Paper-thin walls: Law and the domestic in Marie Belloc Lowndes' popular gothic

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Marie Belloc Lowndes was a prolific author, publishing over forty novels in addition to plays, memoirs and a large number of short stories spanning the first five decades of the twentieth century. Most of these are now largely forgotten. Despite her obvious popularity, evidenced by a significant number of film adaptations of her novels, Lowndes has not yet reached the radar of literary studies. Though the work of Lowndes features relatively regularly in anthologies and compilations of criticism of mystery and detective fiction, this rarely exceeds a few sentences and there is little scholarly work on her significance outside this limited sphere. With rare exceptions,[1] these brief mentions of Lowndes deal almost exclusively with her most famous novel, *The Lodger* (1913), which was initially filmed by Hitchcock in 1927 as *The Lodger: A Story of the London Fog*.[2] *The Lodger* was subsequently filmed by Maurice Elvey in 1932, John Brahm in 1944 and again by Hugo Fregonese in 1953 as *The Man in the Attic*. 2009 saw the most recent remake of *The Lodger* in David Ondaatje's adaptation. In this paper I read Lowndes' 'real crime' fiction as representing the domestic sphere as a place of almost supernatural uncanniness. The walls of the house here do not operate as armour against the outside world but instead are permeable and seem to encourage border crossings; the psychic partitioning off of the perilous outside world, which the architecture of the home strives to achieve, starts to crack and subside.

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[1] Jane Potter is one of these rare exceptions who looks beyond *The Lodger* in Lowndes' oeuvre by providing a reading of *Good Old Anna* (1917) in *Boy in Khaki, Girls in Print: Women's Literary Responses to the Great War 1914-1918* (2008).

[2] These brief mentions include works such as Great Women Mystery Writers: Classic to Contemporary, ed. by Kathleen Gregory Klein (1994) and Albert Borowitz's, Blood & Ink: An International Guide to Fact-Based Crime Literature (2002).

Focusing primarily on Lowndes' novels about murderesses, I interpret law in these novels as being aligned with a patriarchal moral code; as that which functions to reprimand female excesses of 'dangerous' sexuality. Law becomes not just the enforcement of legality, but that which exerts control over all areas of life in its additional regulation and policing of morality. In their function as the body empowered by the state to enforce (with legitimated 'strength' if necessary) the set of rules and regulations that are deemed necessary for social order, the police and the figure of the policeman become crucial to my argument. In Lowndes' psychological murder thrillers the boundaries of the domestic provide scant protection against the threat of law (often made flesh in the form of the policeman) which seeps (or makes his presence felt), in the house uninvited. Charlotte Perkins Gilman writes in *The Home: Its Work and Influence* (1903), that '[t]he time when all men were enemies, when out-of-doors was one promiscuous battlefield, when home, well fortified, was the only place on earth where man could rest in peace, is past, long past.' Despite this, she claims that 'the *feeling* that home is more secure and protective than anywhere else is not outgrown' (2002: 37-8). These thoughts from turn-of-the-century America can be seen to persist throughout the following decades in post-war Britain. Though the domestic can be read as a realm of comparative safety, it can simultaneously and paradoxically be read as a site of vulnerability and of danger. The boundaries between the domestic and the public spheres are not as distinct as they might initially appear, and in the fiction I examine there are multiple instances of the conflation of these two spheres. As external danger creeps inside the home so too does the very law designed to keep these forces in check.

Lowndes' body of work is vast and varied and is by no means limited in terms of genre; Lowndes published short stories and plays as well as romance and crime novels. Here I focus on three novels, *The Lodger* (1913), *Letty Lynton* (1931) and *Lizzie Borden: A Study in Conjecture* (1939). All three novels are at least loosely based on 'real-crime'. Though Lowndes repeatedly states that her novels are works of fiction rather than fact, they are nevertheless represented in a realist mode which sees the accused subjected to judge and jury. Murder here is firmly associated with the feminine. Even in *The Lodger*, the murderer

Mr Sleuth, the Jack the Ripper character, is decidedly feminised; death in Lowndes' fiction is centred in a very domestic space.[3]

The home as the fortress

The Lodger unavoidably inflects itself on readings of Lowndes' other works. In large part owing to the successful film adaptations, *The Lodger* has become virtually the sole representative of its author's labours and has been assured a continued readership as an upshot of its relatively regular republications. The *Times Literary Supplement* review of 1913 was indeed favourable: 'Comparatively guileless people – people who would take a pitiful teaspoon to a drowning fly – can appreciate a really good murder. A tinge of the morbid, some sensitiveness to what is known as "the creeps," must be theirs' (364). Elsewhere Lowndes states that she is 'mournfully aware that a good many intelligent people will not read [her] books because they are afraid they are going to be frightened or horrified. This is largely owing to the fame of *The Lodger,* which I admit does contain some horrible passages' ("Answers to Questions", n.p.). The *TLS* review of the novel confirms this, reporting that '[h]orror thickens into horror – probably *ad nauseum* for the queasier of her readers' (364). Whilst by today's standards *The Lodger* is fairly tame, Lowndes here anticipates the reality of her future works being dwarfed by the reputation of this one book.

[3] Mr Sleuth is described as 'a strange, queer looking figure of a man' who 'was not like other gentlemen' (1996: 33; 34). He is repeatedly described as eccentric and exudes a sense of otherness. Whilst I do not wish Mr Sleuth's vegetarianism to become a proof of his effeminacy it is a point worth noting in the construction of his apartness: 'The perceived strangeness of vegetarianism allowed authors to indicate the otherness of characters, as with Rider Haggard's terrible Ayesha in his bestselling *She;* or the serial killer Sleuth, based on Jack the Ripper, in Belloc Lowndes' Edwardian chiller, *The Lodger*' (Gregory 2007: 26). As Mr Sleuth says to his landlady on being offered meat, 'A sausage? No, I fear that will hardly do. I never touch flesh meat, […] it is a long, long time since I tasted a sausage, Mrs. Bunting' (1996: 20). Sleuth's rejection of Mrs Bunting's domestic services such as cooking and cleaning also pertain to a sense of his own domesticity: I shouldn't want anything of that sort done for me […] I prefer looking after my own clothes. I am used to waiting on myself' (18).

The Lodger is, as Chris Steinbrunner and Otto Penzler describe it, '[a] psychological suspense thriller rather than a tale of detection, […] more a "why-done-it" than a "who-done-it"' (1976: 252). Though the novel, which was initially conceived as a short story, was inspired by real crime, Lowndes made it clear that she did not intend it as a factual account. She states that '[b]efore writing either the long or short version of *The Lodger* I avoided reading the contemporary records of Jack the Ripper's activities. When his crimes startled and horrified London I was not only very young, I was actually living abroad, so I only knew the story in a vague outline' ("The Novelist's Creative Mind", n.p). The story is centred around the London home of Mr and Mrs Bunting. In the novel, the Buntings, who are in financial crisis, rent out their spare rooms to a mysterious but gentlemanly stranger, Mr Sleuth, who knocks on their door in search of lodgings where he might also carry out what he claims are to be scientific experiments. Based on the case of Jack the Ripper, Lowndes' novel tells the tale of Mr and Mrs Bunting's gradual suspicion that their house-guest is in fact the infamous murderer. Both husband and wife are apprehensive about Mr Sleuth but they do not comprehend that they are both harbouring the same unease until they realise that Daisy, Mr Bunting's daughter from a previous marriage, has been left alone in the house with their lodger. The scene that concludes the novel is one of the few incidents that takes place outside of the house, in Madame Tussauds. Confronted with a party of policemen (upholders of the patriarchal law), who are being shown around the museum, Mr Sleuth believes that Ellen Bunting has tipped off the police about his identity as murderer and escapes through a side exit of the museum and fails to return to his lodgings; the reader is left with the assumption that Mr Sleuth is indeed the serial-killer known as 'the Avenger'.[4]

The Lodger is a London-based novel set in large part within the domestic sphere of the Buntings' home. Whilst the focus of the action in the novel is always brought back to the private sphere, *The Lodger* is concerned with the continual breaching of the domestic by the public world outside the house. As Laura Marcus asserts, in *The Lodger* '[t]he

[4] It is interesting to note that Sleuth's name ('sleuth' meaning spy or detective) places him in the time honoured tradition that equates the figure of the criminal with that of the detective. Both detective and criminal are, in some respects, outside of the law.

action is thus divided almost entirely between the house and the sites of law, policing, and criminality – the Black Museum, with its "relics" of infamous nineteenth-century murderers, the Coroner's Court, and Madame Tussaud' (1996: xiii). This breaching of the safety of the home is something that Marcus emphasises:

> The traditional role of the butler is to guard the threshold of the house and to protect the inner sanctum, but for the ex-servants who let in lodgers the boundaries between inside and outside are no longer secured but crossed […]. Mrs Bunting's response to such transgressions of boundaries and spaces is to attempt to 'lock in', and thus to both guard and make safe, the danger that has entered from outside. (xii)

In *The Lodger* class becomes a major concern in setting out the boundaries of the domestic. The feminised domestic realm is associated with the lower class whilst the lodger, whose status remains unknown but who is apparently a gentleman, penetrates the tranquillity of the home. Daisy's suitor, the detective Joe Chandler, who has been placed on the Avenger case, represents the public sphere but, as an embodiment of the legal system, denotes the antithesis of the Avenger.[5] As Marcus affirms, Chandler 'also represents a Law that comes knocking and, like the lodger, cannot be kept out' (xiii). Both become symbolic of the breaking or the enactment of justice and law; notions that find themselves manifested in the newspapers which document the development of the Avenger case, the newspaper itself becoming another way in which public sphere manifests itself.

Initially, it seems that Mr Bunting at least welcomes the intrusion of the public into the private, even if Mrs Bunting does not agree. When the Buntings have to give up their newspaper in a money-saving effort Mr Bunting feels that '[i]t's a shame – damned shame – that he shouldn't know what was happening in the world outside! Only criminals are kept from hearing news of what is going on beyond their prison walls' (Lowndes 1996: 7). For him it is a distraction from his own troubles. Mrs Bunting is less keen to have these harbingers of bad news brought into her home. Whilst the husband feels a sense of entrapment within the domestic, the wife is keen to guard her home against the encroachment

[5] Perhaps also, as the embodiment of what I later go on to discuss as an upholder of a patriarchal law, Chandler is Sleuth's inverse by virtue of his supposed manliness.

of the outside world. It is only when Ellen Bunting's suspicions about the identity of their lodger begin to weigh heavily on her mind that she actively seeks out news of the Avenger: 'Oddly enough, she was the first to wake the next morning; odder still, it was she, not Bunting, who jumped out of bed, and going out into the passage, picked up the newspaper which had just been pushed through the letter-box' (47). It is Ellen Bunting who has the initial inklings about Mr Sleuth and it is she who takes on the role of defender of the domestic sphere.

