

## Male and Female narrative identities and visions in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*<sup>1</sup> (1848)

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### Abstract

*Sometimes considered a secondary figure in the cultural panorama of the Victorian Age, Anne Brontë was generally not included amongst the most important literary figures of her time. She only wrote two novels and died when she had not yet turned thirty. Her fame was obscured by the imposing masterpieces of her two sisters Charlotte and Emily, which cast a durable shadow on her work. The genre of the *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, spanning the novel of manners and the Gothic via the Romantic as well as the realistic, is critically baffling. The depth and complexity of its themes make it difficult to carry out a univocal interpretation. It is, however, the narrative technique employed by Anne Brontë to develop her story, which represents one of the most important factors of her novel. It is a narratological technique, but also a literary choice connected to both social and psychological aspects of the society of the nineteenth century and the condition of women in general. It has been considered as a naïve and improbable form of narration and it has been explored for its compelling function, which seems to convey secret messages. This article explores Anne Brontë's narrative choice in order to formulate new hypotheses on her story.*

**Keywords:** English Literature – Nineteenth Century – Victorian Age – Anne Brontë – The Brontë Sisters – Novel of Manners – Realism – Narratological Techniques – Gothic novels

Of all the Brontë family, Anne is probably the least famous. For quite a long time she was thought to have a smaller talent than Charlotte's and Emily's. She died of consumption at twenty-nine in 1849 when she had published only two novels, the autobiographical *Agnes Grey* (1827) and the daring *Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848). Her blurred fame cannot be ascribed to her young age or to Emily's and Charlotte's respective huge successes with *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre* exclusively. Far from being a semi-unknown work, Anne's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* was a best seller and sold out so quickly that a second edition was issued in the same year of its first publication.<sup>2</sup> The decades of forgetfulness after her death may be the result of her sister Charlotte's decision to discontinue the publication of the novel for some years, which she considered immature and improper<sup>3</sup>. It is also likely that she might have wanted to secure her own personal and economic success, by eliminating a competitor from the literary market. Charlotte may be considered as the real factor for Anne's long-lasting negative reputation in the literary world. Anne was probably too advanced in her ideas,

<sup>1</sup> All quotations are taken from Anne Brontë. 2001 [1848]. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (Introduction and notes by Peter Merchant). Ware: Wordsworth Classics.

<sup>2</sup> All quotations are taken from Anne Brontë. 2001 [1848]. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (Introduction and notes by Peter Merchant). Ware: Wordsworth Classics.

<sup>3</sup> Charlotte actually defined it as a "mistake".

and even somehow scandalous, to be thoroughly understood, especially in the conservative context of the Victorian Age.

This article explores specific features of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, as it aims to demonstrate the literary value of the novel. Anne absorbed the lessons of her female predecessors besides her sisters, and was the precursor of new narrative trends. This essay intends to highlight the original aspects in Anne's second and last novel and to extrapolate her vision of society through her unusual narrative technique. Despite her inexperience and young age, and contrary to what critics opined until some decades ago, Anne created an originally structured novel. It contains modern elements and a special sensibility for women's condition in society, as her presentation seems to confirm, in which she claims that she would consider it successful even if only one person could get a positive lesson from it. As Rachel K. Carnell puts it, Anne Brontë's "somewhat split narrative has recently been reappraised as not a defect after all but rather as a conscious commentary on the intractable cultural rift between public and private spheres"<sup>4</sup>, traditionally separated, the former being assigned to men and the latter to women. The layered narrative is not Anne Brontë's prerogative. Her sister Emily abundantly used it in *Wuthering Heights*<sup>5</sup>, and both Ann Radcliffe and Mary Shelley, among others, adopted this literary device in their novels. However, Anne Brontë not only wanted to create suspense or underline the difference between male and female points of view. It is not a question of feminine desire, which is unspeakable and has to be uttered indirectly.<sup>6</sup> Anne intended to convey specific meanings.

