Nineteenth Century Women Writers and the Challenge of Gender Roles

Feminist Heroines in the Novels of the Brontë Sisters

B.A. Essay

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Abstract
This essay explores the challenges that women writers faced in the nineteenth century, as well as women in general. Therefore, the concept of gender roles is examined, along with the restrictions that women faced. In addition, the notion of separate spheres that were dominant in this period is briefly outlined to exemplify the male-dominated society that these women lived in. However, the main issue focused on is how women writers were able to speak out against this patriarchal society and the traditional gender roles that women were subjected to. Indeed, by becoming professional writers, they challenged the notion of the domestic sphere and the idea that women were mainly supposed to be wives and mothers. As a result, women writers had the ability to empower other women and influence the course of history.

In particular, the Brontë sisters will be discussed to illustrate women writers that challenged the patriarchal society of the nineteenth century. Through their novels and their heroines, the sisters addressed issues that their society faced and they did this in their own unique ways. Special emphasis is placed on Charlotte Brontë and Anne Brontë, as well as their novels. Charlotte and Anne concerned themselves predominantly with problems such as gender roles and equality between the sexes. However, they were also concerned with the education of women and issues concerning the domestic sphere.

The novels discussed are Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë and The Tenant of Wildfell Hall by Anne Brontë. In addition, the novel Wuthering Heights by Emily Brontë is briefly outlined. The novels in question can be considered as feminist novels. Indeed, the key aspect discussed in Jane Eyre is the empowerment of women through the heroine, Jane Eyre, as well as her demand for equality. Moreover, the battle for women’s right and independence is explored in the The Tenant of Wildfell Hall through the novel’s heroine, Helen Huntingdon. Finally, it can be argued that Emily challenged gender roles through the way that she wrote, as well as through the heroine, Catherine Earnshaw, in Wuthering Heights.
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1. Introduction

Nineteenth century society, known as the Victorian period, regarded men as the superior sex and women as inferior. The reason being, that men were believed to be stronger than women, both physically and mentally. Therefore, it was considered to be unhealthy for women to participate in any activities that would strain them physically or mentally. As a result, women's activities were restricted and therefore their opportunities in society were restricted as well. The concept of separate spheres was invented to help women understand that their place in society was to occupy the domestic sphere, while men could participate in the public sphere. Thus, women grew up believing that their sole purpose in life was to become a wife and a mother. Furthermore, this “domestic focus of women’s lives, to be narrowly limited to home and family, was justified and given ideological unity in the nineteenth century by a range of arguments, resting on women's nature, on God’s ordinances, on the evidence of past and present societies” (Rendall 189).

There were many women that challenged these beliefs, and among them were women writers. They faced numerous obstacles when they stepped out of their spheres by becoming professional writers. Critics and men such as John Stuart Mill declared that women could never be innovators and therefore they would always fall into the category of imitators (Showalter 3). In general, women were commonly thought to lack certain characteristics that made a good writer. The reason for that is that women were usually categorized into either angelic beings or monstrous beings. Therefore, women were supposed to be angelic and as angelic beings they could not feel passion, ambition, anger or honour. In fact, critics commonly “did not believe that women could express more than half of life” (Showalter 79). However, there were many women writers that challenged these views and among them were the Brontë sisters.

The story of the Brontë family is a well known story which has fascinated people through the years. It is a story about extraordinary children that lived most of their lives in the isolation of their home, Haworth Parsonage, with their father Patrick Brontë. Their mother died of cancer in 1821 and left behind six children. Charlotte was only five years old when her mother died, Emily was three years old and Anne was only 20 months old. Shortly after the death of their mother, Patrick decided that it would be best to send his oldest daughters, Maria and Elizabeth to the Clergy Daughters’ School at Cowan Bridge to gain education. It did not take long before Charlotte and Emily were sent there to join them. The life there was dreadful and the conditions were poor.
Indeed, Charlotte used her experiences at Cowan Bridge to depict Lowood in *Jane Eyre*. The girls were made to read horror stories of naughty girls that were sent to hell and they were told that whipping children was necessary to save their souls. Indeed, the conditions were so poor that the school faced an outbreak of tuberculosis, which took the life of Maria and Elizabeth in 1825. Subsequently, Charlotte and Emily were brought back to Haworth so they would not have to face the same fate. The death of Maria and Elizabeth affected the whole family, especially the siblings (Bentley 25-26).

The sisters lived a short life and a life full of hardships; however, their novels lived on to become celebrated throughout the world and became the renowned classics that we know today. Their novels addressed many of the issues that society in the nineteenth century faced, especially issues regarding gender equality. Overall, through their novels and their lives, the Brontë sisters showed the world that women did indeed have passion and were not inferior to men. Furthermore, they were examples of women going against traditional gender roles and stepping out of their spheres. Therefore, one can read their novels as feminist novels and indeed one can consider their heroines to be feminists if one takes into account Rendall’s definition, “using the word ‘feminist’ to describe women who claimed for themselves the right to define their own place in society” (1). In the end, the Brontë sisters, along with other female writers influenced the course of history:

For if contemporary women do now attempt the pen with energy and authority, they are able to do so only because their eighteenth- and nineteenth-century foremothers struggled in isolation that felt like illness, alienation that felt like madness, obscurity that felt like paralysis to overcome the anxiety of authorship that was endemic to their literary subculture. (Gilbert and Gubar 51)

2. Women in Nineteenth Century England

Before looking at women writers and examining the novels of the Brontë sisters, the society that these women lived in must be explored in some detail. In the nineteenth century, women were not considered to be equal to men. Therefore they did not have the same rights or the same opportunities that were presented to men in this period. Furthermore, it was believed that men and women occupied separate spheres that were regarded as being very different from each other. The ideology behind the separate spheres was based on the idea that women and men had different characteristics, both
mentally and physically. Men belonged in the public sphere, “the active and aggressive world of politics, the military services and commerce, for instance, where they could use their capacity for logical thought to best effect” (Rowbotham 6). On the other hand, according to Rowbotham, women were considered to belong in “the more passive, private sphere of the household and home where their inborn emotional talents would serve them best” (6). Thus, women were supposed to teach their children the standards of society and what was considered to be morally right and wrong.

