

# The Discourse on Victorian Patriarchy in Anne Brontë's Novel The Tenant of Wildfell Hall

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UNIVERSITY OF RIJEKA  
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES  
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**The Discourse on Victorian Patriarchy in Anne Brontë's Novel**

*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the M.A. in English Language and  
Literature and Italian Language and Literature at the University of Rijeka

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## **Abstract**

As an English author, Anne Brontë was disregarded and left in the shadows for a very long time due to the loud echo of her sisters' voices. But this does certainly not diminish the fact that her works are of great importance for understanding the social norms of the Victorian period, and it does not mean that she did not influence the work of many authors that addressed the subjects regarding the status of women in the Victorian era. It is well known that women had undergone serious struggles to acquire a status and the privileges that were easily accessible to men, especially when it comes to marital rights and political investment. Anne Brontë was one of the authors of the time who used her writing to defy the social norms and put a new light on the position of women. Her second novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), was published under the pseudonym Acton Bell, and the reason underlying this choice was the prevailing view of the public that women were not allowed to speak their mind. The society was hard on the novel because it depicted a heroine brave enough to bend the rules and the laws, as well as to express her thoughts without fear of being judged. With this novel, Anne Brontë voiced her views on the Victorian patriarchy to the general public and we could say that she presented us with a critical overview of her period, and helped in creating a new, more appreciated concept of a Victorian woman. She addressed the most important problems regarding the rights of women that needed to be changed, such as the women's rights in marriage and custody of her children. She had also helped in allowing the women to stand against the patriarchal orthodoxy and changing the prevailing social standards. The aim of this study is to provide a discourse on Victorian patriarchy seen through Anne Brontë's eyes and expressed within the novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

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## INTRODUCTION

*“Unlike the fictional Helen, who consigns her deepest anger and fears to a journal, Anne Brontë proves that women can be heard: she writes a novel, a form designated to be read and talked about. The Tenant of Wildfell Hall lets Helen’s voice be heard as it reveals how often and how effectively women are silenced by the men in their lives”*  
(Senf, 1990: 455-456)

*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, a series of embedded narratives published in 1848, is undoubtedly one of the works that inspired many of the following authors and critics. Not only does Anne Brontë bring forth a portrayal of patriarchal Victorian England, she focuses on the inner struggles of a woman stuck in an abusive marriage. Using the means of a convincing social realism, she tackles on the topics which unsettled the seemingly stable Victorian society: indulgence, education of women, marriage, masculine abuse of power and arrogance, and upbringing of children. These are some of the reasons why the readers were “shocked” with the novel. Its language was considered coarse and brutal, and its subjects unconventional. She was one of the first women authors bold enough to adapt a woman narrator, and she did it using a narrative technique fairly unseen by the readers.

In the first part of the paper, I will present and discuss the broadlines of the Victorian period, with an emphasis on the position of women within the Victorian society and the rights they were entitled to in front of the Victorian law. I will also provide an overview of Anne Brontë’s life, because her experiences and attitudes have had a great impact on her work, especially on the two novels *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Furthermore, the focus will be on the latter novel itself. The paper will mainly concern Anne Brontë’s writing style, the powerful realism and the narrative techniques. These chapters will be followed by an

analysis of the parts of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* which are the strongest representations of Anne's attitudes toward social norms of her period and the struggles that women had to face when it came to being acknowledged and respected regardless of their gender. The key concepts discussed will be the position of women, masculine abuse of power and lack of respect toward women, as well as their disruptive way of life, the education of both men and women, the upbringing of children, a woman's effort to express herself through art, and a few other, not less important subjects. In short, the novel is a representation of a female heroine with a strong attitude and courage, through which Anne Brontë conveyed her own disagreement with the conditions that ruled the Victorian society. The paper will therefore be dealing with the aspects of Victorian patriarchy which mainly concern the status of the women, their role within the society, the differences between masculine and feminine, and the differences between "public sphere" and "private sphere". It is also important to underline that the author's siblings have had a great impact on her character and hence her creativity and productivity. Moreover, I will contrast the two male figures in the novel: Arthur Huntingdon and Gilbert Markham, the first being a vivid representation of a typical 19th-century man, and the second being closest to what women would consider ideal; a man who respects a woman for her opinions, attitudes and actions, and who allows her and supports her to be independent.

As I will mostly be dealing with the terms of patriarchy and patriarchal conventions, I find it necessary to provide some core definitions of the term "patriarchy", in order to be able to properly discuss the subjects related. *Cambridge English Dictionary* defines it as "a form of social organization in which fathers or other males control the family, clan, tribe, or larger social unit, or a society organized this way." Merriam-Webster defines patriarchy as a "social organization marked by the supremacy of the father in the clan or family, the legal dependence of wives and children, and the reckoning of descent and inheritance in the male line; *broadly* : control by men of a disproportionately large share of power", and a simpler

explanation “a society or institution organized according to the principles or practices of patriarchy.” Moreover, the London Family Networks adds one of the most important aspects of the patriarchal society: “women are systematically disadvantaged and oppressed”. John Stuart Mill reflected on the topic in his essay *The Subjection of Women* (1869) and presented his views on patriarchal ideology stating: “*The principle that regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes – the legal subordination of one sex to the other – is wrong itself, and is now one of the chief obstacles to human improvement; and it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality that doesn’t allow any power or privilege on one side or disability on the other*“ (Mill, 2017: 1). He further explains how the notion of patriarchy stems from the deeply rooted conceptions that women are bound to only follow the men just because they are of some value to them, or they are physically weaker, which makes them incapable of being equal (Mill, 2017: 3).

This paper will elaborate on the Anne Brontë’s views and representations of the Victorian patriarchy. It will provide reasons why more attention should be directed towards this novel, since it delivers stark contrasts between reality and imagination, realism and subjectivity, complex characters and a choice of powerful themes. Anne Brontë gave a new perspective on the Victorian conceptions about women and men by dealing with the notion of separate spheres. From her point of view expressed in this novel, there should be no discrepancies between the genders, and the general opinion should not stand as a “rule” when it comes to the social status of women.

# 1. VICTORIAN ERA

## 1.1. Victorian literature and its social setting

The Victorian era is a period of English and world history, marked by the six decades of Queen Victoria's rule, the most lasting of all English monarchs. The period lasted from 1837, the year that the Queen took the throne, until her death in 1901. This is the widely accepted periodization, since there are historians who believe that the era started with the Reform Act in 1837. During these sixty four years of Queen Victoria's reign, the political scene alternated between the two political currents: conservatives and liberals. The internal policy of British prime ministers was geared towards the implementation of numerous social reforms, while the foreign policy was focused towards maintaining the position of leading maritime and colonial forces.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century was undoubtedly a century of great changes and rapid growth, especially in science and technology. But even more than that, it was a period of radical and far-reaching changes in almost every aspect of human activities, which has set the base for the modern period that we know today. The French Revolution in 1789, which is symbolically considered as the year of a new age, was just one of the events that marked that era. But, according to Shea and Whitla, "such transformative changes brought challenging problems" (2014: 1). The rapid process of industrialization and the impact it had on the lives of both the working and the middle classes, the sudden growth of population; especially in the urban areas, better connection of the areas due to road construction, the innovation of the railway, steamboat, electrical telegraph and post service, have changed the people's lives enormously. (Šepić, 2017: 27)

After more than twenty years of Napoleonic wars, in Great Britain the attention of those in power had finally returned to social and economic problems of the nation. In the



period between 1815 and 1852, Tories and Whigs have alternated in holding the power ten times, which explains the extent of change that was strongly present in Britain at the time. In parallel with the industrial development, Britain underwent through a series of post-war crisis, which have urged the working class to riot, protest, go into strikes and organize meetings. The dissatisfaction of the workers grew larger to the point where it became one of the most pressing problems of 19<sup>th</sup> century. Their main demands were the shortening of working hours to 8 per day, better salaries and health insurance. They also did not have any civil or political rights, which encouraged them to start several movements for reform, for example the public health movement. A few years had passed before they reached their goals and the Factory Act was brought in 1833. Other than regulating the working hours and providing better working conditions, the Factory Act has also provided occupational safety and health for women, and enlarged the number of women in the working industry (Black, 1997: 205-216).

It is impossible not to agree with Lionel Madden, who firmly believes that the nineteenth century provides a background essential for the understanding of the modern period and its social structure. All of the present changes, cultural and political ideals, social norms, everything derived from the grounds laid in the Victorian age (Madden, 1970: 2). The study of the Victorian period made us aware of the cultural, political and sociological limitations, and had encouraged us to move forward and improve these aspects. The dynamic changes that originated in the period serve us to define and acknowledge the contemporary thought and way of living.

During the Victorian period, reading was fairly popular amongst the upper classes, but also increasingly popular among the lower ones. The majority of Victorian writers followed a traditional narrative structure, following the chronological order and descriptive way of presenting the development of events. Nevertheless, reading novels still became the focus of 19<sup>th</sup>-century publishing. The demand for more novels grew, and they eventually became

socially acceptable. Kely J. Mays states that early in the century, publishing was perceived as a “traditional, exclusive affair” (in Brantlinger and Thesing, 2002: 12). Books pertained to a wealthy group of people and were considered expensive luxuries. They were usually produced in small editions, and there existed a small group of booksellers who worked together to prevent newcomers of entering their group, or taking their place. The themes and subjects of published books were also traditional and were not supposed to raise scandals or stir the waters. Mays found the simplest way to describe the way of writing back in the time: “(...) *nothing should appear in a novel that a middle-class British father would be ashamed to read aloud to his family or that might make his young daughter blush*” (in Brantlinger and Thesing, 2002: 15).

One of the most famous English writers of this period was most certainly Charles Dickens. In his works he had often criticized the Victorian society and its social norms, which did not help his reputation. His novels first appeared as serials or as either weekly or monthly part-issues, beginning with *The Pickwick Papers*. This part-issue publication later gave way to “triple-deckers” (Brantlinger and Thesing, 2012: 3). The reason why authors published their works in installments was because they wanted their readers to expect more, but also to give their stories linearity – beginning, middle and end. The criticism of social and cultural norms served as a common ground among the Victorian writers. They often depicted both the good and the bad characters to show a striking contrast, and their works usually ended with a hope for progress.

Deirdre David stressed that the “Victorian novel participated energetically in the construction of individual and national identity”, and that it “assisted in the making of powerful ideologies of gender, sexuality, and race” (2001: 2). The Victorian novels became so popular due to their realistic descriptions of character and places, and the treatment of social problems. It was easy for the reader to associate with the characters and the stories they narrated. Usually,

the Victorian novels had “long and complicated plots, the characters were analyzed in detail, and the whole texture of events was explained in the final chapter and the omniscient narrator commented on the plot and distinguished the right from wrong” (Terci, 2015: 9). The early Victorian authors, such as Charles Dickens, popularized novels of social and cultural themes, while novels adopting the Romantic and Gothic traditions were popularized by the Brontë sisters. Moreover, the novels from the mid-Victorian and late-Victorian period were mainly employing the discontent with the social and political occurrences, for instance the novels by Thomas Hardy or Oscar Wilde (Terci, 2015: 9).

## **1.2. Women authors/artists**

The 19<sup>th</sup> century is also the period in which women, after centuries of being silent and excluded from almost every aspect of public sphere, have started searching for a profession or a purpose that was out of the domestic sphere and a lot of them have found that in writing. T. Šepić notes how writing gave women a sense of self-actualization and provided them with a way to make money of their own (2017: 16).

The position of women (artists) in 19<sup>th</sup> century is problematic from multiple points of view. In the period between the 1780 and 1830, thousands of women in Britain had already started writing and even publish their work, but there was very little information about it. In the second half on 19<sup>th</sup> century, the idea of women as artists has slowly started to become generally acknowledged. Besides, this was a period in which women have finally started to enjoy fundamental rights, for example the right to vote. Due to a constant demand for education reforms to give women the equal rights to education, the fight for having a right to vote, demand for entering in the world of the working class, and building an awareness about

themselves, the women have started to gain a stronger incentive for fighting and have managed to include themselves in the dominant, male culture. But it is important to note that this fight for equal rights was a slow and open-ended process. While women were trying to acquire a new social role, the limiting Victorian model minimized the role of a woman to being a mother, a wife, an angel of the house and other closely related social roles.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf explains how in this lasting fight for emancipation and acquiring a social status, having a room of their own presented a symbol for emancipation and a new way of perceiving the role of a woman as a professional artist. It was perceived as the symbol of a small victory, which carried immense importance because even though some progress has been made, the society still considered women to be inferior, with a limited potential in art and without an ability to ever create a master piece. (Šepić, 2017: 42)

There were a large number of female writers who had written about, and laid the grounds for the emancipation of women. Tatjana Šepić (2017) summarized the sequence of writings about the subject. After Mary Wollstonecraft and her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), who made an appeal for women's education in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, many female writers followed her example. Along with George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans) and Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell, the three Brontë sisters played an important role in portraying the Victorian age.

The first step of the Brontë sisters towards the entering the literary scene, was the publication of a joint collection of poems in May of 1846. The fact that the sisters have chosen poetry instead of prose, says a lot about how serious their literary ambitions were, since in that time poetry was still considered more valuable in terms of aesthetics, while novels were part of the popular culture. Even though their collection had been sold in just two copies, the critics gave them courage to start writing novels in the form of three independent stories, which would

fit in the three-deckers form that was popular back then. This time, besides succeeding in getting some positive response, the sisters have also received some harsh reactions from the critics and the readers. Nonetheless, this had awakened an interest in the people who were standing behind the names Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell, that has still not faded away. (Šepić, 2017: 39-40)

The reason why women writers often hid behind the pseudonyms was the common opinion of the society that women were unable to create masterpieces, and because of that they were often not accepted by the readers. So by writing under pseudonyms, they wanted to be criticized objectively, for their work as it is and not being rejected or ignored because of their name and gender.

## 2. ANNE BRONTË (1820-1849)

*“Because she is committed to a truly moral life and not merely a socially proper or correct life, Anne Brontë presents a radical critique of Victorian society.”*

(Langland, 1989: 126)

Anne Brontë, the youngest of the Brontë sisters but also the least famous, is best known for her novels, *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, both of which are largely drawn from her own experiences, especially the one of being a governess. Her sisters, in fact the whole family, have had a great impact on her life and writing. She was guided by her own morals and principles, which can be seen in her works, both in prose and poetry. In her novels, as well as in her poetry, Anne refuses to glorify the male strength. The strength of her male heroes lies strictly in moral principles, reason, passion and intellect. She does not incorporate the theme of marriage as a condition for woman’s happiness, but rather to only serve as a demonstration of how it can restrict the life of a strong, independent woman.

