the house that were both public and private: the mistress had both a public and a private role in the home, as host and manager. The servant was supposed to comply with the private expectation of invisibility but was also expected to act as a public symbol of the family’s wealth, and the estate had both private rooms and public rooms. Objects, although not accounted for, also play a part in this. Materially speaking, what doors, windows and walls admit or deny has a great impact on the sense of privacy. This does not only concern physical access but also sounds, visuals and smells. Another thing is the abstract ideas objects represent. When objects are brought into the home, their public meanings do not stand behind on the doorstep. This means that the home is filled with a variety of objects that reflect public values. It pervades the whole house, for instance, through the absence of dirt – as clean objects signal the public meaning of a respectable household.

It is a combination of the objects’ metaphysical and physical attributes that end up changing the sense of sphere in the novels. The instances where private spheres become public spheres are, at the same time, the same instances where identities, roles and relationships change. Therefore, both types of attributes also take part in changing human relations.

When public meaning is attached to objects on the body, the public meanings become personal. The mistress associated with elaborate dress, for instance, was in danger of becoming an object on display. For Isabel this is negative: Treated like an expense, she begins to feel like an expense. At the same time, windows keep Isabel distanced from her husband while open doors draw her nearer to servants. The effect of the auditory and physical exclusion from her husband is coupled with her already lowered self-esteem from being viewed as an object on display. It is a combination that contributes to severing the marital bonds. In contrast, being an object on display has a positive effect on Lady Audley and her self-worth. One reason for this, is that Lady Audley manages to turn public opinion in her favour through, for instance, the association of innocence attached to blonde curls. One person who is not fooled, however, is her maid, Phoebe. This is not only because the window allows Phoebe to witness Lady Audley’s crime, but also because Phoebe is not spellbound by

the curls' association to innocence, which could be because of the lady's maid's ability to read clothes and hair. In contrast, Lady Audley is fooled by the public meaning of Phoebe's appearance – the lack of colour – which makes Phoebe seem harmless. She is instead wary of her new maid with the rose-ribbons. Lady Audley also looks at Luke with disgust because of the public meaning of low status that his clothes signal. But at the same moment, unknowingly, she is under his thumb as the garden gave him physical access to her secret. Helen, on the other hand, tries to dress in a way that allows her to live at Wildfell Hall in peace, but chooses to wear a mourning attire where the public meaning does not justify her reclusiveness. The suspicions and gossip that ensue, is only amplified by Gilbert trespassing and physically prying into her life.

Objects, therefore, contribute to changing spheres, roles and relationships in the Victorian households. But when they do, they are barely acknowledged. Brown offers an explanation to this as he states that “By doing the same thing with the same things you create the illusion of sameness and continuity over and against the facts of disorder and change” (*Sense* 64). This could be because the objects themselves often remain the same and that it is rather their meanings or their uses that change. Indeed, both objects' meanings and the experiences connected to their materiality are victims to disorder and change. In the example of how an object's materiality is experienced, it varies a lot depending perhaps on the mood of a person, the position of people, and the other items surrounding it. In the example of how an object's meaning is understood, it could change depending on individual ideas or cultural influences. In both cases, it is due to the human element of the subject-object relation. This renders an object's influence unpredictable as it depends on the ebbs and flows of human experience, conduct, ideas, emotions – in short, human life. In the Victorian household, when the window gives Isabel access to view Carlyle and Barbara, but bars the sound, it makes her jealous – and she acts on that jealousy. When Luke decides to not clear Lady Audley of murder, it is due to anger caused by her condescending behaviour which in its turn was caused by her seeing the contrast Luke posed to the luxurious room. As the previous chapter showed, walls generally failed in keeping servants ignorant. How bad this failure is, depends on how much they could trust their servants and how scandalous the leaked secrets were. In the case of the architectural features, what people do, what they talk about and where they are positioned – all contribute more or less to how the house is experienced. Had Isabel been in a different room when the servants talked, or had she not been by the window when Carlyle and Barbara were outside, the physical attributes of the estate would not have contributed to Isabel's scandalous departure. When it came to servants who were sometimes treated as

objects, it was important to take their human quality into account. Indeed, to have loyal servants was important when the various interactions between objects and people rendered the home unpredictable. But loyal servants would most likely only be loyal if they were treated well – as seen in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* in the event where Huntingdon's servants help Helen escape rather than inform him of his wife's planned desertion, something which is due to how badly he treats them.

What it all comes down to is that, yes, the objects do add a sense of publicness to the private sphere, and yes, they do affect relationships, roles and identities within the Victorian home – but they do so through the meanings *people* invest into objects, and through how *people* see, hear, smell and move – not to mention feel – through objects. The subject-object relation, then, is like a call and an echo – where a person's ideas and experiences are imbued into an object and reflected back. But just like an echo does not exist if the call does not exist, so too, are objects lifeless without people there to make them come to life.

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