

**Deconstructing the Stereotypical Images of
Victorian Women in
Anne Bronte's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (*)**

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الملخص

**تفكيك الصورة النمطية للنساء في العصر الفيكتوري في
رواية آن برونتي نزيل قاعة ويلدفييل**

تهدف هذه الدراسة الى إعادة تحليل الصور النمطية التي تشكلت عن النساء في العصر الفيكتوري كنساء خنوعات صامتات وغير مفكرات. الإعتقاد السائد عن النساء في ذلك العصر هو إذعانهن للضوابط الفيكتوريه البطريركية والتي توقعت من النساء أن تبقى في المنزل للعناية بالأزواج والأطفال. بالرغم من ذلك، تقدم آن برونتي الشخصيات النسائية في رواية "نزيل قاعة ويلدفييل" كنساء مستقلات واثرات. برونتي تقدم البطلة هيلين كمرأة قوية تحرر نفسها من قيود المجتمع البطريركي ماليا وعاطفيا. من أجل أن تبني هويتها الأنثوية كفنانه، تعمل هيلين على الهروب مع طفلها من نظام الحياة الفاسد مع زوجها هنتينقدون في مزرعة قراسديل واللجوء الى قاعة ويلدفييل حيث تبدأ باستخدام أعمالها الفنية لتدعم نفسها ماليا وتثبت شخصيتها. بالتالي، تقترح برونتي أن النساء يمكن أن يصبحن فاعلات في المجتمع إذا تم إعطائهن الفرصة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: العصر الفيكتوري، آن برونتي، الهوية الأنثوية، مقاومة النساء، بطريركي

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Abstract

This paper aims at deconstructing the stereotypical images about Victorian women as submissive, silent and unintellectual. The common belief about women in the Victorian age is that women were likely to comply with the Victorian patriarchal norms that expected women to stay at home and take care of their husbands and children. However, Anne Bronte in her novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* challenges the norms of her society by introducing her female characters as autonomous and rebellious. Bronte presents the heroine Helen as a powerful woman who frees herself of the restrictions of her patriarchal society both financially and emotionally. In order to construct her female identity as an artist, Helen escapes the corrupt lifestyle with her husband Huntingdon at Grassdale manor and runs away to Wildfell hall along with her son where she starts using her artwork to support herself financially and establish her individuality. Therefore, Bronte suggests that women can become active participants in society if they are given the opportunity to do so.

Keywords

The Victorian Age, Anne Bronte, Female identity, Female resistance, patriarchy

This paper removes the misconceptions that all Victorian women were passive, silent and dependent upon men. Lise Fortier (1975: 278) argues that “virtually every human society, including our own, has been patriarchal. Patriarchy defines a system of relationships in which the men ‘own’ the women and children and rule over them”. Katrina Honeyman and Jordan Goodman (1991: 621) also believe that during the Victorian age “the visible participation of women in the labour market was considered a problem both morally and because it challenged patriarchal power”. However, Anne Bronte in *The Tenant* challenges the myth that all women during the Victorian age were silent women. To the Victorian patriarchal society, the heroine Helen was a moral outcast by running

away from her husband's house. Nonetheless, Anne Bronte rejects the idea that to be pure, women in the Victorian society had to follow the laws of marriage and remain silent in the home. Accordingly, the image of Helen as a free and professional woman artist proves that not all Victorian women were trapped in the domestic sphere.

Anne Bronte's novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* examines female resistance to the social norms of the Victorian patriarchal society that considered women as inferior to men. The novel introduces the heroine Helen as a powerful woman who never accepts being under the control of the patriarchy or feeling dependent upon men, whether financially or emotionally. As soon as Helen realizes that her marriage to the spoilt and sinister Huntingdon was a mistake, and that this marriage will affect her independent person and lead to her destruction, she runs away with her son to take up residence at Wildfell Hall, where she starts using her artwork as a tool to earn her living. In order to construct her feminine identity, Helen escapes Huntingdon and establishes herself as a professional artist in Wildfell, which helps her become completely independent after inheriting Grassdale estate when Huntingdon dies. Accordingly, through the image of the powerful Helen, Bronte deconstructs the stereotypical image about women during the Victorian age as submissive, dependent and inferior to men.