In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, we can find several themes which we could attribute to the influence that Mary Wollstonecraft had on Anne Brontë. In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft published her protofeminist work *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, which opened a path for later feminist works. She advocated firmly for the equality between men and women, but she primarily pleaded for the education of women. She insisted that women should be educated in order to come out of the private sphere and acquire the same virtues as men, like rationality and sense of achievement. Even though she implies that women are generally weaker, she still proposed a view that they are not made to serve men: *“(…) I shall only insist that men have increased that inferiority till women are almost sunk below the standard of rational creatures. Let their faculties have room to unfold, and their virtues to gain strength, and then determine where the whole sex must stand in the intellectual scale”* (Wollstonecraft, 1970: 35). If we take

Mary Wollstonecraft's attitudes in consideration, we can draw a parallel between her work and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Anne Brontë was not as straightforward in expressing her feminist ideas, but she did present us with a protofeminist perspective. She incorporated several of the protofeminist themes: "marriage as a prison for women, women's struggle to gain independence and an identity outside marriage, and an exposé of man's bad behavior" (Joshi, 2009: 908). By presenting us with these subjects that are central for understanding of the Victorian patriarchal ideology, her works can serve as a testimony of gender inequality in Victorian England and also as a testimony of the beginning of the women's fight for their rights and place within the society.

## **2.2. Literary merit**

Anne Brontë was born in 1820, in Thornton, Yorkshire. She was the youngest sister of Charlotte and Emily. She was often said to be "most afflicted by her own sense of personal unworthiness" (Langland, 1989: 3), and was always inclined to orientate her life towards a divine plan meant for her. This could be attributed to several losses her family experienced, so she was often preoccupied with life and death as she displayed in her poem "*Self-Communion*". Langland also describes her as "the most rigorously logical, the most quietly observant, the most realistic, and, in certain spheres, the most tenacious, the most determined, and the most courageous" (Langland, 1989: 4).

Her father was a clergymen of Irish descent, and was a perpetual curate in Haworth. Her mother died while she was still a baby, and Anne's aunt Elizabeth Branwell took care of the family. The Brontë children spent their days self-educating and creating a fantasy world of Angria and Gondal (Emily, Anne, Charlotte and Branwell). Anne had a special bond with

Emily, and the two expanded the world of Gondal together; they continue to work on it even after they were older. When her eldest sisters were sent to school, she did not follow them but has mastered Latin by herself. In 1836 she followed Charlotte to Roehead school, but had soon left to assume a post of governess in Blake Hall. She worked for a family called the Inghams, learning that educating kids can be rough and hard to handle, and was eventually dismissed. She had then assumed a post at the Robinsons family, at the Thorp Green estate. She was more satisfied working for Miss Robinson, and when she wanted to hire a tutor for her children, Anne suggested her brother Branwell. This turned out to be a bad idea, because Branwell had an affair with Miss Robinson which was the reason why Anne had quit in June 1845 (Reef, 2012: 53). This is an important fact since many critics speculate that Anne created the character of Arthur, in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, based on her brother (Brontë, 1994: 1).

Anne and Charlotte were the only two sisters who experienced working as governesses. Since their father had lost all his savings, someone had to provide for the family and because they were well educated, they wanted to try teaching. In 19<sup>th</sup> century, as already stated, women had a hard time providing for themselves, so the post of a governess was as high as it could get. Catherine Reef explained it in her book *The Brief Lives of Charlotte, Emily and Anne*. A governess taught reading, spelling and a modern foreign language, usually that was French, but they also taught music, drawing, dancing and fancy needlework. In order to set a good example of a proper behavior and high moral standards, they were forbidden to wear fancy clothes, in order to not attract the attention of strayed family members. Moreover, they had difficulties keeping the children in order, since they were not allowed to implement any way of discipline (2012: 35).

After coming back home from being a governess, Anne spent her days doing housework, reading, writing, and taking long walks across the Haworth moors. After going through one more loss, that of her sister Emily, her health started to decline. Anne died when



she was only twenty nine, on May 28, 1849. Her final wish was to be buried in St Mary's churchyard, being the only Brontë member who is not buried in Haworth. Langland notices that "this fact itself is an eloquent testimony to her individuality, which has too often been lost in the myths of the Brontë sisters" (1989: 23).

Critics often describe Anne Brontë's work as distinctive and influential. Elizabeth Langland points out how Anne "took her subjects and techniques from her world and like all creative artists, transformed them" (1989: 148). She also pointed out how Anne was the most realistic one of all her sisters, which can be seen in her work. Writing was her means of expressing the discontent with the present situation and to help put and emphasis on the "woman's question". It is highly visible, which will be discussed in more detail in the following paragraphs that she was strongly against the patriarchal society in which she lived in.

Her engaging in literature started with the creation of the fantasy world of Angria and Gondal. Anne and Emily later expanded the world of Gondal, with imaginative poems and tales, inspired often by the gloomy moors of Haworth. All of the three sisters were always writing, it was their way to express themselves and to confide in something other than each other. Anne Brontë is most famous by her two novels, *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. It is speculated that she started writing *Agnes Grey* while she was still working for the Robinsons, and the novel is based on her life as being a governess (Reef, 2012: 48). After six years of being a governess, the sisters decided to publish their work together. In 1846, the sisters had published *Poems*, which was a "green volume of 61 poems on love, loss, religious faith, and nature" (Reef, 2012: 49). Unfortunately, even though they received some positive critics, the compilation of poems had failed to find readers. Only two people have bought it, and the sisters came to realization that in order to earn money of their work, they need to write novels. Other than collaborating on a collection of poetry, the sisters wrote seven novels in total, intended for publication. In July 1846, they have sent three of their novels to the publicist

in London: *Agnes Grey*, *Wuthering Heights* and *The Professor*. Their work was signed by Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell. There were some women who were courageous enough to write under their real names, and even though women had been publishing books for the past century, whether women should write and publish their work was still a controversial subject.

Their novels were rejected by several publishers, because rare were the ones who wanted to publish works by unknown authors. But in July of 1847, the publisher T. C. Newby informed them that he was willing to release *Agnes Grey* and *Wuthering Heights* as a “three-volume set” (Reef, 2012: 60). Charlotte managed to find a publisher, but for the novel *Jane Eyre*, and her book was published two months before those of Anne and Emily. This is probably the reason why the novels of the two received less praise and acknowledgment; Charlotte had all the attention of the critics.

Anne Brontë’s second novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, encountered some obstacles. Her publisher had the intention to make it available to the general public under the pseudonym of Currer Bell. They resolved the issue by rushing to London and explaining there were indeed three sisters. Langland (1989) has made a strong argument by expressing how this act of the sisters “reveals the serious pride of authorship of each writer” (22). More than earning money, they wanted to be acclaimed writers. Anne herself wanted to be acknowledged for her own work, regardless of the work of her sisters.

Nonetheless, the “Bell-mania” that hit London in 1847, after the publication of *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* by Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell, was the start of what is now called the “Brontë myth” (Šepić, 2017: 18).

### 3. *THE TENANT OF WILDFELL HALL*

*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* was first published in June 1848 (Brontë, 1994: 1). It won immediate success, and it was only surpassed by her sister's novel *Jane Eyre*. But the critics have still managed to find arguments against its value. They characterized the language of the novel as rough, crude, brutal, and even rude. They thought the same of the novel's content; it was unconventional, which represented an infringement of a good style and acceptable Victorian themes and subjects. The novel portrayed a heroine who had left her husband to seek independence and provide with herself, which was contradicting the generally accepted Victorian ideology of private and public spheres. She did not try to embellish the life of her heroine, she portrayed every rough aspect. Anne, even though at that time she was already of very bad health, she wrote a preface to the second edition, in which she stated that her aim was not to merely "amuse the Reader", but it was to "tell the truth" (Brontë, 1994: 18). She portrayed both the masculine world and the feminine world as it were realistically; the profligate husbands did exist in the real world and they were not merely an invention of a female author, and there were women who were in bad marriages but were brave enough to fight for their own independence.