Before turning to writing, Anne had worked in two different families as a governess. The first time she had worked with the Ingham family near Mirfield when she was only 19. It was a very negative experience. On the contrary, her second job was to bring her more satisfaction and long lasting friendships. The reverend Robinson's family in York employed her. Thanks to her recommendations, her brother was called to work as a tutor in the same household. She decided to abandon her post after only two years in 1845 because of a love affair going on between her brother Branwell and their employer's wife. The discovery of the liaison had dire consequences, as Branwell lost his job and mental stability at the same time. The result was a relapse into drunkenness and self-destruction. When Anne went back home, she and her sisters dedicated themselves to writing. Her first novel showed autobiographic elements and was more in the style of the novel of manners, clearly influenced by Jane Austen's mode. She published her second novel in 1848 under a pseudonym: Anne's literary *doppelgänger* was a male writer, Acton Bell. This was not only the fashion of the time. Apart from giving a sense of independence and equality with men, the male pseudonym often represented a mere necessity for literary survival. Even her more famous sisters used male names to publish their works at the beginning of their careers not to mention contemporary George Eliot or the French novelist Georges Sand, who never used their real names to guarantee their presence in the literary world. It was a convention commonly imposed on women by readers and publishers, who apparently preferred works written by men. The Brontë sisters revealed their real identities only after their

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<sup>4</sup> Rachel K. Carnell. 1998. "Feminism and the Public Sphere in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*". *Nineteenth Century Literature*. Volume 53, 1: 1.

<sup>5</sup> Naomi M. Jacobs. 1986. "Gendered and Layered Narrative in *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*". *The Journal of Narrative Technique*. Volume 16, 3: 204–219.

<sup>6</sup> Elisabeth Langland. 1992. "The Voicing of Feminine Desire in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*" in Anthony Harrison and Beverly Taylor (Eds.). *Gender and Discourse in Victorian Literature and Art*. De Kalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 120–136.

novels became acclaimed successes and their publishers were forced to make them known, even though the three sisters experienced a “sense of mockery of conventional masculinity” (207), as Naomi Jacobs claims analyzing their correspondence.<sup>7</sup>

### The story

The novel presents a complicated plot, which keeps the reader in a situation of suspense until the very last pages when the *dénouement* is welcomed with a sort of relief, after many twists of fate and *coups de scene*. The reader has to decipher information through the narrating characters' limited viewpoints to understand what took place in the characters' past, which is slowly unveiled through long, but incomplete flashbacks. A beautiful young widow, Helen, comes to live in a village with her little son. She attracts the villagers' interest, as she is incomprehensibly aloof and makes everybody in the village think that she hides terrible secrets. The male protagonist and narrator, Gilbert, falls in love with her, but his passion seems to be doomed to failure because of several obstacles in his path. Moreover, Helen is distant and mysterious and he becomes irrationally jealous. In spite of her propriety, love for privacy and impeccable behavior, Helen becomes the target of rumors, spread by the envious women in the village<sup>8</sup>. Because of his insistence to learn more about her, Helen decides to give her diary to Gilbert so that he will discover the truth about her past, which the readers slowly discover together with him. After the central part of story, included in the diary interlude, which is the story of Helen's past and is itself still incomplete, Gilbert resumes the narration and maintains it until the very end. The story was published in three volumes and it is still possible to roughly recognize the structure in the ideal division of the novel. Gilbert sends a long letter to his best friend, who is silent and mysterious, and narrates the first part of the story, which includes details on his life, his falling in love with Helen and his despair for not being able to have her. Then he acquires Helen's diary and unveils her story. The second part contains the story of Helen's past, which is not complete and keeps the readers in a state of suspension. In the third and final part, Gilbert resumes and completes his letter to his friend leading to a grand finale, in which all mysteries seem to be unveiled. After part of the truth has come to the surface, Gilbert narrates the events that bring about the conclusion of the story in the third section of the novel. However, his friend remains anonymous until the very last pages when we finally discover his identity, even though he has the role of an “unseen” character, who never intervenes in the story and does not react to the narration of the events.<sup>9</sup> The choice of this particular interlocutor is not clear and it may represent a threat to Helen's sense of discretion.

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<sup>7</sup> See Note 4.

<sup>8</sup> The story offers a parallelism with the plot of the movie *Malena* (2000) by Italian director Giuseppe Tornatore, a sad story about an extremely beautiful woman, who becomes the innocent target of untrue rumors in the village turning her life into a nightmare, which ends in tragedy. Malena represents a sensuous woman, whose sensuality is exacerbated by men's excessive desire and women's blind envy. In Anne's novel, Helen is a caste and proper woman, who lives a secluded life in order to avoid the public eye and the scrutiny of strangers. The mother of a little child, she is pious and charitable, but this is not enough to prevent dangerous gossip from spreading. The beauty of both female characters in the movie and in the novel becomes a serious source of troubles.

<sup>9</sup> Unseen characters, also known as “silent” or “invisible” are a common device in dramatic productions starting from ancient times. Famous examples of unseen characters include Laius in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, Rosaline in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Protopov in Chekhov's *Three Sisters*. See: Gray, Henry David .1914. “Romeo, Rosaline, and Juliet”. *Modern Language Notes*. 29, 7: 209–212. This theatrical convention has been introduced in TV movies and telefilms.

## The genre

It is difficult to define the *genre* of the story of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. It may initially seem a novel of manners. Some critics compare the beginning of the novel to the reassuring atmosphere that can be found in Jane Austen's settings, especially the *incipit* of *Pride and Prejudice*, when a complete village is excited by the arrival of a handsome and well-off unmarried gentleman, which in this case is a widow. Anne Brontë's choice may be considered as a social step ahead. In her novel, the person economically eligible is a woman. The idea of a man climbing the social ladder by marrying a woman is very interesting and reverses any Pamela Andrews or Elisabeth Bennet's syndrome. The protagonist of Anne's novel, Helen Graham, a mysterious young woman in a probably good economic position, has moved to a new neighborhood and the male narrator, Gilbert Markham, who is also one of the most important characters of the story, writes a letter about her to one of his dearest friends. The convention is inverted, as the rich object of desire is a beautiful and independent woman, not a fascinating bachelor. It is not clear whether a sincere emotion or some financial interests dictate the love that Gilbert immediately feels, as the development of the story depends on his exclusive and subjective viewpoint. Another important factor is that people, in particular women, turn pitiless against Helen without any concrete evidence against her. It might be useful to notice that what happens to Helen never happens to a male character in general, as female characters tend to adore and protect men in spite of their setbacks and flaws.

The story may resemble a problematic novel of manners written in an epistolary style describing the slow progression of a love story. However, it is not an epistolary novel in the traditional eighteenth-century style of the like of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) or Choderlos de Laclos's *Dangerous Liaisons* (1782). Gilbert is writing to his friend an extremely long and ultra detailed single letter that is divided into various chapters. The eldest son of a well-off family of landowners, he is a rich farmer and he has become the man of the household after his father died. He progressively passes from a tranquil and monotonous life made of little things to a state of passion and agitated love. He forgets about his previous sweetheart, the village vicar's daughter, Eliza Millward, and even becomes cruel to her because his emotions are completely taken by the fascinating but somehow unsociable new tenant, the young widow morbidly attached to her only five-year-old son. Helen seems to appreciate Gilbert's company, but she is reluctant to engage in a relationship and has many difficulties in accepting his court. Her motivations are unclear and her behavior perplexes Gilbert. In the middle of the story, we are introduced directly to Helen's diary. However, the diary is not meant for our eyes. In fact, it is directed to the original narrator that corresponds to Gilbert, provided that he really got it from her and did not steal it, considering his obsessive jealousy. He is committing a sort of guilty communication of intimate matters to his mysterious friend.

The story could be seen as a romantic novel for it contains tales of passionate emotions. One particular aspect is represented by Helen's emotional situation. The first epiphany for the readers is to discover that she is not a widow. She had to escape from her own house to avoid her husband's brutality. Helen's love for her husband was deep and she meant to make her marriage last until she realized the truth about him. Gilbert's love for Helen seems to be as sincere as Helen's initial love for her husband. However, the characters, especially men, turn out to be morbid, interested, selfish, frantic or even cruel. Gilbert himself becomes obsessively jealous and turns violent

against a potential rival, who is not who he believes to be. Each character seems to be imprisoned in his/her own vision of the world, which does not match with the other characters' views and does not correspond to the truth. The story contains extreme fits of jealousy in different characters that are somehow threatening. In reality, Helen's passionate love for her husband Arthur is only apparently requited at the beginning of their romance. The different forms of passions felt by the various characters do not really correspond to the idea of romantic love, but they take on facets of dangerous attitudes such as cruel indifference, conceit, jealousy, envy, revenge and violence. The story of Helen's husband Arthur, who shares his name with his little son, rather belongs to an eighteenth-century libertine description of debauchery. The patriarchal violence and the horrors that Helen has to put up with, together with her state of reclusion connect the novel to an early Gothic narrative in the style of Ann Radcliffe, Francis Lathom or Matthew Lewis, among others.

### The characters

The relations of the different characters in the novel are extremely complex. They show anachronistic relationships with one another. Helen belongs to (or at least wants to be part of) the Victorian ideal of a woman as the angel of the household. Her husband looks as if he belonged to the libertines of the eighteenth Century. He has nothing of the Romantic hero, but he could be one of the protagonists of Hogarth's serial canvases such as the *The Rake's Progress (1735)* or *Marriage a la Mode (1745)*. Gilbert may sound like a romantically unhappy hero desperate for his unrequited love. Nevertheless, he represents another anachronism embodying a lesser Romantic character, who does not fit in the orderly and positive Victorian society. The atmosphere that surrounds Helen at home during her marital life becomes gloomy and even gruesome when she is frightened because of the danger looming on her life and the life of her child. She has to put up with extreme violence and cruelty. Like a Gothic heroine, she has to undergo prevarication, violence and hate. Her life is constantly in danger. Her forcibly sequestered existence ofte conveys gloomy Gothic themes. The tortures and persecutions she has to face have something in common with the pains suffered by the female characters in Ann Radcliffe's *A Sicilian Romance (1790)*, *The Mysteries of Udolpho (1794)* and *The Italian (1796)* and other innumerable Gothic stories. On the other hand, the way her husband becomes addicted to alcohol and the effects of debauchery and vice are precise and realistic. They share some features with Dickens's gloomy descriptions of self-destruction of the proletarian *oi polloi*.<sup>10</sup> The horrific results of alcoholism on her husband and his final days announce elements that will belong to the naturalism<sup>11</sup> of Emile Zola, which developed three decades after Anne's novel was published. It seems at this point that the apparent incongruous themes become the original aspect of the novel, which results to be unusual for its times and anticipates

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<sup>10</sup> It is interesting to note that Dickens used an impersonal eye to show the evils of his time and the exploitation of lower classes. In this case, Anne Brontë does not show the effects of alcoholism on poor and desperate people, but on a rich aristocratic person and his equally well-off friends.

<sup>11</sup> Grown in importance in the literature of nineteenth-century Europe, realism is a detailed and objective representation of reality, whereas naturalism tends to depict not only the atrocities of real life but also the injustice of society. Naturalism also has a sort of didactic role, as it tries to eliminate the contradictions of the historical context, which inevitably led to social unrest. Naturalism wants to show all negative effects of social evils in order to promote a reaction against them. Anne Brontë not only has a social goal but she rather seems to show a moral issue. She is also autobiographic. She was shocked by her brother's fall into alcoholism (and by other men in her entourage), as she could directly observe the dramatic evolution of his state until his premature tragic death.

important issues which will become more and more important in the decades to come. The novel features an interesting complexity and a daring originality, which Charlotte could not accept or forgive, even though she admitted that Anne and even Emily, for that matter, hid a form of fire in their hearts, which they constantly veiled but became in part visible in their writings.<sup>12</sup> Anne managed to create different levels of meanings and was strategic enough to highlight the parts that could be appreciated by her Victorian readers, whereas she conveyed ideas at obscure levels that could shock her audience if they had been clearly perceived.