Despite her horror at the realisation that her lodger is liable to be a serial killer, Mrs Bunting's abhorrence is outweighed by her compulsion to guard her house-guest against the force of the law: 'To her sharpened suffering senses her house had become a citadel which must be defended; aye, even if the besiegers were a mighty horde *with right on their side.* And she was always expecting that first single spy who would herald the battalion against whom her only weapon would be her woman's wit and cunning' (Lowndes 1996: 77). The Buntings' home, though only a modest abode, is their castle and in it reside their wards. Mrs Bunting's feeling of duty towards her lodger outweighs her sense of obedience to the law. The Buntings see their home as a sphere that should be protected from the infiltration of law and the public world. Lowndes' narrator describes Mrs Bunting's fear of the law: 'Again and again the poor soul had agonized and trembled at the thought of her house being invaded by the police, but that was only because she had always credited the police with supernatural powers of detection' (175). To the Buntings, the law is a source of fear and an almost mystical force. Mr Bunting echoes his wife's sentiments: 'Bunting, like Mrs Bunting, credited the police with almost supernatural powers' (177). The police in *The Lodger* are very real but in the minds of the Buntings their power remains something of a mystery and with this lack of understanding comes a sense of anxiety. As Lowndes' narrator articulates, 'Londoners of Bunting's class [the class of ex-servants] have an uneasy fear of the law. To his mind it would be ruin for him and for his Ellen to be mixed up publicly in such a terrible affair' (182). While the Buntings' dread of the law is based in part on a very real and practical sense that any dealings with it could lead to a loss of respectability, these concerns are engulfed by a more intuitive trepidation.

The workings of the law are, to the Buntings, menacing by virtue of their appearance as part of some huge and almost monstrous machinery.

When Daisy's suitor, Joe Chandler, takes her father to the Black Museum, the 'regular Chamber of 'Orrors' (the place where murder weapons and objects associated with crimes are kept at Scotland Yard), Daisy senses this impression of the law as an almost ungovernable and autonomous entity: 'The moment she passed through the great arched door which admits the stranger to that portion of New Scotland Yard where throbs the heart of that great organism which fights the forces of civilized crime, Daisy Bunting felt that she had indeed become free of the Kingdom of Romance' (Lowndes 1996: 63). The buildings at Scotland Yard are the physical manifestation of this 'creature', this living being with its own beating heart. Mr and Mrs Buntings' view of the law as a kind of machinery which operates independently of its individual actors makes it a menacing spectre which might creep into their house unnoticed at any given moment. On hearing a tap at the door to their house the Buntings wonder whether it was 'possible that, in their agitation, they had left the front door open, and that *someone*, some merciless myrmidon of the law, had crept in behind them?' (191). These 'myrmidons', the brave warriors who are the loyal servants of law in Lowndes' novel, are held in the tide of this superior force. Even Chandler, though a family friend and the future husband of Daisy, is seen, to a degree, as part of this inauspicious mechanism. When Chandler goes to Mr Bunting asking for his daughter's hand in marriage Bunting fears he is about to confront him about their lodger. When he realises that this is not the case he is overcome with relief but nevertheless senses the potential threat that Chandler symbolizes: 'And, indeed, the relief was so great that the room swam round as he stared across at his daughter's lover, that lover who was also the embodiment of that now awful thing to him, the law' (184). Chandler's position is problematic for the Buntings because his presence in their lives is twofold; he is at one and the same time an impersonal representative of the thing they most fear and a personal friend who they are ready to welcome into their home and family. Chandler, being representative of both the public and the private, makes the boundaries of their home less secure.

The Lodger treats the law unsympathetically as a force to be feared. While it in no way condones the crimes of the Avenger it nevertheless expresses sympathy with the criminal hunted by this greater power. Part of this stems from the notion that whilst the criminal might take lives, the law exerts a similar power over life and death. Looking at the relics in

Scotland Yard's Black Museum, Daisy 'guessed that these strange, pathetic, staring faces were the death masks of those men and women who had fulfilled the awful law which ordains that the murderer shall be, in his turn, done to death' (Lowndes 1996: 65). The law is represented rather ambiguously in *The Lodger*; capital punishment is not portrayed as essentially unjust, but the novel expresses a typically conservative sense that perhaps justice in itself is terrible. There is a sense that human nature can be atrocious and that therefore justice has to be equally appalling.

Murder in the Wendy House

Letty Lynton, published eighteen years after *The Lodger*, is a further novel loosely based on a real-life murder. It was made famous by a 1932 film adaptation starring Joan Crawford and directed by Clarence Brown.[6] In the foreword to the novel Lowndes writes that '[a]lthough many readers will realise that the two chief characters of *Letty Lynton* were suggested by a famous Scottish murder trial, the writer wishes to make clear that this story is fiction' (1931: n.p.). Drawing on the Madeleine Smith case, which has provided inspiration for other works of fiction and film including Wilkie Collins' novel *The Law and the Lady* (1875) and Dorothy L. Sayers' *Strong Poison* (1929), Lowndes' aim was not to provide an accurate account of the actual events but rather to make a study of the motivations that might lead to murder. She writes in the foreword:

> Every memorable murder trial opens a window through which can be surveyed a section of a human ant-hill, suddenly isolated and exposed. Of all these people two, the victim and his supposed murderer, stand out with startling clearness; but the writer has always felt particularly interested in the subordinate, what may be called the accessory characters, who remain to the onlooker but dim and shadowy figures. And yet, some of them, at least, may be far more profoundly affected in their lives than even the chief actors in a drama, and this makes them, from the creative point of view, of absorbing interest to the novelist (n.p.).

[6] Lowndes was not impressed with the film of *Letty Lynton.* As she writes in a letter to Alexander Woollcott, 'It seems so strange that the only novel of mine made into a real talking picture was *The Lodger*. I do not count *Letty Lynton*, for I am convinced (secretly) that that was only bought for a blind, for nothing could be more unlike the novel than the film that was called by this name' (Marie Belloc Lowndes to Alexander Woollcott, 1935).