*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* tells the story of a woman who, driven by her heart instead of her instincts, had fallen in love with a corrupt, profligate man, undeserving of any affection or love. At the very beginning of the novel, the readers meet Gilbert Markham, a young and flirtatious landowner, often sarcastic towards the social conventions. His life revolves around working on the land that his father had left him, together with his brother Fergus, sister Rose and his mother. Besides taking care of family business, his favorite pastime is flirting with the daughter of local pastor, Eliza Milward. The established routine of the little village becomes interrupted when the mysterious woman, Helen Graham, inhabits the Wildfell Hall with her

son and a servant. At first, everyone was curious to find out as much as possible about Helen but the initial cordiality soon became a whirlwind of gossips and rude rumors about the absence of chastity and morals of the new tenant. The readers soon get to know about Helen's life and realize she had a hard time with her abusive, profligate husband Arthur Huntingdon.

Anne Brontë implemented a female narrator, and used it to help the readers to better understand her actions and relations with both men, Arthur and Gilbert. Since the novel is set in the times when the divorce laws were not still in force, she was sure that the acts of Helen Graham would effectively delineate the structure of Victorian society. It was a time in which the Victorian world "saw the beginning of the longstanding debate of the woman's question, what was woman's nature was and what was her proper sphere" (Langland, 1989: 23).

Brontë laid bare the constrictions of the Victorian patriarchal ideology, and in her novel she showed how the domestic heaven can thus be a prison for women. The protagonist of her novel had escaped her own hell, and the story deals with her actions which were largely in contradiction with what was considered to be an ideal portrait of a Victorian wife. She escaped her unworthy husband, and hid with his child. She was a talented painter, so she was able to provide for herself and for her child. She was unlike every other woman in Wildfell Hall, was not keen on gossip, lived by her own morals and by those the society promoted. She was an artist who provide for herself and her son and she enjoyed reading books and obtaining education. Her character was in contrast with everything that the Victorian society considered ideal, meaning that she was not a vivid representation of an "angel of the house". The novel itself is a critique of the traits ascribed to masculinity in the Victorian period. She approached the issues of profligate husbands, unequal rights to education, raising children and the expectations of women in marriage and in general. Her heroine is much different from those of her literary precursors. Helen is not driven by feelings as is not willing to tolerate masculine

arrogance and superiority. She wanted respect, equality, appreciation and was eventually guided by reason.

The novel is innovative in many ways, and Anne Brontë thoughtfully implemented each of them in order to show that none woman can, despite her education, beauty, mind, wealth or reason, escape the “disadvantage of social inferiority” (Langland, 1989: 52). When we talk about the inferiority, it is worth mentioning that many critics speculated on the sex of the author. Tom Winnifrith discusses some of these instances in his book *The Brontës and Their Background; Romance and Reality* (1988). He states how the critics argued that only a man could have depicted such a cruel, dark and corrupted human nature, and how no woman could have portrayed “such bold coarseness, a reckless familiarity with the sayings and doings of the worst type of fast man” (119). But as Winnifrith argues, no one noticed that *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* emphasizes the superiority of female character, and no man in Victorian Britain would incorporate this in his writings.

### **3.1. Anne Brontë’s narrative innovations in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall***

It is important to distinguish the two spheres in which the Victorian society was divided on: the private sphere and the public sphere. The women were “to be seen and admired, but not to be heard or counted as presence” (Shea and Whitla, 2015: 62). There were also invisible to the law, education, administration and other public spheres. It was firmly believed that a woman “belonged in the home where she served as presiding angel” (Langland, 1989: 24). This is today referred to as “the myth of the Angel of the house”. In short, to the women belonged only the domestic duties, she was to be outside the business world in order to maintain their good manners and good morals. The Victorian fiction was preoccupied with the

heroines of extremely different values that Anne Brontë prescribed to her heroines, Agnes and Helen. The popular notion of the public was close to that of Rousseau, which Mary Wollstonecraft transmitted and defied in *The Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792):

“(…) a woman should never, for a moment, feel herself independent, that she should be governed by fear to exercise her natural cunning, (…) a sweeter companion to man (…). He carries the arguments, which he pretends to draw from the indications of nature, still further, and insinuates that truth and fortitude, the corner stones of all human virtue, should be cultivated with certain restrictions, because, with respect to the female character, obedience is the grand lesson which ought to be impressed with unrelenting rigour.” (Wollstonecraft: 25)

So the fact that Anne Brontë reversed the roles and gave her heroine such a strong passion for self-accomplishment and self-value, was indeed innovative. The innovativeness lies also in giving her heroine a voice to narrate her story. Helen was neither passive nor silent; she took action and went against all social and cultural conventions. She was independent and content without male attention.

Moreover, her inventive writing style was not something that the literary public was accustomed to, especially when it comes to a women writer. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is a series of embedded narratives. Jan B. Gordon described it as: “the longest single-narrative, enclosing epistolary novel of the 19<sup>th</sup> century” (Senf, 1990: 447), written in a convincing realism. One mark of her strong realism is the fact that she does not portray an idealistic male hero. Anne portrays Arthur, Helen’s husband, as realistic as it gets: all of his indulgences, sins, arrogant behaviors, and much more. She furthermore critiques the manly ideal that the Victorians pictured as flawless, which she achieves through realistic domestic scenes, as well as destructive interactions within one’s home. With all of that combined, Anne Brontë achieves “not only a convincing social realism but also a compellingly psychological realism”

(Langland, 1989: 142). Maybe the boldness of these realistic interpretations was eventually what made her gain respect not only of the readers, but of her fellow colleagues, too. Also, because it is so realistic, it gives a little way to the interpretation, since the only interpretation is the “truth” (Dobrović, 2006: 5).

Anne Brontë made a diary form instrumental to her heroine’s voice. That same diary had a vital function in understanding the actions of the characters within the novel, as well as the relationships they had formed. Hilary M. Schor has brilliantly summarized the thoughts which should cross a reader’s mind when reading the novel. It makes us consider the difficulties which an intelligent woman in Victorian England had to surpass in order to protect her child, and “(...) *it asks that we understand the voice of a feminist narrator in the context of the larger discussion of women, gender roles, and the organized feminist movements of the nineteenth century*” (in Bratlinger and Thesing, 2012: 173). Even though the novel does not in fact deal with strictly feminist subjects, it is still feminist in its deeper sense. If the reader reads between the lines and interprets the novel in a deeper level, it is obvious that it depicts the “manner in which male authority shapes women’s lives” (Senf, 447).

### **3.2. The deployment of unconventional narrative techniques**

Beatriz Paolomo has wonderfully described Anne Brontë’s writing style in her article “The Triumph of Realism over Subjectivity”: “(...) *always wrote with the aim of moral instruction in mind and believed in the didactic potentiality of simple and naked truth, its implicit teaching alien to any kind of sermonizing*” (1993: 193). What is emphasized here as well as in the works of the majority of the Brontë’s critics is Anne’s vivid realism with the solemn purpose to present every fact as it is, without the need for interpretation.

The novel had received a lot of backlash regarding its structure. It starts with Gilbert Markham's narration in the form of a letter to a friend Halford. Then, Anne presents us Helen's diary which covers six years of her life, and the novel ends with Gilbert's epistles again. The critics argued that the story would make a stronger impact if Helen had told her story to Gilbert, instead giving him the journal, and they found this technique "clumsy". But I would agree with Carol A. Senf (1990), in that Anne Brontë's narrative strategy "contributes to the realism of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*" (449), it helped her to create believable characters, which allowed her readers to sympathize with them. Elizabeth Langland further remarks how the series of embedded narratives served its purpose when it comes to accentuating of its fundamental themes, providing evidence and forming conclusions, comparing reliability and belief, reality and interpretation. It helped in engaging the readers "through complex and psychologically convincing characters" (1989: 147).

The reality of the Victorian period in Anne's years of life is hidden underneath the layers of narration. This strategy is drawn, but modified in a significant degree from the framed narrative of the gothic novels. In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* there exists a clear division between the framed and the framer, the subjective and the objective, and also between reality and fiction. More frequently than providing a structure, framed narrative in gothic novels more often disturb cohesiveness. In the case of Anne Brontë's novel, framed narrative served as a guideline of events. What is most different in this novel is that, unlike in the gothic and other genres from the Victorian period, here the framing narrator belongs to the world of the reader. It is not someone who perceives and judges the events from the generally accepted and objective point of view. An objective narrator would most probably judge the actions of the heroine. Here, the narrator is "conventional and pragmatic sort who is shocked by the evils he encounters" (Jacobs, 1986: 206). Gilbert's narrative serves to critically and judgmentally observe the events against the notable and acceptable standards of morality. This novel follows



the form of an epistolary novel, but Anne implemented her unique style. The epistolary novel was immensely popular in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the interest started to fade in the 19<sup>th</sup> century but it still remained a favorable type. Anne implemented the realistic aspect of epistolary novel, as well as the framework; she portrayed realistic characters and situations in the form of diary entries.

The structural innovation of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* lies in the plurality of narrative levels and voices, which implies the stratification of those narrative levels. The narration of Gilbert who corresponds with his friend Halford, belongs to the extradiegetic level of narration, meaning that his narration is the highest level within the hierarchical structure of narrative levels. Rimmon-Kenan explains it as the level “immediately superior to the first narrative and concerned with its narration” (2011: 94). Then the narration transitions from Gilbert’s letters to Helen’s narration in the form of her private diary, and Helen becomes the narrator. Near the end Gilbert undertakes the narration again; therefore Anne Brontë chose to implement a double narrative in which three different narrative levels coincide. The first Gilbert’s narrative is the framed one, whose aim is to create a context for the embedded narrative which follows.

Gilbert introduces us to the character of Helen, to his infatuation, and then the embedded narrative provides explanations and tells the whole story; Helen’s six years of “marital prison” and her escape from it. Helen is given a right to speak her mind without the limits of the Victorian society which would constrain her to do so in reality. Anne Brontë probably took this model from her sister Emily, whose novel *Wuthering Heights* was published just a year before Anne’s novel. Here, Gilbert’s and Helen’s story often coincide to the point it is hard to distinguish whose voice is retelling the story. Langland explains that this enabled Anne Brontë to achieve that Helen’s narrative in the end shapes the whole narrative. It also represents the union between Gilbert and Helen, the equal partnership in which there is no

superior character whose story is more important, or whose voice must be heard more (1989: 135).

N. M. Jacobs used a metaphor of a framed picture to describe the two-dimensionality of the novels, which I feel it is important to mention. The metaphor is as follows:

*“In looking at a picture we are only peripherally aware of the frame, which marks the limit beyond which our eyes need not stray: it is not a presence but the boundary between an artifice which deserves our attention and a surrounding mundane reality which does not. But the Brontë’s framing narratives are more like competing works of art, or outer rooms in a gallery, or even the picture painted over a devalued older canvas. We cannot see or experience the buried reality of “framed” story without first experiencing the “framing” narrative. There is no other way in.”* (1986: 206-207)

To further elaborate on this metaphor, it implies that the outer reality presents the male perspective, and the inner reality generally presents a female perspective; the male narrator frames the female narrator. We need to understand both points of the view. The male serves to give context, and the female one serves to give explanations. The two intertwine in the novel, and this attributes to the argument that Anne Brontë’s choice of implementing the diary through the voice of Gilbert, has indeed contributed to the understanding of the novel. The dual narrative helped Anne Brontë to deal with the subjects that were considered “taboos”, and she managed to undermine the masculine authority through expressing the vulnerabilities and flaws that man possessed.

In contrast to what was discussed so far, it is possible to analyze the implementation of the diary from another point of view, which is in contrast with Anne Brontë’s abandonment of the patriarchal norms. Since Helen gave her diary to Gilbert, and he unveiled it to his friend, there is an underlying notion that women were perceived as commodities, of little or no value.

The diary was part of Helen's whole life, which she gave in Gilbert's hands trusting him to keep it for himself. There is no evidence in the novel that Helen gave her consent for revealing her diary to anyone else, so even though Gilbert presents a man who would satisfy a woman's conception of what is a perfect and most suitable partner, this act can be seen as a violation of Helen's privacy. Nevertheless, Langland defies this argument stating that Anne Brontë might have used the exchange to give the diary a greater value; the importance of sharing the truth, putting an end to silence (1989: 123). She herself states in her *Preface* that her aim was to tell the truth, so it only seems reasonable that she purposefully implemented this narrative technique to echo the sound of reality across the Victorian society.

Anne Brontë chose to conclude her novel with an open-ending, leaving to each individual reader to make their own conclusions. Moreover, by intertwining the male and female narrative, she had also explored the different realms of social discourse and gendered language. Helen's part is not entirely feminine, since she explores the "masculine world" and provides detailed descriptions of male characters and attitudes. In the same way, through Gilbert's narration readers get descriptions of the "feminine world", like for example the gossip and prejudices that women possessed. It also provides an insight into women's thoughts and spiritual side of life through his narration of Helen's life and innermost battles.

The novel also demonstrates how a woman is capable to transform her life, without being dependent on a male figure. She does not have to be constrained and there always is another way to overcome the difficulties of life. Furthermore, Anne Brontë proved that a woman does not need a man to rely on and more importantly, she showed that the roles can be changed. A woman can guide a man, just like Helen was responsible for Gilbert's transformation into a better, morally stronger man. As Keri Lokke concludes in her analysis of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*: "*Helen paints a powerful portrait of the terrible price paid by the woman in a marriage founded on inequality*" (in Hoeveler, Morse, 2016: 124).

#### 4. THE VICTORIAN PATRIARCHY COUNTER-DISOURSE OF *THE TENANT OF WILDFELL HALL*

*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* does not deal directly and explicitly with feminist issues that the women of Brontë's period had to struggle with, but it definitely approaches some important subjects closely related to feminism, such as the independence of women and escaping the male authority. Anne Brontë explained in her *Preface* to the second edition: "*Let it not be imagined, however, that I consider myself competent to reform the errors and abuses of the society, but only that I would fain contribute my humble quota towards so good an aim*" (Brontë, 1994: 18).

This section will present these underlying themes, such as independence of women and defying the Victorian patriarchal ideology, because not only are they important for understanding Helen's actions, but also for presenting the conservative limits of Victorian patriarchy. Kate Flint noted how every work of the Brontë sisters encapsulates the same underlying theme, and this is especially applicable to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*: "*the problems faced by an independent-minded woman, determined on expanding the emotional, intellectual, and on occasion the geographical boundaries of her immediate sphere, and yet forced to consider how far she is prepared to accommodate to societal norms*" (in Glen, 2009: 171). Through the character of Helen, Anne Brontë conveyed that a woman was capable of contradicting the Victorian patriarchal norms, and that the two spheres could be intertwined.

*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* can be compared to contemporary literature. *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), a dystopian novel written by Margaret Atwood, also deals with the role of women within the society, their inferiority to men, and the perception that women were only objects without value. Margaret Atwood presents us with the character of an unnamed woman, who along with other women who were still able to bear children, was named after

their “master” to indicate that she belongs to him. The similarity lies in the fact that just like in the Victorian society, women belonged to only one sphere and their only role was to serve men. June, or Offred, and Helen are much alike since they are strong, independent, and not willing to devote their lives to a man. They were both invisible, but possessed a will to prove themselves as worthy of respect.

There are some suggestions that Anne Brontë took the model for the novel from the story of Miss Collins, a woman who visited the parsonage and told her story to the Brontë sisters. Miss Collins had a husband, a clergyman who exaggerated with the drinking which led to the abuse of his wife and children. He dragged the family into debts and eventually abandoned them. Miss Collins then slowly started to provide for her family on her own, so she boasted with presenting herself as an independent woman who left her husband to save her child from an abusive father in order to give him a better example. Anne was fascinated with the story of such independence unusual for the era, so it is probable that she based her novel on the story (Reef, 93).