As a result, men had access to better education and therefore they had more opportunities to succeed in the world. They could enter various careers, while the options for women were scarce. Indeed, being a woman was considered to be a career in itself and therefore, their highest goal was to become a mother and a wife. In addition, the concept of the “Angel in the house” or the “Household Fairy” became very popular and it became a role for women to live up to (Rowbotham 12-15). Women were supposed to be coached in different things that were required, that is to say, if they were going to succeed in reaching the status of an Angel or a Fairy. Therefore they had to learn things such as drawing, singing, dancing, as well as having basic knowledge of modern languages. As a result, women could only achieve the status of a “Household Fairy” by going through strenuous training in various subjects, ranging from domestic duties to formal academic lessons (Rowbotham 99). However, the main focus was usually not on the academic lessons, for it was believed that women were not able to process as much knowledge as men. Moreover, it was believed that women were small and weak, because of the female body (Showalter 76). This claim was supported by Victorian physicians and anthropologists. Indeed, they argued that women’s inferiority could be seen by analysing the brain itself and its functions. According to them, women had smaller brains and as a result, the brain was not as efficient as the brain of the opposite sex. Furthermore, women were believed to be more likely to obtain certain diseases, as well as having less complex nerve development. The result of this conclusion was that women should not use as much of their mental energy as men, for if they did, “women would divert the supply of blood and phosphates from the reproductive system to the brain, leading to dysmenorrhea, ‘ovarian neuralgia,’ physical degeneracy, and sterility” (Showalter 77). Accordingly, it was more important that they would learn how a proper lady behaves and expresses herself, instead of having a passion for education. Consequently, women that had passion for learning and gaining more knowledge were looked down on and were in the danger of being known as “blue-
“stocking”. This was “the name given to women who had devoted themselves too enthusiastically to intellectual pursuits. Blue-stockings were considered unfeminine and off-putting in the way that they attempted to usurp men’s ‘natural’ intellectual superiority” (Kathryn Hughes). All in all, education was an important tool in making young women aware of the conventional standards of femininity and knowing their place. It is for this reason that the “education of the adolescent girl involved a complex mixture of continuing character training and the teaching of gender expectations” (Rowbotham 111).

However, there were women in this period that fought against the injustices that they faced. One such woman was Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon and in 1857, in *Women and Work*, she wrote “Cries are heard on every hand that women are conspiring, that women are discontented, that women are idle, that women are overworked, and that women are out of their sphere. God only knows what is the sphere of any human being” (37). This indicates how women were feeling in this period, and the tension that existed between the sexes. Women wanted to break out of their bonds, the sphere that predetermined their destiny and their life. Furthermore, they were tired of the idea that for a woman to be feminine, she had to be ignorant, weak and light-minded. Accordingly, this idea of femininity angered many women, including Bodichon and she took it upon herself to speak on behalf of those women, for she believed that “the larger-natured a woman is, the more decidedly feminine she will be; the stronger she is, the more strongly feminine. You do not call a lioness unfeminine, though she is different in size and strength from the domestic cat, or mouse” (44). Additionally, women were tired of hearing that their sole purpose in life was to get married and have children. In fact, many women were brought up believing that they were the property of their fathers or their husbands. Accordingly, young women that strived for more and wanted to have a purpose other than the domestic sphere, became depressed when realizing that they did not have the rights to follow whatever path they wanted. Bodichon addressed all these issues in *Women and Work*, as well as the issue of women not being able to enter as many professions as the opposite sex. She believed that it was the responsibility of mothers to educate their daughters about their worth as human beings. Moreover, she claimed that most girls grow up believing that they are worth more and they grow up curious about the world. As a result, they ask their mothers about what their purpose is in the world, for what they were created and what use they could be to the world and to society. The usual response to this question would not be
that she had a choice about what she wanted to become in the future. It would usually be along these lines: “You must marry someday. Women were made for men. Your use is to bear children; to keep your home comfortable for your husband. In marriage is the only respectable life for woman” (Bodichon 38). Many women writers fought against these injustices as well and they did that through their novels and their heroines. In this context, we must bear in mind that it was not until in the late nineteenth century that it became increasingly acceptable in society to be a woman with certain amount of independence (Rowbotham 222). Therefore, one can conclude that women writers that wrote about gender equality and gender roles were challenging the structure of the male-dominated society that they lived in. As a result, one can draw the conclusion that many of their novels can indeed be interpreted as feminist novels.

3. Women Writers
In the nineteenth century, men dominated the world of literature. Even so, it is often referred to as the age of the female novelist (Showalter 3). The reason being, that it is characterized by great women writers such as Jane Austen, George Eliot, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Elizabeth Gaskell, Mary Shelley and the Brontë sisters. These women are just some examples of women writers that were able to contribute to the literary scene in the nineteenth century, which had previously been dominated by men and in many ways still was. Women writers faced many obstacles when trying to write novels, since girls were restricted from reading various types of literature. As a result, the range of novels offered to men or boys were far more than that offered to girls. For example, novels offered to boys and not to girls were adventure novels with strong spirited heroes. Those novels were not considered to be healthy or advisable for girls to read. In fact, it was believed that it could cause resentment and dissatisfaction in girls, for they might want to enter the public sphere and experience an adventure of their own. This went as far as being considered threatening to society, for it relied on girls knowing what role they played. Both of the sexes were supposed to act out their roles as laid out by society and if they were to stray from that path, it could cause disarray. Although it did not seem likely that men would rebel against “the stereotypical roles marked out for them”, there was “considerably less complacency about feminine acquiescence in the limited sphere open to their sex” (Rowbotham 8). Accordingly, the novels that were written for girls had stories that were meant to rationalize the position of women in society and they were written in a way that helped them realize the role
that they were supposed to follow. If a girl showed passion or behaved badly, she was considered to be heinous. However, if a boy behaved badly, he was just exhibiting his masculine traits (Daniel 39).