Bronte empowers her female characters through giving them freedom of choice. Despite her aunt's advice not to marry the dissolute and alcoholic Huntingdon, Helen feels that her marriage to Huntingdon will never affect her freedom and individuality. On the contrary, she feels that her morality and religiosity will help her reform Huntingdon and transform him into honest husband. In her dialogue with Helen regarding the decision that she took to marry Huntingdon, Helen's aunt says:

I must say, Helen, I thought better of your judgment than this – and your taste too. How you can love such a man I cannot tell, or what pleasure you can find in his company; for ‘What fellowship hath light with darkness; or he that believeth with an infidel?’ ... And thoughtlessness ... may lead to every crime, and will but poorly excuse our errors in the sight of God. (Bronte 1991: 149)

This affirms the fact that Huntingdon’s status is below Helen’s both intellectually and morally, and therefore this marriage does not meet the minimum requirements of equality. Therefore, it is important to note here that Anne Bronte challenges “the domestic, political and social suppression of women as the ‘inferior’ gender” (Ashton 1998: 105). By presenting Helen as superior in every quality, Anne Bronte attempts to change the image of the ‘inferior’ woman that was common in the Victorian society. Helen’s self-confidence and desire to reform Huntingdon lead her to accept him as her husband, not because she desires to improve herself financially as it was common in the Victorian society in which marriage was one of few ways for woman to advance her status, but because she thinks that this marriage will lead him to quit his bad behavior and become religious just like her.

The strong relationship between Helen and her aunt shows how women can work together to symbolize power and resistance through providing assistance and support to each other. Although Helen does not accept her aunt’s advice not to marry Huntingdon, Helen’s aunt remains the guardian and protector of Helen. Helen struggles to reform Huntingdon to quit his bad habits and start a better life together. Helen says: “When Mr. Huntingdon is married, he won’t have many opportunities of consorting with his bachelor friends; and the worse they are, the more I long to deliver him from

them” (Bronte 1991: 148). Soon after marriage, Helen realizes that her decision to become the moral educator of the spoilt Huntingdon becomes futile when Huntingdon does not change his habits. Maria Frawley (132: 1996) states that

Once married, she [Helen] attempts to secure her husband’s salvation by educating him, finding numerous occasions to remind him of his moral feelings, and warning him of the implications for his ultimate redemption. Her efforts as spiritual educator of her husband soon prove problematic. When her husband declares that he finds her ‘too religious,’ saying that ‘a woman’s religion ought not to lessen her devotion to her earthly lord’.

This shows that Helen’s marriage to satisfy her moral and religious needs leads her to fall into the hands of a wicked man who aims to destroy her individuality.

Helen never considered Huntingdon’s thoughtlessness and immorality as signs for being unequal to her as an intellectual and decent woman. Helen says: “I cannot shut my eyes to Arthur’s faults; and the more I love him the more they trouble me. His very heart, that I trusted so, is, I fear, less warm and generous than I thought it. At least, he gave me a specimen of his character today, that seemed to merit a harder name than thoughtlessness” (Bronte 1991: 155-56). As a thoughtless husband, Huntingdon considers the feelings of love of Helen as signs of weakness, and continues treating her as inferior. Therefore, the character of Helen could represent an example of “how women at different levels of society in nineteenth- century England managed to cope with their unequal situation, which for many was inescapable, but also how some women came more and more to resent their disabilities and to press for change” (Perkin 1995:5). This demonstrates the fact that being very emotional may

not always become a sign of excellence of woman, especially in a society that treats woman in an unjust and unequal manner.