Lowndes repeats this sentiment in a letter to Alexander Woollcott in which she responds to praise of her novel, stating that 'character is what interests me, not plot or environment' (Lowndes to Woollcott, 1930).[7] Though Lowndes claims that she is not interested in environment, as in *The Lodger*, the very domestic setting of the murder would suggest otherwise. My discussion of *Letty Lynton* here will focus on the movement of the site of murder to within the domestic sphere. Whereas *The Lodger* represents the beginnings of the border-crossing between public and private, *Letty Lynton* sees this threshold effectively dissolved. The eponymous protagonist of *Letty Lynton* embodies a dangerous and deadly femininity. Transgressing the bounds of the domestic serves as a moral rejoinder in this conservative popular work of fiction; such offenses are shown to be highly perilous for the perpetrator.

Letty Lynton narrates the story of 'Lovely' Letty Lynton, an upper-middle class eighteen-year-old girl who, finding herself restricted by the limitations of her privileged but dull home life, embarks on various trysts with men who, invariably, fall in love with her and desire her hand in marriage. The first of these is one of her father's employees, Maclean. He is followed by the Swede, Axel Ekebon, who is at first perceived by Letty to be a 'splendid looking, fair young man, [...] a true hero of romance in her eyes', and then finally by Lord Tintagel (Lowndes 1931: 49). Letty murders Ekebon by poisoning him with the arsenic that she obtains from her father's chemical works when the Swede threatens to hold her to her prior agreement to marry him whilst she is engaged to Tintagel. She is let off the crime on the verdict of 'not proven', but the reputation of her family is left in tatters by the controversy caused by the court proceedings. Maclean, her initial suitor (and the only character in

[7] Lowndes goes on to write that '[t]he enigmatic character of Madeleine Smith has always puzzled me, and always I have meant to write a story about her. I have been a good deal in Scotland, and at various times I have met people who knew members of her family. The young woman, I can't remember her name as I have carefully avoided reading any record of the trial, who certainly loved Angelier, did go to the Smiths' house the day after his death, and undoubtedly told Madeleine what had happened. That was why Madeleine rushed off in a foolish aimless way to the Smiths' country house whence she was brought back to the unfortunate Minoch, to whom she was engaged. That fact has never been published, but was told me by someone who knew the Smiths' (Lowndes to Woollcott, 1930).

the novel who has definitive proof of her guilt), agrees to marry Letty and emigrate with her at the novel's conclusion. Unlike *The Lodger*, in which the protagonist's guilt is only (albeit strongly) implied, the reader is left in no doubt as to Letty's culpability as we directly witness her crime. Whilst Letty might appear to most of her acquaintances to be the model of innocent wholesomeness, we, the reader, know this to be a falsehood. In a *Times Literary Supplement* review from 1931 *Letty Lynton* is described as 'painful not because Mrs Belloc Lowndes, who has told it admirably, is among those who take pleasure in emphasizing what is painful, but because in her very willingness to distinguish human weakness from depravity she makes it clear that all is not well with a world which visits one and the other with the same penalty' (114). I recognise this lack of distinction in the punishment meted out for Letty's crime of murder, which turns out to be a mere telling-off for her social digressions rather than punishment through law.

Letty, in her deceitful virtuousness, is represented as otherworldly: 'Though it was a hot early September day, there was no hat on her pretty little head, and, as she moved among the rose bushes, clad in a flesh-coloured cotton frock, she looked like a beautiful nymph whom neither age nor trouble could touch – much less destroy (Lowndes 1931: 11). Physically, Letty epitomises an ideal of femininity to such a degree that 'a connoisseur in feminine beauty would have agreed that all Letty Lynton's "points" were perfect' (15). Being this epitome of the feminine, Letty apparently exerts an almost supernatural force over those who surround her. Even at the outset of the novel Letty is aware of this influence; she 'had learnt something of the almost miraculous power exceptional beauty confers on its fortunate feminine possessor. Not only did she attract almost every man she met; women too were softened and subjugated' (15). Letty appears almost ethereally as a timeless beauty, '[s]o different [...] from those bold, cocktail-drinking young minxes one hears so much about!' (15) Seemingly unpolluted by the supposedly lax morals of her contemporaries, Letty is in all her conventionally good and innocent guile, at first, an unlikely candidate for murderess.

In the *TLS* review of the novel it is noted that, '[h]ad [Lowndes] not dwelt on the commonplace routine of a sheltered life her catastrophe would have been less poignant' (1931: 114). It is this focus on the quotidian which makes Letty's actions exaggeratedly disconcerting and provide them with an added strangeness. Paralleling Letty's overt

femininity, the murder in *Letty Lynton* takes place in a rather playfully exaggerated and almost uncanny sphere of domesticity. Whilst in *The Lodger* murder takes place both outside the home and off the page, and we only hear the crimes reported after they occur, in *Letty Lynton*, the 'home' becomes the site of the crime. In *Letty Lynton*, the barn, also the scene of the previous secret meetings of the lovers, in which the murderess administers the fatal dose of arsenic disguised in hot chocolate, has been assembled so that it resembles, in miniature, the essence of domesticity. The barn which 'had been [Letty and her brother's] playroom in summer weather' is described as 'still retain[ing], inside, something of a nursery character' (41). Lowndes' narrator describes the building:

> About the centre of the barn, to the left, there stood a small cooking stove and, hung on to a board close to the stove, a row of tiny shining pots and pans. This miniature kitchen was shut off from the door side of the barn by a high six-leaved screen on which were pasted, and varnished over, all kinds of funny pictures, engravings, and photographs. [...] The farther side of the barn contained a queer medley of sofas, easy chairs, and heavy tables – all things which had been banished from Lee Stoke Place last year by the London decorator, and which Mrs Lynton had thought too good to give away. (41)

The mismatched household articles and various rejected items of furniture give the barn something of the eerie and otherworldly presence that Letty herself embodies. There is something rather artificial and conceited about the doll's house world in which Letty conducts her relationship with Ekebon, and Letty has a doll-like quality within this world. Susan Stewart's description of the secret at the centre of the doll's house illustrates well the sensation the reader of these novels gets on encountering the domestic sphere: '[o]ccupying a space within an enclosed space, the doll-house's aptest analogy is the locket or the secret recess of the heart: center within center, within within within. The dollhouse is a materialized secret' (1993: 61). The action within the barn too has the quality of a game; it has a fantastical and almost dream-like feeling. Running to her old nurse (still known to Letty by the childhood nickname of Squelchy), who is still in the service of the household, and holding tea parties, Letty is portrayed as a child still inhabiting a child's world.