These novels came to be known as didactic fiction, novels that reinforced gender-roles, instead of trying to empower girls. Thus, didactic fiction was “fuelled by the wish to control as far as possible, if not stifle, independent feminine desires” (Rowbotham 12). A good example of writers of didactic fiction is Maria Edgeworth. Her purpose was not to write in a way that promoted equality between sexes. Instead she implemented her novels with moral guidelines and strong views on how girls should behave, as well as what they ought to strive for. Her novels include *Belinda*, published in 1801, and the *Patronage*, published in 1814. For example, in *Belinda*, Edgeworth emphasizes the importance of girls having modest desires. Moreover, she stresses the importance of girls learning not to be greedy and that a girl should not want more for herself. However, it was perfectly alright for boys to behave in that manner (Daniel 42-43).

Another author who wrote didactic fiction was Christina Rossetti. Many of her works, such as *Speaking Likeness* that was published in 1874, serve as a warning that a girl can only reach salvation and virtuousness through “the death of desire” (Daniel 47). Overall, didactic fiction was used by parents, as a tool to educate girls on how they were supposed to behave. In addition, it was important that they learned how to control their passions and be modest in everything they did. They were supposed to know the conventions of their sphere, which was to be the household fairy or a proper lady. That meant that they were supposed to be innocent and pure, while also realizing that they were inferior to men. Therefore, it was important for girls to read novels that had a heroine that could guide them in how to behave and express themselves in a proper way (Rowbotham 22).

This created a difficulty for women writers, for they were supposed to follow certain rules when writing novels and there were limits to what was considered socially acceptable. Nevertheless, there were writers, such as the Brontë sisters, Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot that deliberately went against these rules. They did that through their heroines, by showing the society that women could be passionate and strong. Moreover, they showed how women were trapped in the domestic sphere, when in fact, they should be able to participate in the public sphere. In a way, these female authors themselves challenged the norm by entering the public sphere when they
decided to become writers. However, if a woman wanted to be a writer, she had to understand that her priority was to be a woman and that was always supposed to be her main profession. Therefore, her career as a writer would always come second to that, even though men could make it their first and foremost career. Therefore, “self-sacrifice, not self-sufficiency was the mark of professionalism for women” (Rowbotham 21).

Hence, women often used a male pseudonym to escape the limits that were placed on them; such was the case for George Eliot and the Brontë sisters. Anne Brontë went under the name Acton Bell and her novels were published by T.C. Newby, a minor publisher. Emily Brontë used the same publisher and Wuthering Heights was published under the pseudonym Ellis Bell. Furthermore, Smith, Elder, and Co. published Charlotte Brontë’s novel, Jane Eyre, under the pseudonym Currer Bell. The reason for publishing under pseudonyms was so that they could cross over the boundaries that had been laid on women writers. Furthermore, they wanted to be valued and ranked on the same level as men. Since women writers were always compared to other women writers and they were judged for being women, usually because of the stereotype that women were inferior and not as intellectual as men. Indeed, women were patronized by male critics and this was extremely common in the nineteenth century. For instance, George Eliot was afraid to make her gender known when she noticed that the tone of the criticism changed when the discovery was made that Currer Bell was in fact a woman. The reason being, that she was worried that she would have to go through a similar experience, and this turned out to be the case when she faced a similar fate as Charlotte Brontë and was judged differently for the sole reason of being a woman (Showalter 95).

However, as novels by women became more common, men had to acknowledge that there were women that had a great talent for writing fiction. Although the respect for women writers did increase, it was believed that there were only a few comparable to men. According to Showalter, this made a number of women writers furious and they felt as if they were being made “into competitors and rivals for the same small space” (73). She also explains how women writers were beginning to push back “the boundaries of their sphere, and presenting their profession as one that required not only freedom of language and thought, but also mobility and activity in the world” (28). This also turned out to be the case with the Brontë sisters.
4. Charlotte Brontë

Charlotte is often regarded as the most famous of the sisters, mainly because of her novel *Jane Eyre*, published by Smith, Elder, and Co. in 1847. She became the eldest sibling after the death of her sisters, Maria and Elizabeth. Their death, as well as her experience at Cowan Bridge was going to affect her for the rest of her life. She suddenly became responsible for her other siblings and this might be the reason for her growing resentment that lead to her passionate and fierce temper. Moreover she was a “domineering and ambitious child. Her father’s stories of great men and great doings had fired her with a determination to make something of herself and of others” (L. Hanson and E. Hanson 14). Indeed, Charlotte knew that she had a fire burning inside her that she did not know how to control. In a letter she wrote to Ellen Nussey, she expressed her frustration: “If you knew my thoughts; the dreams that absorb me; and the fiery imaginations that at times eat me up and make me feel Society as it is, wretchedly insipid, you would pity and I daresay despise me” (Barker 38). She used all these emotions to make her dreams of becoming a professional writer true. Accordingly, she took it upon herself to write to the famous romantic poet, Robert Southey in the year 1837. It is likely that she was asking him for advice on becoming a professional writer and she might have sent him some examples of her writing. Her letter is lost, but there is a letter with Southey’s response, where he states that “literature cannot be the business of a woman’s life; & it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure will she have for it” (Barker 49). Southey did not mean to be rude in his letter to Charlotte; on the contrary, he was quite polite. This was just the common belief in this period and it illustrates the obstacles that women writers faced. However, this was not to affect Charlotte in the long run. In her life, she wrote several novels that were published. In the most famous of them all, *Jane Eyre*, she used all her passions and emotions to her advantage.

