Battered, bruised, and abused women: domestic violence in nineteenth-century British fiction

Lynn Renee Wingert

Iowa State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/rtd

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/rtd/14667

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Iowa State University Capstones, Theses and Dissertations at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Retrospective Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.
Battered, bruised, and abused women:
domestic violence in nineteenth-century British fiction

by

Lynn Renee Wingert

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Literature)

Program of Study Committee:
Kathy Hickok, Major Professor
   Linda Shenk
   Amy Bix

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2007

Copyright © Lynn Renee Wingert, 2007. All rights reserved.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introduction</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1. <em>Oliver Twist</em>: Too Busy Struggling to Survive to Help</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2. <em>The Tenant of Wildfell Hall</em>: Marriage, Mixed Drinks, and Mistresses</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3. <em>Janet's Repentance</em>: Blame the Victim</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4. <em>The Woman in White</em>: I'm Broke; to the Insane Asylum You Must Go</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5. <em>The Adventure of the Abbey Grange</em>: The Case of The Justifiable Manslaughter</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References Cited</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Cruelty, like every other vice, requires no motive outside itself—it only requires opportunity. Janet’s Repentance. George Eliot.

**Introduction**

No matter the term used to identify the abuse of women in nineteenth-century Britain—domestic violence, spousal abuse, marital violence, or wife-beating—it was written about by leading authors of the time. Indeed, there is no such phrase as “domestic violence” in the nineteenth century (Lawson and Shakinovsky 2). However, because it is more comprehensive in scope than the other terms used during this period and because it encompasses other actions that I propose constitute abuse, I will primarily use it throughout this paper. In addition, I will refer to victims of domestic violence by using the female pronoun. Although there are cases of husbands being abused by their wives, the majority of victims of abuse—and all of the ones analyzed for this paper—are female.

The works of fiction analyzed for this paper include *Oliver Twist* (1838) by Charles Dickens, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) by Anne Brontë, *Janet’s Repentance* (1858) by George Eliot, *The Woman in White* (1860) by Wilkie Collins, and *The Adventure of the Abbey Grange* (1904) by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. In an attempt to span the Victorian era (1837-1901) and—in the case of Doyle’s short story exceed it by three years—I chose works published from 1838–1904. Although published in 1904, Doyle set his story in 1897. I also strived for an equal balance of pieces by female and male authors so that I could analyze how both genders depicted domestic violence, and whether the violence was explicit or implicit.

In researching this topic, I read books by several authors who, in some way, touched upon the topic of domestic violence in Victorian England. From a book written by Elizabeth
Foyster, I obtained historical background on the lives of abused wives as it related to marriage and divorce laws, and the limited rights they had with respect to both. Adrian Gray’s book provided additional information regarding the rights a woman had under the three versions of the Married Women’s Properties Act. I used Marilyn Yalom’s study of the history of the wife through the use of diaries, memoirs, letters, legal statutes, and religious practices to gain insight regarding the role of wives in the Victorian era.

Kate Lawson and Lynn Shakinovsky’s book focuses on physical violence against middle-class women in Victorian fiction. They also use a psychoanalytical approach to “unveil other aspects of mid-nineteenth-century culture—its characteristic repressions, evasions, and alternative constructions . . .” (17). My argument, as seen later in this paper, differs from Lawson and Shakinovsky’s in that I expand the notion of domestic violence to include acts that are not limited to physical harm.

In her book, Lisa Surridge argues that newspapers played a key role in probing domestic life by including reports of marital violence in the working and upper classes. She also argues that when marital assault was portrayed in fiction, “it was always more or less overtly political” (13). One of the arguments Surridge makes that I wholeheartedly disagree with is that Charles Dickens’s female characters, including Nancy in *Oliver Twist*, were passive women who “accepted” the beatings they received. In this paper, I will provide textual evidence to the contrary.

In James Hammerton’s book, he focuses on the “varied evidence of marital conflict in Victorian and Edwardian England . . .” (2), and the majority of his work is limited to working-class marriages. In contrast to Hammerton’s book, my paper is limited to the
Victorian era. I also expand his focus group to include both lower- and middle-class groups in my analysis of domestic violence.

The primary focus of this paper is to show that, whether instances of domestic violence were covert or overt, or whether they occurred in upper- or lower-class households, the secrecy and shame surrounding the abuse perpetuated the problem and delayed legal protection for women of all classes. When husbands physically abused their wives behind closed doors, the parties had very different reasons for keeping silent about the violence. Men sought to protect their reputations in the community, while verbally and physically battering their wives in the privacy of their homes. Women had a far more altruistic reason for keeping the violence hidden: they wanted to protect their children and other family members from learning of the abuse so as not to frighten them or to be a burden.

All of these works of fiction contain instances of domestic violence, some so graphic and brutal that they are difficult to read, while others are so covert and barely described that nothing but a close reading reveals them. Contrary to what many historians suggest was a problem associated primarily with the lower, working-class population, I found an obvious disconnect between what was reported in the newspapers and recorded on the dockets of the courts in nineteenth-century Britain, and what leading British authors writing at the time portrayed in their works as the reality occurring behind closed doors in the houses of the elite.

One question that arises is why the authors whose works I reviewed for this paper portrayed the characters who experience abuse as coming from the upper and lower classes, especially if—as Parliament debated and courts ruled—domestic violence was not occurring in country estates and palatial homes in the city. I submit that abuse of all types was, indeed, occurring even in the best homes in England and, further, that domestic violence is blind to
social status. Domestic violence cares not whether one is wealthy or destitute, whether one is married or single, or whether one lives in a country manor or a row house in the seediest part of London. Domestic violence happened in all sorts of homes in the Victorian era, both rich and poor, and the violence took a number of different forms. It was not limited to physical beatings. Domestic violence was—and continues to be—an equal opportunity bully.

Absolutely everyone is at risk of becoming a victim of domestic violence when there is no mutual respect between marital partners, there is no sense of morality that deems the very thought of abusing or threatening another as unthinkable, and there are no comprehensive laws with sufficiently prohibitive sanctions. In John Stuart Mill’s book *The Subjection of Women* (1869), the author argues that the notion of marital friendship “was inconsistent with legal and economic inequality, and . . . drew attention to the day-to-day need for mutual tolerance and forbearance” (Hammerton 156). Hammerton further argues that the reason men refused to grant women legal equality was because “the generality of the male sex cannot yet tolerate the idea of living with an equal” (156). Thus, in the Victorian era, we had an entire population of males who believed that they were superior to women in every way and who had no intention of changing the status quo. This self-appointed superiority is part of what made domestic violence against women such an easy and justifiable act for men to perform.

In the works analyzed in this paper, only Nancy in Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* is indisputably lower class and unmarried. Nancy is also the only female who is murdered, after suffering years of brutal beatings at the hands of Bill Sikes. All of the other women in the works reviewed are members of the middle and upper classes. One of the arguments I intend to make in this paper is that domestic violence is not limited to one’s social status.
Even if the newspapers and court dockets of the time do not support this argument, it is my belief that the leading authors of the time realized and wrote stories that reflected the fact that, while the rich may not have brought suits or complaints as often as the poor, or, alternatively, the details of the abuse they suffered were not salacious enough to sell newspapers, domestic violence nonetheless occurred in large numbers in the upper classes. The fact that some of the most popular authors of the time portrayed domestic violence in their books suggests that no class was without its share of heartaches, broken bones, shame, and bruises caused at the hands of an alleged loved one.

This is seen in the numerous writings about Lady Caroline Norton, an upper-middle-class woman. When Caroline separated from her abusive husband George, she was horrified to learn that the law nearly always granted husbands custody of any children born to the marriage. In Elizabeth Foyster’s book *Marital Violence: An English Family History, 1600-1857*, the author notes that when Caroline asked for a separation from George, he denied her access to their three children, including one who subsequently died. He also falsely accused her of adultery with Lord Melbourne, the Prime Minister, in an effort to tarnish her reputation. Caroline’s descriptions of her marriage show that she was shocked by being subjected to physical violence, which was seen by most people as “a vice of the poor”:

> We had been married but a few weeks when I found that a part of my lot was that which generally belongs to a lower sphere—and that, when angry, Mr. Norton resorted to personal violence (157).

The abuse Caroline suffered at the hands of her husband led to her public awareness campaign regarding women’s lack of rights over their children and property after a separation or divorce. Not content to keep behind closed doors the domestic violence she suffered at the hands of her husband, and knowing that revealing it was the only way
legislation would be proposed and enacted, Caroline’s campaign included writing pamphlets, contacting political friends, and even writing an open letter to the Queen in which she “appealed to their shared interests as women” (156). Caroline’s proactive work led to the 1839 Custody of Infants Act, which, while not perfect by any means, was a crucial step in allowing mothers custodial rights after separation or divorce.

In addition to the physical beatings typically associated with domestic violence, I proffer that these works contain numerous other instances of what I would classify as domestic violence—whether or not legally recognized at the time—including verbal and sexual abuse, rape, involuntary confinement (both in the home or in an asylum), threats of harm, physically throwing one out of her home or denying her the right to live there, economically depriving her of money for household or other expenses, infidelity that could result in venereal disease or other sexually-transmitted diseases, denying her request to leave with her child, and isolating her from contact with her family and friends. Most of these activities were not considered abuse in the nineteenth century—and still are not today. While it is speculative to guess why these nineteenth-century authors depict any form of domestic violence in their works, I propose that it is because they thought these actions egregious and reprehensible enough to include them in their story lines. By doing so, these authors were able to educate the public about the true scope of domestic violence and to lift the veil of secrecy associated with it.

In these works, male abusers initiate and perpetuate violence against women for a multitude of reasons, including: (1) perceived threats to his power; (2) the desire to procure or possess her money or property; (3) jealousy; (4) the legally-sanctioned right to do so; (5) the loss of financial standing in the community; (6) the desire to move up the social ladder;
(7) the wish to marry someone else; (8) the feeling of power or superiority over a woman; or, often, (9) because he is under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

While many of the victims of domestic violence in these stories have family or friends in close proximity to their homes, the women nonetheless are often isolated—or feel as if they are—and are left to their own devices, either as to how to survive the abusive situation while staying in the house or how to safely flee. The outcomes associated with leaving or staying are mixed. In fact, one of the women in my selected readings does not survive the beatings she receives. This outcome is sure to give pause to readers of all eras who have suffered from domestic violence as they consider whether it is better to stay and die or to die trying to get out.

The authors depict a number of different options available to the victims of abuse. Some women escape the violence and, at great personal hardship, begin new lives elsewhere. One, as mentioned above, attempts to leave and is killed. Still others choose, for financial or other reasons, to continue living with the abusive spouse, and live miserable lives as a result. It is important to note that in no instance in this paper does the abuser cease abusing the woman. As long as the woman is living in the house, she is subjected to violence. Incredibly, two of the men even find the strength to abuse their wives while the men are on their deathbeds! Finally, some women—though none discussed in this paper—choose to stay in violent homes, only to be killed during one too many beatings. Even when victims have these purported choices available to them, the options are less than desirable and difficult to discern, especially when they must be made in homes filled with unpredictable violence.

Finally, I will discuss how the laws proposed or in effect at the time regarding violence against women, child custody, and property rights affected the choices available to
women who lived in homes where abuse was prevalent. In the Victorian age, for a wife to leave her husband meant giving up her children, home, money, jewelry, and any other property she had brought into the marriage. In Elizabeth M. Craik’s article titled “Self and Society in the Victorian Novel: Women and the Law in Victorian England,” the author writes that married women had very few rights and, indeed, “held the same legal status as criminals, minors and the insane” (1). Thus, even when brutal violence is involved, the choice to stay or leave is not an easy one, especially given the child custody and property laws in effect in the nineteenth century.
Chapter 1

Oliver Twist: Too Busy Struggling to Survive to Help

Of the authors whose works I reviewed for this paper, it is only Charles Dickens in 
*Oliver Twist* (1838)—the author’s second novel after the very popular *Pickwick Papers*,
which appeared in monthly installments and was later published in three volumes—who 
portrays the abuse and brutal murder of someone from the lower classes. According to 
historians, this depiction mirrors what the newspapers were reporting and the court dockets 
were recording in the nineteenth century. Dickens’s portrayal of Nancy as a victim of 
domestic violence is, disturbingly, one in which she is seen as deserving the brutality. Bill 
Sikes, Mr. Fagin, and even Nancy agree that she deserves nothing less than the physical 
beatings to which she is subjected. Nancy’s almost passive acceptance of Sikes’s verbal and 
physical abuse appears to be due either to her status of a lower-class citizen or to her status as 
a female, the latter of which always constitutes a position of inferiority in the Victorian era. 
This is ironic given that a Queen was ruling the country at the time. In either instance, 
Dickens does not paint a very flattering portrait of women during this time, even if it is 
historically accurate. Because of her life as a thief—one groomed over the years by Sikes 
and Fagin—neither of them think she has a right to question how she is treated or to retaliate 
against them.

