

## Fundamentals of Feminism in *the Tenant of Wildfell Hall* – A Fiction by Anne Bronte

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### Abstract

Anne Bronte was the youngest among Bronte sisters. Although her works are not as much celebrated as of Emily or Charlotte but her contribution towards the demand of rights for women can not be simply ignored. She wrote two novels namely *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. These works of fiction depict the saga of women's struggle during Victorian era and contain the elements of feminism. She raised many issues about the grim condition of women which either remained unnoticed earlier or her predecessors could not dare talk about them. Her dedication to women's rights and betterment and her distrust of men as superior gender led her to declare that women must look to defend their self-respect. She openly challenged the double standards that insisted for different rooms and yardsticks to judge and justify what was and was not proper and permissible in male and female writings and demanded equality.

**KEYWORDS:** Bronte Sisters, Anne Bronte, Feminism, Victorian age writers.

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### INTRODUCTION:

The contribution of Anne Bronte to the feminist writing is customarily dismissed. The critics simply emphasise the more celebrated work of her sisters Charlotte and Emily. Probably Anne lacked their genius but it is not right to leave her without a few words of praise. She created two novels namely *Agnes Grey*, and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. These are considered great books in the history of feminist literature written in nineteenth century. The Bronte family has inspired many studies, in which Charlotte, the oldest child, is characterized as the most ambitious writer, and Emily the greatest genius. Anne has been described mild and the less-talented youngest sister although, but her literary creations were sharp and arresting. Her highly independent, revolutionary and blunt heroines contributed much to create an environment which helped to understand the woman's need and right for freedom. It provided a platform to voice their emotions, passions, and desires. These writing qualities from a woman's pen were something that was completely unexpected and radical for their age. Through both of the novels there are scattered passages and phrases which have enough potential to attract the feminist writers.

*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* was her second novel, published in 1848 in three volumes. It appalled and offended critics to no end by its brutal honesty, for call it coarse or harsh the novel did indeed spell honesty and the result was that it ended up further aggravating and intensifying the critical anger. One critic considered it "utterly unfit to be put into the hands of girls," which of course only arose more interest in the work. Instead of presenting the quiet story of one individual's growth related through that individual's perspective, this novel of Anne Bronte details the growth or deterioration of several characters and employs a sophisticated technique of layered narratives that lends moral support to the novel's greatly significant theme. The

success of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* was eclipsed by the more phenomenal works of her more celebrated sisters, Charlotte and Emily. The novel is about the bitter, suffocating, and unhappy marriage of Helen Huntingdon whose body and soul is so repelled by the humiliation of husband that she is forced to flee her home along with her son and search for a new identity and beginning. She wrote:

...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. All novels are or should be written for both men and women to read, and I am at the loss to conceive how a man should permit himself to write anything that would be really disgraceful to a woman or why a woman should be censured for writing anything that would be proper and becoming for a man. These sentiments now integral to the mores of the late twentieth century, were a significant statement in the evolution of modern fiction and an early manifesto for female emancipation and ensure *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* its legitimate place as a classic work of English literature. (TWH introduction)

Composed with truth, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* presents a tacit criticism of the inequities between women and men in marriage as well as in social life. It serves Bronte's purpose of moral instruction by warning young women to use their brain in selecting a mate, to avoid any embarrassment later. The stereotypical distinction between a female domestic sphere and a male public sphere is quite visible. N. M. Jacobs describes the narrative structure of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* as one that "replicates a cultural split between male and female spheres that is shown to be at least one source of the tragedy at the centre of the fictional world" (Gender & Layered 204) Though too much of melodrama resulted in a weak plot, most critics view *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* as a significant and somewhat unconventional statement of Victorian morals and an example of nineteenth-century literary creation by a frequently underestimated novelist. Some critics consider it for having an awkwardly uncommon narrative structure. "During the remainder of the nineteenth century, critics settled into a consensus about Anne, following Charlotte's lead in the biographical notice and Mrs. Gaskell's details in the life. Anne's novels were basically autobiographical written out of a grim sense of duty and therefore devoid of artistry." (Langland 155) In this novel Anne gives the demonized representation of women that brought a challenge to the traditional split between the separate spheres

Are you hero enough to unite yourself to one whom you know to be suspected and despised by all around you, and identify your interests and your honour with hers? Think! It is a serious thing.

I should be proud to do it, Helen! - most happy - delighted beyond expression! - and if that be all the obstacle to our union, it is demolished, and you must - you shall be mine! (TWH 85)

It has been mentioned by Sinclair, in 1913, "...the slamming of Helen Huntingdon's bedroom door against her husband reverberated throughout Victorian England" (Carter & Ray 291) Anne's heroine eventually leaves her husband to protect her young son from his influence. She supports herself and her son by painting, while living in hiding, fearful of discovery. At that time, a married woman had no

independent legal existence, apart from her husband. Thus, in doing so, she violates not only social conventions, but also the English law. A married woman in England had no legal existence. She had no possessions, 'her property is his property', she 'can not legally claim her own earnings', she 'may not leave her husband's house', he may 'take her by force' from the house of anyone who may 'harbour' her, and she may not divorce her husband 'however profligate he may be'. According to this law she could not own her own property, sue for divorce, or control custody of her children. And if she attempted to live apart from him, her husband had the right to reclaim her. If she took their child with her, she was liable for kidnapping and could get punished according to the law. In living off her own earnings, she was held to be stealing her husband's property, since any income she made was legally his.

In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Anne has adopted the narration style. It starts with the narration of Gilbert Markham, a gentleman farmer of Yorkshire, England. The tale of Markham which begins in 1827, takes the form of an extended series of letters to his friend Halford. Gilbert reveals how he met and fell in love with a young and beautiful woman, Helen, who had recently moved with her son to the neighbouring estate of Wildfell Hall. Initially whenever Gilbert wants to start the conversation with her, he is greeted with a strange coldness by Helen. Gilbert feels himself attracted towards her and feels insulted for her rude and strange behaviour towards him. Gilbert suspects that Helen and the man who accompanied her to Yorkshire, Frederick Lawrence, are lovers. Later, in a fit of frustration, Gilbert attacks Frederick before learning that he is in fact Helen's brother. Finding it difficult to explain herself to Gilbert, but wanting him to understand her grim determination, Helen later gives him her faded diary, the pages of which form the central portion of the novel. The first entry in the diary, dated June 1, 1821, reveals some of Helen's thoughts about her painting. In her diary Helen reveals the disintegration of her marriage and adopts disguise as Mrs. Graham. In the following pages, Gilbert learns how Helen suddenly met and married a man named Arthur Huntingdon. Preferring the attractive but violent and unruly Arthur to any other person offered by her relatives, Helen chose him, despite sharp protest from her family members. But Helen is a strong willed woman who feels that in marrying him she could reform him and bring him back to the normal. Arthur Huntingdon believes that his brains are composed of more solid materials than is normal and thus they will "absorb a considerable quantity of this alcoholic vapour without the production of any sensible result" (TWH 233). Though she succeeds to an extent in the initial phase of their marriage but he soon goes beyond all help and hope, lending no ear to Helen's words and sinks too low for any kind of reform.

Helen Huntingdon fights for herself and her son against an abhorrent social and legal system. Readers and audiences who knew Anne only through the purple-heathenish novels and plays of the mid-twentieth century, would have been amazed to discover that she had arguably shocked her contemporaries more than her sister. (Miller 157-158)

After tying the knot, Helen realizes that her husband's excessive addiction to alcohol and gambling leaves him with no time to fulfil his domestic duties. In this way, just for her initial infatuation Helen suffers much after the early bliss of marriage with him. She has to watch and bear his "...metamorphose from a fallen angel into a fiend, as he relentlessly and self-destructively pursues a diabolical career of gaming, whoring and drinking." (Gilbert & Gubar 81) Arthur's subverted behaviour repels Helen, but he

feels extremely happy in the company of a small sect of debased companions, for whom he is the high-spirited and jolly leader.

Arthur is well aware of Helen's passion about painting and he does not like this hobby of hers. Once in a fit of rage, Arthur destroys a number of Helen's paintings. She suffers this unprovoked arrogance and other indignities as her destiny. Her pain goes beyond bear when she finds out an undercover affair between Arthur and the governess he has hired and installed in their household, apparently for the purpose of educating their son. This shatters her completely and after thinking a lot about the future of her only son, she leaves taking the boy along with her, to Wildfell Hall, the property of her brother, Frederick Lawrence. The young and beautiful Helen Graham takes a refuge from her irresponsible, drinking husband at this mansion of the Elizabethan era, built of dark grey stone, cold and gloomy. She takes her hobby of painting as her profession and starts to earn her living by selling off them. In order to circumvent her husband from finding her whereabouts, marks her paintings with fake initials and titles them in such a manner as to create confusion about her place of residence. She uses her art both to express as well as disguise her thoughts, that is something that she has practiced even as a young girl. She once shows her painting to her husband and he discovers a pencil sketch of his own face at the back of a canvas. Helen has been using the back portion of her canvases as an outlet for her secret desires, frustrations and suppressed emotional likings. Though she has been careful to erase all of them, Arthur manages to have a look at one and thus finds a chance to play up and emotionalize her feelings for him and have a hold over her.

In sketching the character of Helen Graham, Anne Bronte has given a wonderful useful paradigm of the female artist. Whether Helen covertly uses a supposedly modest young lady's accomplishments for unladylike self-expression or flaunts her professionalism and independence, she must in some sense deny or conceal her own art, or at least deny the self-expression implicit in her art when, as a girl, she draws on the back of her painting, she must make the painting themselves work a public masks to hide her private dreams, and only behind such masks does she feel free to choose her own subjects. (Gilbert & Gubar 81)

However, the guilty conscious of using her paintings for her so called unladylike passions makes her erase them and this is like denying her own self and cravings from expression in keeping with social restrictions. As the journal approaches to the end, Gilbert realizes his mistake in judging Helen. He apologizes Helen for his immature behaviour. Soon, the two reveal their love for one another. Helen, still married to Arthur, comes to know that her husband is gravely ill and hurries back to London to look after him. Unrepentant on his deathbed, Arthur Huntingdon ultimately dies, allowing Gilbert and Helen to marry.

Anne Bronte makes it quite clear in the preface to the second edition of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* that her purpose of writing the novel is to convey a moral idea. Thus, she hopes to caution those who may make mistakes in marriage similar to those of Helen Huntingdon. Actually, most critics consider Anne Bronte as a critique of the basic concept of marriage in Victorian England. Marriage is considered as an institution that, in cases such as the one illustrated in the novel, leaves little recourse for women. A minor theme related to Bronte's analysis of marriage comprehends the work's entailed attack on the unconventional morals of many of the male figures in the novel led by Arthur Huntingdon. Bronte, of course, does challenge marriage law and

cultural injunctions that require a woman to stay with an abusive husband, just as she criticizes the norms of the separate spheres that prevalent women from raising herself virtuously. The Victorian men used to drink and gamble without thinking about the consequences and its effect on their family especially their children. They used to feel proud of this lavish and careless lifestyle and mentally prepared for their degradations. Helen's status as a female artist provides another theme in the work, as her struggle to support herself through painting is prevented by an unappreciative, male-dominated society which reflects in Arthur. The dynamics of gender discrimination also resonate in the works of Anne Bronte, though most critics agree that her heroines and novels depict a traditionally moral rather than a hardcore feminist one. Also, dramatic narratives and philosophical quotes are scattered throughout *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. This novel can be appreciated for its manner, style, character, and theme. There is also a new depth in the subject matter, an increasingly perfect handling of theme of the novel and a compounding grasp of the ways in which its subject matter shows the emotional impact on the readers.

Bronte's interest in the public good does not reduce her interest in challenging the traditional separate spheres, but the novel's resolution ultimately concerns the betterment of the whole over the betterment of some particular oppressed social groups, i.e. women. With many parallels to Anne's own life, at times seriously thoughtful and depicting the dark side of the society of Victorian era, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is also a story of moral courage and hope. Examining Victorian morals and values, young Helen Graham sets out with a firm resolution to support herself and her son Arthur after leaving her abusive husband. Initially it was met with mixed reviews, many critical of its content and complex structure. However, it is now regarded as a deeply passionate, path breaking and extremely revolutionary step taken by a Victorian woman. The reviews with great negative criticism that greeted its publication – the verbal punishment it received for its coarseness and brutal honesty – were no doubt prompted as much by the portrayal of its heroine as by the portrait of her degraded and fallen first husband. Her decision to flee an unhappy marriage with her young son violated Victorian social convention and law.

In brief, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is a story of female excellence. In so doing, it takes on a radical feminist dimension. Charles Kingsley feels that *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is indeed a strong and hard-hitting book and though it is a general opinion that going by the crudeness of the language and indelicacy of the subject, it is not to be taken as fit reading for girls, he does not grudge it. Instead he feels that "There are foul and accursed undercurrents in plenty, in this same, smug, respectable whitewashed English society, which must be exposed now and then; and society owes thanks not sneers to those who dare to show her the image of her own ugly, hypocritical visage." (Allott 270)

*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* portrays the depressions, dilemmas and miseries of a young and idealistic woman who believes in herself but unfortunately marries a man whose character is already in need of reformation. The bold depiction of Huntingdon's alcoholism and Helen's struggle to free herself was considered by most of the critics as an inappropriate and highly undesired subject for a woman. This masterfully depicted theme reveals that, in psychological terms, Helen has achieved an innocent revenge from Arthur Huntingdon. She is punishing Arthur without causing any physical or emotional harm to him. When Helen comes to know about grave illness of her husband, she immediately returns from the Wildfell Hall to his house to take care of him. Her motives in returning to her husband can not be challenged to be ill intent, but

her presence is deadly to him. He cries, “You never hoped for such a glorious opportunity!” and adds further, “Oh yes, you are wondrous gentle and obliging! – But you’ve driven me mad with it all!” (TWH 365) Finally he defines her victory: “Oh, this sweet revenge! And you can enjoy it with such a quiet conscience too, because it’s all in the way of duty.” (TWH 365) Ultimately, he becomes docile in her hands, admitting, “Oh, Helen, if I had listened to you, it never would have come to this!” and ‘I’m sorry to have wronged you, Nell, because you’re so good to me” (TWH 380) She has won complete vindication from Arthur.

Many contemporary critics have recognized and appreciated *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* as a landmark feminist text, but it had long been unfavourably compared with the novels of Anne Bronte’s more celebrated sisters, Charlotte and Emily. Although critics are not incorrect by any means in suggesting that *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* lacks the intensity of passion, emotions and psychological complexity of the themes of *Wuthering Heights* or *Jane Eyre*, but simultaneously the novel has unnecessarily suffered from the dismissive labels imposed on it by Victorian era critics. This criticism began to magnify with Charlotte's discouraging comments in her preface to *Agnes Grey*. Charlotte claims that Anne had committed a blunder and made a poor choice of subject for *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*:

She had, in the course of her life, been called on to contemplate near at hand, and for a long time, the terrible effects of talents misused and faculties abused; hers was a naturally sensitive, reserved and dejected nature; what she saw sank very deeply into her mind: it did her harm. She brooded over it till she believed it to be a duty to reproduce every detail (of course, with fictitious characters, incidents and situations), as a warning to others. (Gaskell 281)

This critical attitude has been prevailing in this century too, by such critics as Winifred Gerin and Margaret Lane. In their book *The Drug-Like Bronte Dream* (1952), they have designated Anne “as a Bronte without genius, but as one who certainly had her share of the Bronte temperament.” (Gerin & Lane 31). For her own part, Gerin makes the unconvincing argument that the instructive nature of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* prevents it from having literary merit: “It was written too obviously as a work of propaganda, a treatise against drunkenness, to be considered a work of art” (Gerin 39). This type of argument has proven damaging to the novel. This sort of unnecessary arrogant criticism put a seed of caution in the mind of the readers and discourages them to give the work a required amount of attention. Also this prejudice prevents them from investigating the novel by themselves and to take it at nothing more than a superficial level. Bronte exhibits her acute and remarkably contemporary understanding of the uneven distribution of social power between men and women in the nineteenth century.