The passage that describes Helen slamming the door in the face of her corrupt husband shows an image of a powerful Victorian woman. Elizabeth Langland (1995: 51) argues that women were generally expected to be servants of the house. She says: “Mistresses required not only menial labor of their domestics, but also an attitude of obedience and subservience”. However, *The Tenant* presents what was considered taboo by the Victorian patriarchal society as signs of excellence. Helen has complete control over her emotions, she never subjugates herself to Huntingdon and never allows her emotions to overpower her intellectuality. Shirley Foster (1985: 14) states that women may vacillate between being very emotional where they may appear to be angels, and being very resistant and harsh where they may seem to be like Satan. She points out that “female images of escape, and oscillation between overtly ‘angelic’ dogma and covertly Satanic fury, are oblique indications of protest against patriarchal tyranny”. This affirms the fact that by acting as an emotional woman, Helen tries to present the angelic side of her person that she thinks will fascinate her husband to reform and abandon his bad manners.

When Helen reaches a point where she can no longer bear Huntingdon’s attempts to treat her as inferior, she starts criticizing him for being immoral. In her dialogue with Huntingdon, Helen says: “I shall complain to no one. Hitherto I have struggled hard to hide your vices from every eye, and invest you with virtues you never possessed; but now you must look to yourself” (Bronte 1991: 244). The intellectuality and morality of Helen are sources of power that help her resist the immoral behavior of Huntingdon and help her escape the miserable life with him. Helen never gives up her freedom or individuality regardless of the fact that she suffered a lot after her marriage to Huntingdon.

The way that Anne Bronte introduces Huntingdon as corrupt and an alcoholic, shows how the patriarchy in Victorian society was a threat to woman's independence and individuality. Despite the fact that Helen is intellectual and moral and only marries Huntingdon to save his soul, the spoilt Huntingdon never shows any signs of thankfulness to Helen. On the contrary, he never recognizes her intellectuality and does not notice her genius as a very professional artist who may use artwork to support herself. Winifred Gerin (1959: 243) says:

Wildfell Hall is not merely the study of a debauchee; it is the representation of a debauched society. Arthur Huntingdon is no worse in degree, though he may be in kind, than the other male characters in the book: Hattersley, Grimsby, Hargrave, and Lord Lowborough. They have all shared a mutual past of dissipation which has made of Huntingdon what he is.

Gerin presents those male figures as corrupt and wicked and their arrogance prevents them from change and reform. The fact that Helen attempts to reform the immoral Huntingdon and better his life, is never appreciated by the corrupt society that treats women as inferior to men.

In contrast to the corrupt Huntingdon, Bronte presents Gilbert as educated and a good example of the Victorian man. Gilbert is always thankful for his mother who works as a guardian to her respectful son. Therefore, Bronte attempts to create a new image of the Victorian man represented through Gilbert that replaces the image of the patriarchal one represented through Huntingdon. In his relationship with Helen, Gilbert is very supportive and appreciates Helen's artistic work. While Huntingdon tries to destroy Helen's child through alcohol, Gilbert is very supportive of the child.

Helen would have never maintained her individuality or overcome such devastating circumstances if she acted as an emotional and obedient woman. At the same time, she never gives up her moral attitudes that provide her with spiritual power. Elizabeth Berry (1995: 91) affirms the fact that Anne Bronte intends to make her heroine rebellious and powerful rather than obedient and quiet because softness becomes a representation of the weak woman rather than the powerful and independent one. She states that “throughout *The Tenant* she remains true to her credo that hardship produces character, and through the repeated juxtapositions of contrasting tactile images, her rhetoric demonstrates that softness is not a sign of excellence in woman” (91). Helen’s rebellion represents a critique of the Victorian patriarchal society that deprived women of their rights of speech and ownership. The intellectuality and firmness of Helen help her overcome the obstacles that she encounters through her marriage to the dissolute and degenerate Huntingdon in which she never accepts taking a passive role in the patriarchal society. Therefore, Helen represents women empowerment through rejecting patriarchal oppression.