At the gentleman’s house where Oliver lives for a short time, Rose tells Nancy it is 
madness to go back to Sikes. Nancy agrees, but is unable to explain why she and others like 
her return to such abusive situations, saying, “I don’t know what it is, . . . I only know that it 
is so, and not with me alone, but with hundreds of others as bad and wretched as myself. I
must go back. Whether it is God’s wrath for the wrong I have done, I do not know; but I am drawn back to him through every suffering and ill usage; and I should be, I believe, if I knew that I was to die by his hand at last” (Dickens 350). Nancy further attempts to explain to Rose and the old gentleman why she stays with Sikes:

When such as I, who have no certain roof but the coffin-lid, and no friend in sickness or death but the hospital nurse, set our rotten hearts on any man, and let him fill the place that has been a blank through all our wretched lives, who can hope to cure us? Pity us, lady—pity us for having only one feeling of the woman left, and for having that turned, by a heavy judgment, from a comfort and pride, into a new means of violence and suffering (351).

In these passages, Dickens suggests that women are so desperate for love that they will endure anything, even death, in pursuit of even fleeting moments of what they deem to be love. What is also implied is that a woman cannot be happy or fulfilled without a man in her life, even an abusive man, which idea this reader wholeheartedly rejects.

When Nancy attempts to leave the house to meet the old gentleman to tell him about Oliver, Sikes forcibly detains her and refuses to let her leave. It is only after he pins her arms behind her back and holds her down on a bench by force that she, tired of struggling, gives in and gives up hope of leaving the house that night. Fagin and Sikes talk about her stubbornness, and Sikes says, “I thought I had tamed her, but she’s as bad as ever” (386). With this offhand comment by Sikes, Nancy is compared to something less than human and, similar to Sikes’s dog, something that must be beaten into submission. While Lisa Surridge proposes in *Bleak Houses: Marital Violence in Victorian Fiction* that “. . . Dickens created working-class female characters who are passive in the face of abuse, and who refuse or resist intervention when it is offered . . .” (18), I disagree when this description is applied to Nancy. Nancy is anything but passive. While she did, indeed, “receive” beatings and endure
other forms of abuse from Sikes and Fagin, she frequently resists such violence, and often threatens to retaliate. Although Nancy’s actions do not seem to stem or lessen the flow of violence, it is inaccurate to characterize Nancy as passive.

Due to her status as a lower-class, unmarried female—and some suggest a prostitute—Nancy is invisible, as are her rights. Interestingly, it is the old gentleman and Rose who recognize in Nancy the potential for redemption and who offer her the chance of a better life in a place far from Sikes and London. When Nancy describes Fagin and Sikes to Rose and the old gentleman as the ones who hold Oliver hostage, they thank her and offer her a safe refuge as a reward. However, the point at which Nancy would have accepted intervention from anyone has long passed and she refuses, saying, “You can do nothing to help me. I am past all hope, indeed” (Dickens 399). This hopeless feeling is due to the verbal and mental abuse Nancy endures over the years in which Sikes reinforces her worthlessness.

While Nancy initially denies outright their generous offer as impossible, she later gives it some thought. When the gentleman promises that it is within his power to offer her “peace of heart and mind . . . a quiet asylum, either in England, or if you fear to remain here, in some foreign country” (Dickens 399), she hesitates, but then replies, “I am chained to my old life. I loathe and hate it now, but I cannot leave it. I must have gone too far to turn back,—and yet I don’t know, for if you had spoken to me so, some time ago, I should have laughed it off” (400). In this passage, Dickens indicates that at one point, Nancy felt that she was worth saving and that there was a chance her life was worthwhile. However, years of abuse have completely demoralized her and shattered her sense of self worth. Inexplicably—or perhaps not, given her co-dependency on Sikes—Nancy tells him about the “fresh start”
offer and begs him to leave with her. However, just before Sikes kills Nancy, it is clear she has since given the safe refuge offer some additional thought and considers leaving him. However, not about to lose his grasp on the only person he controls, Sikes kills Nancy to prevent her from leaving him. Therein lies the real danger of abusive relationships: those who harm others often will do whatever it takes—including murder—to prevent losing their control.

As Dickens’s novel was published 15 and 19 years before the passage of the Act for the Better Prevention and Punishment of Aggravated Assaults Upon Women and Children (1853) (informally referred to as the Good Wives Rule) and the Divorce Act (1857), respectively, it is doubtful he was attempting to use *Oliver Twist* as a means to effect change in domestic violence and battery laws. This is probably particularly true given that, as a single woman, Nancy would not have been afforded any protection or rights under the laws that protected only married women.

Like many of the men who abused women in the stories reviewed for this paper, Sikes often drank copious amounts of alcohol. When discussing whether Oliver will be a good thief for Sikes’s purposes, Sikes “proceeded to drink brandy at a furious rate, and to flourish the crowbar in an alarming manner” (178). Nancy knows that when Sikes drinks to excess while brandishing a weapon, it often leads to a beating of her or the dog, and often both of them.

Dickens cleverly has Nancy use Sikes’s taste for the bottle to her advantage when she adds laudanum to his glass of whiskey so that she can leave the house undetected to meet the old gentleman and Rose. Had Fagin not grown suspicious, and had Noah not followed her,
Nancy would have carried out the clandestine meeting and returned to the house without Sikes or Fagin knowing otherwise.

Lest readers make the mistake of believing that Sikes was brutal or violent simply because he drank heavily—thereby providing him with an excuse for why he beat Nancy—it is important to note that he was brutal and violent no matter what his blood alcohol content. In nearly every scene in which he is present, Sikes is cuffing or threatening his dog, or verbally or physically abusing Nancy. In many of these scenes, there is no mention of the presence of alcohol or of Sikes drinking to excess or at all. By removing the mitigating factor of alcohol as underpinning Sikes’s violent tendencies, Dickens makes it clear that there need not be any reason for Sikes to abuse Nancy, other than his need to control her and to establish his superiority over her. Like Robert Dempster in Janet’s Repentance, Sikes beats Nancy simply because he can, certain in the knowledge that she cannot, or will not, protect herself from his blows or tell anyone about them.

After Oliver is captured by the police following a pickpocketing incident, Fagin and Sikes decide that Nancy is the only person who can find out if Oliver has reported who really committed the crime, as well as the only one who can convince the police to release him without raising suspicion. However, when the men share their plan with her, she balks and refuses to do so, not wanting anything to do with the police. “By dint of alternate threats, promises, and bribes, the lady in question was ultimately prevailed upon to undertake the commission” (Dickens 121-22). Foyster states that by the nineteenth century, reports of domestic violence had shifted from brute physical force to those that included control by the husbands over their wives “through bullying, humiliation and intimidation . . .” (31). No longer was it necessary to physically beat one’s partner; often, the mere threat to do so was
enough to control her, as was the case with Nancy. After she leaves for the police station, Fagin and Sikes celebrate by drinking to Nancy and her agreeable nature. As he fills his glass, Sikes says, “Here’s to her health, and wishing they was all like her!” (Dickens 122), meaning that she does what she is told without complaining too much and that the mere threat of violence is enough to keep her in line.

When Oliver is living with the old gentleman, Sikes and Nancy kidnap Oliver as he is taking books to the bookseller. Back at Fagin’s house, Nancy begs Sikes to keep the dog away from Oliver, lest it tear him to pieces. Sikes replies, “Stand off from me, or I’ll split your head against the wall” (149). Nancy stands her ground and, stepping between Sikes and Oliver, says, “[T]he child shan’t be torn down by the dog, unless you kill me first” (Ibid.). Sikes replies, “I’ll soon do that, if you don’t keep off” (Ibid.). That same night, when Fagin hits Oliver on the shoulder with his club, Nancy grabs the club and throws it in the fire, stating, “I won’t stand by and see it done, Fagin. . . . Let him be—let him be—or I shall put that mark on some of you, that will bring me to the gallows before my time” (150). These scenes represent two of the rare occasions when Nancy does not appear so beaten down and accepting of certain abuse. Instead, she shows that she still has the spirit and strength to physically resist violence. It is noteworthy, however, that she makes these stands in defense of Oliver, not on her own behalf. In later scenes when it is she who is threatened or beaten, she does not seem to have the same fortitude to fight back, and instead appears merely resigned to her fate.

When Sikes makes fun of Nancy for her concern for Oliver’s safety, especially since she helped kidnap him, she replies she wishes she “had been struck dead in the street, or had changed places with them we passed so near to-night, before I had lent a hand in bringing
him here” (151). Despite her life of crime and violence, Nancy repents of participating in the kidnapping of Oliver, and it is doubtful she would have assisted had Sikes and Fagin not threatened her. Waking Oliver to go on his first thieving trip with Sikes, Nancy warns him not to try to escape. “I have saved you from being ill-used once, and I will again, and I do now. . . . I have promised for your being quiet and silent; if you are not, you will only do harm to yourself and me too, and perhaps be my death. See here! I have borne all this for you already, . . . ” (Dickens 184). Nancy then shows him “some livid bruises on her neck and arms” and says, “Hush! Every word from you is a blow for me” (Dickens 184). Although Nancy shows Oliver the bruises she has from the beatings she receives from Sikes, she does so surreptitiously, not as a way to garner pity or sympathy from him. She does not want anyone without a “need to know” to see them. Nancy shows them to Oliver only as a means of warning him of what Sikes is capable of doing if he attempts to escape.

Like many women in abusive situations, though Nancy is unable to protect herself from Sikes’s abuse, she still tries to protect Oliver from the same fate. Surridge states that Dickens "revered women's attempts to keep their private battles out of the public eye, and saw such attempts as examples of supreme loyalty" (34). As seen in the case of Nancy, this adherence to “supreme loyalty” is fatal. Although many people suspect that Sikes beats Nancy, no one looks too closely, nor does Nancy share her sorrows with anyone. Like Lady Brackenstall in *The Adventures of the Abbey Grange*, Nancy has no family or close friends near to protect her or to whom she can run, which makes Sikes’s brutality of her just that much easier. In essence, Nancy is utterly alone in the world, save the man who abuses her.

Sikes never overlooks an opportunity to abuse Nancy. Even when he is ill, as she nurses and helps him sit up in bed, “he muttered various curses on her awkwardness, and
struck her” (Dickens 331). Likewise, after she drugs his drink with laudanum so that she can go meet the old gentleman, Sikes insults her and says she looks “like a corpse come to life again” (341). Even in a drug-induced and presumably lethargic state, so strong is Sikes’s desire to control Nancy that he still has the physical ability to grab her arms and shake her before he passes out. When Sikes requires Nancy’s nursing assistance, he still threatens and strikes her. After demanding that she help him drink another glass of gin, he says, “[C]ome and sit aside of me, and put on your own face; or I’ll alter it so, that you won’t know it again when you do want it” (342).

Fagin uses his knowledge of the abuse Nancy endures for his own benefit. Although he pretends to be concerned about her, he is anything but. While trying to get Nancy to reveal whom she intended to meet at midnight (who he presumes is a new lover), Fagin tells her, “If you want revenge on those that treat you like a dog—like a dog! worse than [Sikes’s] dog, for he humors him sometimes—come to me” (387). Again, Nancy is compared to a dog, this time by Fagin. Having been beaten throughout the years by Fagin as he taught her the thieving trade before taking up with Sikes, Nancy is reluctant to take Fagin at his word. “I know you well,” she replies, not fooled in the least by his token and false kindness (Ibid.). However disingenuous Fagin is with his concern for Nancy, the dangers associated with any attempt she may make to leave Sikes are real. Having seen Sikes abuse Nancy in the past, Fagin knows well the depths of Sikes’s violent behavior. “The girl must know, well, that if she shook him off, she could never be safe from his fury, and that it would be surely wreaked—to the maiming of limbs, or perhaps the loss of life—on the object of her more recent fancy” (388).
In a moment of complete revelation, Nancy tells Rose that she has had suicidal thoughts in the past. “Look before you, lady. Look at that dark water. How many times do you read of such as I who spring into the tide, and leave no living thing to care for or bewail them. It may be years hence, or it may be only months, but I shall come to that at last” (400). Like Janet Dempster in Eliot’s short story, the tragedy of this confession is that Nancy does not seem frightened by the prospect of death by suicide, only resigned as she acknowledges it as inevitable. Other than killing herself, Nancy sees no other choices she can make on her own at this point to end the violent relationship with Sikes.

Nancy’s identification and betrayal of Sikes and Fagin sends Sikes into a murderous rage. Grabbing her by the throat and neck, he “dragged her into the middle of the room, and looking once towards the door, placed his heavy hand upon her mouth” (Dickens 407). Although Nancy begs Sikes for mercy and for the chance to go live in a faraway place, as promised by the old gentleman and Rose, Sikes denies her request without a single word. There is absolutely no way Sikes will let her leave him and lose his control over her. Even before he begins to batter her with the intent of killing her, he knows it is wrong because he looks to the door to ensure no one is watching and he has the presence of mind to realize that a gunshot would surely raise the suspicion of others who may hear it. Yet he still uses the gun to carry out the horrific murder. Instead of shooting Nancy with the gun, Sikes uses it as a cudgel, battering her until her facial features are bloodied and obliterated. “[H]e beat [the pistol] twice with all the force he could summon, upon the upturned face that almost touched his own. She staggered and fell: nearly blinded with the blood that rained down from a deep gash in her forehead; . . .” (408). Nancy’s murder is particularly brutal and graphic and “with terror added to rage, [Sikes] had struck and struck again” until Nancy no longer resembled
anything human: “... mere flesh and blood, no more—but such flesh, and so much blood!” (409). Like the years of abuse inflicted by Sikes during her lifetime, Nancy’s death is tortuous and excruciatingly painful. Similarly, in treating her as less than human by comparing her to his dog when she lived with him, he dehumanizes her in death by obliterating her facial features so that any trace of humanness is destroyed.

