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Equality and the “Woman Question” in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

by Anne Brontë and *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë

B.A. Essay

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Abstract

This B.A. essay examines how the “Woman Question” is presented in the nineteenth century novels *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and *Jane Eyre*, by the sisters Anne and Charlotte Brontë. The “Woman Question” was a popular topic in Victorian society where critics and novelists alike expressed their views on the subject, whether it was in favour of the patriarchal system or feminist ideas. The Brontës both side with the feminist cause, arguing for equal rights and female independence. The essay focuses on the triangular relationships that are presented in each novel: In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* Helen Huntingdon’s relationships with Arthur Huntingdon and Gilbert Markham are examined, while in *Jane Eyre* Jane’s relationship with Edward Rochester is analysed and his relationship with his wife Bertha Mason. The novels show that patriarchy was a well-rooted ideology within Victorian society; in order for women to gain what is rightfully theirs they have to speak out and fight for what they believe in.
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Introduction

The nineteenth century novels *Jane Eyre* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* by the sisters Charlotte and Anne Brontë were first published in 1847 and 1848. The central characters in both tales are women, Jane Eyre and Helen Huntingdon, who are strong willed and independent in their thinking. The novels describe different versions of marriage and relationships between the various characters of the books yet the cores of the narratives are found in the triangular connections that concern the two female protagonists. Anne Brontë focuses her story on Helen’s relationship with her husband Arthur Huntingdon and on her bond with husband-to-be Gilbert Markham.

*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* centres on the matrimony of Helen Huntingdon to Arthur Huntingdon and shows it in a rather brutal light. Their coupling is unhappy and loveless and Arthur acts as a sovereign in their marriage. As a counterpart to this union Brontë offers Helen’s association with Gilbert Markham, but their friendship begins after Helen has left her husband in defiance of his will. After Huntingdon’s death Helen and Markham marry and their tie appears to be different from Helen’s former one since it is seemingly based on mutual respect and love. Charlotte Brontë’s novel has a similar plot except there the tables have been turned; the story recounts Jane’s attachment to Mr. Rochester and reveals his unlucky match to Bertha Mason.

*Jane Eyre* concentrates on the bond that develops between the governess Jane Eyre and her master Edward Rochester. The novel concludes with their union, which is a blissful and long anticipated merger of two soul mates that cherish and honour each other. In their case the comparison is mostly found in Rochester’s former matrimony to Bertha Mason, a mentally ill woman from the West Indies. While equality promises to be the norm between Rochester and Jane it is Rochester who dominates in his marriage to Bertha and that is one of the reasons why their relationship collapses.
At first the two narratives seem to be fairly similar: The former unions in both tales are the unhappy ones that the protagonists, Helen and Rochester, enter into completely ignorant of what is to come—they are blinded by youth, inexperience and outward appearance—but the latter are the ones where true love conquers and happiness and respect prevail. The stories seem to have all the proper characteristics of an archetypal love story, such as “Beauty and the Beast”, where the strong heroine has to overcome obstacles to find true love. But the message that both plots carry is much deeper than guidelines to finding love.

The triangular relationships between the protagonists, along with most of the other connections in the stories, are in fact examples through which the Brontë sisters examine how patriarchal ideas dominate in Victorian society, especially within the institution of marriage. In most cases the husband has complete control within the marriage; there is no ground for equality or partnership and the women are expected to act according to their husband’s will in every way. Few of the men seem to doubt their authority and most of the women comply with this ideology without any apparent protest. But there are some who want a change in these matters, most noticeably Helen and Jane, and they fight to be able to stand on equal ground with men. In The Tenant of Wildfell Hall and Jane Eyre Anne and Charlotte Brontë simultaneously want to show the absurdity of the rigid patriarchal concepts of the nineteenth century and criticise them by advocating equality between the sexes and within wedlock. In light of the much discussed “Woman Question” during the Victorian era, where speculations on woman’s proper role were addressed from various angles, Anne and Charlotte’s views on equality would have been a nice contribution to the current discussion. But how do Anne and Charlotte Brontë challenge the patriarchal doctrines in their novels and how do they see equality, which contemporary feminists argued for, as being established within the institution of marriage? Furthermore, are the Brontës effective in their attempts to provide support for equality?
The Victorian Period – The Framework and the “Woman Question”

As Carol T. Christ and Catherine Robson explain in their introduction to the Victorian age (1830-1901) in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, it was an era of drastic changes. Society was not only changing in regard to technology and industry but also ideologically. New perspectives emerged and were expressed, right from the outset, through different methods of writing and Christ and Robson observe that “[the] writers of the thirties shared a sharp new sense of modernity, of a break with the past, [and] . . . They responded to their sense of the historical moment with a strenuous call to action that they self-consciously distinguished from the attitude of the previous generation” (“Victorian” 981). Since both of their novels were first published in the 1840s the Brontës would have belonged to this group of early Victorian writers who felt that the time for changes had arrived. Christ and Robson note that “Contemporary historians and critics find the Victorian period a richly complex example of a society struggling with the issues and problems we identify with modernism” (“Victorian” 982). Surely the subject of equality would fall under that category since it embodies the desired “break with the past”, the break from patriarchy (Christ and Robson, “Victorian” 981). But where did this discussion on social reform take place?

Social issues, such as the call for equal rights of the sexes, were broached and debated in novels, essays and poems alike, yet Christ and Robson rightly point out that “The novel was the dominant form in Victorian literature” (“Victorian” 994). While the readers of the Victorian era mostly wanted literature to be entertaining it should also be informing and reflect on society and real life, and the novel combined these two qualities (Christ and Robson, “Victorian” 994). Christ and Robson argue that “each novelist presents a specific vision of reality [in their novel] whose representational force he or she seeks to persuade us to acknowledge through a variety of techniques and conventions . . . [and they] attempt to convince us that the characters and events they imagine resemble those we experience in
actual life” (“Victorian” 995). Usually the main aim of the plot was for the protagonist to find his or her purpose or niche within the rapidly changing Victorian society and:

The novel thus constructs a tension between surrounding social conditions and the aspiration of the hero or heroine, whether it be for love, social position, or a life adequate to his or her imagination. This tension makes the novel the natural form to use in portraying woman’s struggle for self-realization in the context of the constraints imposed upon her. (Christ and Robson, “Victorian” 995).

Furthermore, as Christ and Robson explain, the novel’s continuous form of publication was a considerable advantage to novelists. Since most novels were published in installations, which commonly consisted of three parts, this provided the readers with intermediate time between each published part, allowing them to take in the message of the narrative and think about and judge the arguments and speculations presented (Christ and Robson, “Victorian” 994). The novel was thus a useful medium to address the “Woman Question”; a logical choice for the Brontës that allowed and still allows their readers to empathise with and think about the real situation of many women of the era.

The status of women was one of the most popular topics of discussion in Victorian Britain and is commonly referred to as the “Woman Question”. In their short introduction titled “The ‘Woman Question’: The Victorian Debate about Gender” Christ and Robson state that this Victorian subject touched on problems concerned with “the institution of marriage . . . the family itself and, most particularly, the traditional roles of women as wives, mothers, and daughters” (1581). A quote from Justin M’Carthy’s essay on novels, published in 1864, shows just how great the debate concerning the “Woman Question” was: “The greatest social difficulty in England today is the relationship between men and women. The principal difference between ourselves and our ancestors is that they took society as they found it while we are self-conscious and perplexed” (qtd. in Christ and Robson, “Woman” 1581). The views
on how women should be and act can roughly be categorized into two opposing groups: The views that supported patriarchy and male dominance, and the feminist views, those that promoted the independence of women and the equality of women and men.

Patriarchy – Male Dominance and Female Subjection

Patriarchal views on the “Woman Question” supported the idea of the perfect, obedient and self-sacrificing woman, who is often referred to by the term the “angel in the house,” which Christ and Robson reveal stems from the title of Coventry Patmore’s poem *The Angel in the House*, where the author talks about his own ideal woman, a “woman [who] became an object to be worshipped . . .” (“Woman” 1581). But to fully understand where this angelic image originates we have to look further back than Patmore’s poem. In their famous book, *The Madwoman in the Attic* Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar point to the medieval association of women to the Virgin Mary, the embodiment of purity, as the main source for the requirement of purity and selflessness in females, claiming that “there is a clear line of literary descent from [the] divine Virgin to [the] domestic angel . . .” (20). Indeed, the patriarchal stance believed that women should be practically saint like in their behaviour, devoting themselves and their care to everybody but themselves. Quite a few of so-called conduct books provided Victorian women with guidelines on what constituted as proper behaviour; one of which was *Mrs Beeton’s Book of Household Management*.

Isabella Beeton wrote about her own view on how a proper Victorian middle class lady should behave in her book *Mrs Beeton’s Book of Household Management*, which Nicola Humble reveals to have been “one of the major publishing success stories of the nineteenth century . . .” right from its release in 1861 (vii). The book is mostly famous for its various recipes for nineteenth century dishes and advice on various household matters but the book is also a guide to what Beeton considered to be proper Victorian behaviour and concerns itself
with what Humble terms as “solid Victorian values” (vii). In Beeton’s view, a good wife should be attentive to sanitation and prudence while having a good disposition, being hospitable, charitable, neat, tidy, punctual and of course always maintain her composure in all situations (8-21). Likewise, while attending to her numerous duties, a mistress “should strive to be cheerful . . . [and her] Gentleness, not partial and temporary, but universal and regular, should pervade her conduct . . .” (Beeton 11). Beeton clearly states that a decent wife must be willing to surrender her own wants for the sake of others, especially her husband’s, for example a wife should cut lose ties of friendship formed prior to marriage if they were considered inappropriate (10). Furthermore, a woman should never discuss matters that annoy her with her friends and certainly “never let an account of her husband’s failings pass her lips; . . .” since “each mistress [must] always remember her responsible position, never approving a mean action, nor speaking an unrefined word” (Beeton 10, 29). For modern women some of these innumerable rules and codes of conduct would most likely seem unattainable and even ridiculous and as Gilbert and Gubar claim “it is the surrender of her self—of her personal comfort, her personal desires, or both—that is the beautiful angel-woman’s key act, while it is precisely this sacrifice which dooms her both to death and to heaven. For to be selfless is not only to be noble, it is to be dead” (25). By expecting women to abandon their own will and essentially their own self, men entrapped women in a helpless position and the women, by allowing this to happen, condemned themselves to a fate similar to or worse than death. Such an arrangement could never be fruitful to the woman in question and to be able to hold her ground as her own person she must resist this male domination. In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (hereafter referred to as *Wildfell Hall*) Arthur Huntingdon serves as a prime example of a husband who expects his wife to act in an angelic manner, but that does not set well with Helen, the wife in question.
Helen Huntingdon is trapped in a loveless marriage with a hedonistic and self-indulgent husband, Arthur Huntingdon, who treats her with disrespect and clearly expects her to be his angel of the house. Although neither of them has any love left for the other and Huntingdon openly cheats on his wife he still refuses to let her leave their home at Grassdale Manor to live with their young son and be her own master. The fact that they can barely endure each other’s presence, evident by Arthur’s numerous month-long absences from their home, seems to be insignificant in his mind. He delights in exerting, as he believes, his God-given power over Helen and vexes and provokes her on every occasion because he knows she can do little to oppose him. On one occasion, when Helen has had enough of Huntingdon’s treatment she asks him to let her leave and live separately from him. But Huntingdon exclaims “No – by Jove I won’t! . . . Do you think I’m going to be made the talk of the country, for your fastidious caprices?” (241). As far as he is concerned he is the only one that has a say in the matter. Helen answers him back, attempting to make him see that their marriage is empty; a mere frame with nothing solid to uphold it:

Then I must stay here, to be hated and despised – But henceforth, we are husband and wife only in the name. . . . I am your child’s mother, and your housekeeper – nothing more. So you need not trouble yourself any longer, to feign the love you cannot feel: I will exact no more heartless caresses from you – nor offer – nor endure them either – I will not be mocked with the empty husk of conjugal endearments, when you have given the substance to another! (241)

Huntingdon is unaffected by Helen’s declaration and his sole answer is a mocking “Very good – if you please” (241). This demonstrates just how disdainful Huntingdon is towards his wife and also how much faith he has in his claim to superiority and dominance within their marriage. Her ideas are insignificant and consequently of no importance to him but he still expects her to give him everything he wants, love and attention, without him having to give
her anything in return. Helen does not like this arrangement; she wants equality between them and continually tries to make him acknowledge her views, for example in her frequent attempts to abate his often extreme habits or behaviour by offering him Christian advice or appealing to his moral sense. But Huntingdon always dismisses his wife’s views, while simultaneously diminishing and mocking her with his devilish laughter. Helen’s pleads have no affect on him.

Huntingdon expects Helen to obey him like a proper and devoted Victorian wife and dislikes the fact that she resists him when he tries to make her act as he sees fit. Right from the beginning, during their first weeks of matrimony, he finds fault with her, claiming “you don’t love me with all your heart,” meaning that he obviously takes her lack of obedience as lack of affection (160). Huntingdon also thinks that Helen is too religious, which could not be good since it made her “lessen her devotion to her earthly lord,” who is obviously himself (160). He even goes as far as to blame their infant child for her lack of attention, telling her “I shall positively hate that little wretch, if you worship it so madly! You are absolutely infatuated about it. . . . You have not a thought to spare for anything else. . . . As long as you have that ugly little creature to dote upon, you care not a farthing what becomes of me” (189). Thus, Anne Brontë makes it perfectly clear that the reason why their marriage does not work out is the fact that Helen refuses to be submissive to her husband. As time passes Huntingdon becomes increasingly infuriated with Helen for her, as he deems it, disapproving behaviour and he declares that “You are breaking your marriage vows . . . You promised to honour and obey me, and now you attempt to hector over me. . . . I won’t be dictated to by a woman, though she be my wife” (185). This is exactly in line with what the angel-image embodies; Helen should be obedient and sacrifice her own needs to satisfy her husband’s. In Huntingdon’s view, she has forgotten what Lord Tennyson so neatly stated in this passage from his poem *The Princess*, which is found in “The Victorian Age: Introduction”:
Man for the field and woman for the hearth:

Man for the sword and for the needle she:

Man with the head and woman with the heart:

Man to command and woman to obey. (qtd. in Christ and Robson 992)

The passage is in fact quite misogynistic and plainly states women’s subordination to men as one of the most natural things in life. Men were in charge and women should do as they were told, or as Huntingdon himself termed it, adhere to their marriage vows. In *Wildfell Hall*, Anne Brontë goes to extreme lengths to point out the injustice of these oppressive customs. In fact, Helen and Huntingdon’s marriage, which spans more than half of the narrative, is one big and very revealing example of how misguided the demands for the angel-like woman and predominant male authority are. Through their marriage Helen tries to argue for equality and make her husband see that they should have an equal say in their married life and that honour and respect should be mutual. But nothing she says can change Huntingdon’s outlook. In fact, he sees nothing wrong with his own behaviour; it is completely in line with what constituted as normal in Victorian society.

Of course Arthur Huntingdon is an exaggerated stereotype of the dominant and self-absorbed male but he is certainly not the only man in the novel that feels protected by the patriarchal society. On more than one occasion it is indicated that his friends similarly deem Helen’s conduct as being too forward and inappropriate for a woman. In a letter to his wife, Arthur claims that his friend Mr Hattersley had resolved that when he married he “must have somebody that will let me have my own way in everything – not like your wife, Huntingdon, she is a charming creature, but she looks as if she had a will of her own . . .” (173). For them, having a will of one’s own was not an attractive quality for a woman to possess; women should merely do as they are told without any protest. Like the speaker in Tennyson’s poem, some of the men in *Wildfell Hall* even turn misogynistic, such as Mr Grimsby when he
complains “all these cursed women! . . . They’re the very bane of the world! They bring trouble and discomfort wherever they come, with their false, fair faces and their damned deceitful tongues” (232). People who shared Hattersley’s, and even Grimsby’s, outlook on the matter would surely be found amongst the real flesh and blood inhabitants of Victorian Britain and not only in fictional works; we only have to look at one of John Ruskin’s essays to see his perspective.

In his “Of Queens’ Gardens”, dating from 1864, Ruskin takes a stand with patriarchy and defines the perfections that he believed the ideal Victorian woman should possess. Ruskin argues that the woman’s role is to construct “the place of Peace; . . .” a home that becomes a haven for her husband and simultaneously protects her from the unnecessary dangers of society by keeping her within the protected sphere of that home, with the worries of society barred outside (1588). This is exactly what Jean Wyatt touches on in her article, claiming that the patriarchal Victorian male wanted the woman to be “the Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, Snow White, she who receives and submits . . . she is locked in . . . a captive, sound asleep: she waits” (202). The Victorian woman is indeed required to be asleep; she is not expected to have any views—if she has any she is certainly not supposed to share them—and while the man “comes and goes as he likes, she remains cooped up in the house, awaiting his return” (Wyatt 202). Ruskin regards the home as “the woman’s true place and power,” and he goes on to state that the only thing the woman has to do to establish this sanctuary for her husband is to “be incapable of error. . . . She must be enduringly, incorruptibly good; instinctively, infallibly wise—wise, not for self-development, but for self-renunciation: wise, not that she may set herself above her husband, but that she may never fail from his side . . .” (1588).

Ruskin and Arthur Huntingdon appear to share the view that “It is a woman’s nature to be constant – to love one and one only, blindly, tenderly, and for ever . . .” (185). Helen observes this early on in their marriage, saying that “he dislikes me to have any pleasure but in himself,
any shadow of homage or kindness but such as he chooses to vouchsafe: he knows he is my sun, but when he chooses to withhold his light, he would have my sky to be all darkness; he cannot bear that I should have a moon to mitigate the deprivation. This is unjust . . .‖ (180-181). Helen’s nature is not passive and she eventually renounces the role of the silent and obedient wife that Huntingdon envisions for her. In order for her to escape Huntingdon’s dominance she has to escape from their home—her prison—and create a new life for herself and her young son where she can make decisions for herself and be her own master. As Rachel K. Carnell argues “Helen’s voice . . . [becomes increasingly] rational, confident, and self-sufficient . . . and by the norms of the day, her discourse would certainly be deemed masculine” (10). This heightened confidence allows her to escape Huntingdon’s hold and Carnell illustrates that “In her impassioned and articulate speeches against drinking . . . and against the irrational differences in the education of girls and boys, Helen Huntingdon enacts the sort of ‘talking on a large scale’ that Victorian conduct books . . . would prohibit” (10).

The codes of conduct that Ruskin and Beeton describe show that the angelic norm that women were expected to follow was indeed a commonly held view, both by men and women, during the Victorian era. But like the fictional character Helen Huntingdon there were also real women who spoke out against the conduct rules of patriarchy; one of them was Florence Nightingale.

Florence Nightingale wrote “Cassandra” in 1852 to object the limited opportunities women had at their disposal during the Victorian period. “Why have women passion, intellect, moral activity . . . and a place in society,” Nightingale asks, “where no one of the three can be exercised?” (1598). She objects the self-sacrifice that women had to undergo in order to uphold the strict patriarchal values by exclaiming “Is man’s time more valuable than woman’s?” (Nightingale 1600). In fact, Nightingale openly criticises female authors of Victorian conduct books, like Isabella Beeton, claiming that:
Women are never supposed to have any occupation of sufficient importance *not* to be interrupted . . . and women themselves have accepted this, have written books to support it, and have trained themselves so as to consider whatever they do as *not* of such value to the world or to others, but that they can throw it up at the first “claim of social life.” They have accustomed themselves to consider intellectual occupation as a merely selfish amusement, which it is their “duty” to give up for every trifler more selfish than themselves. (1600)

Nightingale encourages women to claim what is rightfully theirs but in order for women to get what they want and deserve, they have to fight for it. Dreaming will do no good since “Women dream till they have no longer the strength to dream . . . All their plans and visions seem vanished, and they know not where; gone, and they cannot recall them. They do not even remember them. And they are left without the food of reality or of hope” (Nightingale 1601). Dreams must be turned into actions and Nightingale sets the example. She is long since tired of living within the restricting social life reserved for Victorian females. After all, it is hard to imagine a single woman possessing all of the characteristics specified by Beeton and Ruskin and one sees, by Florence Nightingale’s protest, that these rules were driving some of the women in Victorian society crazy, and perhaps not only figuratively speaking. That might certainly explain why Rochester’s marriage to Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* does not work out.

Rochester, like Arthur Huntingdon, expects a good wife to be as the angel of the house and when he marries Bertha Mason, a rich heiress from the West Indies, he clearly takes for granted that she will fall right into the role of a proper English, Victorian wife. Although Bertha excites Rochester at first, like Huntingdon excites Helen, he soon sees that her customs are very different from what he is familiar with and that she behaves in a completely different way than he anticipates. According to Rochester’s description Bertha’s “cast of mind [was] common, low, narrow, and singularly incapable of being led to anything higher . . .” and he
soon realized that he “should never have a quiet or settled household, because . . . of her violent and unreasonable temper . . .” (306). In his view, Rochester is deprived of his place of comfort, his peaceful home that Ruskin so cherishes, because of his wife’s character and behaviour; thus he must find it somewhere else. With this in mind a Victorian reader, inclined towards the patriarchal views, might perhaps not see his marital sidesteps, like his relationship with Céline Varens, as badly as modern day readers might. Charlotte Brontë certainly manages to inspire a certain level of sympathy in the reader through Rochester’s account of his marriage. His candidness and embarrassment which are evident as Rochester relates the story of his first marriage to Jane inspire compassion and he becomes vulnerable as he reveals his shame of being tricked into marrying Bertha. He exclaims “This life . . . is hell! this is the air—those are the sounds of the bottomless pit! I have a right to deliver myself from it if I can. The sufferings of this mortal state will leave me with the heavy flesh that now cumbers my soul . . . there is not a future state worse than this present one . . .” (308). This scene is very picturesque and his sorrow and despair are easily felt. One almost cannot help but pity the man, like Jane does, burdened with such a crazy wife as he is. Despite several attempts to relieve his sorrow by taking up European mistresses, Rochester is still plagued by “the fury I [he] left at Thornfield” (310). It is not until he meets Jane Eyre that he finds a woman who he thinks will suit him.

At the start of their involvement Rochester continues to behave as he did in his marriage to Bertha; he sees himself as the superior partner in their relationship. His perception of Jane and their interaction becomes obvious when Jane has nursed Richard Mason after Bertha’s attack. Afterwards Rochester describes Jane as a lamb, his lamb, as if she were his possession: “I should have been a careless shepherd if I had left a lamb—my pet lamb—so near a wolf’s-den, unguarded . . . .” (216). The analogy presents Jane as a fragile, infantile innocent that Rochester must protect from the corrupting influences of Bertha. The image of the lamb even
brings Jesus to mind, as the protective shepherd, and linking him to Rochester who identifies himself as Jane’s earthly lord. Rochester sees in Jane the perfect, incorruptible and virginal wife that he is deprived of in Bertha and can now finally secure for himself. He even goes as far as to liken Jane to an angel, directly linking her to the angel of the Victorian household. But Jane is an independent and strong willed woman who does not like to be forced into doing something. She knows that nobody is perfect and tries to break down this image Rochester has constructed for her by stating “I am not an angel . . . and I will not be one till I die: I will be myself. Mr. Rochester, you must neither expect nor exact anything celestial of me,—for you will not get it, any more than I shall get it of you; which I do not at all anticipate” (260).

Jane directly disowns Rochester’s patriarchal ideas for her, saying that his expectations are too high and there should not be such a pressure for perfection in her own behaviour since she is not expecting it in his conduct. Equality and mutual respect is the key here. But Rochester does not embrace Jane’s message; he appears to be as stubborn as Arthur Huntingdon. As Jean Wyatt insists “Rochester wants to keep Jane innocent . . .” and consequently almost makes the same mistake as he did in his relationship with Bertha (205).

Despite knowing her strong will, Rochester continues to try and change Jane’s character and adapt her for the role she is about to undertake in becoming his wife; becoming his innocent and obedient angel. This is for example clear, shortly before their wedding is supposed to take place, when he begins to call her Janet right after discussing the impending change of her name to Mrs Rochester. This is reminiscent of what Jean Rhys makes her Rochester do in her fictional prequel to Jane Eyre, called Wide Sargasso Sea. There Rochester begins to call his wife by the English name Bertha, although her given name is Antoinette, and that is his way of forcing her to become something or someone she is not; a perfect and pure angel-woman. As a result, their marriage begins to crumble and Antoinette’s mental health starts to deteriorate. Her worries over her new name are obvious: “He hates me
now... He never calls me Antoinette now... it cannot be worse... I sleep so badly now” (Rhys 70). Antoinette is not able to follow Rochester’s strict English, patriarchal rules. She cannot be this English Bertha he wants her to be, and that sends her over the edge. Jane’s worries in Jane Eyre concerning her name change are similar. The first time Rochester calls her by this new name she “could not quite comprehend it... The feeling, the announcement sent through me, was something stronger than was consisted with joy—something that smote and stunned: it was, I think, almost fear” (258). Jane does not like this new name, it is strange and she claims that “It can never be, sir: it does not sound likely” (258). Whether it is the name Janet or Mrs Rochester that she finds alarming is perhaps irrelevant, but one gets the distinct feeling that it is the former that concerns her the most, since at the end of the novel she obviously takes Rochester’s last name without any agitation. Keeping Wide Sargasso Sea in mind, it is impossible not to wonder about the possible consequences of Jane’s name change. But her character is not like Bertha’s and instead of letting her worries consume her and the rules break her down Jane strives harder to remind Rochester of her true character, telling him that if he continues to try and change her he will in the end be unable to recognise her. Jane explains: “I shall not be your Jane Eyre any longer, but an ape in a harlequin’s jacket,—a jay in borrowed plumes” (259). Charlotte’s choice of words is very revealing: It is obvious that Jane thinks that a woman without control over herself is a fool. Despite the warnings, Rochester does not abandon his plan straight away and that is why Charlotte Brontë cannot have Jane wed Rochester the first time around. The superficial reason provided is of course that Rochester already has a wife and would thus commit bigamy, but the reader is also made to understand that for Rochester to truly deserve and be rightfully able to marry Jane he has to stop his oppressive ways. If Rochester would continue doing to Jane what he has done to Bertha, slowly breaking down her fiery spirit, Jane would end up the same way—miserable and unrecognizable to herself—regardless of her strong will. Consequently, for Jane to escape
Thornfield Hall after the discovery of Bertha and for the blind Rochester to move to Ferndean after the burning down of Thornfield Hall is Charlotte’s way of establishing an equal ground in their relationship and making Rochester see the error of his ways. Without his sight Rochester has to rely on Jane and her decisions; he has to relinquish his dominating hold on her and give her the power of choice and trust her as an equal. As a result their marriage is a success and Jane claims, that after ten years of marriage:

No woman was ever nearer to her mate than I am . . . I know no weariness of my Edward’s society; he knows none of mine . . . we are ever together . . . All my confidence is bestowed on him; all his confidence is devoted to me: we are precisely suited in character; perfect concord is the result . . . He loved me so truly, that he knew no reluctance in profiting by my attendance: he felt I loved him so fondly, that to yield that attendance was to indulge my sweetest wishes. (450-451).

By this Charlotte Brontë seems to claim that the angelic woman is a dying breed that will soon become extinct. Even though many of the aforementioned qualities attributed to the angel of the house are indeed desirable and positive, it is quite obvious that in Anne and Charlotte’s mind the angelic formula does not work. Helen and Jane cannot just accept their situation and live under exclusive male supremacy; they want equality and independence. This was exactly the side of the “Woman Question” that was expressed and argued for by the early feminists.

Feminist Ideas – Plain Protest and Symbolism

In Victorian Feminists Barbara Caine points out that the feminists of the period aimed to solve a lot of issues that they felt were relevant to the “Woman Question”. Most contemporary people tend to focus on “The idea that the English women’s movement was concerned primarily, even exclusively, with gaining access for women to the public sphere . . .” with
matters such as access to the universities and establishing female suffrage in the foreground (2). But Victorian feminists also focused on “the oppression of women in domestic life, in marriage, and in all forms of sexual relations” (Caine 2). Caine claims that the ideas within the feminist movement were as many and various as the numerous angles of speculations about the status of women were (3-4). Furthermore, Caine explains that it is evident by looking at the ideas of four key figures of the feminist movement of the era that:

All four would obviously have agreed that women were legally, socially, and economically oppressed and that this was an unjust state of affairs which required a remedy. But they disagreed about the basis and the nature of this oppression and about how it should be reformed; about the nature of women and the extent to which the differences between men and women were innate or socially conditioned. (7)

In line with the abundance of ideas, numerous propositions on how to amend the status of women legally, socially and domestically were presented. We have already looked at Florence Nightingale’s criticism but ideas on reform were found in the writings of women and men alike.

John Stuart Mill’s essay “The Subjection of Women”, which was published around twenty years after the publication of Anne and Charlotte’s novels, is an excellent feminist account where Mill argues vigorously:

That the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes – the legal subordination of one sex to the other – is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other. (119)

Mill rightly mentions that not all women were silent in their dissatisfaction of this injustice and many “make their sentiments known by their writings . . . [and] an increasing number of
them have recorded protests against their present social condition . . .” (131). He encourages women and men alike to openly discuss the issue of subjection and equality in a proper discussion, where arguments justifying patriarchy by reference to its success through history will not be acceptable; since it is the only method that has ever been tested. Society had changed enormously in all aspect during the nineteenth century, why then should society uphold such an outdated system as patriarchy? (Mill 137-138). It is exactly this change that Helen and Jane long for and they express their longing through both actions and words.

In *Jane Eyre* there are several occasions where Jane speaks out for equality or freedom for herself. An early example can be found when Jane thinks about leaving Lowood and taking up a new servitude. She longs for another existence, what she had at Lowood “was not enough . . . I desired liberty; for liberty I gasped; for liberty I uttered a prayer . . .” (85). As Sally Shuttleworth claims in her introduction to *Jane Eyre* Jane’s exclamation at this moment can be viewed “as an insurrectionary cry for liberty and freedom,” not only from Lowood but in general (xiv). An even more vivid outburst is seen later on, when Jane arrives at Thornfield Hall, and thinks about her own position and compares it to women’s place within society:

> Millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot. Nobody knows how many rebellions besides political rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people earth. Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel . . . they suffer from too rigid a restraint . . . 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 . . . 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. (109)

Jane’s thoughts are so powerful that one can almost imagine her standing at a podium in the middle of a feminist meeting, speaking out and urging her sister on in their battle for equal
rights. Shuttleworth rightly argues that this “attack is directed at the domestic constraints placed on middle-class women’s lives,” such as the ones recommended by Ruskin and Mrs Beeton (xv). Jane learns right from the start that equality should not be taken for granted in life, as when Miss Abbot1 scolds her and warns her that “you ought not to think yourself on an equality with the Misses Reed and Master Reed . . . it is your place to be humble, and to try to make yourself agreeable to them” (13). Even at an early age Jane sees the wrong in this and is determined that she will not be trampled on. Her resistance can, for example, be seen shortly before she intends to marry Rochester. Gilbert and Gubar claim that “Rochester, having secured Jane’s love . . . begins to treat her as an inferior . . . a virginal possession . . .” and when Jane senses that she criticises him for it (355). She angrily refers to the Harems in the East, where women were kept inside houses—as properties, solely for the pleasure of their man—with no self-control at their disposal. Jane does not wish to become such a woman and when Rochester amusingly asks her what she would do to stop that from happening she angrily replies:

I’ll be preparing myself to go out as a missionary to preach liberty to them that are enslaved—your Harem inmates amongst the rest. I’ll get admitted there, and I’ll stir up mutiny; and you . . . shall in a trice find yourself fettered amongst our hands: nor will I, for one, consent to cut your bonds till you have signed a charter, the most liberal that despot ever yet conferred. (269)

The charter is symbolic for the social change that Jane wants. She wants to be regarded as Rochester’s equal, his partner, not as his property like the women in the Harem. Even though this is what Helen Huntingdon similarly envisions for herself she is not as outspoken as Jane, in fact the characters in Jane Eyre are a lot more outspoken and straightforward in their criticism than the characters in Wildfell Hall.

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1 Mrs Reed’s servant in the Gateshead household.
Although Helen is occasionally explicit in condemning the injustice of male supremacy over women, it is more common that the actions of the characters in the story, in most cases Huntingdon’s actions, show the direct consequences caused by their unequal status. On some occasions, Anne Brontë attempts to show the absurdity of the patriarchal views, as when Mrs Markham (Gilbert’s mother) explains to him and his sister Rose how a proper marriage ought to be and what they should expect in their future marriages:

in all household matters, we [women] have only two things to consider, first, what’s proper to be done, and secondly, what’s most agreeable to the gentlemen of the house—anything will do for the ladies. . . . you must fall each into your proper place. [Gilbert,] You’ll do your business, and she [your future wife], if she’s worthy of you, will do hers; but it’s your business to please yourself, and hers to please you. (45-46)

For Mrs Markham these rules appear to be set in stone, but her son has his doubts. Markham thinks, albeit hesitantly, he “was not sent into the world merely to exercise the good capacities and good feelings of others . . . but to exert my own towards them; and when I marry, I shall expect to find more pleasure in making my wife happy and comfortable, than in being made so by her: I would rather give than receive” (46). This is one of the few occasions where Markham’s views on marriage and equality are revealed. He believes his future marriage will be founded on equal terms and his view seems to be the complete opposite of how men usually regarded marriage. In Rochester’s case he dreads “to put my old bachelor’s neck into the sacred noose . . .” (250). Likewise, when he and his guests play charades, Gilbert and Gubar observe that when they attempt to illustrate a prison, referred to as Bridewell, they portray a marriage ceremony and a shackled man (350). Jane herself even openly admits that tying the knot to a man like her cousin St. John, is impossible for her. Although he respects her, he retains the patriarchal notions of his superiority and her subordination, which in Jane’s mind would make their relationship void of happiness and imprison her in the role of the
subordinate wife. Jane knows St. John would undoubtedly “coerce me into obedience . . .” and that in marrying him she would “be chained for life to a man who regarded one but as a useful tool” (409, 416). It is no wonder that Charlotte Brontë depicted marriage as a prison; if equality does not prevail within a marriage both partners are tied down in a restricting union and both are prisoners, especially the wife.

In *Jane Eyre* Charlotte Brontë alludes to the imagery of the caged bird, where the woman is seen as the imprisoned bird. Rochester often compares Jane to a small and delicate bird, calling her his “dove”, “eager bird” and “linnet” (310, 312). Although Jane is indeed physically small and fragile, like a tiny bird, the analogy aims to show how Rochester wants to cage her spirit. He wants her to be his domestic angel and protect her pure spirit, most likely by keeping her confined within Thornfield, like Ruskin proposes for women’s own protection. But Rochester cannot cage Jane’s spirit, as he did to Bertha’s by locking her up. Jane blatantly defies his analogy by saying “I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will . . .” (253). By silently accepting the rules of the male dominant society and deeming them as unchangeable, women could as well turn the key and lock their own cages. Jane refuses to be such a woman. Like Florence Nightingale, she knows from her early childhood at Gateshead that equality was not a thing that was to be taken for granted and surely not a thing that one gained without a fight. So she speaks her mind and eventually succeeds in her battle for equality but Charlotte indicates the resolution in a rather unusual way.

At the end, when Rochester has lost his sight and damaged his arm and face Charlotte Brontë turns her bird metaphor around to show how Rochester and Jane’s roles have been reversed. When Jane sees him for the first time after the fire at Thornfield Hall he has become the bird in their relationship. He is now trapped and subdued, reduced to the state of so many women, and Jane thinks “that [he] reminded me of some wronged and fettered wild-beast or
bird, dangerous to approach in his sullen woe. The caged eagle, whose gold-ringed eyes cruelty has extinguished . . .” (431). Now it is Rochester who must accept Jane’s guidance; he has to resign a part of his will and power over to her. What is also interesting is that Rochester has been fettered by a woman, so Jane’s foreshadowing from her dialogue on the Harem women, has become true, except it was not Jane who constrained him, but Bertha since she set Thornfield Hall aflame. As Wyatt argues “This combination of Jane’s verbal protest with Bertha’s vivid action is . . . [an] example of the way Brontë uses Bertha and Jane to lodge a powerful protest against women’s oppression at all levels . . .” (207). In addition, as Gilbert and Gubar state “his [Rochester’s] ’fetters’ pose no impediment to a new marriage . . . [so] he and Jane are now, in reality, equals . . .” (368). But metaphors and similes are not confined to Jane Eyre alone.

Anne Brontë also constructs interesting symbols, the best of which is found in the game of chess between Helen and Mr Hargrave. The chess is like a battle between the sexes, where Hargrave intends to demonstrate his supremacy. Although Helen and Mr Hargrave talk about a game of chess their words can easily be used in reference to something else, as Anne indicates by pointing out that Hargrave speaks “distinctly, and with a peculiar emphasis as if he had a double meaning to all his words . . .” (235). The game is intense and both are careful and calculated in their moves but in the end Helen has to succumb. Mr Hargrave gloats childishy as he grabs her hand “and squeezing it with a firm but gentle pressure, [he] murmured ‘Beaten – beaten!’ . . .” (236). This provocation causes Helen’s temper to flare up and she calls out “No, never, Mr Hargrave! . . .” (236). When he asks her whether she does not confess his superiority she answers “Yes – as a chess-player,” clearly indicating that she put more significance to their game than a simple game of chess (237). Like within her marriage, Helen will never be ready to yield to a man’s will in every way.
The feminist Mona Caird addresses the status of women within marriage specifically in her article “Marriage”, first published in 1888. She argues that “The ideal marriage . . . should be free. So long as love and trust and friendship remain, no bonds are necessary to bind two people together; . . . but whenever these cease the tie becomes false and iniquitous, and no one ought to have power to enforce it” (Caird 1602). Caird goes on to say that people must recognize “the obvious right of the woman to possess herself body and soul, to give or withhold herself body and soul exactly as she wills,” and that if women are denied this essential liberty their “obvious moral rights are disregarded” (1602). Caird declares that marriages based on male sovereignty cannot be beneficial to women or men and “It is our present absurd interference with the natural civilizing influences of one sex upon the other, that creates half the dangers and difficulties of our social life . . .” (1603). In Caird’s view, abandoning the constricted institution of marriage would enable free marriages which would not only lead to more diversity in society but also bring the partners involved more happiness (1603). But “The economical independence of woman is the first condition of free marriage” (Caird 1602). Considering Anne and Charlotte’s novels, it is interesting that in both novels the female protagonists finally achieve their full independence when they gain their own financial freedom.

In Jane’s case, she ends up inheriting a considerable sum of money while Helen inherits money and a handsome property. Both have already taken the first step of separation from the repressive patriarchal rules embodied in Rochester and Huntingdon, by running away from them, but their economic autonomy becomes symbolic for their full independence. They are no longer tied down by anybody but are independent women that can act as they see fit. This is vital for them and can, for example, be seen when Jane reflects on whether she should accept St. John’s offer of the position of school mistress or not. Jane reasons that although “it was humble . . . it was independent . . .” and that is the main reason why she takes on the
position (355). While living under Rochester and Huntingdon’s roofs, the only thing that the
two women have any control over is their art and even that is not much. This is especially
evident in Helen’s case because as Nicole A. Diederich claims “Not only are Helen’s
emotions repressed with her unhappy marriage, but also her talents, for she has less time to
devote to them” (27). With her marriage she has lost her identity as an artist and it is only
revived when she leaves Arthur. Their union basically allows Huntingdon to take away the
essence of Helen’s selfhood, because at that point “such personal property [as Helen’s
paintings] becomes Arthur’s” (Diederich 28). Lawrence Stone confirms this in his book
Broken Lives, claiming that “On marriage, the husband gained possession of all the wife’s
personal property, and control over as much of her real property as had not been previously
put in the hands of trustees for her own exclusive use. He could do what he liked with the
personal estate, including furniture, jewels, and money, and could enjoy the income of the real
estate” (25). Though this would also have been the case for Jane and Helen in their later
marriages to Markham and Rochester it is important to notice the difference between these
unions and the former ones: Helen and Jane are now finally able to bring something of
importance into their marriages, meaning that now both husband and wife provide something
of corporeal nature to their merger which strengthens their claim for equal rights within their
marriage. Men in Victorian society almost always had the power on their side so it is
noteworthy that to begin with Markham and Rochester are a bit intimidated by the thought of
Helen and Jane’s liberty. Both men seem to think that since Helen and Jane have complete
self-government they cannot possibly want them as their husbands and lovers. Indeed, the
economic sovereignty that the women have achieved is what impels the men to change their
ways and adapt to this new situation. By ending their stories on these economic notes the
Brontës emphasise their side with the feminist cause, showing that they believe women
should have equal rights as men on every level, even when it came to having access to money and property. But do their endings suggest that such claims could work out in real life?

Gilbert and Gubar think that *Jane Eyre’s* ending, “this marriage of true minds at Ferndean [is] . . . an emblem of hope,” and that is true (371). Rochester is indeed ready to give up his omnipotent power and allow Jane to have an equal say in their matters. When she comes back to him at the end of the novel and he learns that she is independent and wealthy, he has to make a decision; either to allow her into his life as an independent woman or lose her forever. The decision is a hard one for Rochester: “He replied not: he seemed serious—abstracted: he sighed; he half-opened his lips as if to speak; he closed them again” (435). But ultimately, when he thinks Jane will leave him he sees that he must have her, even though it means giving up a portion of his control and so, unlike their very first meeting Rochester is ready to accept Jane’s offer of help. Rochester confesses that “I have little left in myself—I must have you. The world may laugh—may call me absurd, selfish—but it does not signify. My very soul demands you: it will be satisfied . . .” (435). By accepting this new state of things Rochester becomes a hero. He has finally seen the light and is willing, unlike Arthur Huntingdon, to live on equal terms with his wife. In *Wildfell Hall* Markham similarly promises to be Helen’s hero, but is he really? As Peter Merchant observes there might be something even deeper going on in Anne’s novel than is perhaps perceptible to the eye at first.

**Completing the Circle – Narrative Silence and Character Connection**

Helen does not find respect and equality in her former marriage, but when she meets Gilbert Markham she appears to have found her prince charming. Gilbert is certainly presented as Helen’s hero and he appears to be the complete opposite of her former husband. But Peter Merchant notes how contemporary analysts have pointed out the peculiar form of Anne Brontë’s narrative, which might indicate that all is not as it seems (xix). In fact, as Carol A.
Senf observes “Much of the critical commentary on Tenant focuses on its distinctive narrative structure . . .” (447). According to Senf, many scholars have insisted that the form of the narrative simply complicates the story, for example claiming that “[T]here is no intrinsic reason why the framework should be in the form of letters. . . . Anne Brontë made herself unnecessarily uncomfortable by using a needlessly elaborate device” and “The diary broke the [love] story in halves” (448). Senf criticises these scholars by stating that they “seem unaware that Brontë’s decision to enclose Helen’s story of several unhappy marriages . . . within Gilbert’s story of his own happy marriage to Helen encourages readers to look beyond Helen and Gilbert” (448).

Merchant states that “Such an embedding is interpreted in this context as repeating and reinforcing Helen’s long experience of male encirclement . . .” and that “the swallowing up of her diary in Gilbert’s letter is a kind of narrative coverture, another ostensible merger which soon starts to look more like a hostile takeover” (xix, xx). Helen’s diary obviously reveals incidents and feelings from her past but it is Markham that discloses them and as Senf rightly points out “Markham . . . edits Helen’s story to his liking” (450). This is of course a pure sign of male dominance, and the reader cannot possibly know to what extent Markham has adjusted or even changed Helen’s account, what he includes and what he skips over.

Nicole A. Diederich believes that Anne Brontë does indeed offer “a basis of comparison between [the controlling] Arthur and Gilbert” (27). Could it be that Anne is implying that Helen’s second husband will turn out exactly like her former one?

In support of her claim, Diederich argues that a connection is established between Huntingdon and Markham through Helen’s art. She claims that “On one occasion,” during Helen and Markham’s friendship, “Gilbert rambles through Helen’s paintings and finds one of Arthur,” which is reminiscent of when “During Arthur’s courtship of Helen he too snatched up a drawing of himself . . .” (Diederich 28). Diederich also sees an association between
Arthur’s psychological violence towards Helen and Markham’s potential for physical violence, pointing to the incident when Markham strikes Helen’s brother, Lawrence (37). