FACULTADE DE FILOLOXÍA

Grao en Lingua e Literatura Inglesas

TRABALLO DE FIN DE GRAO

Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848): an analysis of the novel and of its changing relevance over time

Iria Leal López

Titor: José Manuel Barbeito Varela

Curso 2022/2023

USC UNIVERSIDADE DE SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA FACULTADE DE FILOLOXÍA

CUBRIR ESTE FORMULARIO ELECTRONICAMENTE

Formulario de delimitación do título e resumo
Traballo de Fin de Grao curso 2021/2022

APELIDOS E NOME:	Leal López Iria
GRAO EN:	Lingua e Literatura Inglesas
(NO CASO DE MODERNAS) MENCIÓN EN:	
TITOR/A:	J. Manuel Barbeito Varela
LIÑA TEMÁTICA ASIGNADA:	Literatura en lingua inglesa

SOLICITO a aprobación do seguinte título e resumo:

Título: Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848): an analysis of the novel and of its changing relevance over time.

Resumo [na lingua en que se vai redacta-lo TFG; entre 1000 e 2000 caracteres]:

Anne Brontë is a relevant representative of female Victorian Gothic fiction. Her novels, often overshadowed by her sisters' success and neglected by critics, convey a strong sense of morality and a serious approach to real life issues, such as marriage and motherhood. Anne Brontë's characterisation of her female protagonists, the strength of their will and their ability to face the situations they are confronted with, grant Anne's fiction the title of one of the pioneer's feminist novels. In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), her most controversial novel, Anne presents themes and topics that were not only relevant for 19th century life, but also resonate in contemporary times.

The aim of this project is to identify the main themes of Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and situate them in theirVictorian context, analyse her treatment of these themes, compare the reception of the novel at the time of publication and in the 21st century, and show its current relevance.

The introduction will provide a historical background focusing on the sociocultural conventions that most affected Anne as a female author. The main body of the project will contain the analysis of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*: Chapter 1 will deal with the principal themes addressed by Anne; Chapter 2 will study the critical reception of the novel, and Chapter 3 will include a contrastive approach of the novel's impact in the 19th century and how its relevance has shifted over time. Chapter 4 will examine the current relevance of the novel. The conclusion will focus on the attainments and resulting ideas of this project.

SRA. PRESIDENTA DA COMISIÓN DO TRABALLO DE FIN DE GRAO

Santiago de Compostela, 11 de novembro de 2021.

Sinatura do/a interesado/a	Visto e prace (sinatura do/a titor/a)	Aprobado pola Comisión do Traballo de Fin de Grao coa data
	BARBEITO VARELA, JOSE MANUEL (AUTENTICACIÓN) Firmado digitalmente por BARBEITO VARELA, JOSE MANUEL (AUTENTICACIÓN) Fecha: 2021.11.11 12:07:25 +01'00'	15 NOV. 2021 Selo da Facultade de Filoloxía

SRA. PRESIDENTA DA COMISIÓN DO TRABALLO DE FIN DE GRAO

Summary

Anne Brontë is a relevant representative of female Victorian Gothic fiction. Her novels, often overshadowed by her sisters' success and neglected by critics, convey a strong sense of morality and a serious approach to real life issues, such as marriage and motherhood. Anne Brontë's characterisation of her female protagonists, the strength of their will and their ability to face the situations they are confronted with, grant Anne's fiction the title of one of the pioneer's feminist novels. In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), her most controversial novel, Anne presents themes and topics that were not only relevant for 19th century life, but also resonate in contemporary times.

The aim of this project is to identify the main themes of Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and situate them in their Victorian context, analyse her treatment of these themes, compare the reception of the novel at the time of publication and in the 21st century, and show its current relevance.

The introduction will provide a historical background focusing on the sociocultural conventions that most affected Anne as a female author. The main body of the project will contain the analysis of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*: Chapter 1 will deal with the principal themes addressed by Anne; Chapter 2 will study the critical reception of the novel, and Chapter 3 will include a contrastive approach of the novel's impact in the 19th century and how its relevance has shifted over time. Chapter 4 will examine the current relevance of the novel. The conclusion will focus on the attainments and resulting ideas of this project.

Table of contents

Introduction

Although Anne Brontë's legacy was overshadowed by her sisters' fame, twentieth century critical assessments have raised *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* to the status of one of the most important novels of the nineteenth century. The novel, having met an unexpected selling success at the time of its publication in 1848 –rivalled only by *Jane Eyre*– was, however, spurned by the reviewers and harshly criticised; even Charlotte Brontë deemed the novel too coarse and its subject matter not fit for publication. The overall consideration was that the novel was "offensive", "morbid", "vulgar" and, most of all, too "coarse"; its narrative structure –it is the longest single-narrative, enclosing epistolary novel of the nineteenth century (Gordon 1984, 719)– was regarded as clumsy and poorly executed. The turn of the century saw a progressive change in the critical consideration of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*; as the English novelist George Moore stated in 1924, Anne was a "born tale-teller" and she "could write with heat, one of the rarest qualities" (Gérin in Brontë 2012 [1848], 533). Thus, at that time critics began praising Anne Brontë's storytelling and recognising her talent as a realistic novelist; furthermore, a number of reviewers granted her the status of the "bravest and boldest" of the Brontës. However, the critical success of her sisters' novels and the initial rejection of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* meant that Anne's contribution to literature was obscured until the second half of the twentieth century, when the first discussions centred solely around *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* appeared (Nash and Suess 2001, 153).

As a female author, Anne Brontë was deeply affected by the repression and oppression that women were subjected to in Victorian society, and she chose to reflect that on her novel, accompanied by her personal views on other matters. In her "Preface to the Second Edition", Anne expressed the didactic intention of her novel and –still under the pseudonym of Currer Bell– she vouched for male and female authors to be treated equally. Thus, both regarding its subject matter and Anne's treatment of it, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* constitutes, first and foremost, a manifesto in favour of equality. Written during Victorian times but set in the Regency period, Anne Brontë's novel deals with marital abuse and mistreatment with startling honesty and coarseness. But, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is a thematically complex novel. It does not focus exclusively on women's equality; it also deals with other topics relevant in the context of Victorian society, such as the decadence of aristocracy, the search for a new model of masculinity, religion, education and the upbringing of children. Anne

Brontë's novel constitutes a social revision of an era (Hyman 2008, 465), and through her realistic prose and the complete catalogue of characters, she exposed the reality and hypocrisy that was oftentimes hidden behind Victorian values.

The feminist movement has recently brought about a recovery and reappraisal of the work of women that have been historically silenced (Barbeito 2006, 81). Because its theme still resonates in modern times, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is nowadays considered a nineteenth century classic and a *proto*feminist novel. It has been a useful source of information for the study of Victorian gender roles and the reality of women during Victorian times (Carnell 1998, 2); furthermore, it is considered to be "the first forceful protest against the dominance of the male" (Johnson 1950, 77). *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* sheds light on the common reality of women during Victorian times: the impossibility of obtaining divorce, of managing their own fortunes, of raising their children, the necessity to endure abuse in order to avoid stigma… In short, the novel deals with women's lack of rights, equality, and justice in Victorian times. Through the story of an abused wife, Anne denounces an extreme but plausible situation, and the difficulties a woman must often still face today in her search for freedom. The tale of Helen Huntingdon, the novel's protagonist, is the tale of abused women everywhere, past and present; nonetheless, her relentless search for freedom and happiness reverberated through Victorian England, and it still resonates with modern audiences.

Taking into account both the past and current status of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, this project will strive to provide an analysis of the main themes of the novel and an overall study of its change in relevance. The first aim of this project is to identify and analyse the most relevant themes in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and to understand their connection to Anne Brontë and to Victorian society. The second aim is to point out the reasons behind the novel's rejection by critics at the time of its publication. The third and final aim of this project is to exhibit the current value given to Anne and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. In order to accomplish these objectives, the method followed in this project consisted in the critical reading of a number of essays, dissertations and scholarly articles. First, the reading of *Las Brontë y su mundo* (Barbeito 2006) and "Feminism and the Public Sphere in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*" (Carnell 1998), to name a few, aided in providing the necessary historical context and Victorian sociocultural conventions, especially those that most affected Anne as a woman and an author. Authors such as Carol Senf (1990), Elisabeth Gruner (1997) or Laura Berry (1996) focus in depth on Anne Brontë and her novel, and their essays –among

others– provided the information needed to select and analyse the most relevant themes in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*: equality, masculinity and education. Finally, studies such as *New Approaches to the Literary Art of Anne Brontë* (Nash and Suess 2001), and those written by Betty J. Johnson (1950), Ian Ward (2007), Jill Matus (2007) or Priti Joshi (2009), provided enough information about the critical reception of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, which has been organised chronologically from 1848 to the early 2000s. The information provided by the critical studies researched in this project has been supported by a close reading of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

Chapter 1 of this project narrows down the historical background and Victorian sociocultural conventions. Chapter 2 deals with the main themes of the novel and is divided into three sections: "Equality", "In search for a new masculinity" and "Child-rearing and education". Chapter 3 focuses on the critical reception of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* in 1848 and the first following years, until 1857. Chapter 4 studies the novel's modern relevance, including critical reviews from 1873 to the early 2000s. The final section of the project includes the conclusions obtained from this project.

1. Historical background and sociocultural conventions

The nineteenth century witnessed deep changes and social and cultural transformations in England. The relentless process of industrialisation brought about most of these changes: the traditional social order was threatened by the rise in power and influence of the bourgeoisie with the Industrial Revolution. Individualism, as one of the prime examples of bourgeois values, challenged not only the established moral compass, but also societal relationships. Whereas the traditional social order consisted mainly in the lack of mobility between social classes, in modernity individuals searched for the improvement of their social position based on economic wealth. Industrialisation greatly reinforced this tendency in the nineteenth century.

The rise of the bourgeoisie also meant a change in the social value of aristocracy. The nobles were once seen as the natural social leaders, but in modernity their traditional roles were gradually taken over by the professional classes. In a world shaped by industrial production, the unproductive aristocracy became increasingly useless. This decrease in social worth was linked with a loss of respectability, a middle class value supported by Evangelicalism that acquired a new meaning in the nineteenth century. Traditionally, respectability referred to the social standing given by birth – thus, it was inherent to aristocracy. Its new meaning comprised the importance of work and effort, of good manners and the drive to ultimately better oneself. In Victorian society, the aristocracy faced a loss of respectability because they were already born with wealth and social standing; they did not need to work to earn their livelihood, therefore lacking the drive to improve their status that was such a core value for the bourgeoisie (Barbeito 2006, 46).

In the context of the Victorian period, women were not granted the autonomy and independence characteristic of individualism. Confined to the domestic, private sphere, women and whatever economic assets they might possess mostly belonged to the men in charge, be it a father, brother or husband (Barbeito 2006, 44). Women's status, even though it underwent some legal modifications (Custody of Infants Act of 1839, Divorce Act of 1857), was mostly unchanged during the nineteenth century. In 1886, an instance of this fact was given by a chief of justice called Sir John Duke Coleridge, who remarked that a wife was "regarded as a kind of inferior dog or horse" (Ward 2007, 153).

The idea of the "angel of the house"[1] represented the most widespread conception of women in the Victorian period. Abnegation, submissiveness, obedience and devotion were the main characteristics of this most conservative concept, which aligned with the reality Victorian women lived. During the final years of Victoria's reign, English society went through divorce, suffrage, and education reforms (Walls 2002, 229), which coincided with the rise of another conception of women cast in complete opposition to the popular, reactionary "angel of the house": that of the "new woman". The new woman, as a late nineteenth-century feminist, demanded equal rights with men in opportunities and education, and vouched for the abolition of women's legal and social constraints. Furthermore, according to Walter E. Houghton (1985), between the "angel of the house" and the "new woman", there was a middle position, neither conservative nor radical, that sustained that women had their unique functions in life, different from those of men, and thus men and women occupied different, mutually exclusive spheres.[2]

One of the most constraining legal apparatus affecting women's lives was the divorce law. Before the act of 1857, ecclesiastical divorce was the only means of legal separation. The criteria for ecclesiastical divorce to be conceded was demanding: adultery was not grievous enough for a woman to sue, so she also had to present proof of sodomy, mental incompetence, sexual impotence or cruelty (only if proven to be physical and systematic). The Divorce Act of 1857 universalised the possibility of getting civil divorce, but only women with sufficient economic and legal resources could apply for civil divorce; there were slim chances for a woman to be able to walk away from a marriage with the whole of her property and the custody of her children (Matus 2007, 105; Ward 2007, 157).

Regarding the custody of children, Victorian society cried out for reform during the 1830s, which culminated with the passing of the Custody of Infants Act in 1839. Until that moment, children were considered property of their fathers. Even though raising and educating were mainly a woman's task and though the care of children was entrusted to women, wives had to respect their husband's decisions on educational and familial matters. Patriarchal authority was regarded as "natural" in the core of the family and could not be disregarded. This meant

[1]"The Angel of the House", by Coventry Patmore, was a poem first published in 1854. It gave its name to the concept of the submissive Victorian woman.

[2]Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind: 1830-1870* (Yale University Press, 1985), 348-349, quoted in Julie Nash and Barbara A. Suess, *New Approaches to the Literary Art of Anne Brontë* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), 190-191.

that in the case of divorce, children would always stay with their father and mothers would have very limited chances of successfully applying for and obtaining custody. After the 1839 Act, however, mothers could be granted custody of children younger than 7, and periodic visits if they were older. This small victory in custody matters was nonetheless obscured by the fact that the right of custody could only be granted to women rich enough to enter a petition in civil court (Matus 2007, 106).

Anne Brontë (1820-1849), as a novelist and a woman, did not ignore the transformations of Victorian society and was affected by the same constraints that oppressed women in England. Middle-class women were both granted respectability and subjected to it (Barbeito 2006, 45), thus in order not to lose that virtue, they had to follow either the path of marriage or a career in education; both options entailed abnegation and giving themselves to others. Being the third daughter of a middle-class family, Anne's prospects were limited: her future had to include either marriage or a governess position, since teaching was the first paid position that women could access (24). Anne became a governess in 1839 and based her first novel, *Agnes Grey* (1847) on her experience whilst serving a wealthy family. Anne's second experience as a governess laid the groundwork for her second and last novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), which concerns this project. Naturally, writing as a means to earn a living was a career generally unavailable to women. Some remarkable writers, such as Mary Shelley or Jane Austen, had already set the precedent for the presence of the female writer in the public sphere; despite this, women not only had to balance literary production with domestic duties, but they also had to face fiercer criticism than their male counterparts (49).

Anne's literary production both questioned and answered Victorian society's issues, but without strictly following the literary tendencies of the period. According to Barbeito (2006), some of the main characteristics of Victorian literature were the communicative and moralising function, and plausibility associated with realism. Regarding the communicative function, the use of pseudonyms –Anne's pseudonym as a writer was Acton Bell–, already constituted an "infraction", since it hindered direct communication between the author and their audience (59). Anne also focused on the moralising function of the novel; in the preface to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), she stressed the importance of the moral and social aspect of art. Anne's ultimate aim was to try to educate her audience (Barbeito 2006, 63): as she expressed in her preface, "[...] if I have warned one rash youth from following in their steps, or prevented one thoughtless girl from falling into the very natural error of my heroine,

the book has not been written in vain" (Brontë [1848] 2012, xii). Anne used her realistic prose to expose the contradictions between the values that ruled Victorian society and its hidden reality; she "explores several Victorian myths and misconceptions about education, marriage and the family" (Nash and Suess 2001, 173).

Thematically, Anne made use of topics of a long-established literary tradition, such as the development of passionate love and the relationship between the individual and society. Other topics became more important during Victorian times: the intrinsic abnegation of women and their role in society, marriage and family (Barbeito 2006, 69). However, a critical reading of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* –hereafter referred to as *Tenant*– sheds light on its thematic complexity: Anne approached a number of themes, both classical and contemporary, in a work that ultimately challenged the Victorian mindset. According to Nash and Suess (2001), Anne not only defied the Victorian mindset, but she also satirised it:

> In [*Tenant*], Brontë explores several Victorian myths and misconceptions about education, marriage and the family. And, primarily, she satirises fundamental Victorian assumptions about the natures and roles of men and women. Throughout the novel, Brontë unequivocally demonstrates the 'equality' and not the 'difference' between men and women (173).

One of the issues of Victorian society Anne echoed was the degradation of the aristocracy, a vision she partook of as a middle-class woman who had been in the service of wealthy families. Picking up the figure of the Regency rake (Hyman 2008, 456), prone to debauchery and all sorts of excess, Anne represented the noble male characters of *Tenant* as incorrigible, destructive and unproductive. Anne's narrative is an example of how, faced with a rapidly changing world, nobility seeked refuge in outdated habits that reinforced their class position but distanced them from reality. In Victorian society, the new worthy gentleman was the working man, as Anne also demonstrated in replacing one noble man (Arthur Huntingdon) for a *yeoman* farmer (Gilbert Markham) in her heroine's affections and, eventually, in her marriage.

But *Tenant* did not only deal with class issues; the novel was also Anne's manifesto in favour of equality. Whilst following *Tenant*'s heroine, Helen, the reader follows the lives of all the women subjected to Victorian laws and forced to remain in abusive and traumatic households

and marriages. Anne was aware of the inequality and unfairness of Victorian laws, and she chose to create a heroine that actively acted against them, and against Victorian prerogatives for women. In doing so, Anne openly opposed the conservative view of the "submissive wife" –the "angel of the house"– and endorsed the concept of the "new woman", equal to men, who did not have to occupy a subservient role or a separate public sphere (Nash and Suess 2001, 191).

Anne was a daring and oftentimes misunderstood novelist, but her realism and startling frankness provided the reader with an accurate "portrait of an age", as Carol Senf discussed in her essay "*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*: Narrative Silences and Questions of Gender" (1990). Furthermore, Senf defended that the characters in *Tenant* conformed a catalogue of every kind of individual who could be found in the English countryside during the 1830s:

> Aristocrats like Lord Lowborough, members of the gentry like Huntingdon and Hargrave, commercial newcomers like Ralph Hattersley, and servants like the kindly Benson, who befriends Helen in her distress. Likewise Tenant presents a wide variety of women – young married women like Milicent Hattersley, spinsters like Mary Millward, herisses like Annabella Wilmot, impoverished women of the gentry like Esther Hargrave, and servants like Rachel (450).

In the context of the Victorian era, a woman such as Anne represented rupture and transgression from the established cannons. Even though nineteenth century society was already on the path to progress, the lower classes and women across all social groups were still in a position of inferiority and inequality. The rise of the bourgeoisie brought about a change in the dominating mindset and values; the progressive degradation of the aristocracy and the ideological current ruled by individualism deeply transformed English society. These changes granted women in England a first semblance of independence, but they were still gravely oppressed by law and custom. In this context, a middle-class woman such as Anne, unmarried and doubly employed –as a governess and a writer– was the epitome of the Victorian "new woman", that stood in contrast to the "angel of the house" glorified by patriarchal society. Anne held in her writing the same values she lived by: the need for equality between men and women, the need for female independence and the condemnation of immorality.

2. Principal themes in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

This section of the project focuses on the principal themes of the novel, considered as such due to their relevance in the nineteenth century and to the critical reviews and studies dedicated to them. Even though there are critical studies of *Tenant* solely dedicated to themes such as gossip or alcoholism, this chapter will provide a more general approach to themes that still resonate today: Equality, masculinity, education, and child-rearing.

2.1. Equality

Tenant is the story of Helen's life; it resembles, at the beginning, any other love-marriage story set in the nineteenth century: as a young girl, neglected by her father, she became the ward of her wealthy aunt and uncle. When it is time for her to marry, her aunt strives to make a good match, but Helen, having set her sights on the handsome, charming and wild Arthur Huntingdon, disregards her other suitors and finally marries him. Soon she discovers that the love she bears Arthur is not enough to transform his ways and make a worthy gentleman out of him: Arthur Huntingdon is a drunkard and an adulterer, an amoral man who finds enjoyment only in hedonism and debauchery. He is often accompanied by other gentlemen with whom he shares his taste for depravity, making Helen's life at Grassdale –Arthur's estate– utterly miserable. Eventually, Helen's marriage gifts her a son; in order to get him away from Arthur's indecent influence, she will covertly abandon her husband and move to the semi-abandoned Wildfell Hall, owned by her brother. It is here where she meets the kind-hearted farmer Gilbert Markham, who will become the object of her affections and Helen's second husband after Arhur's death. Gilbert will also be the sole witness to Helen's story, by means of her personal journal, which he faithfully transcribes for his brother-in-law, setting the frame of Helen's narrative.

Anne's cry for equality between men and women is the central axis around which every other theme in *Tenant* rotates. There is almost unanimous agreement between critical analysis of *Tenant* as regards its highlighting of female character's repression. The essence of Anne's novel can be summarised as a critique of the patriarchal society that confined women to subservient roles. By placing a woman in the subject position, Anne demonstrated that women were affected by the same moral and social dilemmas that affected the Victorian man

(Barbeito 2006, 17); in addition, this subject position allowed Anne to explore the unique kind of oppression reserved to women. Anne provided a truthful rendition of the systemic injustice of patriarchy, especially its manifestation in Victorian laws and customs. *Tenant* is the tale of an abused woman: it is an account of the evidence women were not allowed to present in a court of law, since they would be *femme covert*[3], "absorbed" by the identity of their husbands (Nash and Suess 2001, 104). Furthermore, by setting the novel prior to the minimal reformations of custody law enacted by Victorian politics –the 1839 Custody of Infants Act–, Anne ensured that Helen would be utterly powerless to *legally* raise her son outside of her husband's control.

According to Gilbert and Gubar[4], the common characteristic of female characters in Victorian literature was being voiceless: they did not have the privilege nor the power to make assertions of their own. Female ideal characters were depicted as extremely virtuous, and they were often subjected to terrible situations to try their will and "angelic" virtue. Anne's fiction is a prime example of the feminine character placed in adverse situations (Barbeito 2006, 71): Helen, virtuous, religious, and faithful, enters a marriage full of tribulations. In general, female characters across every social class were not able to escape a life of servitude and submission; their position was unchangeable, because only men enjoyed social mobility. In Victorian society, the wants, ambitions, and the overall satisfaction of men were the priority.

As explained in the previous chapter, in *Tenant* Anne gave voice to a heroine that in a sense anticipated the Victorian "new woman" from the *fin de siècle*; through her, Anne expressed her disconformity with Victorian laws and customs and the oppression suffered by women, even if they were wealthy. In Helen's case, it is necessary to mention that her wealth was never actually her own: as a young girl, she was raised by her aunt and uncle, the latter being the one in possession of the family's money and property; afterwards, Helen marries Arthur, a wealthy gentleman; finally, Helen comes into wealth, but only because her uncle chose her as heiress. *Tenant*'s heroine constantly distances herself from the "approved" Victorian

[3]*Femme covert* refers to the legal term *coverture*. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. "coverture, *n*. 9. a. *Law*. The condition or position of a woman during her married life, when she is by law under the authority and protection of her husband". https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/43385?redirectedFrom=coverture

[4]Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New York: Yale University Press, 2000), quoted in Majid S. Mgamis, "'Decolonizing Feminism': Women's power in *Agnes Grey, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and *Wuthering Heights* (Indiana University of Pennsylvania, 2012), 17.

femininity (Mgamis 2012, 24): during her stay at Wildfell Hall, she becomes a working single mother, selling her paintings in order to provide for her and her son. Victorian law would not allow a married woman to hold her own property or estate and, as previously established, the only way for women to make a living was pursuing a teacher or governess position. This would not have been a fitting option for a woman such as Helen, married to a gentleman, and raised in a wealthy background. By economically exploiting her talent as an artist, Helen searches for an autonomy and independence considered inherent to men, but denied to women. Through her work and effort, Helen manages to obtain a semblance of independence during her stay at Wildfell Hall, which, even though it was not the overtly hostile environment Grassdale was, still represented an unsafe place for her. In Wildfell Hall, Helen has to hide her situation as a fugitive married woman and her kinship with Fredrick Lawrence; she changes her last name and tries to avoid contact with her neighbours, all due to the fear of Arthur finding her whereabouts and taking her son away. In the process of obtaining independence through her work, Helen attracts Gilbert's attention; with him, she ultimately finds the stable situation in life she had been denied so far (Barbeito 2006, 71).

Painting is an intrinsic part of Helen's identity. In one of Tenant's most famous passages, Arthur discovers Helen's plot to abandon the marital home and destroys the paintings she had been working on in order to gain some money for a safe escape. In turn, Helen threatens him with one of her painting tools. This significant gesture has great meaning: Helen views her talent and her paintings as her defence and, if needed be, her weapon. She is aware that her talent is the only thing that could sustain her in case of need; as an oppressed woman, however, her identity as an artist is threatened by her husband, who would not allow her to earn her own money. According to Nicole Diederich in her article "The Art of Comparison: Remarriage in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*"[5], "[Helen's] self-definition as a woman artist" is demolished in both her marriage to Arthur and to Gilbert later on. Arthur's choice of destroying Helen's paintings was conscious and intentional, and even though Gilbert is presented as a stark contrast to Arthur's abusive character, he is nonetheless a Victorian man ruled by Victorian conventions who would not, in good conscience, allow his wife to work.

[5]Nicole Diederich, "The Art of Comparison: Remarriage in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*" (*Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature 57*, 2003), quoted in Majid S. Mgamis, "'Decolonizing Feminism': Women's power in *Agnes Grey, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and *Wuthering Heights* (Indiana University of Pennsylvania, 2012), 16.

The constant psychological abuse, the mistreatment at Arthur's hands and the suppression of Helen's autonomy are the most extreme forms of subjection she experiences in *Tenant*, but they are not the only examples. As explained before, even though Gilbert Markham's character is presented in the novel as a second opportunity at love and happiness for Helen, there are some instances of oppression he is also a part of. In order for Gilbert to learn her story and understand the initial reasons why she cannot marry him –she is still married to Arthur–, Helen gives her personal diary to Gilbert. This is how the reader comes across Helen's story: the whole novel is framed in a letter sent from Gilbert to his brother-in-law, the first half of the letter being his personal recollection of how he met Helen, and the second containing the full transcription of her diary. It is true that the ending of the novel can be considered as a happy one: after years of suffering, Helen finds in Gilbert a loving partner with whom she can share a companionable marriage. However, the fact that Gilbert uses Helen's diary to create intimacy between him and his brother-in-law, and that the audience can only be sure of *his* perception of happiness, ends up casting a shadow over Helen's fate (Barbeito 2006, 40). Critics have argued that Gilbert sharing his wife's story is a testament of how Helen is again silenced and voiceless in her second marriage, subjected to Gilbert as she was to Arthur, albeit less violently. It is evident that Gilbert uses Helen's diary to his own benefit, to compensate a friend who was waiting to receive a reciprocal and true account of Gilbert's life; according to this view, the male-male relationship outweighs the integrity of the woman. As a refutation, other critics have claimed that Gilbert's actions were not for his benefit, but for his wife's: the written exchange between men in *Tenant* is the "door through which the woman's narrative passes to the public sphere" (Barbeito 2006, 46). By transcribing Helen's diary, which accounts not only for her actions but also for all of her thought process and logic, Gilbert is *legitimising* her decision and actions, making them "approvable" in society's eyes. It is possible that Anne, as a female writer in Victorian society, purposefully chose to tell Helen's story through a male narrator because it would be the only approach the general audience would accept and recognise. If a man such as Gilbert accepted Helen's unconventional behaviour in his private, masculine sphere, then hers is a story that could also be accepted in the public sphere (Barbeito 2006, 46). Furthermore, according to Nash and Suess (2001), by corroborating Helen's actions Gilbert is implicitly denouncing the injustice and inequality women were subjected to:

> In witnessing Helen's story, the middle-aged, re-educated Markham writes his support of married women under English law. He, like Brontë herself, implicitly questions

> the legitimacy of laws that usurp women's right to the custody of their children in the face of mistreatment by reprobate fathers, that assign all the wife's earnings to the husband, that give the husband legal right to the body of his wife, even if he abuses her (105).

Women's inherited oppression and the inequality they experienced under the law in the early and mid-Victorian period are uncontested facts. Nonetheless, a number of critics have argued that women were not as weak and powerless as Victorian literature reviewers have claimed; among those critics, Majid S. Mgamis provides strong and complete arguments in her dissertation "'Decolonizing feminism': Women's power in *Agnes Grey*, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and *Wuthering Heights*" (2012). Mgamis defends that women in Victorian society –and especially those in the Brontë novels– could show power and potential for action, and were often empowered enough to make their own decisions and change the course of their lives (23). As the model of the future "new woman", Helen personifies the power women held to defy socially established laws if they felt the need to: she left her husband, took their child and posed as a widow, all the while working as a painter (4). Mgamis's disputation revolves around how, despite the female mistreatment that takes place in *Tenant*, Helen still has the potential to influence and create a change in her surroundings and in the men she meets. In the beginning of her marriage to Arthur, Helen is set on trying to placate Arthur's drinking –not only that, but also "fixing and controlling" him–, and she tries to do so both "by shaming him" and "building up his self-esteem" (30). Even though her mission with Arthur does not prove successful, she is able to inspire change in at least one of his friends: the also dissolute Ralph Hattersley. Hattersley is married to Milicent Hargrave, one of Helen's dearest friends and a sweet, submissive woman; he too participates in a life of debauchery and finds pleasure in tormenting and even physically abusing his wife. When Helen shows him one of Milicent's letters, in which she expresses her pain and suffering, Hattersley is deeply touched and he decides to reform his ways, which transforms a horrific marriage into a happy and companionable one. Thus, in dealing with Arthur's friend in this fashion, Helen demonstrates that she holds enough power to influence the men to whom she is socially subjected.

In another instance of female empowerment in *Tenant*, Helen makes the conscious choice to abandon her husband. As a woman, she and all of her belongings were her husband's property, and Arthur exercised full control over them; this relegated Helen to a situation of

economic and legal dependency, a situation that also deprived her of the right to raise her child on her own. When Helen leaves the marital home, she has neither reliable economic resources nor is she endorsed by the law; still, she chooses to exploit her artistic talent, abandon her husband, and raise her son, facing the risk of social ostracism and legal retaliation. According to Mgamis (2012), "the decision to leave and the actual act of leaving is a testimony of power" (43); thus, Helen possessed enough moral strength to defy the law and social constraints; that moral strength drove her to make an independent choice, and that choice lead to building a life of her own.

As a final example of women's power in *Tenant*, it is necessary to take into account the moment of Arthur's death. After a hunting accident, Arthur finds himself on his deathbed, with injuries aggravated by his prolonged drinking. At this moment, Helen makes another important conscious choice: she goes back to Grassdale to take care of his dying husband. As a deeply pious woman, Helen will try to convince Arthur to recant his former ways and repent, so he can have an opportunity of redemption in the eyes of God. The readership of *Tenant* can only theorise about Arthur's possibilities of redemption; nonetheless, it fell into the scope of Helen's religious beliefs to try to save his soul for eternal life. In the novel, Helen's return to Grassdale interrupts her and Gilbert's impending romance, thus it could be argued that Helen did not make the best decision; however, she priorised her morals and religious values over Gilbert's possible wishes. With her decision, Helen demonstrates that she is a morally independent woman, capable of looking after herself and staying true to her convictions without being influenced by men. Furthermore, with both this example and the one concerning Hattersley's transformation of character, "Helen exemplifies how women have power that if used well, can lead to the betterment of their lives and the lives of those around them" (Mgamis 2012, 108). This statement, however, calls for certain criticism, since there was only so much influence women could have in a society that heavily restricted their rights. All in all, Helen provides a new perspective of Victorian women, one that refuses to stay silent even when silence is imposed on her. Through her actions and words, Helen proves she is strong enough to take the necessary measures to improve her own life and the lives of those around her, as she did with Hattersley, Milicent, Gilbert, and tried to do with Arthur.

When writing *Tenant*, Anne equipped Helen with character traits such as "independence, decisiveness, determination, focus, and calculation" (Mgamis 2012, 108), making her

protagonist stand outside gender stereotypes. Helen is not only the Victorian new woman that cries for justice and independence and refuses to stay silent; she is also all the women subjected to male hegemony over the course of history. According to Nash and Suess (2001), "as Brontë transforms the story of Woman under patriarchy, she re-envisions some of the key stories that underlie English literature and culture: Genesis, *Paradise Lost*, the Arthurian saga". Helen is the epitome of the unaccommodated woman; she has not lost her innocence or tempted her partner the way Eve had, but still, because her actions did not correspond to the Victorian standards of womanly behaviour, Anne made it clear that, in a case such as Helen's, the "daughter of woman has no place to lay her head[6]". This way, Anne reinterpreted the story of the fallen woman, reimagined as the story of a child, orphaned of mother and neglected by her father; as a wife and mother, abused by her husband and mistreated by law and society. This fallen woman makes use of her bright mind and indomitable will to escape her circumstances and find a better life for herself and her son. In this new interpretation, "Woman is not responsible for the Fall; she is neither sinful Eve to the yet unfallen Adam nor betraying Guinevere to the faithful Arthur" (106).

Tenant is a nineteenth century feminist novel. Anne translated personal experience, observations, and her knowledge and vision of the world into the tale of an abused woman in search of freedom and happiness. Taking into account the validation of female independence, the denunciation of abuse and legal injustice, and the story of a female character that rebels against imposed gender roles, *Tenant* can be considered a feminist manifesto that still resonates in modern times. In short, as stressed by Nash and Suess (2001), *Tenant* "rewrites the story of the Fallen Woman as a story of female excellence and in so doing, it takes on a radical feminist dimension" (174).

[6]This is a reinterpretation of a Biblical quote. In Matthew 8:20, Jesus says: "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head". This meant that Jesus, during his life, had no permanent place of rest, and that he was bound to earthly suffering.

2.2. In search for a new masculinity

Masculinity is another important theme in *Tenant*. Deeply related to the issue of equality, the Victorian notions of masculinity were the yoke that oppressed both women and men. According to Priti Joshi in her article "Masculinity and Gossip in Anne Brontë's *Tenant*" (2009), the most recent studies of Victorian masculinities have provided different views on what was once thought to be something unchangeable and "monolithic": the Victorian man (916). In the early decades of the nineteenth century, as social conventions fluctuated, so did the notion of masculine identity, which at the time was considered "fragile, still in the process of being forged" (916).

As stated in the previous section of this chapter, the story of *Tenant* is framed in the context of a letter sent from Gilbert Markham to his brother-in-law. Even when Gilbert transcribes Helen's diary and the audience receives the story through her words, the presence of the male narrator does not vanish, for it is *his choice* to transcribe Helen's diary instead of merely retelling its contents. The choice of a male narrator for *Tenant* is crucially important, since it provided Anne with an opportunity to explore established constructions of masculinity whilst comparing male and female socialisation (Matus 2007, 103). In the catalogue of male characters present in *Tenant*, two are the protagonists: Gilbert Markham and Arthur Huntingdon; it is through their characters that the readership has a better understanding of masculinity and masculine relationships.

Throughout the novel, Anne cleverly positions Arthur and Gilbert in opposition to one another: the first an aristocrat, the latter a yeoman[7] farmer; the gentleman who shows respectability despite his humble birth, and the one who progressively loses it. However, despite the clear differences between both characters –in simple terms, the audience could consider Gilbert as the hero and Arthur as the villain–, Gilbert is not an utterly innocent character, for he also holds a position of superiority over Helen, granted to him by patriarchal society. In *Tenant*, both men are "depicted as comfortably at home in a male-friendly world. They have the power, the will, the way, and the tools they need to lead happy lives, and instead of being satisfied, they decide to gain even more power through the oppression they

[7] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. "yeoman, *n*. 3. a. A man holding a small landed estate; a freeholder under the rank of a gentleman; hence *vaguely*, a commoner or countryman of respectable standing, *esp.* one who cultivates his own land". https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/231598?redirectedFrom=yeoman.

exercise on women" (Mgamis 2012, 14). In truth, the latter part of this statement is better applied to Arthur Huntingdon, who consistently abused Helen in the duration of their marriage, and whose character turned out to be irredeemable in the end.

Focusing firstly on Arthur Huntingdon, Charlotte Brontë sketched an accurate portrait of his character in a letter written in 1848:

> Huntingdon is a specimen of the naturally selfish, sensual, superficial man, whose one merit of a joyous temperament only avails him while he is young and healthy, whose best days are his earliest, who never profits by experience, who is sure to grow worse the older he grows (Johnson 1950, 37).

When Helen first met Arthur, it was the "joyous temperament" Charlotte wrote about that completed the list of qualities that made him seem an adequate husband: he was young, handsome, charming, rich and noble born. As time passed, Arthur's temperament became enslaved to his alcoholism, until it completely deformed not only his personality, but also his physical form. In the words of Winifred Gérin in her commentary to *Tenant* (2012), Arthur "had no moral stamina to deny himself the least indulgence" (531); be it alcohol, laziness, or extramarital affairs, Arthur indulged in everything he found pleasurable, although this did not make him happier.

As critics such as Nash and Suess (2001) have noted, Arthur's behaviour was shared by his friends or "cronies" (174) –Helen called them "human brutes" (Brontë 2012 [1848], 356). Although it is not clear whether Arthur held the position of leader in this group of debauched, upper-class men, it is possible that he was the worst-behaved one amongst them. The constant psychological abuse, humiliation and neglect he exerted on Helen could only be matched by the abuse that Milicent Hargrave suffered at the hands of Ralph Hattersley. Even so, as previously explained, Helen was ultimately able to reform Hattersley's behaviour, a goal that she did not achieve with Arthur. Thus, in *Tenant* the criticism of these upper-class men comes from Helen, a gentlewoman who is literally "trapped" in the evil environment these men create (Nash and Suess 2001, 174). In the world of *Tenant*, the audience is witness to the way in which "aristocratic male domination can easily slip into abusiveness" (Nash and Suess 2001, 160); Huntingdon and his friends are not only a product of patriarchy, but also of

aristocracy, and they "spend little time in the company of women and are neither domestic nor domesticated" (Joshi 2009, 917). Even though the story narrated in *Tenant* takes place a few decades before the beginning of the Victorian era, this pervasive criticism of aristocracy, represented by Arthur and his cronies, falls in line with the new predominating mindset of the nineteenth century, that pointed out the degradation and unproductiveness of English nobility.

Critics such as Priti Joshi (2009) have stated that *Tenant* "targets the bad behaviours of upper-class men", whether they belong to the rich bourgeoisie or to aristocracy (911). However, Anne Brontë was aware that these masculine behaviours were permitted and supported by society, law and custom. It was the system set in place –patriarchy– that defined and shaped nineteenth century masculinity; it was patriarchy that allowed men –from every social background– to exert abuse on women without virtually any consequence. Besides her denunciation of abusive masculinity, Anne also "censured the silences that enshrined and perpetuated such behaviour –and here Helen too was culpable" (Priti 2009, 911). During their marriage, Helen barely interferes with Arthur's friends and pastimes; when she does, it is only for the sake of her friend Milicent, who is the victim of an abusive marriage similar to Helen's. However; Helen never denounces or accuses neither Arthur nor Ralph Hattersley publicly; she even goes out of her way to hide Arthur's affair with Lord Lowborough's wife, another member of his group of friends. In this episode of *Tenant*, Helen confronts Arthur about his affair with Lady Lowborough, but she chooses not to reveal the truth to Lord Lowborough, who was the other direct victim. Years later, when Lowborough finally finds out about his wife's infidelity, he accuses Helen of "helping to deceive him" (Priti 2009, 911). As a consequence of Helen's choice, Lowborough "must bring up as his own the daughter of the adulterous union between his wife and [Arthur]" (Priti 2009, 911).

With this intricate network of relationships, deceptions and silences, Anne intended to criticise the passivity of society in the face of the abuse carried out by upper-class men. In the novel, certain characters are witnesses to the way that nineteenth century masculinity could negatively affect people's lives. In the words of Nash and Suess (2001), "Helen and others witness to the truth of what they actually see, rather than subscribing to social codings of manners and mores [...]. The admirable characters in the novel demand openness and vision; rather than the masking and blindness endemic to society's upper classes" (103). Even though the characters in the novel could be chastised for their silence, their witnessing of the bare truth is "an act that defies the authority of the patriarchy" (Nash and Suess 2001, 103). By

putting part of the focus of the novel on the abusive masculinity that characterised Arthur Huntingdon, Anne also asks the readership to "judge in lieu of a society that provides no forum for legal redress when women and children suffer domestic abuses" (Nash and Suess 2001, 103).

The character of Gilbert Markham, by comparison to Arthur, shows far more complexity regarding his personality and the traits that define his masculinity. Critics such as Nash and Suess (2001) or Matus (2007) have thoroughly analysed Gilbert's character and the underlying implications of his words and actions. As previously stated, Gilbert, either by force of contrast or by his own merit, could be considered as the hero of the novel. Through his character, Anne tries to construct the basis of a new, healthier masculinity; Jill Matus provided a brief but complete account of Gilbert's character in her essay "'Strong Family Likeness': *Jane Eyre* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*" (2007):

> Markham is a self-styled romantic hero, whose turbulent passions and excesses are at times made to seem slightly ridiculous. In the course of the novel, he occupies a variety of subject positions as Anne engages with the discourses that construct masculinity: youthful romanticism; foppishness; sexual jealousy, aggression and violence; sensitive, unthreatening manliness. He is never an idealised antidote to Arthur Huntingdon, but a means by which Anne Brontë puzzles over the questions of masculine adequacy – what makes a worthwhile, redeemable, 'good enough' man (105).

There is no consensus on whether Gilbert is a good enough man or even a good enough character. Amongst the critics, he has both supporters and detractors. His supporters argue that, as a dynamic character, Gilbert shows the ability to change and reform –contrary to Arthur–, and it is his spiritual and moral growth throughout the novel that finally makes him worthy of Helen's love: "Initially captivated by [Helen's] beauty, he comes to admire her intelligence, her strength of character and her gifts" (Nash and Suess 2001, 167). In the course of their acquaintance, Gilbert's techniques to gain Helen's affections might not be the most morally upright, such as his "feigned emotional restraint, the cultivation of shared tastes, and shows of interest in little Arthur" (168). Despite this, Gilbert's intentions are overall honourable, since he truly "believes Helen to be free to marry him, [...] and he shows no sign of wishing to press her into an illicit affair" (168). Gilbert's feelings for Helen are not

as worldly as Arthur's were; their love is "not only an *affaire de coeur* but also [...] a matter of the soul" (168). All in all, Gilbert's emotional and moral development, far superior to Arthur's. Gilbert is a new type of man, both in English society and in Helen's life. According to Nash and Suess (2001), "Gilbert is something Helen has never known before: a *vir bonus*[8], both physically active and mentally agile" (167). Gilbert is able to deny himself and not act upon his desire towards Helen; he makes his advances, but after reading Helen's diary, he understands her initial rejection and respects her values and purpose. Nash and Suess (2001) also suggest that there is a contrast between Gilbert "the farmer, a man of the earth" and the "spiritual and devout" Helen, that is not inherently contradictory, for in the end they are able to find perfect equilibrium in their marriage (166). In fact, at the end of the novel, it is made explicit that Helen, Gilbert and their children reside in Staningley, Helen's inherited estate; Gilbert has renounced his own estate at Linden-Car in favour of his younger brother. Again according to Nash and Suess (2001), "both in choosing to inhabit his wife's house and in having a younger brother inherit in defiance of primogeniture, Gilbert symbolically demonstrates that he does not want to be implicated personally in the injustices of English property laws" (105). This is another stark difference between Gilbert's "new" form of masculinity and Arthur's, who would destroy Helen's paintings to prevent her from making her own money. By having a –newly– very rich heiress marry a modest landowner, Anne Brontë defends both non-conventional masculinity and non-conventional marriages (Barbeito 2006, 71). Helen's ultimate desire regarding marriage is to have a companionate one, "centred around the romantic heterosexual couple", a marriage in which "the "new man" spends considerable time in the company of women" (Joshi 2009, 917). This is another discrepancy between Gilbert and Arthur's constructions of masculinity that is patent since the beginning of the novel: whereas Arthur spends all of his free time with his group of male friends, Gilbert is comfortable and used to the company of his mother, his sisters and other women in the community. Consequently, Gilbert's behaviour towards Helen is expected to be radically different than Arthur's, even though both of them hold privileges granted by Victorian patriarchy.

[8]"A *vir bonus* is an upright man, with moral and personal strength, gifted with good natural qualities and a strong cultural education, able to make a positive impact in the political hereafter". Covarrubias, Andrés. 2009. "*Vir bonus*: el modelo retórico-educativo en Quintiliano." Veritas. Revista de Filosofía y Teología IV, no. 21: 290. Redalyc, https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=291122930004. Accessed March 16, 2023 (translation is mine).