The narrator suggests that Sikes’s murder of Nancy was almost too horrendous for English residents to imagine. “Of all bad deeds that, under cover of the darkness, had been committed within wide London’s bounds since night hung over it, that was the worst. Of all the horrors that rose with an ill scent upon the morning air, that was the foulest and most cruel” (408). In an eerie twist of fate, Londoners would experience even more brutal murders when, fifty years after Dickens published this novel, Jack the Ripper killed five prostitutes in the Whitechapel neighborhood, one of the areas Fagin keeps a house.

Like Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare’s famous play, who attempts to wash away imaginary blood on her hands, Sikes is unable to clean away Nancy’s blood that has splattered all over the flat, the dog, and himself. Despite his attempts to clean up, “... there were spots that would not be removed...” and he is forced to burn his clothes in order to destroy the evidence. “How those stains were dispersed about the room! The very feet of the dog were bloody. All this time he had never once turned his back upon the corpse; no, not for a moment” (409). At last, but only in death, the tables are turned and Sikes is frightened of Nancy for the first time in their relationship.

Where Dickens redeems himself in this reader’s mind are the scenes that follow Nancy’s murder. Whether because of the horrific brutality and rage associated with the killing or whether there is a limit of how much violence fellow citizens are willing to allow
to happen before they will intervene, Dickens creates a vigilante-style search for Sikes by irate citizens after finding Nancy murdered on the floor of the apartment. Although this protective attitude comes too late to save Nancy, it may be that Dickens is encouraging readers to be proactive rather than reactive when it comes to domestic violence. Had these citizens intervened earlier, it is presumed Nancy would not have died—at least not that night. Had her neighbors or other citizens held Sikes accountable for his earlier vicious beatings of Nancy, it is possible she might have been able to locate the inner strength necessary to leave him and take the old gentleman up on his offer to provide her a safe place to live. Due to the constant barrage of verbal and physical abuse, however, Nancy was too defeated, both physically and mentally, to leave Sikes and her violent home. Ultimately, her inability to do so cost her her life.

As the crowd surrounds Sikes in his hiding place and he taunts them from the window, their fury at his murder of Nancy is palpable:

> Of all the terrific yells that ever fell on mortal ears, none could exceed the cry of the infuriated throng. Some shouted to those who were nearest to set the house on fire; others roared to the officers to shoot him dead. Among them all, none showed such fury as the man on horseback, who, throwing himself out of the saddle, and bursting through the crowd as if he were parting water, cried, beneath the window, in a voice that rose above all others, “Twenty guineas to the man who brings a ladder” (436).

These people were nowhere to be found when Sikes was beating Nancy on a daily basis. It is only after she is murdered that they take action against him. Of course, after Nancy is dead, it is far too late for their vigilante justice to make any difference to her. By failing to intervene and by turning deaf ears during earlier violent episodes, the neighbors effectively allowed and enabled Sikes to murder Nancy. In their defense, considering the poverty-stricken neighborhoods they lived in, most if not all of these neighbors were
struggling to survive themselves and some may have been enduring violence in their own homes; they had no energy to stop a beating from occurring in someone else’s house.

As Sikes prepares to lower himself down from the roof to the ground with a rope in an effort to escape the angry mob, he is again haunted by the thought of Nancy’s dead stare as she lie motionless on the floor. “The eyes again!” he screamed. (438). As a sort of poetic justice for Nancy, Dickens writes Sikes’s death scene as one of fear followed by a hanging. While Nancy’s murder was agonizingly slower than other methods would have been, not to mention incredibly painful, Sikes faces the threat of death in three different forms. First, like a hunted animal, the angry crowd chases him through the streets of London, eventually cornering him in a building and leaving him no viable means of escape. Second, as Sikes loses his balance and falls off the roof of the building, the prospect of a painful death is imminent as he tumbles past floor after floor of the building with nothing to stop him before he hits the street. Finally, the rope that slips from around his waist to around his neck effectively ends his life in an unexpected and inadvertent lynching.

As does Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in *The Adventure of the Abbey Grange*, reviewed later in this paper, Dickens ends his novel with the brutal death of the man who abuses a woman. While Dickens depicts Sikes’s death as inadvertent, the text strongly suggests that had he not slipped and fallen, the vigilante crowd would have killed him, and no one would have mourned the fact. Although this reader does not believe Dickens wrote this novel with the intent of proposing laws against domestic violence, it may be suggested by his ending that he thinks that those who abuse women should pay a high price for doing so.
Chapter 2

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall: Marriage, Mixed Drinks, and Mistresses

In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), Anne Brontë’s second novel after *Agnes Grey* and published in three volumes just one year before she died in 1849, the author shows the danger of ignoring one’s intuition before making the decision to marry someone. This is especially true in the Victorian age when it was nearly impossible for a woman to extract herself from an abusive marriage once she exchanged vows with her husband. However, as the old adage states, hindsight is 20/20. It is patently obvious that Helen Huntingdon would have saved herself a lot of heartache and a miserable marriage had she simply listened to her own intuition or heeded the rumors about Arthur's playboy ways before she married him. Like many women throughout history, Helen and many women of her time were believers of the “Yes, I know he’s a rake, but I can change him” way of thinking. In her introduction to the novel, Brontë very bluntly states that she chooses to depict her antagonist as an alcoholic philanderer because, “[I know] such characters do exist, and if I have warned one rash youth from following in their steps, or prevented one thoughtless girl from falling into the very natural error of my heroine, the book has not been written in vain” (x). As Brontë is alleged to have loosely based the character of Arthur on her brother Branwell and his friends, she was all too familiar with the destruction caused by such a lifestyle.

After only eight weeks of marriage, Helen admits that Arthur is “not what I thought him at first” (191), and that, had she known it earlier, she would not have fallen in love with him nor married him. His favorite pastime is to tell her about his former lovers, especially when the woman was ruined or her husband found out about their affair. Six months after
their marriage, Helen and Arthur go to London; a month later, he sends her home while he
“attends to business” (206). This is the start of his abandoning her for weeks and months at a
time so that he can stay in London to drink and have affairs with other women. I submit that
all of these behaviors constitute various forms of domestic violence. In abandoning Helen,
Arthur subjects her to economic deprivation. She has no idea when to expect him home after
his trips to London, which grow longer in duration as the years go by, and she is left to
wonder how to pay household bills. Arthur’s drinking and philandering with different
women puts Helen at risk, at the very least, for contracting a sexually-transmitted disease.

Arthur’s controlling and abusive nature is most selfish and appalling when Helen’s
father dies. Arthur was “vexed to hear of [his death],” but only because “he feared the
circumstances would mar his comfort” (256). In effect, he involuntarily confines her to their
home when he forbids her to attend her father’s funeral or even go to comfort her brother
Frederick for a day or two (Ibid.). Arthur has the audacity to tell Helen that she was
“unreasonable to wish it” and that he could not “spare [her] for a single day” (257). This
outrageous directive comes after he has returned from another four-month stay in London!

Although her marriage to Arthur is a disaster almost from the beginning, becoming a
mother fulfills Helen like nothing else. As suggested in Janet’s Repentance, reviewed later
in this paper, having children can give a woman purpose for her life and, when a home is
filled with domestic violence, a child serves as a distraction from all of the ugliness
surrounding the abuse. At her son’s birth, Helen is already aware that she has brought a child
into a less than ideal household, and she is both overjoyed and filled with fear for him. She
prays that if—despite her best efforts—her son becomes “a slave of sin, the victim of vice
and misery, a curse to others and himself,” that he be taken from her by God (228). The toll
that the domestic violence has taken on Helen is obvious when she states she would rather that her son die than turn out like his father. After seeing Arthur teaching their very young son to drink, curse, and treat Helen rudely, much like Arthur does on a daily basis, she decides it would be “far better that [her son] should live in poverty and obscurity with a fugitive mother, than in luxury and affluence with such a father” (336). Thus, the plan to escape is hatched. Although she hopes that living elsewhere will save her son, Helen is not unaware of the trials she will face when she flees with him. “I am fully alive to the evils that may, and must result upon the step I am about to take; but I never waiver in my resolution because I never forget my son” (347). Given a Victorian woman’s sense of duty, it is doubtful that Helen would have had the same fortitude to leave her abusive husband had she been single and childless.

Helen is passionate and clear about how she will raise her son, and she defends her parental actions and beliefs to Mrs. Markham. Helen speaks up not only for her son, but for females who are not raised to be independent in their own right. "[Y]ou would have [girls] be tenderly and delicately nurtured, like a hot-house plant, taught to cling to others for direction and support and guarded, as much as possible, from the very knowledge of evil" (30). Having just escaped from a house filled with evil, Helen acts as somewhat of an authority on the subject, though she does not disclose whereby she acquired her resolute opinions. She continues:

I would have [boys and girls] so to benefit by the experience of others, and the precepts of a higher authority, that they should know beforehand to refuse the evil and choose the good, and require no experimental proofs to teach them the evil of transgression. I would not send a poor girl into the world, unarmed against her foes, and ignorant of the snares that beset her path; nor would I watch and guard her till, deprived of self-respect and self-reliance, she lost the power or the will to watch and guard herself (31).
Finally, Helen leaves no question about how strongly she feels about the subject when she states, “[A]s for my son, if I thought he would grow up to be what you call a man of the world—one that has seen ‘life,’ and glories in his experience, . . . I would rather that he died tomorrow!” (Ibid.).

Helen is just as protective of her friends as she is her son. Helen and her friend Milicent are both trapped in loveless, miserable marriages and do all they can to prevent Milicent’s single sister Esther from suffering a like fate. The dangers and grief that come from a loveless marriage, whether or not to an alcoholic spouse, is a point so important to Brontë that she creates Esther, a character for whom the lessons are reinforced several times throughout the novel. The first is when Millicent begs Helen to impress upon Esther that she should, “never, on any account, or for anybody’s persuasion, marry for the sake of money, or rank, or establishment, or any earthly thing, but true affection and well-grounded esteem” (271). A second instance is when Esther reports to Helen that her mother is upset with her for refusing the hand of a man who offered marriage. Helen replies, “You might as well sell yourself to slavery at once, as marry a man you dislike. If your mother and brother are unkind to you, you may leave them, but remember you are bound to your husband for life” (359). Helen is aware of the irony associated with keeping secret any evidence of domestic violence and states, “How odd it is that [Millie and I] weep for each other’s distresses, when we shed not a tear for our own!” (272). This is another instance of women attempting to protect family and friends from any knowledge of violence, and putting their own needs to the side.
Despite acknowledging that just two years after her marriage, she has “now got down to the lowest gradation in [his] affection, and discovered all the evils of his nature” (232), the duties associated with being a spouse in the Victorian era run deep within Helen. As such, she is obligated to accept and endure whatever behavior Arthur exhibits, no matter how heartless or brutal. Just when she thinks it cannot get any worse, he proves her wrong time and time again. After one such incident, she is certain that “surely we shall find no lower depth than this. And, if so, I can bear it well—as well, at least, as I have borne it hitherto” (Ibid.). Not only is that an incredibly sad statement to make about one’s spouse—not to mention about one’s life with such a spouse—but, unfortunately, it turned out to be false: things could and did get worse.

The birth of her son binds Helen even more tightly to her husband, especially since she wants to live with her son. The Divorce Act stated that, “Insofar as children were concerned, their legal custody belonged to the father. In the case of divorce, even one caused by an abusive or adulterous husband, the divorced wife could be prevented from seeing her own children” (Yalom 186). Thus, if Helen wants to be part of her son’s life, the Divorce Act essentially forces her to stay with her abusive husband. Resigned to staying with Arthur rather than running the risk of losing her son, Helen’s depression deepens and she is “so determined to love [Arthur]” (Brontë 250), despite his drinking and boorish behavior, and was “so intensely anxious to excuse his errors,” that she is “familiarized with vice and almost a partaker in his sins. Things that formerly shocked and disgusted me, now seem only natural” (251). She continues, “I am gradually losing that instinctive horror and repulsion which was given me by nature . . .” (Ibid.). By staying with an abusive spouse, a woman becomes inured to acts, language, and behavior that formerly would have been considered
derogatory or unacceptable to her. One’s notion of what is acceptable is lowered on a daily basis.

Even the fact that Arthur is flagrantly having affairs with other women shortly after the marriage begins is not grounds enough for Helen to legally end her marriage to him. The Divorce Act did not allow a divorce “solely on the grounds of her husband’s violence. Instead, the chief ground for divorce was adultery” (Foyster 236). While Helen would not have had any trouble establishing Arthur’s infidelity—something he never attempts to hide from anyone and, in fact, something that he boasts about—the courts made wives jump through even more legal hoops in order to petition for a divorce. Wives still needed a mitigating reason in addition to the adultery before a magistrate would grant a divorce. In true double standard, husbands needed only to prove a wife’s adultery in order to divorce her. However, before a wife could divorce her husband, she also needed to establish that the adultery “had involved incest, bigamy, rape, sodomy, bestiality, desertion for more than two years, or adultery ‘coupled with such cruelty as without adultery would have entitled her [the wife] to a divorce a mensa et thoro’ (separation from ‘bed and board’)” (Foyster 236-7).

Like many in similar situations, Helen feels shame at being involved in such a sordid and abusive relationship. This shame leads her to keep silent about the violence she endures at the hands of her husband. She questions why she did not share with her aunt what is going on with Arthur (though her aunt probably has already heard rumors). “Was it pride that made me so extremely anxious to appear satisfied with my lot or merely a just determination to bear my self-imposed burden alone and preserve my best friend from the slightest participation in those sorrows from which she had striven so hard to save me? It might have been something of each, but I am sure the latter motive was predominant” (Brontë 253).
Like Nancy in *Oliver Twist*, Lady Brackenstall in *The Adventure of the Abbey Grange*, Laura Fairlie in *The Woman in White*, and Janet Dempster in *Janet's Repentance*, Helen attempts to protect everyone around her from the abuser, but does not or cannot do the same for herself.

After much consideration and planning, Helen finally makes the decision to leave Arthur and take her son with her. When she tells Arthur that she is leaving him, he refuses to allow Helen to take their son, saying that he has no intention of being “the talk of all the old gossips in the neighborhood; he would not have it said that he was such a brute his wife could not live with him” (308). Up to this point, of course, Arthur has shown no remorse for the fact that Helen has been the fodder of the gossips in the community since the day she married him. As he controls everything about their marriage, Arthur has the sole authority to decide whether Helen can leave. Yalom states that a woman in an unhappy marriage, such as Helen, was “not allowed to live separately from her husband, if he insisted upon cohabitation” (185).

In this novel, Brontë depicts a second marriage in which domestic violence occurs. However, unlike Helen, who finds her inner strength and is able to break away from the violence to lead an independent life while supporting her son, Milicent Hattersley is portrayed as a truly submissive and wounded woman. Milicent suffers physical and verbal abuse at the hands of her husband, Ralph Hattersley. Like Arthur, Ralph is a heavy drinker. At a dinner party at the Huntingdons’ home, Ralph is drunk, “[s]wearing and cursing like a maniac” (Brontë 266). Pulling his wife onto his knee, he demands that she tell him why she is crying. When she denies that she is weeping, he “rudely pull[s] her hands from her face” and demands again that she tell him. Her response indicates that her husband abuses her in the privacy of their home: “Do let me alone Ralph! Remember we are not at home.” He
ignores her plea and says, “No matter: you **shall** answer my question!” and then attempts “to extort the confession by shaking her and remorselessly crushing her slight arms in the grip of his powerful fingers” (Ibid.).

When Helen insists that Milicent’s brother, Mr. Hargrave, intervene and stop the abuse, Hattersley punches him and nearly knocks him down. He then demands for a third time that Milicent tell him why she was crying. “Tell me now!” said he with another shake and a squeeze that made her draw in her breath and bite her lip to suppress a cry of pain.” (267). When she refuses again, he throws her from him “with such violence that she fell on her side; . . .” (Ibid.). In true blame-the-victim fashion, Hattersley freely admits that he verbally and physically abuses his wife, but like Robert Dempster in *Janet’s Repentance*, he blames his wife for forcing him to harm her. He also shows absolutely no remorse for the violence he directs at her when he is drunk, though this reader is unconvinced that he only abuses her while he is inebriated. Hattersley confesses to Helen, “I positively think I ill-use [Milicent] sometimes, when I’ve taken too much—but I can’t help it, for she never complains, either at the time or after. I suppose she doesn’t mind it” (277). Helen immediately contradicts this and says, “[S]he **does** mind it; and some other things she minds still more, which, yet, you may never hear her complain of” (Ibid.). Again, the duties of a Victorian wife, and the submission and secrecy associated with abuse, are difficult for this twenty-first century reader to comprehend at times.

As does Janet Dempster in *Janet’s Repentance*, Helen returns to her marital home to care for her husband during his final illness. When Gilbert and others in the community comment how they cannot understand why she would do such a thing, considering the abuse to which he has subjected her, Helen’s brother Frederick replies that she does it because of
“her own sense of duty” (406). Although readers may think Arthur does not deserve such devotion from the wife he abandoned time and time again, they can still admire Helen’s dedication to her marriage vows. Like Janet Dempster, when Helen returns to nurse her husband for the last time, it is the first time in their relationship when she is in control. This is shown when Arthur asks whether she has forgiven him. She replies, “I have forgiven you, but I know you cannot love me as you once did, and I should be very sorry if you were to, for I could not pretend to return it. So let us drop the subject” (417-418).

Like Bill Sikes in *Oliver Twist*, who continues to physically and verbally abuse Nancy even as she nurses him, Arthur subjects Helen to the same treatment after he suffers a relapse in his recovery and starts drinking again. Helen sends her beloved son to live with Esther so that she can nurse Arthur around the clock. Her devotion is all-encompassing and she tends to him twenty-four hours a day, catching only an hour of sleep at a time (426). When she steps to the door to speak to her son and Esther for five minutes, she later states that Arthur “reproached me bitterly for my levity and neglect.” When Milicent’s husband tells Arthur that Helen is “worn to a shadow” because of his demands, Arthur replies, “what are her sufferings to mine?” (Brontë 427).

In this novel, Brontë presents an interesting dichotomy of the Victorian wife. While there are certainly scenes in which Helen and Milicent show submission to their husbands and a resigned “acceptance” of the abuse directed toward them, Brontë also shows readers that escape from a violent marriage is possible, that a woman can earn enough to support her son and herself (with the help of family, in this instance), and that if she chooses to return to nurse a dying spouse, it is only because she wants to, not because she is forced or obligated to do so.
From the opening scene of George Eliot’s *Janet’s Repentance* (1858), the author’s third volume in her collection titled *Scenes of Clerical Life*, antagonist Robert Dempster has a reputation of someone who drinks heavily, but who can still function for the most part, a dubious distinction that is admired by many in the community. At least, at the beginning of the story. After watching Dempster leave the bar to attend to an ailing client, Mr. Tomlinson, “looking after the lawyer admiringly” states, “I never see Dempster’s equal; if I did I’ll be shot. Why, he’s drunk the best part of a bottle o’ brandy since here we’ve been sitting, and I’ll bet a guinea, when he’s got to Trower’s his head’ll be as clear as mine. He knows more about law when he’s drunk than all the rest on ‘em when they’re sober” (Eliot 7).

Dempster’s ability to “hold his liquor,” especially given the vast quantity he consumes at a sitting, is seen as something admirable by the men in the pub, not as a problem. Of course, they do not have to live with him or suffer the effects of his brutal nature when he goes home inebriated. Although Surridge states that abusers were "widely perceived by Victorians as that of the unmanly and unclassed" (45), this is certainly not the case in Eliot’s story, where Dempster is deemed to be the best attorney in the area, despite his proclivity to drink to excess on a daily basis, and no matter what he did to his wife behind closed doors, but widely suspected by all.

The domestic violence depicted by Eliot in this story is multifaceted. Most noticeable are the physical beatings that Dempster inflicts on his wife. He also verbally abuses and threatens Janet. Finally, and unique to this paper, he throws and locks Janet out of their home and denies her housing.
Janet, Dempster’s long-suffering wife, is seen by women in the community as someone who does not hesitate to help others in need; however, she also is known as a woman who drinks. Mrs. Pettifer defends her and states, “When a woman can’t think of her husband coming home without trembling, it’s enough to make her drink something to blunt her feelings—and no children either, to keep her from it. You and me might do the same, if we were in her place” (Eliot 24). Although Mrs. Pettifer and others are aware of Dempster’s drinking and abuse of Janet, the violence Janet suffers is seen as something that could be endured more easily if she had children to tend to and to keep her occupied. That is, if she is able to have children—and the fact that she cannot is seen as yet another of her shortcomings—she would not need to drink to forget about the abuse because she would presumably “have a purpose in life.”

Despite the knowledge by almost everyone in the community of Dempster’s abuse of Janet, no one ever intervenes to stop it. This is similar to Sikes’s abuse of Nancy in *Oliver Twist*. Surridge notes, "[I]n early nineteenth-century culture, the emergent ideal of marital privacy was pitted against the impulse to intervene in wife-beating cases" (43). Later nineteenth-century works, including this short story, were still battling the notion that a man’s prerogative to verbally abuse his wife or to beat her at his discretion trumped intervention by neighbors and community members, especially if the abuser was a wealthy member of society. It is interesting to note that Eliot published this story five years after the enactment of the Act for the Better Prevention and Punishment of Aggravated Assualts Upon Women and Children. Perhaps she was making a social commentary that the Act was not effective.
The first instance of physical violence toward Janet that the reader sees occurs after yet another night of heavy drinking by her husband. Arriving home in the early hours of the morning, Dempster pounds on the door for Janet to let him in, even though he carries his own latchkey. Forcing her to wake in order to let him into the house is just another means by which he controls her; no matter what time and no matter in what condition he arrives home, she is expected to wake and let him in. In effect, she is little more than a servant for him. True to form, he chastises her for the length of time it takes for her to reach the door to let him in and threatens her: “I’ll teach you to keep me waiting in the dark, you pale staring fool! . . . I’ll beat you into your senses” (Eliot 33). He then accuses her of being drunk, though there is nothing in the text or in her manner to suggest that she has been drinking.

As Dempster brutally beats Janet, a portrait of her mother is personified. “Surely the aged eyes take on a look of anguish as they see Janet—not trembling, no! it would be better if she trembled—standing stupidly unmoved in her great beauty while the heavy arm is lifted to strike her. The blow falls—another—and another” (Ibid.). Eliot seems to suggest in this passage that cowering or showing fear will result in fewer blows for a victim of domestic violence. Foyster states:

[W]hile being a wife signaled adulthood, authority and usually governance over a household, it also required a woman to assume a gender role of subjection and obedience to her husband. The institution of marriage was intended to be the bedrock of the patriarchal ideal where women were subordinated to men, and husbands ruled over and dominated their wives (9).

Thus, for Janet to retaliate or to strike back at her inebriated husband would likely have been fatal for her. As a wife, she was inferior in status and subordinate to her husband in all respects. Standing motionless and submissively receiving the blows without making a sound may have saved her life.
Janet’s mother, like the other members of the community, is aware that her daughter is being abused. When reflecting on the painful and anxiety-ridden life her daughter lives as an abused wife, she thinks, “When our life is a continuous trial, the moments of respite seem only to substitute the heaviness of dread for the heaviness of actual suffering: the curtain of cloud seems parted an instant only that we may measure all its horror as it hangs low, black, and imminent, in contrast with the transient brightness; . . .” (Eliot 38). Thus, in writing this story, Eliot suggests that a home filled with violence offers few opportunities for happiness. Instead, with daily barrages of physical and verbal abuse, the only ray of hope Janet’s mother identifies for her daughter are those days that are not as bad as it was the day before or as bad as it could have been or as bad it may be tomorrow. In effect, Janet and other women in abusive situations are simply forced to divine happiness from the lesser of several evils available to them.

Dempster’s mother is also aware of the abuse, especially since she lives in the same house with them. However, unlike Janet’s mother, Old Mrs. Dempster blames her daughter-in-law for the harm that befalls her and feels that, had her son married “a meek woman like herself, who would have borne him children, and been a deft, orderly housekeeper” (43), her son would not be driven to abuse his wife. Old Mrs. Dempster is obviously a proponent of, and fulfilled the responsibilities expected from middle-class wives, as identified by Marilyn Yalom in her book, *A History of the Wife*: (1) obeying and satisfying one’s husband, (2) keeping one’s children physically and morally sound, and (3) maintaining the household (cleaning, washing, preparing food, etc.)” (181).

Perhaps as a means of deflecting responsibility for the son she raised or perhaps because she was jealous of her son’s wife, Robert’s mother always had “a disposition to lay
the blame on the wife rather than on the husband, . . .” and she resolutely “appeared unconscious of the sounds that reached her ears, and the facts she divined after she had retired to her bed; . . .” (Eliot 43). Unfortunately for Janet, Dempster’s mother apparently subscribes to the “out of sight, out of mind” way of thinking. However, in this reader’s mind, this does not absolve her of an obligation to protect Janet from harm, especially when, as a resident of the house, she saw and heard firsthand the abuse her son inflicted on his wife.

By refusing to acknowledge that her precious son is abusing his wife, despite all evidence to the contrary, Old Mrs. Dempster pretends that it simply is not happening. However, as Foyster notes, “Marital violence began as a struggle between two people, but it was rarely possible to contain its effects within the family and household” (204). Even when other family members are aware that domestic violence is occurring under their roof, some, like Dempster’s mother, still refuse to act or address it. If family members are unwilling to acknowledge the problem, it is unfair to expect neighbors or complete strangers to intervene in a domestic violence situation.