Helen refuses to accept the laws of the Victorian patriarchal society that considered children as the property of man. Patriarchy is defined as “a pervading societal system or set of institutional arrangements which accept, reinforce, or structure male hegemony” (Honeyman and Jordan 1991: 609). However, Helen seems to be rejecting patriarchy as a dominating force in society by refusing to be the property of her husband. The fact that Huntingdon uses the child as a tool to torture Helen by trying to destroy him through alcohol, shows his incompetence to take care of the child, and therefore Helen insists on her decision to run away with her child to protect him from the corrupt father. Helen points out that “nothing could persuade him to give up his son, whatever became of me, he being as fully

determined the child should not leave him, as I was not to leave the child; and that, in fact, nothing would answer but his, unless I fled the country, as I had intended before” (Bronte 1991: 293). Therefore, the success of Helen to escape with the child represents a triumph over the ills of the patriarchal society.

Anne Bronte celebrates Helen as an intellectual woman who strives to establish her identity in the patriarchal society. Miriam Allott (1974: 262) criticizes Huntingdon who uses the religiosity and morality of Helen to do more vices rather than accepting reform. She says:

Helen, the heroine, is doubtless a strong-minded woman, and passes bravely through a great deal of suffering ... She marries a profligate, thinking to reform him; but the gentleman, with a full knowledge of her purpose declines reformation, goes deeper and deeper into vice, and becomes at last as fiendlike as a very limited stock of brains will allow.

Helen’s marriage to Huntingdon gives her limited access to her own property, and therefore leads her to suffer and struggle to resist the ideologies of a patriarchal society. Frawley (1996: 131) says: “Bronte focuses especially on the ways in which marriage usurps Helen’s rights to her ‘property,’ including her son, and in doing so forces her to cultivate other ways of establishing her independence”. Accordingly, the success of Helen in saving her child from his alcoholic father presents a moment of victory over the patriarchal society.

Helen realizes that separation is the best solution to escape the corrupt life in Grassdale manor and finding another place in which she can express herself more freely rather than her commitment to the debased lifestyle with Huntingdon. She explains:

Only let the stormy severity of this winter weather be somewhat abated, and then, some morning, Mr Huntingdon will come down to a solitary breakfast-table, and perhaps be clamouring through the house for his invisible wife and child, when they are some fifty miles on their way to the western world – or it may be more, for we shall leave him hours before the dawn, and it is not probable he will discover the loss of both, until the day is far advanced. (Bronte 1991: 285)

The escape of Helen gives her the chance to express her thoughts freely far from the social constraints and captivity that she feels with Huntingdon. When Helen leaves Grassdale manor with her child, she no longer worries about her artistic tools to be destroyed or on her paintings not to be taken seriously. It is important to note here that women artists during the Victorian age were marginalized or ignored. Heather Anderson (1992: 14) says: “Women artists have always existed, but they have often been invisible”. However, Helen succeeds in establishing herself as a professional artist and she is able to paint pictures and send them to the market to support herself and child.

The diary that Helen writes represents a private form of communication in which she writes down her private thoughts and the events of everyday life including her life with her spoilt husband. Unlike the other forms of communication, such as letters, which appear to be a less private form of communication, having access to the diary may affect the individuality and privacy of the diary writer. Huntingdon orders the artistic tools of Helen to be destroyed because he finds out about her intentions to escape through reading in the diary. This scene of burning the artistic tools shows the tyranny of the patriarchy that denies women their rights. Huntingdon orders the

burning of the artwork of Helen: “‘Benson, take those things away,’ said he, pointing to the easel, canvas, and stretcher; ‘tell the housemaid she may kindle the fire with them: your mistress won’t want them any more’” (Bronte 1991: 287). Frawley (1996: 130-131) argues that Huntingdon’s access to Helen’s diary has great influence on her own individuality that ends up in the failure of her initial plans to escape and leads to the destruction of her artwork. She says: “Helen’s attempt to leave Huntingdon initially fails when he discovers her intentions in her diary, takes her papers from her, and destroys the accumulated artwork that she had intended to sell as means to independence”. Consequently, the suffering of Helen partially resulted in making her private thoughts accessible to her immoral husband through her diary.