Even though most critics agree that Anne "deliberately attempted to create a hero with human weaknesses", the general perception is that "she failed to make his humanity appealing" (Nash and Suess 2001, 164). Despite Gilbert's moral development, there are those amongst the critics who "find him less than satisfactory as a romantic hero" (Nash and Suess 2001, 164). Since the whole story of *Tenant* is enclosed in the letter Gilbert writes to his brother-in-law, he is "able to tell a story against himself and does so with some relish –a fairly disarming characteristic" (164-165). However, according to some critics, this narrative structure "contributes to giving the reader a somewhat unfavourable impression of Gilbert in that he cannot, after all, write much about his good sides" (164); furthermore, however disarming his personality may appear at first, P. J. M. Scott argues that Gilbert "presents a self which gradually disquiets our nerves" (181). Despite Gilbert's development, some critics have argued that he and Arthur are not radically different from one another; this characterisation avoids presenting Gilbert as completely angelical and blameless. Laura Berry, in her article "Acts of Custody and Incarceration in *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*", describes Gilbert as follows:

> Gilbert has throughout the novel maintained an undercurrent of volcanic fury that is often eroticised; thus he is not psychologically so different from Arthur. He is prone to outbursts, he spies on "Mrs. Graham" (Brontë 2012 [1848], 124), and he is vicious to his horse as well as to Lawrence (whom he suspects of consorting with Helen) (134, 125). As he says himself of his behaviour towards Helen, he "secretly exulted in [his] power, [and] felt disposed to dally with my victim like a cat" (143) (Berry 1996, 45).

One of the most controversial moments in *Tenant* regarding Gilbert's character is his attack on Frederick Lawrence, Helen's brother. Without being aware of Helen and Frederick's kinship, Gilbert is possessed by a blind rage after hearing the rumours that they are involved romantically; after a wild horseback chase, Gilbert inflicts upon Frederick a blow on the head, which leaves the latter bedridden for some time. This episode has given the critics reason to think that Gilbert "is not sufficiently far off from the monster condition for our comfort", as P. J. M. Scott stated (Nash and Suess 2001, 181). In her search for a new, healthier masculinity apparently embodied by Gilbert, Anne Brontë does not redeem Gilbert's actions; instead, she openly condemns Gilbert's violence, and she clearly shows the evil of his actions and the reasons behind them. Elizabeth Langland has given a possible explanation

for Gilbert's violence: "[Gilbert's] unprovoked attack on Frederick is both irrational and violent. [...] Thematically and structurally in the novel, this episode develops the insidious effects of an indulgence [community gossip] that leads to masculine arrogance and abuse of power" (Nash and Suess 2001, 181). Gossip in *Tenant*, alongside its characteristics and consequences, is a recurring theme that has been amply discussed by critics such as Jan B. Gordon; the most dire consequence we can extract from Langland's statement is that Gilbert is actually a victim of insidious gossip. Gilbert finds himself time and time again provoked by gossip, which ultimately leads to his negative emotions and culminates in the physical attack. Whilst illustrating how mindless gossip can be destructive, Anne shows how Gilbert becomes so violent so that a reader can more readily forgive him. Nevertheless, and again according to Langland, modern readings of *Tenant* do not justify Gilbert's violence so easily, and "readers have been dissatisfied with Helen's marriage to Gilbert precisely because he seems different only in degree not in kind from Arthur" (Nash and Suess 2001, 181). By portraying Gilbert's faults alongside his virtues, Anne indicates a continuity in men's attitudes and behaviour towards women (Joshi 2009, 914), which can be considered a virtue of the novel.

Finally, despite the existing discrepancies regarding Gilbert's character, it is overall agreed on that he displays a new model of masculinity that contrasts with the aristocratic masculinity of Grassdale –more domestic and "domesticated" (Joshi 2009, 917). There is progression and learning in his story: "Early in the novel he is spoiled and violent, not unlike Arthur Huntingdon in some ways, but under Helen's influence he begins to promote a new, more domestic standard of masculinity" (Gruner 1997, 323). In the end, it is Gilbert and not Arthur, nor Helen on her own, who "gets custody" of Helen's son, of Helen's story, and of the whole narrative. But first he must prove his worthiness, and Anne's decision was to test him. Gilbert ultimately achieves reform and betterment during the period of his separation from Helen, "especially when he manages to renounce his desire to hear about Helen after she returns to nurse her husband". Such a change in his character makes "manliness" a matter not only of respect and respectability, but also of resistance; the characters and the novel manage to get closure only "when masculinity is redefined as a resistance to desires that threaten self" (Berry 1996, 52). In the words of Laura Berry, "in the end [his reform] qualifies him as the one who ought to get the girl" (52).

2.3. Child-rearing and education

To understand Anne Brontë's vision on child-rearing and education –not only of children, but human learning in general–, it is essential to take into account the social and political climate of the nineteenth century. As explained in the first chapter, one of the major legal reforms of the Victorian period was the reform of custody law. Family law at large was the subject of criticism in the early 1800s, since it did not accurately represent public sentiment about the family, and especially about the role of the mother (Berry 1996, 34). Intimately linked to the idea of the "angel of the house", the popular vision of motherhood focused on the sentimental and nurturing value of mothers; thus, a legal code that would not allow custody to women was at odds with the cultural representation of nurturing motherhood (35). At last, in 1839, the Custody of Infants Act allowed a woman that was separated from her husband to petition the court and, "provided she was good of character, to gain access to her young children and, potentially (although it was unlikely), temporary custody of children under seven years of age" (34). This reform was possible only after consensus on the nature of motherhood was reached in Parliament, thus establishing that motherhood was "a nurturing domesticity vitally necessary to a child's proper development" (35).

Even though reform was achieved, the law was still far from fair and equal to women. An accurate description of the unjust situation permitted by law was given by the author William Forsyth in 1850, in *A Treatise on the Law Relating to the Custody of Infants* (12-13):

> The application of this law which enforces with such jealous care the rights of the father, has often been extremely harsh. He might be a man of the most immoral character, and his conduct towards the mother such as to render it impossible for her, without all sacrifice of dignity and self-respect, to live with him; and yet, provided only that he was cautious enough not to bring his children into actual contact with pollution [...] he had the entire control over and disposition of them, and might embitter the life of the mother by depriving her of the society of her offspring. And what untold suffering might she not be called upon to endure, in the mental struggle between the affection which prompted her to submit to insult and injury for their sake, and the desire to escape from such usage by abandoning her home (Berry 1996, 34).

Forsyth's description is perfectly mirrored by Anne Brontë in *Tenant*: Helen, enduring an abominable marriage, knows that she cannot legally take her child away, for Arthur has the "entire control over and disposition of" little Arthur. But it is the fact that she is a mother, first and foremost –over all the other roles of womanhood given to her in the novel: wife, widow, ostensible fallen woman (Nash and Suess 2001, 113)– which ultimately prompts her escape. As Forsyth explained, Helen submits "to insult and injury", but she will not allow the corruption of her child.

Helen is deeply concerned about child-rearing even before little Arthur's birth; proof of this is that initially she blames Arhur's "harsh yet careless father and madly indulgent mother" for his vices (Brontë 2012 [1848], 236). In this passage of *Tenant*, Helen explains in detail how she thinks the rearing of her husband is the cause of his dissipate behaviour and vices:

> [...] make him what he would have been if he had not, from the beginning, had a bad, selfish, miserly father, who to gratify his own sordid passions, restricted him in the most innocent enjoyments of childhood and youth, and so disgusted him with every kind of restraint; –and a foolish mother who indulged him to the top of his bent, deceiving her husband for him, and doing her utmost to encourage those germs of folly and vice it was her duty to suppress– [...] (Brontë 2012 [1848], 183).

As time passes, Helen realises that Arthur's rearing is not entirely to blame for his character; his nature is indulgent and careless, and he does not have any incentive to practise moderation in his vices. Moreover, Helen's father is also a victim of alcoholism –he drank himself to death–, and Helen herself was a victim of his neglect; however, neither she nor her brother Frederick inherit their father's vices.

In *Tenant*, the issue of custody and child-rearing is conceived as a struggle between a tyrannical but negligent father and a loving mother whose prime interest is her child's wellbeing. As a deeply devout person, Helen views child-rearing as a mission commended to her by God; in her words: "thank Heaven, I am a mother too. God has sent me a soul to educate for heaven" (Brontë 2012 [1848], 251). Furthermore, she thinks of her role as a mother as that of a "shield, instructor, friend –to guide him along the perilous path of youth, and train him to be God's servant" (251). Helen's son is not only a godsend, but also her most

prized possession; this is why, in time of need –when Arthur takes away the money she had saved to escape the marital home–, she opts to take her child with her even if they have to face economic difficulties: "I am not going to sell my child for gold, though it were to save both him and me from starving; it would be better that he should die with me, than that he should live with his father" (Brontë 2012 [1848], 399; Berry 1996, 40, 51). On Arthur's part, he does not only not care about his son, but he even comes to resent him during the first years of his life for the attention he commands from Helen, thus depriving Arthur of her caring ministrations.

Arthur's influence on their son is Helen's "constant terror", a fear that haunts her constantly. As a wealthy Victorian man, for whom it would be virtually impossible to lose the favour of the law, Arthur does not have to concern himself directly with child-rearing. However, as little Arthur grows up, he seems ready to instil on his son his own vices; Helen describes Arthur's influence on their son as "contaminating": "his father [...] delighted to encourage in [him] all the embryo vices a little child can show, and to instruct him in all the evil habits he could acquire –in a word, to 'make a man of him'" (Brontë 2012 [1848], 384). Of course, as Arthur is a man, he would expect his son to be raised to behave in his same fashion; when he learns that Helen is actively trying to counteract his influence, he tells his wife that she is "not fit to teach children, or to be with them", for she has already "reduced the boy to little better than an automaton" (387) (Berry 1996, 50-51). But Arthur's corrupting influence goes beyond spoiling his son and encouraging his vices; it is his own vital example that Helen seeks to spare her son from. Thus, when Helen witnesses the adulterous encounter between Arthur and Annabella in the shrubbery of their mansion, she centres the ensuing confrontation on the welfare of the child rather than on the behaviour of the father (Berry 1996, 38): "Will you let me take our child and what remains of my fortune and go [...] anywhere, where he will be safe from your contaminating influence [...]" (Brontë 2012 [1848], 315). As soon as Helen becomes a mother, it is that role that becomes predominant over any other; she can bear to be replaced as a conjugal partner by Arthur's mistresses, but she cannot bear to be replaced as a mother. This is why, when a new governess enters the house –a woman with whom Arthur is having an affair–, Helen is determined to flee, to free his son from the influence of both his father and his governess. In the letter she writes to her aunt, Helen expresses that although she has endured Arthur's abuse so far, "in duty to my son, I must submit no longer; it [is] absolutely necessary that he should be delivered from his father's corrupting influences" (Brontë 2012 [1848], 391; Gruner 1997, 310).

Tenant argues for the importance of child-rearing in creating a moral human being, empathic and self-disciplined (Nash and Suess 2001, 111). Anne Brontë imbued her novel with her own ideas about child-rearing and education, often based on her readings of the *Methodist Magazine*[9], which was a primary source of enlightenment and education for her. The contemporary religious debates featured in this publication allowed Anne to reflect on how education privileged boys and crippled girls, and on how pedagogy was intrinsically linked with the gendered behaviour that was considered appropriate at the time (Nash and Suess 2001, 128-129). In the essay "Anne Brontë: A Quiet Feminist", written by Marion Shaw, she argues that it was Anne's exposure to her brother's alcoholism that prompted her denunciation of the destructive effects of the upbringing of boys. It was the concept of "manliness" and "womanliness" instilled in children that inspired Anne's most independent and groundbreaking views on education. First and foremost, Anne argues for an ungendered and Christian upbringing for children of both sexes throughout the whole *Tenant* (Nash and Suess 2001, 111-112). Helen, in her passionate speech about education, says: "You would have us encourage our sons to prove all things by their own experience, while our daughters must not even profit by the experience of others" (Brontë 2012 [1848], 30). In her discourse, she publicly acknowledges that the minds and spirits of male and female children are equal, and equally susceptible to influences from the "fallen world of experience"; moreover, all children –as well as adults– are bound to obey the "precepts of a higher authority", the moral and religious laws that take no account of gender (Nash and Suess 2001, 113-114). Her vital experiences have made it clear for Helen that society's codes of "manliness" provide an excuse for men to be licentious, and that to be "a man of the world" –as Arthur was– is the opposite of being a child of God and observing His principles; in truth, the man who claims to have "seen life and glories in his experience" is becoming a devil that works against the Life and the Glory of God (Brontë 2012 [1848], 30; Nash and Suess 2001, 113). Helen's voice, and thus Anne's, provides not only a woman's humanising influence on the child she is raising, but also a critique of education that is aligned with the contemporary debates taking place in bourgeois Victorian society (Carnell 1998, 11).

[9]Methodism –closely related to Protestantism– followed the doctrines taught by the clergyman John Wesley (1703-1791). Methodism defended the belief of universal redemption, contrary to the Calvinist doctrine of predestinarianism. The *Methodist Magazine*, founded by Wesley and published from 1744 to 1960, consisted mainly of extracts and original treatises on universal redemption. "Wesleyan and Primitive Methodism, 1744-1960", British Online Archives, https://microform.digital/boa/collections/3/wesleyan-and-primitive-methodist-periodicals-1744-1960. Accessed March 29, 2023.

Tenant not only focuses on the upbringing of children, but also on the learning and education of adults. Taking into account the moralising function of the novel, that Anne stressed in her "Preface to the Second Edition", one of Anne's aims was to teach the unvarnished truth, to help prepare her readers to live in the world. In order to do that, in *Tenant* Anne explores the principles of learning, and how learning affects knowledge, again using the publications of the *Methodist Magazine* as her primary source (Nash and Suess 2001, 131, 129). Human learning is rarely linear, and through Helen's story and her narrative technique, Anne reflects the roundabout path that humans sometimes are forced to take in order to understand a difficult truth. As learning is not linear, Anne's novel is not linear: her narrative strategy –the story interrupted by the diary– takes the readers back to the past, and frustrates their need to witness the logical and progressive development of Helen and Gilbert's relationship. As Helen and –especially– Gilbert fall prey to insidious gossip and speculation, Anne demonstrates how Gilbert, his family, and the whole community prefer to believe an easy story and remain ignorant of the truth rather than face a harsh reality. But Helen's diary is Anne's chosen remedy for ignorance: it is a collective movement from ignorance to enlightenment (Nash and Suess 2001, 134-136): first, Helen learns her life lesson; then, Gilbert learns the truth about Helen's past, which he reports to his family; finally, Halford learns the truth of Helen's story at the same time the readers do. All in all, the insertion of Helen's diary is mainly meant to teach its readers –Gilbert, his brother-in-law and *Tenant*'s readers– about the realities of alcoholism and abusive marriages. In its thwarting of the love story, Helen's diary not only contributes to the education of its readers, but it also documents Helen's own education in the horrors of her married life (Nash and Suess 2001, 133).

Anne's novel is revolutionary in its understanding of child-rearing and education. It defends mothers' rights to raise their children, denouncing the unsuitability of negligent fathers, at the same time that it calls for an equal Christian upbringing of girls and boys. Anne criticises the consequences of ignorance and promotes the quest for the truth, even if harsh and painful, as that of Helen and Gilbert's. In her documentation of the recognisable consequences of alcoholism, neglect, infidelity and abuse, Anne created a novel that embodies the processes of waiting and learning (Nash and Suess 2001, 146); as she makes her characters learn, she instructs her audience not to fall into their same errors.

3. The critical reception of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* at the time of publication (1848 - 1857)

This section of the project will provide a general review of the critical reception of *Tenant* at the time of its publication and the first following years, up until 1857, when critical recensions of the novel stopped for a period of thirteen years (Johnson 1950, 5). Anne Brontë, who died in May, 1849, was only exposed to the critics and the public's reaction to her novel for a year after its publication.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall was first published in June, 1848, under the pseudonym of Acton Bell. The man in charge of its publication, Thomas Newby, had previously published *Agnes Grey* and *Wuthering Heights*. At the time, the Brontë sisters' true identities were still hidden behind their pseudonyms –Ellis, Currer and Acton Bell– and it was an object of speculation amongst the public. Newby decided to advertise *Tenant* as written by the author of the new bestseller *Jane Eyre*, which prompted Anne and Charlotte to arrange a first personal meeting with him, revealing for the first time the personalities behind the pseudonyms. Nonetheless, early reviewers often discussed the two novels in conjunction, treating them as if the two belonged to the same writer (Matus 2007, 100).

Although it was published after both Emily and Charlotte's most celebrated novels, *Tenant* achieved more success than anything else previously written by the sisters, with the exception of *Jane Eyre* (Johnson 1950, 35). Due to its immediate popular success, a further printing of *Tenant* was called for in July, 1848, which included Anne's notable "Preface to the Second Edition", in which she challenged her first reviewers's accusations of writing to "gratify [her] own taste" and depicting painful scenes with "a morbid love of the coarse, if not of the brutal" (Brontë 2012 [1848], xi-xii). Furthermore, Anne justified her reasons for writing about her chosen topics and her wish to tell her truth. Her words further "enthralled library subscribers" and "shocked the moralists" (Winifred Gérin in Brontë 2012 [1848], 525). Anne recognised both a certain surprise at the success of her novel and resentment at the harsh criticism it received in the following excerpt from her "Preface":

> While I acknowledge the success of the present work to have been greater than I anticipated, and the praises it has elicited from a few kind critics to have been greater than it deserved, I must also admit that from some other quarters it

> has been censured with an asperity which I was little prepared to expect, and which my judgement, as well as my feelings, assures me is more bitter than just (Brontë 2012 [1848], xi).

Even though, in publishing terms, the novel was a "striking, if unexpected, success", the vast majority of contemporary responses, published in various magazines, were overtly critical and negative (Ward 2007, 168). In *The Spectator*, the reviewer was appalled by the "morbid love for the coarse, not to say the brutal" displayed by Anne; this same reviewer considered the subject matter of the novel as "offensive". *The Rambler* considered *Tenant* "one of the coarsest books which we ever perused"; *Sharpe's London Magazine* was concerned by the thought that "lady-readers" could stumble across the novel, because many scenes were "so revolting, so coarse and disgusting the language put into the mouths of some of the characters, that the reviewer to whom we entrusted [the novel] returned it to us, saying it was unfit to be noticed in the pages of *Sharpe's*". A similar distaste for the novel could be found abroad. *The North American Review* wrote that "everywhere is seen the tendency of the author to degrade passion into appetite, and to give prominence to the selfish and malignant elements of human nature". The American magazine went on stating that the novel was "disgusting" and that the author had surely "spent too much time reading the most lascivious reports of the criminal courts" (Joshi 2009, 919; Ward 2007, 168). Overall, the early critical response to the novel suggests that the reviewers did not wish to hear the "unpleasant truths" it revealed, and that the critics were "disturbed by the domestic violence [it] portrayed". The most used adjectives to refer to *Tenant* were "offensive", "coarse", "vulgar", "morbid" and "unhealthy". Furthermore, the reviewers felt the need to "reassure themselves and their readers that education, cultivation, and civilisation will preclude brutal behaviour; and objected to powerful fictional representations contradicting this premise" (Gruner 1997, 322).

Charlotte Brontë was amongst *Tenant*'s severe critics. She first expressed her dislike for *Tenant* in a letter dated from September, 1848, in which she wrote: "Acton Bell has published another book… but I do not like it quite so well as *Agnes Grey* –the subject not being such as the author had pleasure in handling" (Johnson 1950, 37). In Charlotte's "Biographical Notice" from 1850, she wrote that *Tenant*'s "choice of subject was an entire mistake" (920); she claimed that Anne's fictions were merely copied, in an obsessive way, from life. She indirectly suggested that their brother Branwell's progressive degradation –his depression and abuse of drugs and alcohol– might have inspired Anne to write a novel such as *Tenant*.

Charlotte wrote that "Anne 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 [...]. She brooded over it till she believed it to be a duty to reproduce every detail [...] as a warning to others. She hated her work but she would pursue it" (Nash and Suess 2001, 34). According to Nash and Suess, Charlotte was able to diminish Anne's narrative talent and inventiveness, rendering the novel as a mistake and the product of obsession, against which "she had in vain struggled to persuade her" (79). In terms of Priti Joshi (2009), Charlotte was the one to deliver "the greatest blow to Anne Bronë's reputation and the novel's survival": the novel's unfavourable reception led Charlotte to eliminate *Tenant* from the reprinting of her sisters' novels, choosing instead *Agnes Grey*. She declared to her publishers that *Tenant* "hardly appears to [her] desirable to preserve", a negative assessment that plagued and encumbered Anne's achievements (Gordon 1984, 744). One of the reasons Jill Matus (2007) provides for Charlotte's dislike of *Tenant*, besides its similarity to Branwell's story, is its twinning with *Jane Eyre*, which had also been labelled coarse and vulgar. It is the belief of some modern critics that the ensemble of Charlotte's negative assessments of *Tenant* set the tone for its ensuing valuations (100) until 1849.

The first critic to publish a somewhat favourable review of *Tenant* was Charles Kingsley, who wrote for *Fraser's Magazine* in 1849. He was the first to refer to *Tenant* as a "satire, and an exposure of evils"; he praised Acton Bell's determination to expose the "foul and accursed undercurrents" that laid beneath the "smug, respectable, whitewashed English society". Kingsley expressed his wish that "every man in England might read and lay to heart that horrible record [narrated in Helen's diary]". However, even though he recognised the author's realistic narrative talent and their intention to reveal the hypocrisy of English society, he also condemned the "coarseness" of the book, which rendered his review neither wholly positive nor negative, but contradictory. Regarding Helen's diary, he stated: "But what greater mistake can there be than to fill such a diary with written oaths and curses, with details of drunken scenes which no wife [...] would have the heart, not to say the common decency to write down as they occurred". According to him, the author had ultimately violated propriety, because the things she spoke of, even if realistic and plausible, should not be narrated (Joshi 2009, 919; Nash and Suess 2001, 190). To add to the positive aspect of Kingsley's review, two other favourable anonymous reviews were found: in the *Literary World*, the reviewer hoped that the "reality of the novel would make it seize upon the public mind"; the *Athenaeum* published that *Tenant* was the "most interesting novel which we have read for

some time" (Ward 2007, 169). Another critic called Edwin Percy Whipple published an overall negative review in *The North American Review*, but he conceded that "all the characters [of the novel] are drawn with great power and precision of outline, and the scenes are as vivid as life itself" (Johnson 1950, 38).

As previously mentioned, Anne Brontë issued a reply to her critics in her "Preface to the Second Edition". She saw a connection between the speculations surrounding Acton Bell's gender, which stemmed from the way her characters were presented, to the critical reception of her novel; she attributed *Tenant*'s critical judgement to a timorous attitude regarding female projects (Barbeito 2006, 50). There are two separate instances in her "Preface" in which she addressed the irrelevance of the gender of the author: "As little can it matter whether the writer so designated is a man, or a woman as one or two of my critics profess to have discovered. I take the imputation in good part, as a compliment to the just delineation of my female characters" (Brontë 2012 [1848], xiii). In the following quotation, Anne vouches again for equality in authorship:

> [...] in my own mind, I am satisfied that if a book is a good one, it is so whatever the sex of the author may be. All novels are or should be written for both men and women to read, and I am at a 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 (Brontë 2012 [1848], xiii).

Anne also defended her individuality from those who believed the three Bell authors to be one and the same: "Respecting the author's identity, I would have it to be distinctly understood that Acton Bell is neither Currer nor Ellis Bell, and therefore, let not his faults be attributed to them" (Brontë 2012 [1848], xiii). Regarding the general negative criticism her work received, Anne stated that her wish was only to tell the truth and depict reality without any "delicate concealment" of facts: "[...] I find myself censured for depicting *con amore*, with 'a morbid love of the coarse, if not the brutal', those scenes which, I will venture to say, have not been more painful for the most fastidious of my critics to read, than they were for me to describe" (Brontë 2012 [1848], xii). In her brief but powerful "Preface", Anne chose to make a stand in favour of equality in authorship, while defending the truth revealed by her novel in face of those who denounced its "coarseness".

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall was widely read and discussed during Anne's lifetime, but her works fell out of favour over time. At first criticised for being too "coarse" and "vulgar", its assessment progressively changed to too "religious" and "didactic" instead (Nash and Suess 2001, ix). Already marked by the negative criticism given by the first reviewers –including Charlotte Brontë–, *Tenant* contributed to society's negative attitude towards the Brontë novels, which would become more exacerbated once the identities behind the pseudonyms were revealed. This, together with the rigidity of Victorian values –such as respectability and decorum– in the 1850s, relegated *Tenant* to literary obscurity, for absolutely no critical reviews were found between 1857 and 1873, and only four in the next twenty-six years (Johnson 1950, 42). To Victorian society, it was inexcusable for a woman to pen such an infraction of values, full of coarse descriptions and an illegitimate romance that not only went unpunished, but ended in a happy union (Barbeito 2006, 51).

4. The novel's modern relevance. The critical reception of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* between 1873 and the early 2000s

This section of the project focuses on the criticism *Tenant* received during the late part of the nineteenth century, the twentieth century and its current consideration amongst literary critics, who revaluated its worth and elevated the status of the novel to a nineteenth century classic, and a pioneer feminist novel.

According to Johnson (1950), who compiled the critical reviews of *Tenant* from the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries, much of the search for criticism of Anne's novels has been fruitless (5). After its initial critical rejection, writers and critics continued to ignore Anne's novels or dismiss them with a passing comment. As mentioned in the previous chapter, there was no recension of *Tenant* to be found between the years 1857 and 1873, and only four could be found until the year 1899. One of these latest reviews was signed by George Barnett Smith in *The Cornhill Magazine* of July 1873. He criticised that some parts of *Tenant* were "more offensive and repulsive" than even the "great *pièce de résistance*" that was *Wuthering Heights*; however, he conceded that there was a certain "gentleness" to Anne's writing, and that the general unpleasantness of the novel was redeemed in the last few chapters. He also recognised Anne's goal to educate her audience, condemning vice and trying to steer people away from its path:

> No one can affirm that vice is ever winked at: it is, on the contrary, drawn without cloak or veil, in order that its devotees may be ashamed, or that those who are in danger of becoming its victims may be arrested and appalled. Such, we take it, is the great lesson of *Tenant*, and readers, even without sympathy for the author, would be unjust to affirm that the lesson is not taught with sufficient distinctiveness and force… (Johnson 1950, 42).

Another review from this period was written by the English poet and essayist Algernon Charles Swinburne, in 1886. He stated that, knowing that *Tenant* was penned by the sister of Emily and Charlotte Brontë, it seemed "ludicrously weak" and "apparently imitative" in comparison to their works. Despite this comment, he considered that *Tenant* deserved a little more notice and recognition than it had received, because "as a study of [...] immorality it bears signs of a more faithful transcription from life than anything in *Jane Eyre* or *Wuthering*

Heights" (Johnson 1950, 44). With the beginning of the twentieth century, the reviews of *Tenant* increased in number, and the novel began to be considered under a more favourable scope. All in all, critics started to agree that *Tenant* deserved more recognition than what had been initially given to it.

It is worth mentioning the attention dedicated by modern critics to the narrative structure of *Tenant*. The first review of this century appeared in 1903, written by Walter Frewen Lord, who admitted that *Tenant* was "a much neglected book", but considered that the narrative device of a story within a story was a "drawback [...] which always fatigues the attention" (Johson 1950, 46). In 1924, the English writer George Moore, who otherwise ranked Anne Brontë very high on the list of English novelists –almost worthy of a place beside Jane Austen or even higher, had she lived ten years longer–, agreed with Lord in complaining about Anne's choice of narrative structure (Gérin in Brontë 2012 [1848], 533). According to him, the transcription of Helen's diary "broke the story in halves", and he suggests that "almost any man of letters would have advised Brontë" to produce a melodramatic revelation scene instead of "the clumsy device of the plot within a plot" (Nash and Suess 2001, 77-78).

Even though *Tenant*'s narrative structure has been under attack since the publication of the novel, criticism has lately warmed to its form. Criticism focused on gender and gender roles has seen the role that power plays in *Tenant*'s narrative structure, which is now considered to be "a conscious commentary on the intractable rift between [male] public and [female] private spheres" (Carnell 1998, 1; Nash and Suess 2001, 81). According to N. M. Jacobs, *Tenant*'s narrative structure "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" (Carnell 1998, 2). This cultural split between male and female spheres is reflected on how Helen's story belongs to the private, domestic, female sphere, and as such it must be shared through Gilbert's hands for it to achieve a semblance of acceptance in the public sphere, dominated by men. Further praise to the narrative structure of *Tenant* states that "Anne's complex narrative helped her explore the complexity of real life", since it helped her to create believable characters. Anne made use of the embedding of Helen's diary after Gilbert's initial narration in order to create a more relatable heroine, since this "provided the reader with the opportunity to see the heroine before becoming absorbed in her own story" (Senf 1990, 449).

The opinion of the critics regarding Anne's narrative talents and realistic writing also shifted during the twentieth century. After the initial consideration of *Tenant* as a "clumsy" novel and "without any element of greatness" (Johnson 1950, 42, 52), George Moore recognised in 1924 that Anne possessed a "quality of heat, one the rarest qualities" (Gérin in Brontë 2012 [1848], 533). Clara H. Whitmore, in her book *Woman's Work in English Fiction* (1910), wrote that she found the story realistic and a remarkable change from the novel of a century before, in which Huntingdon would have made a fine hero of romance instead of a villain. Whitmore also praised Anne's narrative talent and *Tenant*'s potential, although it lacked a certain "maturity":

> If years had mellowed that "undreamt-of experience" of Thorp Green[10], Anne with her truthful observation and sympathetic insight into character might have written a classic. The material out of which *Tenant* was wrought, under a more mature mind, with a better grasp of the whole and a better regard for proportion, would have made a novel worthy of a place beside Jane Eyre (Johnson 1950, 49).

Anne's realistic writing was a source of shock when *Tenant* was published, but it is now highly valued by critics. By creating realistic characters, "drawn with great power and precision of outline", and situations "as vivid as life itself" (Johnson 1950, 38), Anne provided a source of material for historical research in matters as diverse as agriculture, changing tastes in the arts and male friendship (Nash and Suess 2001, 153). It is nowadays considered that *Tenant* was crafted with "artistry and power", and that Anne's narrative mainly constitutes a satire, a weapon with which she could expose "many great abuses and fight evil and injustice through her fiction" (Nash and Suess 2001, 130, 173).

Anne Brontë's current consideration is that of a courageous, bold author who was ahead of her time in some aspects. In 1912, Mary Sinclair was the first critic to address Anne's audacity in handling moral situations. According to her, "there was, in this smallest and least considerable of the Brontës, an immense, terrifying audacity [...] it was willed, it was deliberate, open-eyed. Anne took her courage in both hands when she sat down to write *Tenant*". She goes on asserting that there are scenes in *Tenant*, those who deal with the most

[10]In the estate of Thorp Green Anne found her second position as a governess. Her brother Branwell also worked there as a tutor, and he engaged in a personal relationship with the lady of the house, which met an unhappy end. Branwell's moral and physical degradation Branwell –his abuse of opium and alcohol– increased afterwards. The events that took place at Thorp Green were supposed to be the inspiration behind *Tenant*.

unpleasant parts of abuse in marriage, "which for sheer audacity stand alone in mid-Victorian literature" (Johnson 1950, 50). A further statement of Sinclair's seemed to have cemented this consideration of Anne as a courageous author: in 1913, she wrote that "the slamming of Helen Huntingdon's bedroom-door against her husband reverberated throughout Victorian England" (Gérin in Brontë 2012 [1848], 525). In 1929, Dr. Will Hale published the first study dedicated solely to Anne Brontë; he agreed with Sinclair in saying that "the views there set forth in the mid-Victorian period by a woman show that the youngest of the Brontës was one of the bravest and boldest". Furthermore, he stated that "in her ideas and situations, she was way ahead of her times" (Johnson 1950, 58). This opinion was also shared by Grant Cochran Knight, who in 1931 described *Tenant* as the novel in which Anne "advocated the right of a wife to leave an intolerable husband and live apart from him without suspicion or stigma. [...] *Tenant* is the first strong protest in English fiction against the dominance of the male" (63). Years later, in 1973, Tom Winnifrith described Anne as the "most obvious and crude of the sisters", "for in her views of marriage as in other spheres Anne Brontë is a much more blatant preacher of unorthodox attitudes than her sisters" (Senf 1990, 446). For its audacity, coupled with Anne's, *Tenant* now stands alone among other mid-Victorian novels, and Anne's treatment of the separation in marriage was considered a prophecy of what was to come (Johnson 1950, 56).

Feminist reappraisals of *Tenant*, framed in the study of women who have been historically silenced (Barbeito 2006, 81), have ensured a change in the social value of the novel. The novel was condemned as a stone of scandal in 1848 and relegated to a "shadowy" status in Victorian England. Victorian readers were troubled not only by the depictions of brutality, drunkenness and abuse, but also by the revelation of society's hypocrisy and the shattered illusion of marital harmony. Its realistic portrayal of an abusive marriage and the faithful picture of the degradation of a drunkard cemented *Tenant*'s status in the mid-twentieth century as "the most truthful and impressive handling of the subject in fiction" (Johnson 1950, 77). Moreover, *Tenant* started a discussion on how the law affected women, and about how the law might be challenged and rectified. Marital abuse and the legal inequalities that perpetuate various tyrannies are issues of "burning immediacy to generations of wives and mothers, and husbands and fathers"; for this reason, *Tenant* is a novel that spoke to its Victorian audience and continues to speak to its current readers (Ward 2007, 151-152). *Tenant* now commands critical attention as a "gesture of active resistance to marital violence"

and as “the first forceful protest against the dominance of the male” (Johnson 1950, 77; Ward 2007, 152) .