After the publication of *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte became increasingly aware of the inequality that existed between the sexes. It frustrated her that women were regarded as being inferior to men, both physically and mentally. It was important to her to be able to express her views on this matter, as she did in *Jane Eyre*, as well as in her responses to reviewers. In a letter that Charlotte wrote to G. H. Lewes in 1849, she conveys to him her irritation at being judged differently based on her sex: “You will- I know- keep measuring me by some standard of what you deem becoming to my sex ... come what will- I cannot when I write think always of myself- and of what is elegant and charming.
in femininity— it is not on those terms or with such ideas I ever took pen in hand” (Barker 261). In addition, she used to express her anger over the criticism of *Jane Eyre*, but this was because after it became known that Currer Bell was a woman, the criticism and reviews on the novel took a turn for the worse. However, Charlotte preferred to confront the critics that judged her based on her sex and therefore she often wrote back to journals and critics. An example is a letter that she wrote to the *Economist*. The critic of that paper wrote that he would praise the book if it had been written by a man and pronounce it odious if it turned out to be the work of a woman. Charlotte’s response to him was: “To you I am neither Man nor Woman- I come before you as an Author only- it is the sole standard by which you have a right to judge me- the sole ground on which I accept your judgement” (Barker 256). All things considered, one can argue that Charlotte was indeed a “feminist” by the common interpretation presented by Jane Rendall, using the word feminist to describe “women who claimed for themselves the right to define their own place in society” (1).

### 4.1. *Jane Eyre*: Jane the Feminist Heroine

*Jane Eyre* is the second novel written by Charlotte Brontë. However, it was her first novel to get published by Smith, Elder & Co. and it was published in 1847 under the pseudonym Currer Bell. When it was revealed that the author behind *Jane Eyre* was a woman, it outraged many readers and critics. One of the reasons was, that critics thought that her realism was improper, because she was a woman (Showalter 91). Moreover, the traditional belief in the nineteenth century had been that women were supposed to accept the roles that society had placed upon them. More importantly, they were not supposed to question them and that is exactly what Jane does in Charlotte’s novel:

> Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts, as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they
seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex. (C. Brontë 69-79)

Jane does not let society mould her into one acceptable form. She has respect for herself, is independent and she does not submit to those who treat her with injustice. Instead of being a silent good girl, she speaks her mind and she is proud of her knowledge. She does not think of herself as inferior to men and she is not afraid to let men know that she is their equal. Furthermore, the ways in which Jane is a feminist heroine can be seen in the way she interacts with other characters, especially men. It is most evident in her relationship with Mr. Rochester and it can also be seen in her relationship with St. John and John Reed. She does not yield to the will of men and she is not afraid to speak to them on equal terms demonstrated in the next chapter.

4.1. Jane’s Relationship with Other Characters

Jane Eyre is aware that women in society are being treated differently than their male counterparts. They do not have the same opportunities to express themselves and they are being restrained by gender roles. More importantly, she does not believe in society’s conception of women and she challenges the idea that women are supposed to be confined to their sphere. Therefore, Jane does not let any character treat her as an inferior and she actually demands to be treated as an equal. The earliest example can be seen in her relationship with her cousin, John Reed, when she is just a child. Right at the beginning one can see examples of Jane’s reaction against patriarchal society when she refuses to be submissive and let a person treat her with disrespect. For instance, when she is reading behind the red velvet curtain, she refuses to address John Reed as Master Reed and therefore she is going against her masculine authority. He throws a book at Jane, resulting in an injury to her head. However, she does not turn the other cheek; she goes at him and attacks him in return: “Wicked and cruel boy ... You are like a murderer—you are like a slave-driver— you are like the Roman emperors” (C. Brontë 3). She shows her fearlessness in going against her oppressor and while doing so she shows her intelligence: “I had read Goldsmith’s History of Rome, and had formed my opinion of Nero, Caligula, &c. Also I had drawn parallels in silence, which I never thought thus to have declared aloud” (C. Brontë 3).

Overall, Jane is able to overcome a difficult childhood and this is what helps her to grow stronger and more independent. She becomes more aware of the issues that
women face and the discrimination that they face, as well of social inequality. However, she does not let these things define herself. She is proud of being a woman and she does not belittle herself for being an orphan or a governess. Instead, she focuses on her qualities, attributes and knowledge. This can best be seen in her relationship with Mr. Rochester. He is the first man in her life to acknowledge her as an equal and respect her passionate and strong character. Moreover he values her opinions and her knowledge. Jane’s first meeting with Rochester is a fairytale meeting and it is full of mythic elements. She sees a large dog that reminds her of a spirit known as Gytrash running on the road; in the tales that she heard as a child, the Gytrash is a spirit that is able to take the form of a horse or a large dog. Additionally, she sees a horse that might also be a Gytrash spirit. However, the horse comes carrying a rider on its back and that convinces her that she is not seeing a spirit. Indeed, that rider is a human being, Mr. Rochester, and “his figure was enveloped in a riding cloak, fur collared and steel clasped ... He had a dark face, with stern features and a heavy brow” (C. Brontë 72). He appears at first to be the very essence of patriarchal energy, a middle aged warrior according to Gilbert and Gubar (351). However, Rochester falls on the ice, together with his horse and accepts Jane’s offer of help. Furthermore, just as Jane, he also feels as if their meeting is a mythic one and he conveys that feeling to her: “When you came on me in Hay Lane last night, I ... had half a mind to demand whether you had bewitched my horse” (C. Brontë 77). According to Gilbert and Gubar, it is important to bear in mind that “his playful remark acknowledges her powers just as much as (if not more than) her vision of the Gytrash acknowledged his” (352). As a result, Jane and Rochester do not only begin their relationship as master and servant, they also begin as spiritual equals (Gilbert and Gubar 352).