It is also important to mention the effect that Charlotte Brontë’s *Biographical notice on The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* had on the novel’s success. She did not approve of Anne’s choice of subjects and was also blaming the novel for the deterioration of Anne’s health. She wrote that: “*The choice of subject was an entire mistake. Nothing less congruous with the writer’s nature could be conceived. The motives which dictated this choice were pure, but, I think, slightly morbid. (...) what she saw sunk very deeply into her mind; it did her harm. She brooded over it till she believed it to be her duty to reproduce every detail (...) as a warning to others*” (Allot, 1995: 274). One view that could explain the reasons behind Charlotte’s harsh words, might be to protect Branwell since it is also speculated that Anne created the character of Arthur based on her brother and his problems with alcohol. Whatever the reasons might be, it certainly had diminished the value of Anne Brontë’s novel, at least for some time.

#### **4.1. Victorian patriarchal laws and the case of Helen Graham**

Anne Brontë has set her story in the real Victorian world of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in the period when women had just started to fight for equal rights. During Queen Victoria's reign, three Reform Acts were brought, but those three Acts had little effect on women; their opinion still did not matter for the political structure, despite the fact there was a Queen on the throne. There was a significant agitation near the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century when the women started organizing movements to change their position in the society, but the women have started to feel the change only with the Representation of the People Act in 1918. Still, their right to vote depended on several factors, such as age and marital status (Reed, in Brantlinger and Thesing, 155-156).

Moreover, women struggled with law even when it came to marriage. If they were unhappy in marriage or treated badly, it was difficult to get a divorce. It required an Act of Parliament, which was hard to achieve because it required a lot of time and even more money. Things changed a bit with the Matrimonial Causes Act in 1857, but divorce still remained unfair for the women. In order to get a divorce, a woman had to prove her husband's adultery and that he was also guilty of some other offense such as "physical brutality, incest or rape" (Reed, in Brantlinger and Thesing, 2002: 163), while a man had only to prove that his wife was unfaithful. Unless both parties have agreed to special arrangement, all wife's belongings and properties belonged entirely to the husband at marriage (Reed, in Brantlinger and Thesing, 2002: 163). This explains why Helen had no other choice but to flee her husband and hide. Even though he had an affair with flirtatious Annabella Wilmot, she had no way to prove it in front of the court, and even if she had, Arthur's character would never allow such order of events. A man pride would not allow him to, and there was little possibility that the court would give precedence to Helen's word. Not only Arthur had an affair, but he tried making it

seem like she is having one with his friend, Walter Hargrave. Arthur was aware that Walter had feelings for Helen, and he wanted to attribute his own mistakes to her. So knowing the laws, and knowing that men were superior in front of the law, he was “safe in assuming that she was vulnerable to divorce proceedings while he, for the same transgression, was not” (Bellamy, in Bloom, 2009: 158).

Fleeing was not the only way in which Helen defied the law. Maybe the most difficult fact to fathom, which John Reed elaborates perfectly in his essay *Laws, the Legal World, and Politics* (in Brantlinger and Thesing, 2012: 163), is that if the wife was to separate from her husband, there was no common law which granted her right to custody or access to her children unless the husband gave his consent. So when Helen takes her son with her, depriving Arthur from access to him, she is violating his rights. There are several lines in Helen’s diary which best demonstrate the extremes of the double standards, both when it comes to one’s moral judgment and the legal privileges. The following lines belong to the part where Helen finally decides that she can no longer let her child grow under the same roof as her husband, so before fleeing, she confronted him directly.

*“Will you let me take our child and what remains of my fortune and go?”*

*“Go, where?”*

*“Anywhere, where he will be safe from your contaminating influence, and I shall be delivered from your presence – and you from mine.”*

*“No – by Jove I won’t.”*

*“Will you let me have the child then, without the money?”*

*“No – nor yourself without the child. Do you think I’m going to make myself the talk of the country, for your fastidious caprices?”* (Brontë, 1994: 288)

It is hard to say whether the Victorian readers would justify or condemn Helen's action, but the reader of today would probably agree that Arthur had left Helen no other choice. He was already starting to corrupt his young son, by encouraging him to drink, and Helen could not accept that his son would be growing up in such extreme conditions.

Near the end of the novel, Helen returns to take care of Arthur on his deathbed. In front of Rachel as a witness, she bravely and confidently uses the language of law in the attempt of making Arthur sign a waiver of his custodial rights: "*You will not see him till you have promised to leave him entirely under my care and protection and to let me take him away whenever and wherever I please, if I should hereafter judge it necessary to remove him again*" (Brontë, 1994: 330). Arthur eventually manages to hold the pen and sign the contract. We must admit that the legitimacy of this contract surely is questionable, but taking into consideration the Brontë's aim to present a different notion of gender roles, the contract has a bigger value than just legal because here for the first time Helen is superior to Arthur.

These legal rights of women were slowly adjusted with the Married Women's Property Act, first of which was passed in 1870. It had also changed the law according to which the husband possessed all of wife's properties (Reed, in Brantlinger and Thesing, 2002: 163). But knowing the situation, it is ironic that the newspapers were full of reports about the outcomes and proceedings in the divorce courts, while novelists were affronted if they implemented the themes of divorce or adultery in their work, just like it was the case with Anne Brontë and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

Nevertheless, Helen was not the only character in the novel that contended with the marital laws, but in this case the roles are reversed. Lord Lowborough was married to adulterous Anabella. They had initially just separated quietly, in order to avoid scandal. She lived in London, and he lived a secluded life with the two children. But when Anabella crossed



the line, Lord Lowborough sought divorce and obtained it. He eventually remarried with a woman who shared his values and moral integrity and found peace. This case provides enough evidence for the inequality in front of the law. A man had to go through only as much trouble as to prove his wife adultery, while a woman never had any guarantee that all of her effort would pay off and that she would manage to get a divorce, at least a part of her property, and the custody of her children.

#### **4.2. Anne Brontë's construction of masculinity**

In both of her novels, Anne Brontë deconstructed the Victorian notion of “masculinity”. From the Victorian point of view, Arthur would be an epitome of a masculine character, but Anne contrasted it with the character of Gilbert. The first one is a dominant figure, withholding women’s right on her own agency and closing her in the typical frames of the “angles of the household”, while the other becomes the “ideal” version of masculine. Gilbert is a character who could love a woman exactly for her love of freedom, that is, for whom she really is and not for whom he wants her to be. It is clear from Anne Brontë’s *Preface* that she brought forth a realistic portrayal of Victorian man: “(...) *but when we have to do with vice and vicious characters, I maintain it is better to depict them as they really are than as they would wish to appear*” (Brontë, 1994: 18).

Helen fell in love with Arthur when she first saw him. He seemed entertaining, amiable and wily. His impact on her was so strong that she refused the proposal of her uncle’s friend, Boarham. Eventually, since he had a powerful ability to convince her that he was a perfect, pious, caring man, their acquaintance led to marriage. Her aunt tried to warn her, to choose wisely instead of trusting and following the first impression: “*First study; then*

*approve; then love. (...) If you should marry the handsomest, and most accomplished and superficially agreeable man in the world, you little know the misery that would overwhelm you if, after all, you should find him to be a worthless reprobate, or even an impracticable fool*" (Brontë, 1994: 111). But Helen was blindsided and guided by her heart instead by her reason. She acknowledged that he was not perfect, but she was convinced that it was her role to bring him on the path of righteousness.