Because *Tenant* touches upon a variety of themes, it has been considered a difficult novel to classify formally (Gruner 1997, 309); however, recent criticism has highlighted its feminist intention. Inga-Stina Eubank argued in 1966 that *Tenant* was a feminist novel, but not in “the obvious sense”, since she believed that Anne’s feminist impulses were “unconscious”, and she did not focus her novel on issues such as women’s access to university or employment (Senf 1990, 447). However, Anne’s choice of subjects for *Tenant* was conscious; Joshi (2009) labels *Tenant*’s themes, such as “women’s struggle to gain independence and an identity outside marriage, and an exposé of men’s bad behaviour”, as protofeminist (908). Anne’s novel was a testament of the way that women’s views on such subjects were silenced: the fictional Helen had no choice but to consign her marriage story to a diary, but Anne chose to break the barrier of silence and she made both her protagonist and herself be heard (Senf 1990, 455). Henceforth, the interest of feminist critics in the novel is amply warranted: first, as an author, Anne defended in her “Preface” the purpose of her novel and the right of male and female writers to be judged equally; second, *Tenant* denounces the situation of a married woman “powerless to detach herself by legal means from even the most depraved husband” (Nash and Suess 2001, 153).

In sum, *Tenant*’s progressive change in status was due to the comparative openness of the twentieth century and the rising importance of the feminist perspective. The revaluation of the themes of the novel was closely linked to the recognition of Anne’s talent as a writer: as the novel went from vulgar to courageous, so Anne’s narrative abilities went from unremarkable to powerful. Ultimately, what enabled Anne to denounce social injustice and immorality so powerfully was her ability to transform real-life issues into literary art (Gérin in Brontë 2012 [1848], xii). Anne’s use of a carefully curated narration as a tool to pose a strong, unprecedented critique of an abusive marriage is what guarantees *Tenant*’s current status as a pioneer feminist novel and a nineteenth-century classic.

Conclusions

After introducing a general historical context including some defining sociocultural conventions of the Victorian period, one can affirm that Anne Brontë, as a female writer, was deeply concerned by the social issues of her time. Anne decided to write not only about the difficulties women had to face to obtain freedom and independence –from the search of feminine autonomy and individuality to the denunciation of the oppression suffered by women– but also about other issues that affected Victorian society, such as the decadence of aristocracy and the rise of bourgeois values. *Tenant* touches on some of the social issues of mid-Victorian society, such as women's legal inequality, the question of child custody and divorce, and other concerns that still hold relevance in contemporary times, as the abuse of alcohol and marital abuse. Anne also imbued her novel with her personal views, some of which were ahead of her time, thus giving *Tenant* a progressive, prophetic quality. Even though *Tenant* is considered a difficult novel to classify in terms of topic, due to the variety of issues it discusses –gossip, religion, love, marriage…– three have been selected as the most relevant: the issue of equality between men and women, the search for a new masculinity, and child-rearing and education. Anne's innovative personal views in the treatment of these themes and their moral and social relevance, both past and present, were the criteria for their selection.

Regarding equality, Anne denounced a situation of marital abuse, and through Helen's story, she defended the right of women to escape from and separate their husbands. Anne bravely portrayed a dysfunctional marriage, corrupted by adultery, alcoholism and psychological abuse. Even though Anne's heroine possessed great moral strength, oftentimes drawn from her religious beliefs, she did not opt for submission and sacrifice: Helen endured, but in the end, prompted by self-preservation and love for her child, she made the choice to abandon Arthur, braving the censure of society and even legal consequences. In a sense, Anne anticipated the reform of divorce law that took place in 1857, which allowed the possibility of civil divorce for women; granted, only for those with enough economical means and who could prove to be enduring harrowing situations. Furthermore, in a time when women could only hold property under very specific circumstances, and their access to jobs and education was strictly limited, Anne defended women's right and ability to earn their own money and be independent. In order to support herself and her child, Helen painted and sold her art, thus displaying a sense of entrepreneurship so far reserved to men. In this way, Anne also went

beyond the only two professional roles allowed to women in Victorian times, those being teachers and governesses; she made Helen an artist who could actually earn her livelihood with her art. Moreover, in another twist of social conventions and property laws, Helen finishes her story as a wealthy heiress that marries below her station. Instead of Helen relocating to her husband's estate and managing his household, Gilbert forfeits his property and moves to Staningley, where they enjoy a companionate marriage founded on the worthiness of both characters.

Concerning the search for a new masculinity, Anne made use of her two male protagonists, Arthur and Gilbert. This theme was deeply linked to the decadence of aristocracy, brought about by the steady rise of capitalist bourgeoisie since the start of modernity, which infused society with its values: productivity, effort, and the wish to better oneself. Arthur was the decadent, unproductive and hedonistic aristocrat who was unable to master his vices and eventually met his demise because of them. But he was not an exception; he was almost constantly accompanied by his friends, a group of similarly wealthy and debauched men whose only apparent interest was to indulge in endless revelries. Gilbert, on the other hand, embodied a new masculinity, that of a farmer who provided for his family, and who showed a moral and emotional development that eventually merited Helen's affections. Nonetheless, it is necessary to recall that Gilbert provoked both negative and positive appraisals from critics, and his character is still questioned. It is believed that Anne intended for Gilbert to be a positive contrast to Arthur; however, critics have argued that these male characters are not so different. Gilbert's character shows more complexity than Arthur's in the way he is capable of sensitivity and change, but according to his detractors, his shortcomings –unchecked impulses that lead to violence– outweigh his virtues. Anne cleverly avoided creating a blameless male character in order to discuss the question of masculine adequacy: Gilbert is radically different from Arthur, but he is still susceptible to abuse his power –as he sometimes does with Helen and Frederick–; thus, the reader is led to ponder if Gilbert is, in fact, a good enough man despite his redeeming qualities. Nonetheless, by portraying a flawed, even dislikable hero, Anne vouched for a new model of masculinity represented by Gilbert: a man able to renounce his wishes and evolve emotionally, who spent a lot of time in the company of women –contrary to Arthur and his friends– and who was, as a result, the other half of a companionate marriage.

Anne's views on child-rearing and education were probably the most transgressive at the time of the publication of the novel. Until 1839, it was not allowed for a mother to hold custody of her children; a legal code that was at odds with the cultural representation of nurturing motherhood and dutiful wife that was so common in Victorian England. By setting her novel prior to this reform, Anne once again defied social conventions and interceded for the right of mothers to raise their children. To get her son away from his father's damning influence, Helen fled the marital home in search for a place where she could raise her child to be a morally upright human being. In order to do this, Helen chose unconventional methods of education that would be frowned upon by society, effectively posing a critique of the educational method that implied that boys had to be exposed to temptation in order to learn to avoid it –often leading to uncontrolled excess, as was the case of Arthur–, while girls should be shielded even from the experiences of others. Anne disagreed with the standards of manliness and womanliness imposed upon children, and she fervently defended an ungendered Christian upbringing; these beliefs she expressed through Helen's passionate speeches about her son's education. In *Tenant*, Helen –and thus, Anne– fiercely advocates for an egalitarian education to prepare both boys and girls for the real world. From the very beginning of the novel, in the "Preface to the Second Edition", Anne stressed the importance education held for her and stated her wish for her novel to be didactic and moralising, a guide for readers on the path to avoid.

It was Anne's innovative ideas and her treatment of controversial themes that accounted both for the initial rejection of *Tenant* and the following revaluation of its value. At the time of publication, even though it found unexpected success, critics agreed that the novel was "coarse", "vulgar" and "morbid"; the depictions of alcoholism and brutality were revolting and considered unrealistic, and Anne's narrative technique was "clumsy" and "without any element of greatness". These initial critical reviews were conditioned not only by the mid-Victorian mindset, which signalled the novel as a breach of respectability, but also by the criticism the novel received from Charlotte Brontë, which, according to some critics, set the tone for part of the negative consideration of the novel and the ensuing indifference. Nonetheless, the beginning of the twentieth century saw a slow but steady change in critical perspective; literary critics began to consider *Tenant* under a new, more favourable light. It could not be denied any longer that Anne had been greatly bold and courageous to publicly denounce marital abuse in the nineteenth century, and that her ideas were ahead of her time. Likewise, critics admitted to Anne's realistic prose being careful and curated, and her choice

of narrative structure, once criticised, is now regarded as a contribution to the social value of the novel.

Critics today generally recognise *The Tenant*'s historical, social, moral, and aesthetic value; its current status as a nineteenth-century classic and a pioneer feminist novel is due to the truth it speaks: marital abuse is an issue as pressing today as it was almost two centuries ago. As Winifred Gérin stated, "what makes the book so readable today is its total honesty, its psychological truth" (Brontë 2012 [1848], 530). Anne was capable of discussing contemporary issues with artistic mastery, and its artistic value and the ongoing relevance of its themes is what makes *Tenant* a classic and one of the first –if not the first, as some have argued– truly feminist novel.

Bibliography

Primary sources:

Brontë, Anne. 2012. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Penguin English Library.

Secondary sources:

Barbeito Varela, J. Manuel. 2006. *Las Brontë y su mundo*. Editorial Síntesis.

Berry, Laura C. 1996. "Acts of Custody and Incarceration in *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*." *Novel* 30, no. 1: 32-55. https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/acts-custody-incarceration-wuthering-heights/docview/205295171/se-2?accountid=17253.

Carnell, Rachel K. 1998. "Feminism and the Public Sphere in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*." *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 53: 1–24. https://doi.org/10.2307/2902968.

Gordon, Jan B. 1984. "Gossip, Diary, Letter, Text: Anne Brontë's Narrative *Tenant* and the Problematic of the Gothic Sequel." *ELH* 51, no. 4: 719-745. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2872781.

Gruner, Elisabeth R. 1997. "Plotting the Mother: Caroline Norton, Helen Huntingdon and Isabel Vane." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 16, no. 2: 303-325. https://doi.org/10.2307/464364

Hyman, Gwen. 2008. "'An Infernal Fire in My Veins': Gentlemanly Drinking in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*." *Victorian Literature and Culture* 36: 451-469. https://www.proquest.com/undefined/infernal-fire-my-veins-gentlemanly-drinking-em/docview/2152415367/se-2?accountid=17253.

Johnson, Betty Jean. 1950. "Criticism of Anne Brontë's two novels." Thesis. Indiana State University.
http://hdl.handle.net/10484/4916

Joshi, Priti. 2009. "Masculinity and Gossip in Anne Brontë's *Tenant*." *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 49: 907-924. https://www.proquest.com/undefined/masculinity-gossip-anne-brontës-em-tenant/docview/215259389O/se-2?accountid=17253.

Matus, Jill. 2007. "'Strong Family Likeness': *Jane Eyre* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*." In *The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës, Cambridge*, edited by Glen, Heather, 99-121. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://www.proquest.com/books/strong-family-likeness-jane-eyre-tenant-wildfell/docview/2137992922/se-2?accountid=17253.

Mgamis, Majid S. 2012. "'Decolonizing feminism': Women's power in *Agnes Grey*, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and *Wuthering Heights*." PhD diss. Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

Nash, Julie and Barbara A. Suess. 2001. *New Approaches to the Literary Art of Anne Brontë*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Senf, Carol A. 1990. "*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*: Narrative Silences and Questions of Gender." *College English* 52, no. 4: 446. https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/tenant-wildfell-hall-narrative-silences-questions/docview/236916764/se-2?accountid=17253.

Walls, Elizabeth MacLeod. 2002. "'A Little Afraid of the Women of Today': The Victorian New Woman and the Rhetoric of British Modernism." *Rhetoric Review* 21, no. 3: 229–46. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3093009.

Ward, Ian. 2007. "The Case of Helen Huntingdon." *Wayne State University Press* 49, no. 2: 151-182. https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/case-helen-huntingdon/docview/200449359/se-2?accountid=17253.