In his essay 'The Uncanny' (1919), Freud discusses the linguistic particulars of the German term *das Unheimliche* (the uncanny) and its

peculiar conflation with its opposite. According to Freud, *heimlich* 'merges with its antonym *unheimlich*': 'The uncanny (*das Unheimliche*, "the unhomely") is a species of the familiar (*das Heimliche*, "the homely")' (Freud 2003: 134). Freud writes that the word *heimlich* 'belongs to two sets of ideas, which are not mutually contradictory, but very different from each other – the one related to what is familiar and comfortable, the other to what is concealed and kept hidden' (132). Julia Kristeva elucidates this phenomenon when she writes that, 'in the very word *heimlich*, the familiar and intimate are reversed into their opposites, brought together with the contrary meaning of "uncanny strangeness" harboured in *unheimlich*' (1991: 182). In the uncanny, the strange is harboured in a position of interiority to the familiar. The imitation of domesticity which the barn in *Letty Lynton* exemplifies can be perceived as an instance of the uncanny; it is at once familiar, in that it is apparently made up of the components of a home, and unfamiliar, in that there is something askew with its presentation. The fantasy world of this space is one that in childhood may have appeared playful and entirely commonplace, but it recurs in adulthood with a sinister aspect. In her analysis Kristeva explores the uncanny in terms of its temporality, writing 'that which *is* strangely uncanny would be that which *was* (the past tense important) familiar and, under certain conditions (which ones?), emerges' (183). It is in very much this sense that both the barn and Letty herself seem to be almost out of place in an adult world, and it is in this sense that we see an element of the Gothic creep into *Letty Lynton*.

However, Letty's defence against the outside world is not water-tight. In fact, the barn in which she has constructed her play-like world is literally porous. Her imaginary world is breached by reality when a gap in the wood of the barn allows an outside onlooker to witness one of Letty and Ekebon's meetings. This onlooker happens to be another of Ekebon's lovers, the daughter of his landlady at Napier Street. On suspecting Ekebon of unfaithfulness, Kate Roker follows him one evening to the barn:

> Putting out her hand, Kate found that there was a small hole or chink between two of the planks. Though she could see nothing, for the barn was in darkness, by pressing one side of her head towards the aperture, she could hear plainly all that the two standing in the barn, a few feet from where she herself stood outside, were saying. (Lowndes 1931: 81)

When later testifying in court to what could be crucial evidence in the murder trial, Kate's account is undermined because in the intervening time the crack in the barn wall has been repaired. Despite her culpability, it seems that forces are still at work to protect Letty from a guilty sentence.

Although there is not enough evidence to convict Letty of the crime, there is a sense that Letty gets her just deserts. After the trauma of the court proceedings, Letty finds her own and her family's reputation irrevocably broken; her engagement to Lord Tintagel is broken off and the novel ends with her marriage to Maclean imminent. Letty finds that the tables of power have turned on her. She has never been physically attracted to Maclean; '[w]hat had enchanted her had been the exercise of her power over a man who had always appeared to be both cold and extremely reserved' (Lowndes 1931: 20). By the end of the novel, however, Letty finds that her only possible course of action is to submit to him. Though 'Letty was a child of nature, and nature is predatory' (110), she finds herself ultimately ensnared

The reversal of the gendered power dynamics that occurs here is the culmination of a broader theme that runs throughout the novel, pitting the masculine against the feminine in a kind of battle of the sexes. For instance, although Ekebon is under the power of Letty, he still seeks to prove his dominance over his other lover, Kate. The narrator describes how in relation to this other woman '[t]here swept over him a violent, irrational wish to prove his mastery anew over her heart and senses' (Lowndes 1931: 46). Ekebon has a vehement and fierce desire to conquer Kate in a way that he is unable to do with Letty. Ekebon has a 'brutal desire to tame her, to bend her to his will' (85), which seems to be a reaction to his impotence in relation to his other lover. There is the suggestion throughout *Letty Lynton* that Ekebon's demise might be in part due to his effeminacy. In *Letty Lynton* it is the masculine which is aligned with the law and ultimately comes out triumphant having put feminine guile in its 'proper' place. In *Letty Lynton*, Letty is not punished by law, she is not convicted of murder, but, nevertheless, it is the legal and courtroom proceedings which provide justice for her moral 'crimes' aside and distinct from the crucial act of murder; the fact that she was behaving in what was seen to be an improper manner by meeting men by moonlight seems to be her more serious offence, or at least the offense for which she is punished. Nevertheless it is the enactment of the

courtroom process that sentences Letty to social ostracism. As Letty is shepherded into the courtroom there is a sense that it is as a social and sexual deviant rather than the murderess she truly is:

> A storing double-line of police men still form a blue hedge between which Letty and her escort have just hurried up the wide row of steps which lead to the high doors of the State Building. But by now those high doors are shut and bolted, and it needs but one uniformed man to shepherd the miserable little group along the broad passage broken by fluted columns. (204)