Again, Anne Brontë illustrates another side of Victorian spheres; women should serve men, they were imagined to be such angelic creatures with an illusion of being able to guide a man and save him from his own errors: *"No; I should not wish to guide him; but I think I might have influence sufficient to save him from some errors, and I should think my life well spent in the effort to preserve so noble a nature from destruction"* (Brontë, 1994: 124). Unfortunately, Helen's illusions disappeared shortly after the marriage, when Arthur had got what he wanted and started showing his character. It took her time to accept the fact that he was not as good and "heavenly" as she perceived him, but she saw through his character, *"(...) it is I that am less patient and forbearing. I am tired of his injustice, his selfishness, and hopeless depravity. I wish a milder word would do it: I am no angel, and my corruption rises against it."* (Brontë, 1994: 208).

Men in the novel, the vast majority of them at least, are depicted as selfish child-like personas whose only satisfactions are self-indulgence, vices and excesses, just like Arthur's friends. Anne Brontë wanted to show that these men existed within Victorian society, which she declares in her *Preface*. This Brontë's critique of manly ideals is contrasted with the character of Gilbert. The novel subtly proposes the view that an ideal man must possess a combination of good spirit and some restraint. Helen awakens both of the following in Gilbert. At the beginning of Helen's story, Gilbert seems a bit narcissistic, a bit spoiled by his mother, but he possessed a kind of ironic attitude towards society. Helen attracted his attention from the

first moment he saw her. The fact that she treated him with an attitude of an “untouchable” woman captured his imagination and awakened an interest. He described it himself when they met in the church, when she looked at him “*with an indefinable expression of quiet scorn, that was inexpressibly provoking to me*”. And then he continues, proving aforementioned narcissistic side: “*She thinks of me an impudent puppy, (...) she shall change her mind before long, if I think it worth while*” (Brontë, 1994: 22). But as he became cognizant of her character, he proved to be an ideal partner for Helen. The main difference between Helen’s relationship with Arthur and Gilbert is that with Arthur, Helen had to be silent. Her opinions and thought did not matter and were not acknowledged. But with Gilbert, she was free to speak and he was always willing to listen, “*You should have told me all – no matter how bitterly – it would have been better than this silence*” (Brontë, 1994: 107).

Another way in which Brontë presents her own construction of masculinity is the scene in which Gilbert, thinking that Lawrence had an affair with Helen, violently whips him. What is important here is that Gilbert stood behind his action and accepted the consequences. We could only assume how Arthur would behave, and by getting to know his character we can infer that from his perspective, this would be a “manly” act, justified by all means. Gilbert approaches Lawrence after the attack, providing him a tissue to take care of his wounds. He had enough conscience to come back and check on his victim. Jill Matus describes this act as a “passion outburst” (in Glen, 2003: 107), in which Gilbert acted upon his feelings rather than reason. Anne Brontë engages in various discussions about masculinity, and Gilbert is somehow always a means for presenting her own standpoints. As was already stated, Gilbert is not an outright antidote to Huntingdon, but through him, Anne Brontë displayed “what makes a worthwhile, redeemable, *good enough* man” (Matus, in Glen, 2003: 108).

With presenting us with these two male characters, Anne Brontë proposes an idea of what kind of man a Victorian woman should accept as deserving; a man who upon finding a

virtuous, intelligent and self-reliable woman, is willing to change and mature into a kind, reasonable and exemplary man. He must possess the virtue of allowing his other half to act on her morals, and to be supportive and encouraging instead of aggressive, restrictive or abusive. He must become someone able to find a perfect balance between passion and reason.

There are various scenes in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* which can make the reader hold his breath, so we can only imagine the shock of the Victorian readers. For example, the scene where Arthur again tried to provoke Helen's anger with drunken stories about his past loves and mistresses, so she chose to respond with action rather than words: "*Without another word I left the room and locked myself up in my own chamber*", says a fragment from her diary (Brontë, 1994: 170). It was unimaginable for a Victorian woman to prohibit her husband entrance in the room, and as Catherine Reef concluded, this was a "bold statement of female independence" (2012: 102).

#### **4.3. The questions of education and independent women**

Among the upper classes of Victorian England, it was assumed that a girl would get married so obtaining a formal education was generally considered pointless as long as a girl possesses the virtues of keeping the home clean and taking care of the children and her husband. The goal of education was not gaining knowledge, but acquiring "accomplishments" in drawing, singing, and foreign languages. This can account for why women were considered so vulnerable; even if a woman was determined and ambitious, the opportunities for getting a formal education were very limited. Intelligent women had thus started to feel a stronger need for education. A move forward was made in 1848 with the opening of Queen's College and a

year later with the opening of Bradford College (Schor, in Brantlinger and Thesing, 2012: 175).

Helen was particularly resolute when it comes to her son's education. She considered the views on education to be narrow and discriminating, and she was not afraid to express them out loud. When she came to Wildfell Hall, the women were eager to get to know her, the mysterious woman who came to live in the ruins with her son, without a man by her side. Among other questions which were mostly directed to her for the purpose of gossiping more than the women were actually interested in getting to know her, the question of education was brought up. Since Helen rarely appeared in public, the women were curious about her son and his education. When Helen declared her idea of educating him by herself, the women were noticeably shocked. She firmly held her ground and explained how she felt about the inequality of education for boys and girls. This scene early in the novel, Helen's words on education, provides us with the educational philosophy of the novel:

*"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; – and as 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, even though he should so far profit by it, as to sober down, at length, into a useful and respected member of society – I would rather that he died to-morrow!"* (Brontë, 1994: 35).

Her aim was not only to school her son, but to teach him good manners, respect and good morals. Her main goal was that her son would grow up being able to learn from his mistakes, and from the mistakes of others. Upon expressing her views, she was accused for turning her son into a "mere Miss Nancy", but Anne Brontë had her perception on the

prevailing constructions of gender, so this was only another argument for construing a different notion of the masculine and the feminine.

We could say Helen was overprotective, but she was also aware that her husband stood as a bad example for her son, and she wanted a better life for her child. Arthur, on the other hand, wanted his son to become a man like himself. “*So the little fellow came down every evening, in spite of his cross mamma and learnt to tipple wine like papa, to swear like Mr. Hattersley, and to have his own way like a man, and sent mamma to the devil when she tried to prevent him*” (Brontë, 1994: 269). This explains why Helen was so protective over her son. She wanted to shield him from every possible evil he might encounter, and this could only be achieved if he was taught properly, “*I hope to save him from one degrading vice a least*” (32). The large difference between the upbringing of boys and girls lies also in the fact that girls were brought up to be charming, delicate and directed towards the support of a man, without an opportunity to ever experience evil. Boys on the other hand were encouraged to explore the world and to acquire as much knowledge as possible, but this knowledge was mostly geared toward vices and bad habits.

Helen was an intelligent woman, well-read, and was determined enough to reach independence. She also possessed the talent of drawing. Drawing was her way to provide for her little family, her own possession that no one could take away. In that time, another harmful effect of limited education was also the limitation of employment opportunities. Women most often had no choice but to work as governesses, or to become writers. In her first novel, Anne Brontë drew largely from her own experiences as being a governess. In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, we can also find autobiographical accounts. Anne loved writing, so she gave Helen the talent to confide in paper. She saw how alcohol damaged her brother’s health and life, so she gave Helen the courage to escape. Even Helen’s return to her husband’s deathbed, may be ascribed to Anne’s care for Branwell. But the point is that Anne Brontë created a female

character who served as a mockery of male authority. Helen showed that being intelligent does not endanger a woman, but it empowers her. She went out of the “domestic sphere” and showed her intellectual and moral superiority.