In the mid-nineteenth century, Foyster states that “[a] new cultural stereotype emerged of the cruel husband. He was working class and subjected his wife to physical and verbal violence that no middle- or upper-class wife could be expected to bear” (72-73). Eliot’s story strongly contradicts this commonly-held belief of the “typical” domestic violence situation. Dempster is the leading attorney in the community and, as such, is one of the upper-class residents. I submit that his abuse of Janet is not the result of his heavy drinking, but rather is the result of his love of power; she is nothing more than an object for him to possess and control. This is shown when Mr. Jerome, a wealthy client of Dempster’s, takes his business away from Dempster after becoming disgusted by Dempster’s treatment of
Janet. The loss of such a client “galled [Dempster] out of proportion to the mere monetary deficit it represented. The attorney loved money, but he loved power still better” (Eliot 63). Without facing legal repercussions, Dempster cannot strike out at others in the community when things do not go his way; however, at home he has the sole authority to beat Janet whenever he believes she has failed to recognize and abide by his every order.

Although Janet lives in a house filled with unpredictable and daily violence, she is empathetic with others, especially Mr. Tryan, the local minister whom Dempster hates. When Janet sees how Mr. Tryan suffers from consumption, she questions whether he, “like herself, knew what it was to tremble at a foreseen trial—to shudder at an impending burden, heavier than he felt able to bear?” (75). With this passage, Eliot shows the truly universal nature of suffering, and one that makes this short story so timeless. Eliot suggests that one need not be in a domestic abuse situation to empathize with another who suffers; any type of physical or mental suffering has the ability to bind fellow sufferers together. However, the “daily thickening miseries of her life” (76) cause Janet to forget for a while the sufferings of Mr. Tryan. Her own suffering is so encompassing and overwhelming that it eclipses thoughts of all else. For someone as selfless and compassionate as Janet, this is evidence of the effects of the unrelenting suffering that she endures at the hands of her husband.

As Dempster’s drinking increases and his furious temper flares up more frequently, Janet begins drinking more and her depression deepens with each new day, one that is more often than not exactly like the day before:

Every feverish morning, with its blank listlessness and despair, seemed more hateful than the last; . . . The morning light brought no gladness to her; it seemed only to throw its glare on what had happened in the dim candlelight—on the cruel man seated immovable in drunken obstinancy by the dead fire and dying lights in the dining-room, rating her in harsh tones, reiterating
old reproaches—or on a hideous blank of something unremembered, something that must have made that dark bruise on her shoulder, which ached as she dressed herself (77).

Unbelievably, even Frances Power Cobbe, who wrote “Wife-Torture in England” in 1878, bought into the belief that domestic violence was limited to the lower classes and states, “The dangerous wife-beater belongs almost exclusively to the artisan and laboring classes, . . . whereas in the upper and middle classes, marital violence ‘rarely extends to anything beyond an occasional blow or two of a not dangerous kind’” (Foyster 254). Cobbe appears to suggest that when abuse is only “occasional,” it does not damage or affect middle- and upper-class women at all. Indeed, it is as if Cobbe expects these women to endure such violence patiently and silently because, in comparison to the brutal and constant abuse she alleges happens only in lower-class homes, it is minor in nature and severity. Although Cobbe explains that the violence is due to the inequality of women and their status as the property of men, this reader heartily disagrees with Cobbe’s suggestion that women of any class should acquiesce or accept even one “occasional blow,” whether or not it is dangerous in and of itself. Taking the stance that violence is expected simply lays the foundation for it to continue, often at greater and more frequent intervals.

Such is the case when Old Mrs. Dempster continues to blame Janet for Dempster’s abuse. She charges Janet with such crimes as “always running about doing things for other people, and neglecting her own house,” as well as not “being at hand when he wants anything done” and not attending “to all his wishes” (Eliot 77). Janet’s life and needs are to be completely and always inferior to his. Eliot’s narrator exhorts the reader “not to believe that it was anything either present or wanting in poor Janet that formed the motive of her husband’s cruelty. . . . [A]n unloving, tyrannous, brutal man needs no motive to prompt his
cruelty; he needs only the perpetual presence of a woman he can call his own. A whole park full of tame or timid-eyed animals to torment at his will would not serve him so well to glut his lust of torture; they could not feel as one woman does; they could not throw out the keen retort which whets the edge of hatred” (78).

Dempster does not need a reason to beat Janet; the mere fact that she is present is reason enough. She does nothing to elicit the abuse and certainly does nothing to deserve it. Dempster beats Janet whether he is drunk or sober; whether his business is successful or not; or whether she has everything in the house as he likes it or not. She is not the problem; his need for power and superiority are the initiating factors for every instance of abuse towards her.

Janet reminisces about how the relationship with her husband has changed since they married. In doing so, her thoughts show the escalation of the violence. “He had no pity on her tender flesh; he could strike the soft neck he had once asked to kiss. Yet she would not admit her wretchedness; she had married him blindly, and she would bear it out to the terrible end, whatever that might be. Better this misery than the blank that lay for her outside her married home” (Ibid.). Like many women who had neither father nor brother to protect them from an abusive husband, Janet knew that to attempt to leave her husband possibly meant living an even more miserable life, hard as it may be for readers to imagine.

Friends and neighbors begin to notice the change in Janet’s demeanor, and so begins the dissection of Janet’s behavior. “The various symptoms that things were getting worse with the Dempsters afforded Milby gossip something new to say on an old subject. Mrs. Dempster, every one remarked, looked more miserable than ever, though she kept up the old pretense of being happy and satisfied. She was scarcely ever seen, as she used to be, going
about on her good-natured errands . . .” (79). Even knowing that Janet’s life is a living hell, no one intervenes to help her or gives her a shoulder on which to cry. Instead, her horrific home life is considered nothing more than fodder for the local gossips. Friends then begin to add to Janet’s already isolated life by avoiding paying her visits at home due to Dempster’s unpredictable behavior. Ironically, it is a male who recognizes the ostracism of Janet by the other females in the community. When Mrs. Phipps rationalizes her desertion of Janet and excuses Dempster’s abuse of her by listing her many shortcomings, including visiting the elderly and marginalized in the community, it is Mr. Phipps, “amiable and laconic, [who] wondered how it was women were so fond of running each other down” (Ibid.).

After another night of brutal abuse at the hands of her husband, Janet breaks down in front of her mother and asks, “Why don’t you speak to me? . . . [Y]ou don’t care about my suffering; you are blaming me because I feel—because I am miserable” (81). When her mother responds that she does not blame Janet for the abuse and, in an effort to change the subject, suggests to Janet that she is upset because she did not like her breakfast, Janet says, “Yes, that is what you always think, mother. It is the old story, you think. You don’t ask me what it is I have had to bear. You are tired of hearing me. You are cruel, like the rest; everyone is cruel in this world. Nothing but blame—blame—blame; never any pity” (Ibid.). As a Victorian woman, Janet’s mother downplays Janet’s misery and tells her that women must not judge, but submit instead. Again, the duties expected of women in the Victorian era and passed on throughout the years from mother to daughter, such as is the case here, suggest a passivity and total disregard of a woman’s own wants and needs in relation to her husband.

As the abuse continues and the isolation increases, Janet feels completely abandoned by everyone, including her beloved mother. Janet also feels that everyone has grown weary
of hearing the same old stories of the abuse she continues to suffer at the hands of her husband. As seen in *Oliver Twist*, people have become inured to the brutality that continues in Janet’s home. The violence has become so commonplace that people in the community find it easier to overlook and ignore, rather than taking action to prevent it. This cavalier attitude by Janet’s neighbors works to the advantage of her husband because, in effect, no one cares what he does to her behind closed doors because he has always done it and presumably always will. In fact, as noted earlier, the law grants him the right to “correct” Janet. Even if she leaves him, Janet’s life will be miserable. Foyster states, “[E]vidence suggests that loneliness could be the fate of the wife who no longer lived with her violent and cruel husband, and that it could be other women who were the agents of social ostracism” (202). As Janet’s neighbors already ostracize her, her loneliness would only deepen if she left her husband.

The combination of the abuse, the isolation, and Janet’s depression causes her to confess to her mother that, similar to Nancy in *Oliver Twist*, she has tried to kill herself in an effort to escape her miserable life with her husband. She also asks why her mother did not warn her of what marriage could bring, especially since the text suggests Janet’s mother might also have been a victim of abuse in her own marriage. “How could I know what would come? Why didn’t you tell me, mother?—why did you let me marry? You knew what brutes men could be; and there’s no help for me—no hope. I can’t kill myself; I’ve tried; but I can’t leave this world and go to another. There may be no pity for me there, as there is none here” (Eliot 81). Again, Janet can identify no place safe from the abuse, neither in this world nor the next.
The final straw—and the one scene in which Janet definitively shows she will no longer fear the very real possibility of death at the hands of her husband—occurs just before a dinner party with clients when Dempster throws on the floor the clothes Janet has readied for him. Rather than picking them up as she would have done in the past, Janet instead leaves the clothes on the floor for the guests to see when they arrive. After a night of heavy drinking and the guests have left, Dempster calls for Janet. When she doesn’t immediately come back downstairs, he threatens her life: “If you don’t come, I’ll kill you” (84). For Janet, however, the thought of death—and the chance to escape him once and for all—is no longer a frightening concept. Instead of considering that she will receive yet another beating for her actions, the very real possibility of death is almost a welcome thought. Janet thinks, “Perhaps he would kill her. Let him. Life was as hideous as death. For years she had been rushing on to some known but certain horror; and now she was close upon it. She was almost glad. She was in a state of flushed feverish defiance that neutralized her woman’s terrors” (Ibid.).

Instead of beating Janet, Dempster subjects her to an act that I submit is a form of domestic violence just as harmful as a physical beating: he throws her out of their house and locks the door behind her. It is after midnight and she is clad only in a light nightdress. The March winds swirl as she stands shivering on the front step trying desperately to think of a safe place to seek shelter. Janet remembers her mother telling her that “troubles were sent to make us better and draw us nearer to God” (87). Because of the years of brutality inflicted by her husband, Janet “had no faith, no trust” (Ibid.). It is as if Dempster beat those out of Janet, too. Because the servants sleep in the rear of the house and would not hear her if she
knocked on the door—nor would Dempster allow them to answer it—Janet is forced to walk through the streets to search for alternative shelter while dressed only in a thin nightdress.

Going to her mother’s house was not an option, in Janet’s opinion, as it was the first place Dempster would look for her. Because Janet has been ostracized for so long by so many in the community, it is not easy for her to decide where the safest place for her to go would be. She finally decides to see if Mrs. Pettifer will take her in, which she generously does, cementing their friendship forever. Foyster suggests, “An occasion of marital violence was a time when neighbors made judgments that could determine the nature of a couple’s future social interaction, as well as their marital relations. It sometimes marked the moment when mere neighbors became friends. But it could also lead to a social distancing between a married couple and their neighbours” (194)

Even though it is Dempster who locks Janet out of the house, he expects her to return in the morning and resume her subservient role. The fact that she does not return enrages him. Like Bill Sikes in *Oliver Twist*, Dempster has lost the one person over whom he exerted complete control, even though he refuses to acknowledge his part in her absence. By failing to return home to her husband and to fulfill her duties as a wife, Janet risks legal sanctions. Adrian Gray states in *Crime and Criminals in Victorian Literature* that “where a husband was drunken or abusive—or both—a woman risked criminal proceedings by moving away, as for much of the period her property passed wholly to her husband on marriage. It took three Married Women’s Property Acts (1870, 1882, and 1884) to establish a degree of independence of women, but before these acts a married woman could technically be arrested for leaving the marital home while wearing her clothes—which legally belonged to her husband. Women were still subject to harassment, even if they took shelter with others”
Thus, not only does Janet face legal punishment for leaving her husband, Mrs. Pettifer also risks legal fines and/or jail time by taking in Janet after Dempster locks her out of their house. By taking such a risk, however, Mrs. Pettifer undoubtedly saves Janet’s life.

Once Janet is safe at Mrs. Pettifer’s house, Janet’s quality of life greatly improves, if for no other reason than she is no longer abused by Dempster on a daily basis. She fills her days by performing charitable deeds and working at whatever she can to earn her keep. Like Helen Huntingdon in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Janet does not return to her home until Dempster is thrown from his carriage one night while he is driving drunk. Janet’s Victorian sense of duty is so strong that, despite the horrific physical and verbal abuse experienced while living with Dempster, she returns to nurse him until he dies.

I suggest that, in addition to duty, perhaps the fact that Dempster is totally helpless and unlikely to survive makes the decision to return home easier to make. For the first time in her life, Janet is in control. What is interesting is that the other community members, like those in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, do not think Janet has an obligation to tend to her dying husband, given the violence he directed at her over the years. However, because Janet and her husband were not divorced, she still is legally bound to him. In the Victorian era, a violent, but not adulterous, husband is not enough for a wife to petition for divorce. In such a case, the wife was only entitled to a judicial separation, which “did not allow her to remarry” (Foyster 237). Thus, legally, she was forever bound to her violent husband. The intent of the Act is clear: “[A] husband’s violence, however severe, was not alone serious enough to dissolve a marriage” (Ibid.).