Although Helen struggles to hide her private thoughts from Huntingdon where she feels not comfortable about her relationship with him, she makes her private thoughts accessible to Gilbert through giving him her diary to read. The diary that Helen gives to Gilbert explains her suffering at the hands of the debauched Huntingdon and the harsh circumstances that made her move to Wildfell Hall. Although Frawley (1996: 120) blames Anne Bronte for allowing the heroine Helen to give her diary to the farmer, the diary remains a document that recounts the tyranny of the patriarchal society in the Victorian era. Through giving her diary to Gilbert, Helen makes it known to him that the false ideologies of the patriarchal society caused her to suffer along with her son.

Through her experience with Huntingdon, Helen has acquired the knowledge that acting in an emotional way may lead her to lose independence. She tells Gilbert: “If you cannot be content to regard me as a friend – a plain, cold, motherly, or sisterly friend, I must beg you to leave me now, and let me alone hereafter – in fact, we must be strangers for the future” (Bronte 1991: 82). Betty Jay (2000: 51)

explains that “Helen’s identity as a respectable woman is intimately connected to the question of her body and, more specifically, her ability to regulate desire”. As a result, Helen overcomes the obstacles that she encounters and establishes her identity as a free and independent artist.

Despite the fact that Huntingdon considers Helen’s hardness as a kind of resistance to his own authority where he expects her to be obedient and submissive, Gilbert never discusses with her issues of gender as Huntingdon did. Gilbert considers Helen an ideal woman artist who struggles to prove her intellectuality and resist the false ideologies of the patriarchal society. Berry (1995: 93) says: “Gilbert places the women in his life more accurately according to their depth of character, also occurs in his reading of Helen, as he recognizes that what appears to the undiscerning as ‘hardness’ in her is actually integrity, uncommon intelligence, and strength of character which has been forged largely through adversity”. Gilbert appreciates Helen’s intellectuality and shows sympathy toward her because of the misery that she encountered as a result of the ideologies of patriarchy. Dianne Macleod (1996: 244) explains that “it is not coincidental that the gendering of female success occurred with increasing frequency after mid-century, at a time when men began to express their disillusionment with the promises of the public sphere and to rebel against the social control implicit in the standard definition of manliness”. Accordingly, Gilbert represents the new image of man that Anne Bronte wanted to create in the Victorian society and she was realistic in describing the suffering of women and offering solutions for them to achieve freedom and individuality.

The death of the spoilt Huntingdon represents the limits of the power of the patriarchy. This implies the defeat of the patriarchy and the triumph of Helen that gives her the opportunity to prove her intellectuality. The death of Huntingdon allows Helen to become

completely independent through inheriting Grassdale manor where she becomes financially autonomous. Betty Jay (2000: 56) argues that the refusal of Huntingdon to change even when he is on his deathbed and ignoring Helen's attempts to save his soul prepares him to punishment in the hereafter. She says:

The infection which takes control of Huntingdon's body as a result of persistent self-violations suggests the corporeal limits to his power. Huntingdon's accident combines, with a last drinking bout, to bring about his demise. On his deathbed, Helen seeks to reinsert him into the conventional order by persuading him to prepare for judgment in the afterlife. Huntingdon's refusal to comply suggests, fittingly, that he forfeits his place in heaven just as he has compelled Helen to relinquish hers on earth.

This shows the didactic purpose of the novel through presenting the heroine as a moral character who is rewarded in the end for keeping her integrity, truthfulness and pride and punishing her nemesis for his bad deeds.

Through her perseverance to regain her property, Helen never loses the sense that she has authority that should be recognized by society. The death of Huntingdon allows Helen to make legal claims on both her son and Grassdale manor that she was denied by the law. Anne Bronte presents her heroine as a very intellectual mother and gifted artist who struggles to reform the patriarchal society by demanding equal opportunities with man. Helen 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. Now I would have both so to benefit by the experience of others, and the precepts of a higher authority, that they

should know beforehand to refuse the evil and choose the good, and require no experimental proofs to teach them the evil of transgression. I would not send a poor girl into the world, unarmed against her foes, and ignorant of the snares that beset her path; nor would I watch and guard her, till, deprived of self-respect and self-reliance, she lost the power or the will to watch and guard herself. (Bronte 1991: 37-38)

This speech affirms the fact that Helen aims to challenge the traditional role of motherhood by raising her son differently from the established Victorian mother. Bronte seems to be aware that women would not be able to reach independence by devoting themselves to household duties, but by educating themselves and defying the unjust and unequal standards of the patriarchal society.

Anne Bronte presents Wildfell Hall as a kingdom in the wilderness and it appears to be a perfect place for Helen to show her creativity as an artist and it also provides her with a safe haven from the ills of the patriarchal society. Although the main goal of painting landscapes to Helen was to support herself and her little child, art remains a way to express the feelings and thoughts of the artist. Frawley (1996: 130) argues that “the paintings themselves serving as visible manifestations of Helen’s otherwise private thoughts. Just as Huntingdon taunted Helen into revealing her affection for him, so too does he on several occasions exploit her artwork as a revelation of her feelings and desires, insisting on looking at her work despite her pleas that he not do so”. It is also important to mention here that women artists in the Victorian era were not given the same opportunities as their male counterparts. No doubt that the profession of Helen as an artist helps her in constructing her identity as a powerful and independent woman. Foster (1985: 74-75) affirms that “a girl should develop her particular talents, so that if she is ‘fated to

make her way in the crowd and to depend on herself' she may have the satisfaction of feeling that she is her 'own mistress'".

The Tenant provides an image of a woman that is different from the common image of the female as an inferior and dependent being. Despite the rise of the woman artist in the nineteenth-century, not many women writers presented the theme of the woman artist in their writings as Anne Bronte did in her novel. The image of the free Victorian woman with a studio of her own was not studied much by scholars. Gerin (1959: 251) notes that Helen is "one of the very first married women in fiction who is both competent and resolved to keep herself not by any of the accepted means of employment open to women of birth and education such as housekeeper, companion, governess, but as painter selling her canvasses to dealers". Therefore, by introducing the story of the woman artist, Bronte presents a more genteel image of the educated and intellectual woman in the Victorian age.

The rise of the professional woman artist in the nineteenth-century and the founding of "The Society of Women Artists" in 1855 gave the opportunity for many women to train themselves to become painters. Antonia Losano (2003: 10) says: "The intersection of gender and aesthetics must be considered in any examination of the aesthetic ideology of any historical period, but the nineteenth century in particular offers a rich field for study, for this period saw a dramatic rise in the number of women artists as well as women art historians and museum-goers". Accordingly, the rise of the schools of art that teach women painting in the nineteenth century encouraged many women to pursue a profession as artists which guarantees a source of income for them. In *The Tenant*, Helen rejects the traditional values of the Victorian patriarchal society and demands her rights as an artist to be recognized. Therefore, the

insistence of Helen on pursuing her artistic career in a male-dominated society leads her to realize her female identity as an artist.

In conclusion, Anne Bronte's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* deconstructs the stereotypical image about women in the Victorian society as silent, dependent and passive. The novel represents a critique of the unequal treatment of women who suffered at the hands of the patriarchy. Through rejecting the unjust laws of the Victorian society, Helen reclaims her active role in society through proving that she is not less intellectual than her male counterpart. Therefore, Helen shares much in common with the modern woman in the sense that they are both independent financially and emotionally.

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