More importantly, Jane is able to converse with Rochester on equal terms throughout the novel. She is unafraid to answer him honestly and she is not afraid to match his dark sense of humour. Equally important is the fact that she is never submissive in their conversations and she never looks at herself as an inferior to him. Their equality is presented in other ways as well. For example, when Rochester asks her rudely to entertain him, Jane smiles “not a very complacent or submissive smile” (C. Brontë 84) and he realizes that his request was not fair and tells her: “Miss Eyre, I beg your pardon. The fact is, once for all, I don’t wish to treat you like an inferior ... I claim only such superiority as must result from twenty years’ difference in age” (C. Brontë 85). In addition, when Jane has fallen in love with Rochester and believes that he is
going to marry another woman, she declares to him that as much as he wants her to stay in his household, she cannot:

Do you think I can stay to become nothing to you? Do you think I am an automaton?—a machine without feelings? ... Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong!—I have as much soul as you,—and full as much heart! ... I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh;—it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God’s feet, equal,—as we are! (C. Brontë 161)

Jane does not respond to Rochester as a woman is supposed to respond. In general, women were supposed to be calm and in control of their feelings and in fact it often seemed as if women were not supposed to have feelings at all. However, Jane does not address Rochester through the medium of conventionalities; she addresses him as if they were equal spirits. Moreover, she looks at herself as an independent woman: “I am no bird; and no net ensnares me; I am a free human being with an independent will, which I now exert to leave you” (C. Brontë 162). Furthermore, when Rochester tells her that it is truly her that he wants to marry and he exclaims: “My bride is here ... my equal is here, and my likeness. Jane, will you marry me?” (C. Brontë 162).

The relationship between Jane and Rochester angered many critics, as well as her passion towards him and her passionate temper. Furthermore, there was the fact that throughout the novel, Jane and Rochester regard each other as equals. This was not common in the nineteenth century and it made many critics angry. The reason was that this portrayal of a heroine claiming herself to be the equal to a man could inspire young women and that could cause disorder and confusion in society. It did not help that a character that is a man enforced that idea as well. The stories that were acceptable for girls to read, were stories that exposed “the pivotal importance of that ‘traditional’ feminine role in contemporary society, by revealing many of the factors and reasoning behind this limited domestic tradition” (Rowbotham 12). However, Jane challenges the traditional feminine role that women were supposed to conform to.

In the end, Jane decides to leave Rochester, when she finds out that he is still married to Bertha Mason, a woman that has gone insane. After a long journey she ends up in Marsh End, where she meets St. John Rivers. Her role as a feminist heroine is
reinforced in her discourse with him. He helps her get a job as a teacher and as a result she becomes financially independent. In the novel, St. John wants to become a missionary and after noticing the strength of Jane’s character, he asks her to marry him. However, she does not want to become a missionary’s wife, especially if it means marrying a man that does not really love her:

He asks me to be his wife, and has no more of a husband’s heart for me than that frowning giant of a rock ... can I let him complete his calculations—coolly put into practice his plans—... Can I receive from him the bridal ring, endure all the forms of love (which I doubt not he would scrupulously observe) and know that the spirit was quite absent? ... No: such a martyrdom would be monstrous. I will never undergo it. (C. Brontë 260)

Jane does not submit to St. John’s power and she defies his will. Indeed, she has never felt as if she should behave differently in front of St. John owing to the fact that he is a man: “He had not imagined that a woman would dare to speak so to a man. For me, I felt at home in this sort of discourse. I could never rest in communication with strong, discreet, and refined minds, whether male or female” (C. Brontë 241). She is not ready to disown her nature for him, to be “always restrained, and always checked”, to be forced to keep the fire of her nature “continually low, to compel it to burn inwardly and never utter a cry” (C. Brontë 262).

John is a cold man that reinforces the central concepts of gender roles in many ways. Indeed, passionate Jane tells him that if she married him, it would kill her, and his response is: “I should kill you—I am killing you? Your words are such as ought not to be used: violent, unfeminine, and untrue” (C. Brontë 265). By comparison, Rochester does not belittle Jane for her temperament or her passion. He himself is passionate and he loves her for herself, her body and soul. As a result, towards the end, Jane decides to return to Rochester. She is now equal to him in every respect, since she has become financially independent, which is what she wanted in the first place. There are some critics say that by ending her journey in marriage she is abandoning everything she stood for and what made her a feminist heroine. However, Jane marries Rochester because she wants to and because she chooses to marry him. She shows us that women can choose their own destiny and that women can marry whatever person that they want to be with. Moreover, she shows women that it is best to marry a man that considers you
his equal and respects you. Therefore, she is not just a feminist heroine that demands equality for women, but also a great role model for women that wanted more for themselves in the nineteenth century. For this reason, *Jane Eyre* enraged many critics and readers. Therefore, Gilbert and Gubar claim that it is not “primarily the coarseness and sexuality of *Jane Eyre* which shocked Victorian reviewers (though they disliked those elements in the book), but, as we have seen, its ‘anti-Christian’ refusal to accept the forms, customs, and standards of society- in short, its rebellious feminism” (338). Moreover, Gilbert and Gubar continue their argument by stressing that “they were disturbed not so much by the proud Byronic sexual energy of Rochester as by the Byronic pride and passion of Jane herself, not so much by the asocial sexual vibrations between hero and heroine as by the heroine’s refusal to submit to her social destiny” (338). Indeed, it was Jane’s independent nature that was considered a threat to society, as well as her power and sexuality. It was the fact that Jane did not follow traditional gender roles and that her behaviour was not suitable for a proper lady. Therefore, she was not thought to be a proper role model for young girls or women.