Eliot’s ending suggests that, even in violent marriages where the wife escapes, wives are still obligated to return to nurse their dying husbands. As seen in this short story and in
The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, works in which the conclusions are extremely similar, divorce laws in place at the time in essence guaranteed that women would not be allowed to enjoy their lives or true freedom until their husbands died. While the abusers in the works of fiction by Eliot and Brontë conveniently die in the end and free the wives to begin new lives, the reality for many wives in violent homes during the Victorian era was that they were forever bound together with their abusive husbands.
Chapter 4

The Woman in White: I’m Broke; to the Insane Asylum You Must Go

One of the main themes in Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* (1860)—the author’s serialized novel identified as the most popular novel written in England in the nineteenth century and one that has never been out of print since its initial publication—is the ease at which a husband can involuntarily confine his wife in an asylum for the insane. Published fifteen years after the passage of legislation concerning asylums, the text suggests that Collins feels as if the laws are not as effective as they might be, especially when an individual can commit another to an asylum with little more than a couple of pieces of paper. Indeed, it was not until 1891 that “judges first declared that husbands did not have a right to beat or confine their wives . . .” (Foyster 254).

The story begins when Anne Catherick, whom Sir Percival Glyde has committed to the same asylum to which he later commits his wife, comes across art instructor Walter Hartright in Hyde Park after midnight. Anne says she is running from a baronet and when Walter asks why she is so frightened, she replies, “Don’t ask me; don’t make me talk of it, . . . I’m not fit, now. I have been cruelly used and cruelly wronged” (Collins 22).

Soon after Anne leaves, two men tell Walter she has escaped from an asylum. He questions whether he has assisted her in getting away and what kind of person she is. “What had I done? Assisted the victim of the most horrible of all false imprisonments to escape; or cast loose on the wide world of London an unfortunate creature, whose actions it was my duty, and every man’s duty, mercifully to control?” (26). In Peter McCandless’s article, “Dangerous to Themselves and Others: the Victorian Debate over the Prevention of
Wrongful Confinement,” the author states, “The nineteenth century saw the rapid expansion of an asylum system designed ‘mercifully to control’ the insane, a development of which many Englishmen felt proud. Yet this pride was often accompanied by an endemic, nagging fear that persons were being improperly confined in asylums” (84). As seen in this novel, several people question whether Anne, and later Laura Fairlie, should be confined to an asylum, but still the women are committed—and quite easily at that.

The duties a woman owes her father and husband are also a theme in this novel, as shown when Laura follows through on a marriage to a man twenty-five years her senior that her father arranges on his deathbed. Knowing that Laura will obey her father’s promise to Sir Percival Glyde despite the fact that she does not love him, Laura’s cousin and confidant Marian describes the upcoming marriage as “an engagement of honour, not of love . . .” (Collins 68). The engagement does not begin well, which does not bode well for the forthcoming wedding. It is obvious to everyone who sees the engaged couple together that things are not right. Indeed, when Percival arrives at Limmeridge House, Laura’s family home, she was “constrained and uneasy in his presence, and that she took the first opportunity of leaving the room . . .” (126). Even Laura’s dog senses there is something wrong with Percival, for when he reaches out to it, the dog “looked up at him sharply, shrank away from his outstretched hand, whined, shivered, and hid itself under a sofa” (129).

Frederick Fairlie, Laura’s uncle and guardian in name only, cares little what Percival is like or how he may treat Laura once they marry and move away. He wishes only to be rid of his niece so that he can wallow in his hypochondriacal world. Laura’s solicitor, however, has misgivings about Percival from the start. Although Mr. Gilmore cannot put his finger on anything outwardly wrong with Percival, when Gilmore leaves to return to London, he thinks,
“I felt as if I could cheerfully do anything to promote the interests of Sir Percival Glyde—anything in the world, except drawing the marriage-settlement of his wife” (143).

Percival aggressively pushes for the marriage to occur before the end of the year, which ensures that he will have access to and control of Laura’s money and property for three months before she turns twenty-one years old in March. In marrying Laura, Percival can expect £3000 per year and Limmeridge House after Frederick dies. When Laura turns twenty-one, Percival will get £20,000. Although Gilmore initially drafts the marriage agreement so that Percival will only receive a life interest for the £20,000, Percival refuses to sign it until it is revised so that he will receive the principal upon Laura’s death (145).

Percival stands to inherit a veritable windfall should Laura die shortly after she reaches age twenty-one. Thus, Laura is doomed from the moment her uncle refuses to abide by Mr. Gilmore’s legal advice not to allow Percival to receive the £20,000 upon her death.

Given the laws at the time, it is difficult to understand why women married at all during the Victorian era. Sir William Blackstone’s 1753 *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, which provided the basis for common law in nineteenth-century England states:

> By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being, or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing, protection and cover, she performs everything. Or, as the popular saying went, ‘husband and wife are one person, and that person is the husband’ (Yalom 185).

Gilmore continues to implore Frederick to hold firm to the distribution of the £20,000 as only a life interest going to Percival upon Laura’s death: “Sir Percival must give way—he must give way, I tell you, or he exposes himself to the base imputation of marrying Miss Fairlie entirely from mercenary motives” (Collins 156). When Frederick refuses to follow Gilmore’s legal advice, Gilmore disgustedly tells him, “[N]o daughter of mine should be married to any man alive under such a settlement as you are forcing me to make for Miss Fairlie” (157).

Laura’s duties, as they concern abiding by the marriage arranged by her father, are clear. Even though she is in love with Walter, she has no option other than to marry Percival. She tells her cousin, “I must submit, Marian, as well as I can, . . . My new life has its hard duties; and one of them begins to-day” (169). What should be the happiest day of her life is definitely not and, as seen elsewhere in this paper, Laura’s sense of duty takes precedence over all else. “I am held to my engagement, . . . The evil day will not come the less surely because I put it off. . . . I have caused trouble enough and anxiety enough; and I will cause no more” (174). Marian’s thoughts on loveless and, in this instance arranged, marriages are clear when she tells Laura, “No man under heaven deserves these sacrifices from us women. Men! They are the enemies of our innocence and our peace—they drag us away from our parents’ love and our sisters’ friendship—they take us body and soul to themselves, and fasten our helpless lives to theirs as they chain up a dog to his kennel. And what does the best of them give us in return? . . . I’m mad when I think of it” (178). Although Marian is mourning what she anticipates is the end of their close relationship because of Laura’s marriage to Percival, Collins hints of even more sinister effects from the wedding, as Marian later notes in her journal that “writing of her marriage [is] like writing of her death” (183).
In marrying Percival, Laura loses much of what she owned—or would own upon her twenty-first birthday. As noted in Elizabeth Craik’s article, “Self and Society in the Victorian Novel: Women and the Law in Victorian England,” the author states, “On marriage, the control of and income from a woman’s real property, that is, property held in the form of freehold land, passed under the common law to her husband, though he could not dispose of it without her consent” (1). However, a wife’s personal property, such as “money from earning or investments, and personal belongings such as jewellery, passed absolutely into his control, and she could part with them only with his consent; . . .” (Ibid.). Losing all control of her personal property left a wife completely at her husband’s mercy and, as such, left her completely without any escape route from him should he become abusive. Additionally, as seen in the case of Laura’s marriage, refusing to consent often accelerated violence from verbal to physical. In fact, Laura admits to Marian that Count Fosco has “several times checked Sir Percival’s outbursts of temper” (Collins 230).

The absence of rights for women who bring money or property into a marriage in the Victorian era is seen when Laura refuses to sign the loan document Percival demands that she sign without reading. When he refuses to let her read it or to explain it to her, she balks. “I ought surely to know what I am signing, Sir Percival, before I write my name?” He responds angrily, “Nonsense! What have women to do with business? . . . I am your husband, and am not obliged [to explain it]” (246). Although as mentioned above, Percival cannot dispose of Laura’s property without her consent, he was counting on the fact that men were considered superior to women in all respects, especially in matters of business.

One of the first mistakes Percival makes is when he insults Laura by referring to her love for Walter. This infuriates Laura and, in a rare act of assertiveness on her part, she
shows that she is not the passive, weak woman Percival believes her to be. Indeed, it is at this point that she realizes her refusal to consent and sign the loan document gives her incredible power over Percival. Marian and Count Fosco both acknowledge that Percival’s insult toward Laura contained “something hidden, beyond a doubt, under the mere surface-brutality of the words which her husband had just addressed to her” (249). Laura, flush with this newfound power over her verbally abusive husband, and bolstered by Marian’s guidance, still refuses to sign the document: “After what you have just said to me, . . . I refuse my signature until I have read every line in that parchment from the first word to the last” (Ibid.).

Although the text suggests that Percival’s abuse of Laura is still only verbal at this point, we learn later that the physical abuse actually begins in Rome on their honeymoon. Laura intimates to Marian that the abuse has, indeed, gone beyond the verbal stage: “You don’t know how he has used me” and “I have kept many things from your knowledge, Marian, for fear of distressing you, and making you unhappy at the outset of our new lives” (252). This is yet another instance of a woman in a violent situation who does not want to burden family or friends with the fact that she is being abused. Rather than seeking help from their loved ones, these women instead attempt to shield family and friends from any worry or anxiety. By doing so, however, the women perpetuate the problem of domestic violence and allow the abuse to continue unchecked.

After seeing Percival’s verbally abusive behavior in the library, Marian decides that his actions during the engagement—“elaborate delicacy,” “ceremonious politeness,” “modesty,” “candour,” and “moderation”—were merely “artifices of a mean, cunning, and brutal man, who had dropped his disguise when his practiced duplicity had gained its end . . .” (253). Laura, too, now clearly sees that the arranged marriage will be even worse
than Marian first anticipated after meeting Percival for the first time. She tells Marian, “It is very hard for a woman to confess that the man to whom she has given her whole life, is the man of all others who cares least for the gift” (260). Although Laura fulfills the promise made by her father, she realizes the dangerous liaison has been created because she has money and property, and tells Marian, “Thank God for your poverty—it has made you your own mistress, and saved you from the lot that has fallen on me” (Ibid.). Laura is now well aware that Percival duped her and, presumably her father, in making them believe he was in love with her. However, Laura’s Victorian duty as a daughter to a promise made by her father obligates her to go forward with the marriage.

As earlier stated, readers learn that the physical violence started after a dinner party in Rome on their honeymoon during which Percival guesses the name of Laura’s true love. We then see the first instance of battery. When Laura and Percival return to their hotel room, he “locked the door, pushed [her] down into a chair, and stood over [her] with his hands on [her] shoulders” (263). Any attempt by Percival to hide his pecuniary reason for marrying Laura disappears after he later goes into a rage when she refuses to sign the loan documents and his need for money to satisfy his creditors becomes more evident. He no longer attempts to hide his violent and abusive nature.

The domestic violence toward Laura escalates and also begins to affect the other members of the household. Not only does Percival involuntarily confine Laura to her room by bolting the door and guarding it from the inside by a mean-spirited housemaid, he also threatens to do the same to Marian. Showing no fear of Percival, Marian confronts him after being denied access to Laura’s room, “Am I to understand, Sir Percival, that your wife’s room is a prison, and that your housemaid is the gaoler who keeps it?” He replied, “Yes; that
is what you are to understand, . . . Take care my gaoler hasn’t got double duty to do—take care your room is not a prison, too.” While Marian may be frightened of—and illogically attracted to—Count Fosco, she is neither intimidated nor so easily threatened by Percival as is Laura. “Take you care how you treat your wife, and how you threaten me; . . . There are laws in England to protect women from cruelty and outrage. If you hurt a hair of Laura’s head, if you dare to interfere with my freedom, come what may, to those laws I will appeal” (296). As seen later, even this threat by Marian does not stop Percival from violating many of those same laws.

Marian does not hesitate to let Percival know she is knowledgeable of the laws concerning domestic violence against women, including the Act for the Better Prevention and Punishment of Aggravated Assaults Upon Women and Children (the “Act”), which was enacted by Parliament seven years prior to the publication of The Woman in White. In The Marked Body: Domestic Violence in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Literature, Kate Lawson and Lynn Shakinovsky note that “in practice, the body of a woman normally had to be able to provide clear and compelling evidence of physical violence if a verdict of ‘marital cruelty’ were to be supported” (13). That is, with no marks, broken bones, and bruises, women received no protection from the courts. Indeed, even with visible proof of abuse, women often were denied legal recourse. The effects and damage from verbal abuse, threats, involuntary confinement, economic deprivation, and other forms of non-physical abuse were given no credence under the law. At this point in the novel, Marian is unaware of the physical abuse that occurred on Laura’s honeymoon. As such, her not-so-veiled threat to prosecute Percival under the Act serves as a warning to him not to physically abuse Laura or
her. As we see later, this warning is completely unheeded by Percival as his desperation grows as he tries to get money to pay his creditors.