### **The narrative technique**

After a relatively placid narration, which Penny Gay<sup>13</sup> noted to be very similar to Jane Austen's context but reversely<sup>14</sup>, carried out by Gilbert with his exclusive point of view on the events, we witness a sudden change. Gilbert has a terrible fit of jealousy for a potential rival. He attacks his friend Frederick Lawrence that he assumes to be Helen's secret lover, after he accidentally sees their night meeting. He believes to see signs of affection between the two<sup>15</sup>. Later he receives a manuscript by Helen that should clarify her position: it is her diary and it contains the truth about her life. Therefore, we are suddenly thrown into a completely different atmosphere. Helen's diary introduces her past story and recounts her predicaments. Having taken possession of her diary, Gilbert gives up his narration and the storyteller changes, even though he continues to be rearrange the story by copying the diary in another exchange with his silent friend. We enter Helen's personal narration in the centre of the novel, a solitary monologue, which replaces the epistolary monologue by Gilbert. From now on, we are inside her point of view.<sup>16</sup> It is a story within a story, a layered tale of violence and prevarication. The text offers two points of view on the same scenes, but the plot is not clarified and remains veiled in ambiguity. It is as if the reader can never reach the truth until the very end, and even at the conclusion of the story a series of doubts persist. The introduction of Helen's diary is unexpected. The novel creates a sudden twist in Chapter XV, which takes the reader by surprise because the style changes, the point of view is different. We discover Helen's shocking story and the events that took place during her unfortunate marriage before coming to Wildfell Hall. We discover a completely new Helen. However, it is another limited point of view, which covers a period in the past taking place before the events in Gilbert's incomplete and subjective narration. When Gilbert resumes the narration, which is in reality a masculine discourse and a male perspective, the readers have to face another sea of uncertainties instead of an epiphany. They find the narrator's insecure elucubrations on what could be happening with no real certainty.

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<sup>12</sup> Noemi Jacobs, *cit.*, 217.

<sup>13</sup> Penny Gay. (1998) "Anne Brontë and the Forms of Romantic Comedy". *Brontë Society Transactions*. 23, 1: 54–62.

<sup>14</sup> It is intriguing to notice how Anne Brontë chooses a man as a narrator to describe the situation and how we are totally inside his mind and feelings. In this sense she shows great originality because she not only goes inside the mind of her she-hero, but she describes the feelings of a man, which were a masculine narrative prerogative, with a few exceptions. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) represents one example of masculine perspective narrated by a female author.

<sup>15</sup> Gilbert is misled by the events that he does not understand. He interprets most situations in the wrong way. The reader remains as ignorant as he is until after reading Helen's diary and discovering the denouement of the story

<sup>16</sup> Gilbert resumes the narration and returns to the present time in the third part of the novel, after he has read (and thoroughly reported) Helen's past vicissitudes.

### Women's roles in the novel

The role of women in the story is highly problematic.<sup>17</sup> When they are good, they are of no help. When they are envious, their actions become fierce and devastating. They can also be gratuitously cruel to hurt other women. Helen cannot count on them and she has to be constantly alert. Helen's aunt, who represents her surrogate mother, who died when she was young, is very strict. She gives her sermons on the dangers of a marriage based on love and a wrong husband, but she does not clearly explain to Helen what difficulties she may encounter on her path. Despite her rigidity and knowledge, she is not able to help Helen and prevent her from committing a terrible mistake in marrying a man that everybody knows to be vicious. Millicent Hargrave, a pious and shy girl, is Helen's best friend. A meek and compassionate young woman, she is completely inexperienced. Therefore, she cannot support her friend and she cannot understand her despair. In fact, she constantly needs Helen's assistance to face reality. She is completely passive and gets married because her mother wants her to. She loves her husband just because she blindly follows social traditions and rules dictated by marriage conventions, according to which a woman is forced to love her husband whatever the circumstances. She is acquiescent and does not react to the progressive dissolution of her husband, whereas Helen is enraged at her submission. Millicent's little sister adores Helen, but she is too young and cannot understand her older friend's private tragedy. Another positive but equally powerless figure, Helen's faithful servant, Rachel, is the only one who apprehends her terrible situation and is aware of her unfortunate marriage, but she does not have the means to help her. Her master, Helen's fierce husband, cruelly strips her of all her possessions so that it would be impossible for her to assist Helen. On the other hand, a female character who becomes dangerous for Helen is Eliza Millward. Courted by Gilbert at the beginning of the story, she should become his wife, but she is scornfully neglected after he meets Helen.<sup>18</sup> Originally, a tender suitor, Gilbert becomes harsh, indifferent and even cruel to her, turning her into a virago, unchaining her worst side as an unscrupulous<sup>19</sup> gossipmonger, whose sole intent, which is completely successful, is to destroy Helen's reputation. She manages to convince the whole village that Helen is a sinner and a social disturbance for the peace of the community. The most devastating and obscure figure in the story is embodied by the ambiguous Annabella Wilmot, who later becomes Lady Lowborough. There is something strange and disturbing in this character. A provoking agent trying to turn her friend mad by constantly humiliating her and taking her husband as her lover before her very eyes, she represents Helen's antithesis and antagonist: the two women constantly challenge each other in a sort of good versus evil contest. One may think that Helen should be victorious and the vicious Annabella should succumb. Actually, even if Helen is never defeated, she is not a real winner and the brief mention of Annabella's bleak destiny at the end of the story is not certain and

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<sup>17</sup> Even feminist critics of the caliber of Rachel Carnell (*cit.*, 13) must admit they have come to terms with the utter negativity of some female characters. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* shows extremely negative female characters and seems to demonstrate that it is impossible to put all women on the same level.

<sup>18</sup> Leaving aside the strange metamorphosis of Miss Millward, which turns her in a cruel and revengeful creature, who wants to destroy Helen, it would be necessary to analyze Gilbert's erratic behavior and his sudden change, which poses further problems and may not guarantee a brilliant future for Helen, after her marriage to him.

<sup>19</sup> An interesting study published by Cambridge University Press in 2004, called *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Rumors and Gossip*, authored by Pamela Stewart and Stephen Strathern, makes an interesting analysis on how witchcraft and sorcery were based on gossip and rumors. Today gossip and rumors, exacerbated by an excessive use of the social media, still have a diabolic frame in them and represent a dangerous source of conflicts that can generate problematic social and political misunderstandings, and even hatred and violence.

may be simply another rumor like the many that preceded it. Any expectation for a just punishment of the villain of the story remains frustrated. Helen's character is unique among all these female characters and she has to fight the terrible challenges of her life alone. She is honest, strong and not as contradictory as the other people populating the story. She is proudly aware of her position and struggles to maintain both dignity and independence for the sake of her little son. She voices a form of protofeminism, which cannot be accepted by the society around her. Her real voice cannot be heard, as she is controlled by masculine figures, who enclose her in their own narration of male control.

### Suitors, gold diggers and predators

Appearances are deceptive and men are treacherous<sup>20</sup>. Sometimes, they turn out to be terrible nuisances. On other occasions, they are strangely indifferent.<sup>21</sup> What is interesting is that Helen's diary is full of masculine characters. There is a myriad of them. On the other hand, the dominating figure in Gilbert's narration is Helen and his feelings for her. It is interesting to notice that the majority of these men is rendered very negatively. Coming of age means for Helen to start fighting against a number of middle-aged and senile second-hand Casanovas, who are unbearably boring suitors and ridiculously unaware of her utter dislike of them. One may wonder why they are so stubborn and insist in hunting Helen. Probably according to the general opinion of the time, a young woman was supposed to be an easy and docile prey of well-off old bachelors or widowers. However, Helen is untamed and she does not accept the general rule. She is stubborn and determined to marry only who she really loves<sup>22</sup>. She does not want to marry to get a better position or financial security. She wants to love a man and feel pure passion mixed with affection and respect. Helen's suitors seem to turn into dangerous predators, whether they are young or old it does not matter, they are surrounding and suffocating her. Alternatively, they appear docile and sweet, but they are actually money-hunters. One of the worst characters is undoubtedly Millicent's brother, Mr. Hargrave, a greedy and mean young man, who rejoices in Helen's marital disgraces because he wants to take advantage from the situation. He does everything in his power to make, or better, literally force her to become his lover, a proposal she defiantly rejects. In spite of his apparently angelic manner, she senses the devil and the gold digger inside him and her intuition does not fail. In her past experience, once Helen realized that her husband was not the excellent man she believed him to be, she stood up for her ideals and resolutely rejected any form of compromise<sup>23</sup>. She is

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<sup>20</sup> In spite of Verdi's famous refrain "La Donna e' Mobile" (Women are changeable), sung by The Duke of Mantua in the last act of *Rigoletto* (1851)—which cannot refer to Helen's character at all—it would be wise to mention the bard and adapt his words to the story. William Shakespeare actually states, through Balthazar's song in *Much Ado About Nothing*, that men are not to be trusted: "Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more./ men were deceivers ever./ one foot in sea, /and one on shore, /to one thing constant never" (II, 3, 61–64). This can be applied to Helen's husband easily. In a way, even Gilbert's love for Helen does not give us any guarantee, especially when we consider the way he abandoned the vicar's daughter in the blink of an eye. After promises of eternal love.g

<sup>21</sup> One of the puzzling aspects of the story is that her father inexplicably abandons Helen, whereas her brother continues to live with him. Her father does not care about her education and he does not even go to her marriage. Her uncle, with his debonair attitude, lets her marry a young man he probably knows to be a libertine, as if he just wanted to get rid of her.