5. Anne Brontë

Anne Brontë was the youngest of six siblings and she was just an infant when her mother was diagnosed with cancer. As a result of her illness, her mother had to pass her remaining days confined to her bedroom in Haworth. Indeed, this must have affected Anne as she began to grow older and it is likely that this loss contributed to her doubts and insecurities about herself and her position in life. Furthermore, this might have triggered her passion for religion and life after death. Anne is most commonly seen as the most fragile of the siblings. She was prone to colds and influenza, as well as suffering from asthma her whole life. Charlotte once recalled Anne’s childhood and she said that it was as if Anne had been preparing for an early death since she was born (Langland 3-4). Indeed, Anne might have been born with a weaker immune system and have been physically frailer than her sisters; however, she did not let this affect her. Throughout her life, Anne was extremely observant, courageous, determined and realistic. For instance, she was playing a game with her father and siblings once, where her father asked the siblings a question each. When it was her turn, he asked her what a child like her most wanted. Without hesitating she told him “age and experience” (Langland 5). This passion only grew stronger as she grew older. In fact, she wanted to be able to support herself and she did not want to be dependent upon others.
Langland is convinced that from her letters and novels, one can assume that Anne believed that education was an important way for girls to gain a certain amount of independence, as well as experience (11). Indeed, she wanted to shed the image that had been made of her, the image of frail little Anne. Moreover, she wanted to show the strength and ambition that she had inside her. She went away from home to work as a governess, and in a way she left home not only to prove herself, but to work for her independence (Langland 19). In addition, when *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* was going to be published by T.C. Newby as a novel written by Currer Bell, the author of *Jane Eyre*, Anne went with Charlotte to reveal their identities to Smith, Elder & Co. This was because Anne wanted her work to be acknowledged as her own and judged on its own terms (Langland 22). *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* was published in 1848 and it became a controversial novel. It is evident from the preface to the second edition of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* that Anne wanted to be considered equal to men. In the preface she wrote: “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” (Barker 216). Anne addressed the problems that women writers and women in general faced in the nineteenth century. She believed that people should realize that women were just as talented as men, and that they could just as easily express themselves. Furthermore, she touched on the subject that women were not allowed to read the same novels as men and that both men and women should be able to read what they wanted to.

5.1 *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*: Shedding Light on Women’s Rights

*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is the second novel that was written by Anne Brontë and published by T.C. Newby under the pseudonym Acton Bell in 1848. Considering the New Woman fiction it can be concluded that *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is indeed an early example of the New Woman feminist movement. In the final two decades of the Victorian era, a women’s movement came into being which challenged patriarchal male superiority and addressed issues such as gender equality. The concept of the “New Woman” emerged, along with New Woman novelists such as Sarah Grand, Olive Schreiner and Mona Caird. This was an important feminist movement that called for “a redefinition of women’s roles in marriage and society, and opposed the social norms imposed on women” (Diniejko). Moreover, they opposed the notion that all women should strive to be mothers and wives. They believed that women could aim for other professions than that of the “Angel in the House”. Therefore, they supported women’s
professional aspirations and denounced the traditional idea of womanhood. Furthermore, they supported women’s independence and through their novels, they revealed how women suffered because of their inferior status and the dangers that they might encounter in conventional Victorian marriage. As a result, the New Woman fiction “emerged out of Victorian feminist rebellion and boosted debates on such issues as women’s education, women’s suffrage, sex and women’s autonomy ... it made a lasting impact on popular imagination and ... contributed to major changes in women’s lives” (Diniejko). While this is the case, many of these issues are presented in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, published well before their time. Therefore, with regard to the legal status of women in the nineteenth century, it can be argued that *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is indeed a feminist novel and a forerunner to the New Woman feminist movement.

It is important to remember that when the novel was published in the mid-nineteenth century, women were still dependent on their husbands and they had no power to defy their will. Moreover, they had no rights over their children and they could not obtain a divorce from their husbands, even though men could divorce their wives. Therefore, if a woman was being mentally or physically abused by her husband, she could not leave. In addition, the law claimed that what a woman earned or had in fortune was entitled to her husband, “under the law, her earnings were his earnings” (Langland 24). Therefore, women had no resources available to them and as a result, a woman and her children were entirely “dependent on his will, responsibility, and generosity” (Langland 24).

Anne Brontë was aware of this inequality and she challenges it in her novel. Her heroine, Helen Huntingdon, flees from her abusive husband and goes into hiding. She takes their child with her and moves into Wildfell Hall under the pseudonym Helen Graham. Her husband, Arthur Huntingdon, is an alcoholic and he abuses her emotionally, as well as being unfaithful to her. As a result, Helen pleads with him to divorce her or let her leave with their son. However, he refuses and she becomes a prisoner inside their own home. In the end, Helen sees that her husband is corrupting their son and this is what prompts her to leave her husband and go into hiding: “I was determined to show him that my heart was not his slave, and I could live without him if I chose” (A. Brontë 164). She does this, knowing that she is going against society’s will, as well as abandoning her domestic sphere. More importantly, she establishes her independence by becoming a professional painter to provide for herself.
and her son. Therefore, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is the “story of woman’s liberation... it describes a woman’s escape from the prisonhouse of a bad marriage, and her subsequent attempts to achieve independence by establishing herself in a career as an artist” (Gilbert and Gubar 80). As a result, the novel touches on many problems that concerned feminists in the late nineteenth century, especially the issues that New Women writers focused on.

With her novel, it can be argued that Anne wanted to educate girls on these problems and make them realize that they deserved so much more than what society made them believe. Through her heroine, Anne teaches women about the dangers that they might face in society as women. In the first place, she sheds light on the dangers of marriage and reminds women that they are responsible for their own happiness. They should not be forced to marry someone that they do not love and therefore be subjected to a miserable life. However, they should also realize that love can blind, making it hard to estimate the other person’s faults. Therefore, they should follow their heart, as well as their common sense to be able to escape being imprisoned in a miserable marriage. In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Helen gives her friend a similar advice: “When I tell you not to marry without love, I do not advise you to marry for love alone: there are many, many other things to be considered. Keep both heart and hand in your own possession, till you see good reason to part with them” (A. Brontë 293). This is an important advice, for women could not divorce their husbands and therefore they had to marry a man that they loved, as well as a man that would treat them with kindness and respect. Furthermore, Anne wanted girls to be aware of the fact that the domestic sphere was not always as perfect as society made it out to be. Indeed, the novel “explodes the myth of domestic heaven and exposes the domestic hell, from which the protagonist ultimately flees into hiding” (Langland 24-25).