Percival’s physical abuse of Laura intensifies, and he leaves a mark when he grabs her and demands to know what she and Anne talked about in the boathouse. As he questions her, Laura tells Marian that his “cruel hand was bruising my arm” (Collins 302). Marian, wiser than Laura in the ways of the law, knows that physical evidence is required under the Act before a complaint can be filed with the magistrate. Marian also knows that having a witness to any evidence abuse may bolster a victim’s complaint. “I want to see [the bruise], Laura, because our endurance must end, and our resistance must begin to-day. That mark is a weapon to strike him with. Let me see it now—I may have to swear to it, at some future time” (Ibid.). To add insult to any injury suffered, whether physical or otherwise, the word of a victim of domestic violence was not sufficient to bring a legal complaint against the abuser. Before a victim could file a complaint, “... a significant number of people had to concur that the violence had been cruel” (Foyster 45). This is just another form of victimization for the one seeking the court’s assistance. God help the women who were abused in the comfort of their own home with no witnesses or, even worse, with witnesses who would not speak up on her behalf. Servants and household help who corroborated an allegation of domestic violence were often out of a job shortly thereafter. Moreover, family members who spoke up had to be prepared to receive into their house the victim and provide her with food, clothing, and shelter, for she would have no place to live after filing a complaint.

When Percival is convinced that Laura has not told him all of her conversation with Anne, he again confines her in her bedroom and locks the door until she decides to confess
all. The text suggests more verbal abuse as Laura later tells Marian, “He looked and spoke like a madman” (Collins 303). Again, Marian, ever mindful of the Act and the protection it provides women, vows to write to Laura’s attorney: “Little as I know of the law, I am certain that it can prevent a woman from such treatment as that ruffian has inflicted on you today. . . . But the lawyer shall know of those bruises on your arm, and of the violence offered to you in this room . . .” (304). When Laura says that she is worried about the exposure and danger associated by telling her attorney of Percival’s abuse, Marian replies, “I am calculating on the exposure. Sir Percival has more to dread from it than you have. The prospect of an exposure may bring him to terms, when nothing else will” (Ibid.).

Count Fosco, an expert in the ways of how to keep a wife submissive, tells Percival there are two ways to manage women: “One way is to knock her down—a method largely adopted by the brutal lower orders of the people, but utterly abhorrent to the refined and educated classes above them” (327). Fosco’s notion of the differences between the classes as it relates to domestic violence is corroborated in an 1827 case involving Lord and Lady Westmeath, in which Sir John Nicholl ruled:

A blow between parties in the lower conditions and in the highest stations of life bears a very different aspect. Among the lower classes blows sometimes pass between married couples who, in the main, are very happy and have no desire to part; amidst very coarse habits such incidents occur almost as freely as rude or reproachful words: a word and a blow go together. Still, even among the very lowest classes, there is generally a feeling of something unmanly in striking a woman; but if a gentleman, a person of education . . . uses personal violence to his wife, his equal in rank . . . such conduct in such a person carries with it something so degrading to the husband, and so insulting and mortifying to the wife, as to render the injury itself far more severe and insupportable (Foyster 79).

Sir John further opined that “physical violence within the ‘lower classes’ occurred more frequently, and did not have the same consequences as violence experienced by
members of his own social rank. What was tolerable violence in one social class was cruel in another” (Ibid.). This reader neither subscribes to this distinction between the acceptability or resignation of domestic violence in the lower classes, nor to the notion that middle and upper classes were immune to domestic violence because of their status and rank. Ironically, however, as the son of unmarried parents and not the baronet he purported to be, Percival fits the description of the lower classes as described by Sir John in the above case. No matter what class Percival falls into, he should not be given carte blanche to physically abuse Laura.

Count Fosco’s other tip on how to manage women consists of always staying in the superior position. “Quiet resolution is the one quality the animals, the children, and the women all fail in. If they can once shake this superior quality in their master, they get the better of him. If they can never succeed in disturbing it, he gets the better of them” (Collins 327). Count Fosco’s notion of the importance of males keeping the upper hand in their homes supports the discussion earlier in this paper. That is, by maintaining a position of superiority, the males in these works of fiction use it to control and abuse the women in their lives. Again, women are relegated to the same status as children and animals.

Like Robert Dempster in Janet’s Repentance, Sir Eustace Brackenstall in The Adventure of the Abbey Grange, and Bill Sikes in Oliver Twist, Percival often drinks heavily, “swearing, with every appearance of the most violent passion” (403). As mentioned elsewhere in this paper, the fact that these men drink copious amounts of alcohol is not to be seen as a viable excuse for why they abuse their partners. The domestic violence in these stories—and in most non-fiction situations—is not instigated by the consumption of alcohol. Instead, violence often occurs when a male asserts his alleged superiority over the inferior female.
As if the verbal and physical abuse of Laura were not enough, Percival and Count Fosco carry out what I suggest may be the most diabolical form of domestic violence in the works of fiction reviewed for this paper. In an effort to confuse everyone about the true whereabouts of Laura, Count Fosco tells Frederick that Anne has been recaptured at last and returned to the asylum. However, Fosco says that Anne is said to be delusional and thinks she is Laura. The Count tells Frederick to ignore any letters he might receive from her. (426). Frederick, not one to ever be concerned about anyone but himself, is quick to abide by this directive.

The proprietor of the asylum is one of the few individuals who can reveal the duplicitous commitment of Laura, rather than the return of Anne, and he is vaguely suspicious when Count Fosco brings her to the asylum. Indeed, he questions his memory as to whether the woman who is returned to the asylum as Anne is, indeed the same woman who escaped some months earlier. Although he acknowledges that there are some “curious personal changes” in Anne since she has been captured and returned, he knows that insane people often change in appearance over time. Still, “he was . . . perplexed, at times, by certain differences between his patient before she escaped, and his patient since she had been brought back” (429). No matter his misgivings, the certificates and order produced by Count Fosco allay his anxiety about her true identity. If nothing else, the official paperwork will suffice to protect him should anyone later ask him about the woman.

In the late nineteenth century, groups formed to protest the ease at which one could be committed to an asylum. In an article in the Westminster Review of 1883, one reform group expressed its outrage:
It is simply monstrous that any man or woman should be liable to incarceration, possibly for life, in a lunatic asylum, upon the certificates of any two of our registered medical practitioners, who may be bribed or deceived, coupled with an order from some third person who may be acting from the most infamous motives. People who think that these powers are not abused merely live in that fool’s paradise of ignorance wherein so many good folk . . . do delight to ensconce themselves” (McCandless 89).

While the text does not suggest that the proprietor keeps Laura locked up because he has been bribed by Percival and Count Fosco, it is disturbing to think that the asylum proprietor does not look too closely at or question the necessary commitment order and certificates produced by the Count, or the explanatory letter and instructions from Percival. The process by which one could be involuntarily confined in a living hell was deceptively easy.

While committing someone to an asylum may have been a relatively easy thing to achieve, it was extremely difficult, if not impossible, to get someone released through legal channels if one did not have the authority of the person who committed her. Marian can see after only one brief meeting with Laura that by the time she can establish Laura’s true identity, the delay “might be fatal to her sister’s intellects, which were shaken already by the horror of the situation to which she had been consigned” (Collins 431). Indeed, Marian finds Laura’s memory to be “confused and weakened” after three months of living in the asylum. (433). In addition, because of the horrors to which she is subjected in the asylum, Laura reverts to a childlike state. “She spoke as a child might have spoken; she showed [Walter] her thoughts as a child might have shown them” (447). In what can be described as a living nightmare, Laura is involuntarily confined for a quarter of a year in an asylum filled with the truly mad. In fact, the detrimental effects on Laura’s physical features and mental faculties are so striking that neither Frederick nor the servants who had known her since birth recognized her (439).
The fact that Marian is able to bribe an underpaid nurse to release Laura into her care is all that saves what is left of Laura’s sanity. The sheer number of patients at insane asylums in the Victorian era made checking each individual an effort in futility. McCandless notes that four times a year, six male commissioners were responsible for visiting 20,000 lunatics in 37 public asylums, in addition to checking on 6,000 lunatics in up to 100 private asylums, to ensure that those individuals who had been committed by family, friends or physicians were, indeed, insane as claimed (90). Unfortunately for individuals like Laura, commissioners approached their jobs with the preconceived notion that “no one would be in an asylum unless there were plausible grounds for their commitment” and “every person placed in confinement must prima facie be presumed to be insane” (91). To be released from an asylum after being involuntarily committed, one must be able to prove she is sane. Marian sees the impossibility of freeing Laura without Percival’s permission, which he definitely will not grant as he is the one who wickedly commits her for his own pecuniary gain. By bribing a nurse to release Laura to her care, Marian puts herself at great risk of detection and legal sanctions. However, Marian’s desperation to free Laura before Laura’s sanity is completely gone, drives her to such lengths.

The life of an asylum resident is chillingly described by Shaftesbury, one of the aforementioned commissioners in the nineteenth century, who wrote the following entry in his diary:

What an awful condition that of a lunatic! His words are generally disbelieved, and his most innocent peculiarities perverted; it is natural that it should be so; we know him to be insane; at least we are told that it is so; and we place ourselves on our guard—that is, we give to every word, look, gesture, a value and meaning which oftentimes it cannot bear, and which it never would bear in ordinary life. Thus we too readily get him in, and too sluggishly get him out, and yet what a destiny! (McCandless 91).
Shaftesbury’s diary entry confirms the ease by which one could commit another to an asylum and the difficulty associated with getting someone released. By presuming that those who are committed are insane—for why else would they be there?—those who are committed for nefarious reasons face an uphill battle as they try to prove a negative: that they really are not crazy, as alleged by those who committed them.

As seen in *The Woman in White*, when Percival commits Laura to an asylum when she refuses to sign the loan document so that he can pay his many creditors, “many Victorians were convinced that one of the main reasons people were wrongfully confined was so that their relatives or others could get their money. Such a view tended to draw suspicion away from the public asylums whose clientele was primarily working class and directed it toward private asylums which served mainly middle- and upper-class patients” (95). Indeed, Dr. John Conolly, an asylum proprietor, argued, “the feelings of the rich on these matters were so strong that if private asylums were abolished they would shut up their relatives at home ‘in garrets, or in the secluded wings of country mansions’” (97). It is curious then—disregarding that they are always trying to get rid of Anne—why Percival and Count Fosco go to such elaborate lengths to commit Laura to the asylum, especially when, contemporaneously, they have successfully locked Marian in an unused wing of the house with no one, save Laura, seeking her whereabouts. Given Frederick’s complete disinterest in his niece’s whereabouts and Marian’s prisoner-like status, the two men could just as easily have confined Laura in a similar manner and saved themselves the threat of the asylum proprietor discovering their disingenuous plot.
In this work, Collins points out the ease with which someone can involuntarily commit another to an insane asylum and the loopholes available to the determined with respect to the laws concerning asylums. By portraying an aristocratic victim of domestic violence, Collins also shows that brutality is not limited to the lower classes. Of the works of fiction chosen for this paper, Collins’s novel depicts the first instance of another woman intervening when she sees evidence of domestic violence. Rather than keeping silent about what she has seen and heard, Marian is knowledgeable about domestic violence laws and she is very vocal about the legal action she will take to stop the abuse Laura suffers. In creating an outspoken advocate in Marian, Collins’s stance is clear regarding his thoughts on the utter unacceptability of domestic violence against women and the ease at which one can be involuntarily committed to an asylum.

Forty-four years after the publication of The Woman in White, Doyle resurrects the theme of domestic violence in the upper classes in The Adventure of the Abbey Grange by showing bruises on the wrists of Lady Brackenstall, bruises that are undetectable to all but Sherlock Holmes.
Chapter 5

The Adventure of the Abbey Grange: 
The Case of the Justifiable Manslaughter

Arguably, one of the most famous lines spoken by Sherlock Holmes is, "When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth" (Doyle 111). However improbable it must have appeared to Victorians that middle- and upper-class women experienced, among other things, the same beatings, economic deprivation, and involuntary confinement as did women in the lower classes, the fact was that they did happen and they were just as traumatic. I submit Parliament’s realization that domestic violence was occurring in households all over London, not just those in the worst parts of the city, was what prompted the passage of legislation that harshly punished abusers in the hope that it would end the violence. No matter what stories the newspapers chose to print and no matter what class of women filed complaints most often with the magistrates, domestic violence was happening in homes all around the city, regardless of the social status of the family who resided within them. With newspapers publishing details of domestic violence complaints, and with the writings of Lady Caroline Norton described earlier in this paper, the private and secret nature formerly associated with domestic violence was shattered and made public. As episodes of abuse increased in severity and frequency all over the city, it was no longer possible to keep it behind closed doors.

In The Adventure of the Abbey Grange (1904)—Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s short story set in 1897 and contained in the collection known as The Return of Sherlock Holmes—the author builds his story line around an upper-class woman whose husband physically abuses her. In response to a letter Sherlock Holmes receives from Inspector Stanley Hopkins,
Holmes and Watson travel to the country home of Sir Eustace Brackenstall, “one of the richest men in Kent” and whose head has been “knocked in with his own poker” (Doyle 637). When Holmes and Watson meet the new widow, Lady Brackenstall, she clearly has suffered a beating at the hands of someone, who the Inspector assumes were the burglars who have been terrorizing the neighborhood in recent weeks. Holmes, never one to take anything at face value, notes, “Her sufferings were physical as well as mental, for over one eye rose a hideous, plum-coloured swelling . . .” (Ibid.). Holmes also notices that no matter how badly she has been beaten, Lady Brackenstall’s “quick, observant gaze . . . showed that neither her wits nor her courage had been shaken by her terrible experience” (Ibid.).