<sup>22</sup> In showing a heroine who makes an effort to be in control of her life, Anne is extremely modern and she is the most genuine feminist, even though on a latent level, of the three sisters. Helen Huntingdon is not like Jane Eyre or Catherine Earnshaw: the former feels complete only with a maimed Rochester, and the latter sacrifices her passion and love for Heathcliff to have a conventional marriage. Anne is ideally linked to Ann Radcliffe's independent heroines.

<sup>23</sup> Pre-Raphaelite paintings can convey some interesting images concerning Victorian women and the dichotomy of their roles within society. Helen is a special person and embodies the pious woman that is represented in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Ecce Ancilla Domini* (1850), but, at the same time, she shares similarities with the female



extremely strong and even scandalous according to the feminine ideal of the Victorian period when she slams her bedroom door in the face of her husband, a gesture that novelist and critic May Sinclair considered revolutionary in her introduction to an edition of the novel.<sup>24</sup> This action dooms her to the progressive estrangement from her husband, who abandons her for periods that become longer and longer. Then her husband turns into a sort of Mr. Hyde, who from amorous becomes violent and cruel. The crude descriptions of the effects of alcoholism and debauch were very strong for Anne's contemporaries, not used to see reality described so vividly. Very disturbing and particularly strong is also the fact that Arthur, Helen's husband, becomes violently jealous and tries to make their son become addicted to alcohol, accelerating the woman's decision to try and run away to save her creature. These probably represented the scenes that could not be approved by Anne's sister, Charlotte, who stopped any new printing of the book for a number of years. The only masculine figure who does not seem to be part of the game is Gilbert who, like Helen, is different from the other people of his gender, even though our perspective on the story and his character is filtered through his own narration. There is an interesting and very innovative idea that he expresses in one of the first chapters. He is convinced that women have the right to be respected by their men<sup>25</sup>. He sounds very idealistic and he is probably one of the most honest and genuine characters of the whole story, if we exclude his way of treating his first fiancée. A particular positive connotation of light surrounds his figure at the beginning of the story: wherever he meets Helen he is surrounded by nature and light. On the contrary, she is constantly surrounded by obscurity and darkness, which may convey an idea of mystery or even danger. However, it would be interesting to remember his uncontrollable fits of jealousy or his obstinate insistence with Helen that introduce the theme of the next chapter.

### **Framing the protagonist**

Technically Helen's story is framed<sup>26</sup> within Gilbert's story. It may seem as a form of love for Helen from her suitor and protector. However, a number of scholars consider this particular structure as full of negative connotations. It is not only that her diary, which is included in Gilbert's narration. She cannot actually speak for herself. Her words are within the words of her most faithful suitor, who in reality does not let her have a personal and independent utterance. Although the device of Gilbert's narration enclosing Helen's diary may seem a form of protection, it can also be seen as a spider web slowly and inexorably wrapping around the woman giving her no opportunity to escape. He proclaims he wants to help her and free her from her sad destiny, but he seems to be trying to capture her instead. She does not seem to have the right to take

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protagonist of William H. Hunt *The Awakening Conscience* (1853), with the basic difference that she is no fallen woman like the one dominating the painting. Rossetti represents the woman as an angel, a mother and a pure creature, who is ethereal and respects the law of God. On the contrary, Hunt represents a sensuous and passive woman, the man's mistress dependent on his economic support. Helen is a pure creature as in Rossetti, but she is also the prey and the victim of man as in Hunt. Remaining in the visual field it would be interesting to consider Rossetti's *La Ghirlandata* (1873) as an iconic representation of Annabella as a pitiless femme fatale.

<sup>24</sup> Published in 1914, London: Dutton & Company, New York.