Furthermore, Anne’s heroine believes that to hinder women from falling into this trap, they should receive the same education as men, so that both sexes would look upon each other as equals. For instance, in her discussions with Gilbert Markham, she declares that: “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” (A. Brontë 20). Indeed, boys were allowed to experience the world around them and they were educated on it as well. However, girls were not allowed to experience the world in the same way, for they were confined to the domestic sphere.
To prove this point Anne Brontë shows us the circumstances of Helen’s life. Helen was young when she fell in love with Arthur Huntingdon and she married him although she knew that he had many faults. However, she believed that she could reform him and make him turn his life around: “I shall consider my life well spent in saving him from the consequences of his early errors, and striving to recall him to the path of virtue” (A. Brontë 118). This was a notion that many young women in this period had and this idea was even reinforced by writers such as Sarah Stickney Ellis, who maintained that when men have bad habits and are unkind to their wives, it must still be a “woman’s part to build him up ... to raise him in his own esteem, to restore him his estimate of his moral worth” (68). This is exactly what Helen does in the beginning of the novel, until she realizes that she should not have to. In the end, she decides that the best thing she can do for herself and her son is to leave her husband and become independent so she can take care of herself and her son. By leaving her husband and taking her child, Helen is taking a big step for she is indeed breaking the law by doing so.

For this reason, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* enraged many critics and readers. They believed that women should not be allowed to read novels about heroines like Helen. Simply because Helen stepped out of her domestic sphere and she challenged the traditional gender roles that she was supposed to follow. However, this was Anne’s purpose by writing the novel and in the preface to the second edition of her novel she wrote: “My object in writing the following pages was not simply to amuse the Reader; neither was it to gratify my own taste, nor yet to ingratiate myself with the Press and the Public: I wished to tell the truth, for truth always conveys its own moral to those who are able to receive it” (Barker 216). Indeed, with the novel Anne went against what was acknowledged as socially acceptable, as did her sisters. Since, they ventured beyond the boundaries that had been laid out for women writers and the subject matter of their novels. Anne wanted women to be able to read novels that would educate them and therefore empower them. However, she knew that with her novel she would not be able to reform society, although she desperately wanted that to happen: “Let it not be imagined, however, that I consider myself competent to reform the errors and abuses of society, but only that I would fain contribute my humble quota towards so good an aim; and if I can gain the public ear at all, whisper a few wholesome truths therein than much soft nonsense” (Barker 216). As can clearly be seen from the above, her subject matter
indeed challenged the foundation of male-dominated society, instead of reinforcing it as was considered socially acceptable.

6. Emily Brontë
Out of all the sisters, Emily is usually regarded with the most sense of mysteriousness, for there is not a lot known about her. What is known is that she loved nature and its powers, as can be clearly seen in her novel *Wuthering Heights*. The Brontë siblings loved roaming around the moors and used to spend many hours playing there. However, as Charlotte notes, none loved the moors as much as Emily: “My sister Emily ... loved the moors ... They were far more to her than a mere spectacle; they were what she lived in and by, as much as the wild birds’, their tenants, or the heather, their produce ... she found in the bleak solitude many and dear delights; and not the least and best loved was- liberty” (Quoted in Bentley 22-23). This description of Emily is also reflected in her character, as well as her love for the powerful wild nature, which contributed to the making of *Wuthering Heights*. Furthermore, it demonstrates the main female characters in her novel, who are Catherine Earnshaw, Catherine Linton and Isabella Linton. They are strong and powerful female characters that show their power in different ways. However, *Wuthering Heights* does not address women’s rights as distinctively as the other novels that have been discussed here and therefore it differs from *Jane Eyre* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Nonetheless, is does deserve a brief discussion for it is a powerful novel that has many feminist aspects.

6.1 *Wuthering Heights*
*Wuthering Heights* is the first and only novel written by Emily Brontë that was published. It was published by T.C. Newby in 1847 under the pseudonym Ellis Bell. Victorian women were supposed to be weak, innocent and fragile. However, in *Wuthering Heights*, Emily presents us with many strong willed female characters, while also challenging the conventions of love stories that had previously been written (Mukherjee 133). For instance, the character Catherine Earnshaw and the character of Isabelle Linton are women who defy society by going against the traditional gender roles of the nineteenth century. Catherine is a rebellious child that does not submit to anyone’s power. Indeed, when being herself, “Catherine is never docile, never submissive, never ladylike” (Gilbert and Gubar 265). In fact, Catherine and Heathcliff make a promise to each other to “grow up as rude as savages” (E. Brontë 80).
Accordingly, Catherine is wild and often behaves like a savage, instead of an innocent and sweet young lady. In addition, she is not afraid to stand up against male characters and she is not afraid to speak to them on equal terms. For instance, as Catherine’s father is dying he asks her “Why canst thou not always be a good lass, Cathy?” to which she answers “Why cannot you always be a good man, father?” (E. Brontë 76). However, when she comes into contact with the Lintons, she begins to reform herself into what society’s concept of a lady is. She does this to please the Lintons and her brother and by doing so she adopts a “double character without exactly intending to deceive any one” (E. Brontë 119). The Lintons represent the society and they transform Catherine to fit society’s conventions. She learns that a girl is supposed to control her passion and be docile (Kolle 58). Thus she becomes stuck between being who she is and being what society expects her to be. This conflict between her nature and society’s expectations ultimately leads to her demise. Therefore, through the character of Catherine Earnshaw, Emily shows us how society acts as a destructive force against female nature. Through society, Catherine is made into a lady where she is not allowed to express herself freely. When Catherine marries Edgar Linton, she becomes a prisoner in her house, expected to behave in a proper way and take care of her domestic duties. Edgar represents both society and patriarchal rule. Accordingly, he denies Catherine’s freedom and as a result he is denying “her a chance of being true to her own instincts” (Kolle 58).

As indicated by the restrictions placed on Catherine through marriage to Edgar, women barely had any legal rights in the nineteenth century. Therefore, women could not divorce their husband if they were unhappy in their marriage. They were their husbands’ property. Such is also the case for Isabella who is stuck in a loveless marriage with Heathcliff. He treats her badly and abuses her; however, she decides to take matters into her own hand and she takes their son and goes into hiding. Therefore, Wuthering Heights criticizes marriage as an institution like Emily’s sister Anne does in the novel The Tenant of Wildfell Hall. Catherine and Isabella are forced to be in unhappy marriages, which are not motivated by love and respect. Indeed, Wuthering Heights, Jane Eyre and The Tenant of Wildfell Hall show women that they should be able to choose whom they marry and that they should base that decision on love and respect, since marriage is not supposed to be a sacrifice for women (Kolle 62). Because Catherine and Isabella are stuck in a loveless marriage, they are forced to take drastic actions to be able to control some aspect of their lives. Since they do not have the legal rights to divorce, Isabella is forced to flee to another city and go into hiding, while
Catherine, who is both passionate and stubborn, tries to rebel as she becomes desperate and for that she uses the methods of starvation. Catherine becomes ill as a result of her confinement and because she is not able to be true to her nature. Her method of starvation is a last resort, a “medium to voice her resistance against the male-dominated world, the bigger world over which she had no control” (Mukherjee 142). When she refuses to eat, she is seizing control of the only thing that she has power over, her own body. Indeed, the kitchen is usually thought of as the territory of the domestic sphere, a sphere that belonged to women. As a result, it can be argued that by using the methods of starvation, Catherine is challenging the patriarchal structures in a symbolic way (Mukherjee 140).

In addition, the way in which Emily wrote challenged both society and male writers. She produced a realistic narrative, in which the men “battle for the favors of apparently high-spirited and independent women” (Gilbert and Gubar 249). More importantly, in her novel, women are neither angels nor monsters. They are not doomed to be one or the other. Women can be kind and generous, while also capable of expressing anger and passion. Catherine possesses traits that society would consider as both male and female traits. She is able to show compassion and love; however, she also has desires and she is not afraid to express anger or passion towards characters in the novel. Indeed, *Wuthering Heights* is a story that is filled with passion, darkness and destructive force. Therefore, characters in the novel, especially Heathcliff and Catherine, are very passionate and not afraid to express their desires. It was not usual for a woman to write in this dark, passionate and powerful way and, what is more, women were not supposed to write in this manner and therefore Emily was subjected to harsh criticism. She defied the notion of gender roles through the way she wrote and through her characters. Victorian girls were trained to repress their feelings and conceal their emotions. Moreover, this training of self-censorship was inhibiting for women who wanted to write and express themselves. Women writers were supposed to write in a certain way and that consisted of not using coarse language. They were supposed to be ladies and that involved verbal inhibitions that were reinforced by critics (Showalter 25). However, Emily was not afraid to use coarse language and express various emotions through her writing; indeed it was the coarse dialect, violence and hatred shown in *Wuthering Heights* that shocked readers and critics (Showalter 25). It was inconceivable that a woman was able to write such a dark tale and that she had taken the liberty to do so. Indeed, Emily “delineated herself from the patriarchal tradition by her
In conclusion, this essay has shown that women in the nineteenth century were supposed to behave according to traditional gender roles. Therefore, women faced the struggle of expressing their true self while also conforming to what society expected them to be. There were limited options and opportunities available to women in nineteenth century male-dominated society and their legal rights were almost nonexistent. However, there were women who raised awareness of these issues, women such as the Brontë sisters. Moreover, the women who challenged the notion of gender roles and spoke up for women’s rights were criticised and accused of attacking the foundation that society was built on. Therefore, they were in the danger of being isolated and viewed as monstrous. As a result, women who stood up against patriarchal society showed remarkable courage and endurance.

Many women writers were able to challenge the idea of gender roles through their novels and raise awareness of women’s rights through their heroines. Certainly, through the act of becoming professional writers they were challenging the notion of separate spheres, the notion that women could only belong in the domestic sphere. Therefore, they served as an example to young women that women could indeed become much more than wives and mothers. In addition, they challenged male-dominated society by showing that women were not inferior to men and that women did not lack in mental or physical strength. Their novels had strong heroines that were able to inspire women, as well as help them understand the injustices that they were made to endure. Such is the case of the Brontë sisters.

In Charlotte’s novel, Jane Eyre is a passionate woman that is not afraid to express her honest opinions. Jane showed women that it was acceptable to be passionate and that women could stand up for themselves and claim their right to equality. Furthermore, Charlotte was not afraid to express these opinions herself, as can be seen in her letters. Similarly, Emily’s heroine Catherine is able to express her emotions and she does not look at herself as inferior to men. In addition, Emily serves as an example of a female writer who showed society that women writers did not lack in originality and that they could indeed produce work that was both powerful and passionate. Furthermore, through her novel, she draws the readers’ attention to women’s legal
rights and challenges the marriage as an institution. Equally important is Anne’s portrayal of women’s sufferings through their lack of legal rights. Furthermore, she stresses the importance of women being able to receive the same education as the opposite sex.

All the above details, as argued in this essay, demonstrate clearly that the Brontë sisters, challenged male-dominated society by showing that women did indeed have passion and were not inferior to men. They were clear examples of women stepping out of their sphere and going against traditional gender roles. In addition, through their novels, they depict women's sufferings and their demands for equality. Their heroines are strong women that take it upon themselves to decide their own fate by taking control of their own lives at important moments in their lives. For instance, Jane refuses to become a mistress or a wife in a loveless marriage. Similarly, Helen decides to leave her husband in search for a better life for her and her son. Finally, Catherine decides that the only way to control her life is to starve herself and destroy herself. The novels demonstrate how “there is more to women than society believes, that women are more than ‘angels’. These three heroines represent the emerging end of the Perfect Woman, and the start of the New Woman, as they claim their right to be a subject, and seek to be agents of their own lives” (Kolle 62). As a result, it is safe to conclude that their novels can be interpreted as feminist novels. Their protagonists are strong, independent women that take it upon themselves to claim their place in society.
Bibliography