When relating what happened, Lady Brackenstall buries her face in her hands and the sleeves of her gown reveal additional marks on her forearms. Only Holmes notices the “two vivid red spots [that] stood out on one of the white, round limbs” (Ibid.). She quickly pulls down her sleeves and denies that the marks have any connection with the burglary of her house earlier that night. As she tells Holmes and Watson about her marriage, however, it does not take long for Holmes to deduce how she received those marks.

Lady Brackenstall reports that she and Sir Eustace have been married almost a year, but that it has not been a happy union. She knows that the fact of their troubles is most likely no longer confined to their own home and says, “I fear that all our neighbors would tell you that, even if I were to attempt to deny it” (638). As seen in *Oliver Twist*, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and *Janet’s Repentance*, members of the community know, at the very least, that the Brackenstall’s marriage is troubled, and, at worst, that Sir Eustace is abusing his wife. Despite the abuse, Lady Brackenstall embraces some of the fault for the unhappy marriage, explaining that she finds it difficult to conform to England’s conservative way of life, which
is very different from that of her native Australia. However, she acknowledges that Sir Eustace’s drinking is really the root of their problems and that his heavy drinking is “notorious to everyone” (Ibid.). She states, “To be with such a man for an hour is unpleasant. Can you imagine what it means for a sensitive and high-spirited woman to be tied to him for day and night? It is a sacrilege, a crime, a villainy to hold that such a marriage is binding. I say that these monstrous laws of yours will bring a curse upon the land—God will not let such wickedness endure” (Ibid.). With this passage, Doyle appears to be making an argument for reform of the Divorce Act so that it provides additional protection for women.

In contrast to the other women in the works of fiction reviewed for this paper, Lady Brackenstall’s situation is unique because, in marrying Sir Eustace, she literally removes herself thousands of miles from her family and friends, save her loyal and fiercely protective housemaid Theresa. Thus, Lady Brackenstall is isolated from everyone she knows and loves, and Sir Eustace takes full advantage of that fact. He knows that it will be incredibly difficult for his wife to file for divorce because of her status as a foreigner. This near-impossible feat is confirmed in an argument by Lord Lyndhurst during a Parliamentary debate in 1856 on reforming the divorce law: “The wife is almost in a state of outlawry. She may not enter into a contract, or, if she does, she has no means of enforcing it. The law, so far from protecting, oppresses her. She is homeless, helpless, hopeless, and almost wholly destitute of civil rights” (Foyster 201). By leaving her husband, Lady Brackenstall would be impoverished and, thus, this may be one of the reasons she stays with her abusive husband. Foyster notes that it is unknown how many women “resumed relationships with violent husbands because the fear of poverty was greater than that of blows” (53). It is incredibly sad that Victorian women were limited to a choice between the lesser of two evils.
Lady Brackenstall and her maid Theresa do their best to convince Holmes and the others as to how Sir Eustace was murdered by three burglars. Maternal-like in her protection of her employer, Theresa states that “with his blood and brains over the room,” it was no wonder that Lady Mary was “out of her wits, tied there, and her very dress spotted with him” (Doyle 639). Thus, in order to present a credible alibi, the women bind Lady Brackenstall to a chair and have her remain in the same blood-stained dress in the very room as her dead husband.

When viewing Sir Eustace’s body, Watson noted that “[h]is dark, handsome, aquiline features were convulsed into a spasm of vindictive hatred, which had set his dead face in a terribly fiendish expression” (640). By describing his death as such, Doyle ensures that the reader is aware that Sir Eustace’s violent nature is so ingrained that it shows even at the very moment of death. Sir Eustace’s abusive past is well known in the community, which Inspector Hopkins describes to Holmes and Watson:

He was a good-hearted man when he was sober, but a perfect fiend when he was drunk, or rather when he was half-drunk, for he seldom really went the whole way. The devil seemed to be in him at such times, and he was capable of anything. From what I hear, in spite of all his wealth and his title, he very nearly came our way once or twice. There was a scandal about his drenching a dog with petroleum and setting it on fire—her ladyship’s dog, to make the matter worse—and that was only hushed up with difficulty. Then he threw a decanter at that maid, Theresa Wright—there was trouble about that. On the whole, and between ourselves, it will be a brighter house without him” (640).

Like many of the abusers portrayed in this paper, Sir Eustace’s drinking plays a part in domestic violence. As argued earlier, however, drinking does not excuse the abuse and, in fact, plays a very minor role in instances of violence. In fact, Inspector Hopkins notes that Sir Eustace “seldom really went the whole way” to drunkenness. Like the other men, Sir Eustace abuses his wife for one reason: because he can.
Theresa corroborates the Inspector’s description of Sir Eustace, and adds details about how Lady Brackenstall met him and his subsequent physical abuse of his wife:

He was forever ill-treating her, and she too proud to complain. She will not even tell me all that he has done to her. She never told me of those marks on her arm that you saw this morning, but I know very well that they come from a stab with a hatpin. The sly-devil—God forgive me that I should speak of him so, now that he is dead! But a devil he was, if ever one walked the earth. He was all honey when first we met him—only eighteen months ago, and we both feel as if it were eighteen years. . . . He won her with his title and his money and his false London ways. If she made a mistake she has paid for it, if ever a woman did (644-45).

As seen in the other works of fiction reviewed earlier, this brief description shows the rapid escalation of abuse. It also once again depicts an abused woman’s attempts to keep secret the violence she endures behind closed doors. While part of the reason Lady Brackenstall keeps silent is the shame she feels at being in such a situation, I submit that the primary reason she does so is to protect her beloved maid from feeling pain or sorrow on her behalf. As seen numerous times elsewhere in this paper, the victim often attempts to protect those around her from the effects of the violence, even as she is unable to protect herself. Unique to these works of fiction, however, is the fact that Sir Eustace is also violent towards Theresa in throwing things at her. Although Lady Brackenstall may be attempting to keep private her own suffering, it is obvious that the violence is spreading throughout the house. No one is safe from Sir Eustace’s rage.

Like many women who are duped into marriage based on false promises, Lady Brackenstall is, because of the marriage laws at the time, effectively trapped for life to an abusive husband. Although laws enacted a century earlier granted husbands the right to physically correct their wives as long as they were not cruel about it, there was an ambiguity about just exactly what was meant by cruel. By 1832, the law stated: “The husband hath, by
law, power and dominion over his wife, and may keep her by force within the bounds of duty, and may beat her, but not in a violent or cruel manner; for, in such case, or if he but threaten to beat her outrageously, or use her barbarously, she may bind him to the peace” (Foyster 40).

Unfortunately for many women, courts initially determined that “cruel” required the wife to show that the violence against her was “life threatening” or that it was so severe that it “endangered life, limb or health” (Foyster 41). In effect, the law required victims of domestic violence to endure and to refrain from reporting anything less than life-threatening abuse. Moreover, it presumes that the women will be able to anticipate and predict when abuse will be merely life threatening and not life ending.

The ever-omniscient Holmes confronts Lady Brackenstall and asks for the truth about what happened. It is clear from his words that he does not hold her responsible for her husband’s death and, rather, empathizes with her and the abuse she has endured. Wishing to help her if he can, Holmes says, “I will not cause you any unnecessary trouble, Lady Brackenstall, and my whole desire is to make things easy for you, for I am convinced that you are a much-tried woman. If you will treat me as a friend and trust me, you may find that I will justify your trust” (Doyle 645). As a victim of abuse at the hands of her husband, a man she should have been able to trust implicitly, Lady Brackenstall is naturally wary of men who make promises. She initially denies to Holmes that she has told him anything but the truth.

Holmes then interviews Captain Crocker, who fell in love with Lady Brackenstall (then still a single woman) on his ship when she was coming to England. In contrast to the characters in other stories reviewed for this paper, Crocker is not afraid to intervene in an effort to protect a woman from an abusive male. He not only intervenes, but challenges
Holmes and Watson—and possibly readers of the story—by asking whether they would be able to stand by while a woman is being beaten. Crocker does not hesitate to describe in detail what happened the night Sir Eustace died:

Again I heard from [Mary’s] own lips things that made my blood boil, and again I cursed this brute who mishandled the woman I loved. . . . I was standing with her just inside the window, in all innocence, as God is my judge, when he rushed like a madman into the room, called her the vilest name that a man could use to a woman, and welted her across the face with the stick he had in his hand. I had sprung for the poker, and it was a fair fight between us. See here, on my arm, where his first blow fell. Then it was my turn, and I went through him as if he had been a rotten pumpkin. Do you think I was sorry? Not I! It was his life or mine, but far more than that, it was his life or hers, for how could I leave her in the power of this madman? That was how I killed him. Was I wrong? Well, then, what would either of you gentlemen have done, if you had been in my position?” (649).

To test Crocker as to his love for Mary, Holmes tells him that he will not reveal to the Inspector what really happened for twenty-four hours so that he can escape. Crocker refuses to leave, knowing that if he does, Mary will be charged as an accomplice to murder.

Satisfied at Crocker’s love for Mary, Holmes sets up a mock trial for what today would be considered involuntary manslaughter and says:

See here, Captain Crocker, we’ll do this in due form of law. You are the prisoner. Watson, you are a British jury, and I never met a man who was more eminently fitted to represent one. I am the judge. Now, gentlemen of the jury, you have heard the evidence. Do you find the prisoner guilty or not guilty?” When Watson responds, “Not guilty, my lord,” Holmes rules, “Vox populi, vox Dei. You are acquitted, Captain Crocker. So long as the law does not find some other victim you are safe from me. Come back to this lady in a year, and may her future and yours justify us in the judgment which we have pronounced this night! (650).

Surridge suggests that Doyle’s short story “draws attention to the question of how a woman’s private loyalties may impact public narratives about or investigation into spousal assault; and to the role of the courts in the punishment of the assaultment” (3). By having
Holmes hold a mock trial for the man who kills Sir Eustace, Doyle seems to suggest that in cases of domestic violence, sometimes it is necessary to take the law into one’s hands, as it concerns punishment, when it cannot be assumed that the real justice system will protect a woman from an abusive husband. By not revealing Crocker as the one who caused Sir Eustace’s death, Doyle indicates that, until laws regarding domestic violence are reformed, sometimes abusers receive exactly what they deserve and that no one should be punished for it.
Conclusion

The authors and fiction reviewed for this paper were chosen for their representation of different forms of domestic violence, a term I suggest should be greatly expanded to include the forms seen herein. While many of the stories depicted physical abuse, as is commonly associated with domestic violence, others focused on covert forms that, I submit, were just as damaging as physical beatings.

Susan Amussen argues that “violence causes physical harm” (Foyster 35). I disagree and suggest that domestic violence is not, and should not be, limited or contained to only those acts that leave a temporary bruise or a permanent scar. Verbal abuse, threats, involuntary confinement in an asylum or one’s home, economic deprivation, the potential exposure to sexually-transmitted diseases, involuntary isolating someone from her family, and many other acts can have equally devastating and lasting effects as those associated with physical violence. To limit the definition of abuse to only physical violence is shortsighted and denies victims legal recourse for the abuse that leaves no visible marks. Bruises and broken bones fade and heal with time. I suggest that the harm caused internally and mentally by other forms of abuse identified in this paper can have much longer-lasting effects. In an 1856 study of cases of marital violence, J. W. Kaye states:

Men of education and refinement do not strike women; neither do they strike one another. This is not their mode of expressing resentment. They may utter words more cutting than sharp knives; they may do things more stunning in their effects on the victim than the blows of pokers or hammers; they may half kill their wives by process of slow torture—unkindness, infidelity, whatever shape it may assume—society will forgive them. The law, too, has nothing to say to them. They are not guilty of what is recognized as an assault, because they only assail the affections—only lacerate the heart. (Foyster 80).
If this is truly the reality of domestic violence as shown in the courts’ dockets, the question arises why leading Victorian authors were writing the opposite; that is, writing about men from the middle and upper classes abusing their wives. By doing so, these authors pulled back the curtain of secrecy as it related to domestic violence. The works of fiction and Kaye’s study also confirm the notion that domestic violence in the nineteenth century was neither limited to physical beatings nor restricted to the lower classes. By discussing these works chronologically, it is interesting to note that the domestic violence in the first novel portrays horrific, physical abuse of the worst kind. The other pieces that follow contain a wide array of other acts that, while not as physically brutal as that in *Oliver Twist*, nonetheless constitute domestic violence in this reader’s mind.

One of the most important lessons these nineteenth-century authors teach readers by addressing different forms of domestic violence is that allowing shame or fear to take such a hold as to prevent one from speaking out, intervening, and bringing abusers to justice only perpetuates the problem. Silence and failing to report acts of abuse creates a community of fear and, even worse, supports the notion that men have the right to harm the women in their lives.
References Cited