<sup>25</sup> "...when I marry, I shall expect to find more pleasure in making my wife happy and comfortable, than in being made so by her..." (p.46)

<sup>26</sup> It could be worth citing the controversial 1993 film by Jennifer Lynch *Boxing Helena*. The male protagonist, a successful doctor, dreams of keeping the independent woman he loves as a prisoner in his wonderful house, taking advantage of a street accident she had. In order to do so he slowly deprives her of her arms and legs so that she can be his forever. We could find a similarity in the way most men in the story try to keep Helen prisoner.

care of the narration of the story and we are not allowed to hear her own voice. The interesting introduction by Peter Merchant to the Wordsworth edition of the novel, printed in 2001, of which we provide a large and interesting extract, is illuminating in this sense. He mentions a form of “encirclement”, which progressively engulfs Helen with no possibility of a way out, “Brontë appears completely in control of the effects which her narrative strategy produces. But in so far as the letters and the diary simultaneously co-operate to open—with their respective positions inside the novel’s structure—a His-and-Hers split in the storytelling, there may be deeper and darker implications. For the embedding of the diary kept by the woman within the letters written by the man has been seized upon by modern commentators keen to challenge any reading of Brontë’s novel which fashions it as domestic idyll or as allegory of recovery and rescue. Such an embedding is interpreted in this context as repeating and reinforcing Helen’s long experience of male encirclement—summed up by perhaps her bitterest biblical quotation, “He hath hedged me about, that I cannot get out” (p.288)—and as equating Gilbert, whose framing discourse begins and ends the book, with all the other characters who banefully beset her round [...]. The point to grasp here is that Helen [...] submitted to being incorporated in the person of her husband, with her past life and name erased and her property combined with his. And now the swallowing up of her diary in Gilbert’s letters is a kind of narrative ‘coverture’, another ostensible merger which soon starts to look more like a hostile takeover [...].The fact that Gilbert reveals that history to a comrade of his might be an aggravating circumstance, even many years after the chronicled events took place” (XIX-XX). Critics tend to see Helen as a symbol of the inevitable condition of women as preys or objects, unable to have their independent status within society. If the pessimistic interpretation is valid, the novel becomes a token of the sad, inescapable condition of women in the nineteenth century with no possible happy end, as every step of their lives is managed by male figures, who are disturbingly contradictory.<sup>27</sup>

### Some further considerations

In spite of the shame that Charlotte Brontë may have felt because of her youngest sister’s novel, the story is not only worth reading but it also contains a series of novelties both technical and thematic that make it an intriguing little masterpiece that can be analyzed under many perspectives. It provides different and challenging interpretations. Some critics have noticed that it unconsciously absorbed influences from the works of Anne’s sisters. It is intriguing to unveil a strange analogy in the initials of the novel (*Wuthering Heights* and *Wildfell Hall*). From a phonetic perspective, the novel shows an abundance of names starting with the letter ‘H’, just as in *Wuthering Heights*. In effect, the analogies remain on a superficial level and apart from these minor details, Anne’s novel offers original perspectives. The story was transposed to television and to the big screen with mixed results. Probably because it is a dark and difficult plot that nonetheless has its originality, which lies in the specific form of an encased, or layered, narration carried out through Gilbert’s single viewpoint, which is difficult, if not impossible, to reproduce in a film. The visual rendering of story inevitably multiplies the points of view, which the written story only limits to one. The

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<sup>27</sup> Signorotti, who considers the presence of Gilbert in Helen’s life as menacing and dangerous as Arthur’s, expresses a particularly negative opinion on the real essence of the novel and Helen’s destiny. See Signorotti, Elisabeth. 1995. “A Frame Perfect and Glorious”: Narrative Structure in Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. *Victorian Newsletter*. 87 (Spring): 20–25.

difficulty in appreciating it is that it cannot be clearly specified as a definite genre. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is not a “mistake”, as Charlotte claimed. It represents a very original voice in the rich panorama of the nineteenth Century literary production, starting from its ambiguous title, probably chosen according to Gilbert’s imposing perspective. By apparently lessening the importance of the main character, describing her as a “tenant”, while she is the owner of the property, the male agenda reveals the sense of inescapable masculine superiority mixed to its the greedy financial interest, typical of the growing liberalism of the times.