Anne Bronte’s writing lacks the qualities which have made *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* landmark texts, but this should not prevent critics from recognising the important contribution of a novel like *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*: “Without the searing intensity of Charlotte or the dramatic inventiveness of Emily, Anne

demonstrates through her writing that she has a conscious, perceptive control of her fictional materials. This control gives Anne Bronte a claim to artistic merit in her own right.” (Jackson 198) He mentions that the naked realism of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* has the potential to defy the Victorian myths about the specific role of the genders in “revealing a marital discord full of suffering, agony, and even ugliness” (Jackson 200) In this way, he appreciates the novel's uniqueness in the way it demands the equality of genders asks bold questions about the power structures that define sexual relationships during the Victorian period:

Anne Bronte also answers a question that other novels of her time do not ask, what happens to a marriage and to the innocent partner when one partner (specifically, the male) leads a solipsistic life, where personal pleasures are seen as deserved, where maleness and the role of husband is tied to the freedom to do as one wants, and femaleness and the role of wife is linked to providing service and pleasure not necessarily sexual, but including daily praise and ego-boosting and, quite simply, constant attention. (Jackson 203)

Although Anne's limitations as a writer can be acknowledged throughout the novel, these can be set aside to concentrate on specific gender issues in the novel. Helen's occupation as a female artist has been viewed as significant by a number of critics, who have concentrated on her status as a marginalised writer. Also, Helen's socially and ideologically offending desires in the novel have been emphasised. Her unconventional attitude towards her husband Arthur's upbringing is what forces her to be an object of scrutiny from the time of her arrival at Wildfell Hall.

Victorian women seemed to face the risk that in defining their voices as female they would be excluded altogether from public debate. The obsession in early works of the Bronte's work with the sex of the authors or with the appropriateness of the subject matter for female readers underscores the Victorian obsession with judging all behaviour through a rigid lens of gender. (Allotte 249)

Moreover, female writers of the nineteenth century could not exhibit the same confidence as their literary predecessors demonstrated. They could maintain their identity and dignity as women while their assigned norms of male discourse in their literary attempts. If they wanted to address questions of general political interest, Victorian women were discouraged to reveal their demands.

Helen's voice provides not only a woman's humanizing influence on the male child she is raising but also a intellectual critique in the discourses and debate of the bourgeois social sphere. “Whereas the literary public sphere has a potentially humanizing influence, Bronte recognizes that literature in and of itself does not guarantee affective humanism.” (Carnell 18) Through her position as a professional painter, Helen also emerges as an extraordinarily talented woman in the literary public sphere. Her faultless taste is something that she and Gilbert share. They never discuss about her paintings, but Gilbert immediately approves of them with a smile, showing her fondness.

Obviously, the example of Helen Huntingdon as exceptional woman provides a powerful example of independence and autonomy and yet it is misleading merely to place Anne Bronte within some artificial continuum of emergent feminists, as if these voices existed in isolation from attitudes towards liberal political theory and the public sphere. Rather than demand a separate platform of rights for women, Bronte ultimately sought wholeness and integration between the sexes through an eighteenth century ideal of the public good in which most women might participate. (Carnell 20)

It highlights and indicates that they see eye-to-eye on the intellectual subject. Exceptionally artistic and literate, Helen questions and opposes the traditionally separate domains for man and women. She is an example of one of the rare enlightened women who could raise the voice for their rights. Moreover, Helen is visible symbol of women's intellect participating in the literary public sphere through her position as professional painter.

Bronte thus concludes the novel by reinforcing the humanizing ideal of a woman's influence on men as well as the ideal of the benevolent, rational landlord, crucial to stability of the bourgeois public sphere. The ambivalence of her bipartite narration, marks Anne Bronte's reluctance to repudiate the educated, bourgeois sphere in which she was raised. (Carnell 19)

#### **CONCLUSION:**

Through her unconventional heroines, Anne Bronte depicts the emotional trails and pain of women of Victorian era. Anne's self-confidence in her own passion and judgment, as well as her strength of character and gentleness of manner, combined together, makes her heroine a woman of substance. The heroines created by Anne Bronte were individuals in their own right, free and independent, but none of them were shown to deliberately defy society, in order to assert their freedom and individuality.

The feminist critics, who have been so generally successful in revising our literary appreciation and critical estimate of woman writers, especially those in the Victorian period, have had surprisingly little to say about Anne Bronte. While Charlotte has benefited immensely by the feminist perspective, Anne is little better known and scarcely more frequently discussed than she was previously. (Langland 157)

The general opinion about Anne Bronte as an author remains that she was not indeed a radical woman writer of her age. She spoke of women's issues in a truthful and realistic manner but her approach was mild in comparison with her contemporary women authors. "But an attention to the literary context of Anne's work and to the historic context of her publications allows us to begin to revise the image of Anne as a pale shadow of her sisters." (Langland 149)

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