The crucial difference between Arthur and Gilbert lies in Gilbert’s appreciation of Helen’s intellectual and artistic possessions. He admired her because of that, and he strived to live up to her standards. Arthur had a tendency to violate Helen’s artwork. There were several accounts of it. In their first days of getting to know each other, he took her portfolio against her will, just because he wanted to find a sketch of himself. He found out about her plan of escaping by reading her diary, which can easily be flagged as a breach of privacy. On another occasion he burned all her painting materials, so that she could not sell anything and could not escape. These acts could be deemed as a sort of rape; he took everything without her consent. He wanted to diminish all her values, degrade her and undermine her moral judgment. He would not let her be superior in any way, especially if that meant her being able to make a life on her own.

#### **4.4. The question of women’s silence**

As Anne Brontë states in her *Preface*, the “delicate concealment of facts” (1994: 14) can only lead to more trouble; both for the women who hide their truths from others, and for those women who follow this example. In her novel, Anne Brontë speaks for those who are unable to say their truths; Helen, Milicent and Aunt Maxwell. Through exposing the story of Helen to the readers, she gave an insight into the lives of different women, their way of dealing with difficult relationship but also their way of dealing with feelings and burdens of life.

As discussed in previous paragraphs, we cannot know if Helen's diary was transmitted the way it was really plied, since we are presented with it through Gilbert. Helen herself was not given the opportunity to actually use her voice to tell her story. We could draw a parallel with Bernstein's work on confessional subjects. If we consider the diary form as the memoir sub-genre, it also becomes a confession. Bernstein approached a feminist perspective and argued that a confession is a form of resistance. In this case, it can present s "refusal of patriarchy; of unequal power relations based on gender" (1997: 28). It served as a critique of the masculine authority in all spheres. But the diary probably does not provide every detail of Helen's life with Arthur, so the reader can only assume how many other difficulties had Helen faced. The question of diary is not the only instance where Anne Brontë subtly shows how women were silenced.

At the beginning of the novel, Aunt Maxwell realizes that Helen fell deeply in love and from the fear that Helen was blind for all of the Arthur's flaws, she wanted to give her some advice. She wanted to warn her against the dangers of an unhappy marriage, but had avoided every opportunity to speak of her own marriage. When Helen asks her if she had suffered in her own marriage, she replies: "*No, Helen [ . . . ] but I know many that have; and some, through carelessness, have been the wretched victims of deceit; and some, through weakness, have fallen into snares and temptations terrible to relate*" (Brontë, 1994: 110). Anne Brontë presented the character of Helen's uncle as someone very much alike Arthur, he also kept friends resembling Arthur's character and it is possible to conclude that there were times when he led a "rebellious" life. Since Aunt Maxwell is like a mother to Helen, it was expected that she will provide her with advice grounded on her own mistakes, but here again Aunt Maxwell was silenced. As Meghan Bullock noted, Helen's aunt "serves as Helen's model for how to deal with marital troubles: silence" (in Bloom, 2009: 93).



Silence is also evident in Helen's relationships with other women. Milicent was supposed to be her best friend, but Helen rather confides in her diary than telling Milicent about her marital troubles. The strongest reason for this might be the shame, for Helen was eventually ashamed that she made such a terrible choice despite being warned by her aunt and by Milicent. A fragment from Helen's diary confirms this thesis: "*This paper will serve instead of a confidential friend into whose ear I might pour forth the overflowing of my heart. It will not sympathize with my distresses, but then it will not laugh at them, and, if I keep it close, it cannot tell again; so it is, perhaps, the best friend I could have for the purpose*" (Brontë, 1994: 127). Since Milicent is described as gentle and kind soul, it is strange that Helen would feel ashamed to confide her worries with her. However, as the story unfolds, Milicent turns out to be a good confidant, but Helen did not realize it at the right moment. Anne Brontë demonstrated that in the world where women were so inferior against the men, and where men did not listen to their voice, they should at least unite and listen to each other; like she should have done with Milicent. They are stronger together and moreover, a female friendship can help to surpass many things that life puts in front of them.

However, same as Helen did not speak about her marital troubles, neither did Milicent. This proves that women followed each other's example; since Helen was silent, Milicent had no reason to not be silent, too. If a woman lacks the support and example of past experiences of other women, it is very much likely that they will fall into the same traps. Most often they will find excuses for their husband's behavior, or they will be silent because of the shame they feel. Helen herself admits that in her fight with Arthur, when she confesses that she would never have married him, if she had known all the things about his character beforehand, or at least if she had listened. There is also a scene in the novel in which Arthur accuses Helen and Milicent of talking about their marital troubles in their correspondence, where Helen's answer proves how women are so willing to keep their things private, hide them even from

their best friends, for the sole purpose of not feeling ashamed. *“We are both of us far too deeply ashamed of the errors and vices of our other halves, to make them the common subject of our correspondence. Friends as we are, we would willingly keep your failings to ourselves – even from ourselves if we could”* (Brontë, 1994: 204).

The fact that the novel does not end in silence is liberating. In order for Gilbert to tell her story, she had to have the courage to give him the diary. She did so when she felt so drawn to Gilbert, that she fully trusted him and unlike before in her life, she wanted to liberate herself from all the shame she felt. This is the way in which Anne Brontë breaks Helen’s silence. When she ran from Arthur, she allowed herself to accept her own truth. It was not until she managed to bring herself to share her truth with Gilbert “that she (was) able to begin transformation” (Bullock, in Bloom, 2009: 99). With this act, Anne Brontë shows that silence can only make things worse, and telling the truth liberates a person. Moreover it gives one a chance for experiencing solidarity, which can further encourage others to learn from their example and do the same.

## CONCLUSION

Even though the *Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is often approached in comparison to *Jane Eyre*, I would argue that this novel represents an even more revolutionary and remarkable literary masterpiece, especially if we take into consideration the social issues that Anne Brontë discussed in the novel. Some might argue that she does not do so directly, hiding behind the framed narrative and epistolary forms, but she was courageous enough to unveil the foothold of patriarchal society.

Her *Preface* to the second edition is equally important as the novel itself, since Anne Brontë raised some interesting and accurate observations regarding the differences between men and women. The differences can be seen even among the Victorian readers, where there are certain borders which female part of the readership could not cross. Anne Brontë had managed to realistically depict the drama in the interactions of her characters as well as their inner emotional and psychological turmoil, and had still succeeded in delivering the novel in a dynamic way leaving the readers wanting more. She managed to make the realistic characters which made the story more plausible.

The novel initiates a turning point in the way women were treated, and it often subtly or obliquely articulates a disagreement with the privileged status of the male members of society. It is an exceptional novel with an atypical narrative style and thoughtfully delineated characters, which undoubtedly deserves more attention in the literary world.

Anne Brontë novels must be considered in three intersecting contexts: “*the changing social circumstances in which their work appeared, the changing literary context in which works of narrative were created and understood by Victorian people, and certain ideological factors which unite these two*” (Rylance, in Glen, 148). The fact is that the Victorian Britain

was strictly patriarchal, a society in which women were subordinated in every aspect of public life. So we need to take into consideration the boldness of writing such a novel where every sphere of public and domestic life was exposed without hesitation and without hiding any truth. Anne Brontë declared that she wanted to tell the truth, so as already stated in this work, she left us with very little need for interpretation. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* posed a social critique and was a sort of appeal to the Victorian society that changes were needed.

The focus in Anne Brontë's novels was on moral issues which were entrenched in the society, rather than on imagination. She tried to look for the roots of social inequalities and provide ways to correct it. She objected the idea that boys and girls should be raised differently, and the idea that a woman was incapable of being an artist and providing for herself. She defied the Victorian notion that a woman should serve to her husband without objection, but had also implicitly stated that women should strive for more than just being a wife and a mother. Instead of depicting a Byronic hero, she depicted a strong-minded heroine and had laid grounds for feminist writers of the following centuries.

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