Whilst the police are there to protect the party from the baying crowds, the single policeman who steers them into the court represents a symbolic show of authority. The mob from which the police are protecting Letty represents the social order which has condemned Letty's behaviour and which is endorsed by the apparatus of the law. Though the building in which the proceedings take place is literally a centre of the law in that it is a tangible architectural manifestation of the concept—'the inquest is to take place in a huge hall, lit by a skylight, situated in the centre of the State Building, and known by its old name of Court-House' (Lowndes 1931: 204) —the building retains something of the domestic. The fact that the law has become conflated in *Letty Lynton* with social norms is further illustrated by the homely appearance of the court-room:

> [Letty] realises with a pitiful sense of relief, that the scene, that the scene round her is very different from that which she remembers having witnessed in the Assize Court. There is no grim judge in long red robes and grey-white wig, sitting up aloft ready to put on a black square of cloth which means the coming of a horrible death. Instead of a judge, Dr. Powell, the coroner of the district, with whom Lady Lynton and her daughter have always had a bowing acquaintance, is sitting in an ordinary arm-chair, with a table before him. (205)

Letty, the murderess, gets an embarrassing telling off rather than a criminal conviction or death sentence. Rather than law entering the sphere of the domestic it seems that the domestic has entered the sphere of law; either way, as in *The Lodger*, the two are most definitely conflated.

The doors are bolted but still the law seeps in

Lowndes' 1939 novel *Lizzie Borden: A Study in Conjecture* is written along a similar premise to *Letty Lynton*, providing a possible account of the actions and motives of the infamous 1892 Fall River, Massachusetts murder case in which Lizzie plays the role of key suspect in the murder of her father and stepmother. For Lowndes, the process of writing *Lizzie Borden* was a foray '[i]nto the dark secrets of motive [that] only surmise can penetrate' (1939: vi).[8] Whilst Lowndes' *Lizzie Borden* did not repeat the success of *The Lodger*, it still enjoyed a good reception. In a letter Flora Mervill wrote to Lowndes praising her work and claiming that '[a] friend of mine who lives at London Terrace told me that the lending library there had eight copies of "Lizzie" and that the book was so popular she had quite a time getting it' (Mervill to Lowndes, n.d.).

Lizzie, though certainly beautiful, is not the embodiment of female perfection that Letty is; nevertheless there are certain features of these protagonists which mean that we can read them as analogous. Although, at thirty-one, Lizzie is over ten years older than Letty, her story shares the backdrop of an overly restrictive domestic existence which means she is largely cut off from the broader society of her peers. Unlike Letty's loving father, Mr Borden is a tyrant in his home: 'Even his attachment to her, his wife, was a tyrannical attachment. […] He did not often quote the scripture, but when he did so, invariably when they were alone together, it was always some verse concerning the duty of a wife to submit to her husband' (Lowndes 1939: 131). However, despite this, Lowndes' Lizzie believes it is her stepmother who holds sway over the family. In the novel Lizzie's crimes are motivated by her attachment and

[8] Like other authors who have been attracted to the Borden case, for instance Elizabeth Engstrom in *Lizzie Borden* (1990), Evan Hunter in *Lizzie: A Novel* (1984) and Sharon Pollock in her play *Blood Relations* (1980), Lowndes does not seek to solve the crime but she does seek to 'offer a possible, even a probable solution' (*1939:* vi). Lowndes continues to write that '[t]his study in conjecture tries to relieve, by offering a credible solution, the staring that arises when the incredible has happened, and no reason can be found for it. For on the fourth of August, 1892, the incredible did happen. As was so powerfully pressed in the closing Argument for the Commonwealth, 'It was a terrible crime. It was an impossible crime. But it was committed…Set any human being you ever heard of at the bar, and say to them, "You did this thing," and it would seem incredible. And Yet it was done. It was done' (vi).

secret engagement to a man she believes herself to be in love with. In an uncharacteristic decision, Mr Borden sends his daughter away to Europe with a party of women. On this trip she meets and falls in love with the rather pathetic and dour Hiram Barrison. She realises, however, that her father will never let her marry this man who, like the man her sister was engaged to long before and was forbidden to marry, is in a rather unfavourable financial situation.

In a remarkably similar style to *Letty Lynton*, Barrison meets Lizzie secretly in a barn which is a very short distance from the house. It is here that the future weapon of murder is revealed to Barrison with a distinct sense of the Gothic as 'he noticed the glint of a moonbeam on what looked like an oddly shaped knife. But, as he stared down at it, he told himself it was the steel belonging to a handless axe' (Lowndes 1939: 106). Lizzie's stepmother is witness to Barrison, and then Lizzie, leaving the barn. She confronts Lizzie and threatens to tell her father for, as Lowndes' narrator reveals, 'Abby Borden had not lived for sixty-five years in this strange, and so called civilised, world, without becoming aware, even if unwillingly so, of certain curious and sinister facts concerning the part sex plays in the hidden lives of many women' (136). It is this idea of a potentially promiscuous sexuality that is at the heart of Lowndes' fiction; it is this that ultimately constructs the 'dangerous' femininity which must be curbed. The day after Lizzie and Barrison's secret meeting, when her stepmother reveals that she knows about this man, Lizzie violently kills both Mr and Mrs Borden in the house they share, using an axe from the barn. This is no 'unobtrusive' poisoning but a bloodthirsty attack which Lowndes depicts in a concise and measured yet gruesome manner. Though we never gain access to the inner workings of Lizzie's mind and motives are only implied, there is a clear link between the murders and the restrictions of Lizzie's home and family life.

Even when Lizzie is away from home on another continent, her American home continues to haunt her. Lizzie has her fortune told in Paris by Madame Pythagora (who reveals to Lizzie her more commonplace name of Ann Hopkins). Though the fortune-teller never divulges the fact to Lizzie, she sees a future disaster befalling her. Thus, it is the fortune-teller's house which, in its uncanny similarity to Lizzie's own, strikes dread into her heart. Lowndes' narrator tells of how, '[w]ith hesitating steps Lizzie followed the English-woman into a plainly

furnished bedroom which, oddly enough, reminded her or her own home' (1939: 52). Here 'Lizzie suddenly felt frightened. She longed to escape from this commonplace bedroom, and from this commonplace woman' (53). Though there is an ocean between this room and her own there is a sense of trepidation with which Lizzie unconsciously contemplates the home she is has temporarily left and is soon to return to. *Lizzie Borden* is, like both *Letty Lynton* and the earlier *The Lodger*, very much concerned with the boundaries of the private sphere. As Marcus writes:

> The most striking aspect of *Lizzie Borden: A Study in Conjecture* is not, in fact, the portrait of Lizzie, but the depiction of domestic space in the novel. The unhappy family members – and the asymmetry of father, stepmother, and daughter repeats that in *The Lodger* – turn themselves or are turned into prisoners inside their home. Belloc Lowndes gives us a house in which entrances and connecting doors are locked, but in which family secrets make themselves heard through the walls. (1996: x)

Gina Wisker, in describing the Gothic, writes that '[k]nowing what we fear, we know what we desire: safety, mother, friends. Our worst fears arise from dangerous domestic disillusionment […] The removal or undercutting of the dependable domestic is the stuff of horror' (2004: 106-7). The house, as it is described in the early pages of the novel, has something of the uncanniness that the barn possesses in *Letty Lynton*. Initially there is nothing peculiar about the house: it 'stood on the east side of the street, and was separated from the sidewalk only by wooden fence, in which there were two gates' (Lowndes 1939: 9). The first indication that the reader gets as to the slight oddities of the house is when Lizzie, approaching the door, 'proceeded to take out a steel ring on which were four keys, out of the pocket of her pretty pink dress' (9).

Though the house she grew up in is normalised in her own mind—'[t]o Lizzie Borden there appeared nothing strange in the fact that number Ninety-Two Second Street, while looking exactly like the other houses clustered round about it'—the house contains peculiarities which make it the ideal Gothic setting (9):

> There were three outside doors, and as to that there was nothing strange or unusual. But what to most people who were aware of it seemed very strange was that on each of these doors had been fixed an outside lock of a substantial make, and on the inside, a spring latch, and also a strong bolt. […] Even the doors to the barn and the cellar, where there was nothing of any value, were kept locked all day, as well as all night. (Lowndes 1939: 9)

As the Bordens' servant, Bridget Sullivan, ponders to herself, 'What a constant, unending source of trouble were all those locks and bolts and bars! Why couldn't the Bordens go on like other folk?' (169). Kate Ferguson Ellis writes that the eighteenth-century Gothic novel 'can be distinguished by the presence of houses in which people are locked in and locked out. They are concerned with the violence done to familial bonds that is frequently directed against women' (1989: 3). With its vast quantity of locks and bolts, the Borden house is like a prison. There are locks on both sides of the doors as if the Bordens are trying to shore up the domestic from the public, but this also serves to stop the interior seeping through the doors and escaping into the outside world.

Mr Borden had not only sought to exclude the outside world from his home, but also to manage and have control over the internal workings of his house by segmenting its interior. 'Even more strange, in some ways', than the locked and bolted doors, 'was a fact only known to the inmates' close friends. This was that the second floor of the house was practically divided into two parts, each part having its own set of stairs' (Lowndes 1939: 10). This home is not a home but a prison in which inmates have their own set of keys but are segregated from one another. It is not through force that the inmates of this prison conform, but fear that makes them self-regulate their own behaviour. Lowndes writes that '[t]here was a door between the listener's [Lizzie's] room and their room, but it was locked and barred. Locked on [Mr and Mrs Borden's] side, bolted on hers' (17). Lizzie too, though shut out of the other side of the house, is complicit in this division. Despite all attempts by both parties to shut out the other, noise could still pass between the rooms: 'The door between her room and theirs might be locked and bolted, but she could not but overhear a good deal the couple said to one another' (20). The boundaries that have been set up within the home are permeable in much the same way as the house is porous to the outside world. Though Mr Borden has attempted to make his home secure against the outside world, parts of it creep in. Just as Lizzie hears the goings on from her father and stepmother's side of the divided house, sounds that mirror the process in *The Lodger* are capable of penetrating the walls. Having just killed her victims, Lizzie hears joyous voices from outside which 'seemed to belong to another planet from that on which she was now living. Theirs was a simple, normal, everyday world, remote from the world where deeds of darkness and of secret cruelty might be committed without

remorse or even fear of discovery' (186). The world that Lizzie now inhabits, and arguably has always inhabited, is far removed from this place that exists on the other side of her front door.

The police and the law are one aspect of public world from which Mr Borden is seeking to shield his home. Though, as far as we are aware, Mr Borden is no criminal, he sees the police as a threat to his own sovereignty over the home. When some money goes missing from his desk, the police are called in but dismissed without a resolution: 'he intimated to the City Marshal that he did not wish the matter to be pursued further' (Lowndes 1939: 59-60). The police briefly feature at the end of the novel in the aftermath of the murders, but other than on these occasions mention of the law is largely absent from the novel. Just as Lizzie thinks only of her father's wrath, considerations of the law seem to be entirely missing from the page. This absence seems all the more glaring in light of the high-profile nature of the Borden case and Lowndes' focus on legal proceedings in other novels. Though in both *The Lodger* and *Letty Lynton* the notion of law is cast ambiguously, it is central to the plot in both instances. In *Lizzie Borden*, law is notably left out and the figure of the father, arguably the figure who has sought to exclude a more public law from his home, comes to bear instead.

Despite her fear of her father, in the aftermath of the first murder Lizzie re-enters the home which has been the scene of her brutal murders; she unlocks the door 'and lifting the latch, walked into the hall'. To Lizzie, the hallway she enters remains unchanged and the fact '[t]hat everything there looked as everything had always looked there filled her with a sense of dull surprise'. Lizzie knows, however, that 'behind the door of the living-room on her right everything was different from what it had always been, and in a sense presented what might be called an incredible sight' (Lowndes 1939: 184). Maria Tatar writes of the uncanny house that '[w]hether we are dealing with the marvellous legend, the fantastic romance, or the strange novel, it is knowledge that transforms the sinister habitation of supernatural powers into the secure haven of a home' (1981: 182). Tatar's sense of the uncanny originates in the mystery at the heart of the home. In Lowndes' thrillers, though a possible explanation of events is given, it is never given as knowledge, only as conjecture, and for this reason the home always remains unhomely. While none of the novels discussed here are explicitly supernatural, they retain their uncanniness as mystery always remains.

As Lowndes writes of the Lizzie Borden case in the preface to her novel, 'the more we know what happened, the deeper the mystery' as to why 'Lizzie Borden killed her father and stepmother' (1939: vi). The mystery here is essentially unfathomable. However much the mystery is impenetrable it is important to note that, in murdering her father, Lizzie has destroyed the personification of patriarchy and thus struck out at the male-dominated moral codes that weighed down on her.

The impenetrability of the concealed is what gives Lowndes' fiction its distinctively Gothic tone. Furthermore, there is, as Tatar affirms, an intimate connection between the home and that which is kept secret. This becomes even more pertinent when considered in relation to the Freudian reading of the uncanny. Tatar explains:

> A house contains the familiar and congenial, but at the same time it screens what is familiar and congenial from view, making a mystery of it. Thus it comes as no surprise that the German word for a secret (*Geheimnis*) derives from the word for home (*Heim*) and originally designated that which belongs to the house. What takes place within the four walls of a house remains a mystery to those shut out from it. A secret, for the Germans in any case, literally ex-cludes others from knowledge.
>
> (1981: 169)

While in both *Letty Lynton* and, more exaggeratedly, in *Lizzie Borden*, we are witness to the crime, the motive always remains something of a mystery, just as the houses in which the murders occur appear uncanny. However, the susceptibility of the domestic sphere to the influences of the outside world means that we are able to catch stolen glimpses of the hidden; the very nature of the Gothic house with its indefinite threshold necessitates this. Both Anthony Vilder, who states that the house in the Gothic becomes uncanny through the fact that this 'most intimate shelter of private comfort' is subject to 'the terror of invasion by alien spirits' (1987: 7) and Homi Bhabha, who writes that in the uncanny the 'border between home and world becomes confused', affirm this tendency (1992: 141). Bhabha's claim that, 'uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing us upon a vision that is as divided as it is disorientating', supports this argument (141). In Lowndes' fiction, however, the transgression of this border means that the threat of law is ever present to punish those who overstep the bounds of proper domesticity.

Conclusion

In Lowndes' fiction the Gothic is manifested in a palpable way; her novels employ many of the genre's tropes such as suggestions of the supernatural, madness and concealed secrets. Most pertinently for this present article, the theme of the haunted house is one that recurs, implicitly but repeatedly, in Lowndes' novels. In Lowndes, the Gothic is tied up with notions of law and sovereignty in that it represents a female sphere saturated with repressed and dangerous sexuality which attempts to exclude the law with murderous results; the patriarchal law attempts to penetrate and make safe this sexuality. Drawing on Judith Walkowitz's argument that cultural representations of the Ripper case exclude the narrative of the female, Elyssa Warkentin argues that such early narratives provided a space for moralization. As Warkentin writes, 'the cultural narrative or "modern myth" of the Ripper's crimes developed as a warning for women: if they transgress the margins of traditional, domestic femininity, they risk incurring the ferocious punishment meted out by the Ripper. Thus the Ripper narrative is one means of controlling potentially subversive female behaviour' (2010: 38). Though Lowndes' *The Lodger,* functions in much the same way, her later novels too serve as moral warnings against the transgression of the domestic sphere.

With the exception of *The Lodger*, Lowndes writes about murderesses (and this is typical of her broader oeuvre), usually upper-middle class women who falsely envisage murder to be the way out of the restrictions of their class and gender. These restrictions usually manifest themselves in the form of seemingly unfathomable romantic entanglements. Ultimately I argue that, in Lowndes' work, though it exists to enforce a patriarchal moral code, law and order is privileged over the law-breaking and destructive power of the female protagonist. Lowndes' protagonists are repeatedly engaged in attempting to thwart such domination at the hands of a repressive system of male authority. Lowndes represents a rather conservative approach whereby positively endorsed notions of order and justice are symbolised in terms of the masculine. The notion of law in Lowndes is articulated in terms of a totalising system of thought in which notions of justice are always fed back to the legal system. In Lowndes' fiction, the absence of a controlling external form of law with which to govern behaviour is disturbing. Incapable of self-policing, the individual as represented in

Lowndes' fiction is an unpredictable entity whose dangerous sexuality must be curbed by an external set of rules and regulations.

Though the scope of this project was small in attempting to amass three of Lowndes' novels by recourse to a shared thematic concern with the triangle of law, domesticity and sexuality, my hope is that it will contribute to a revival of interest in Lowndes. The vast body of fiction that was voraciously devoured by Lowndes' contemporary reading public has much to add to an understanding of a genealogy of the popular gothic. Moreover, as artefacts of cultural history, Lowndes' novels have a great deal to reveal about rather conservative conceptions of sexuality and morality. In addition to her portrayal of crime and punishment, feasibly Lowndes intended her novels to contribute to a self-regulation of society that might control a potentially 'unseemly' promiscuity that was in her mind 'at large'.

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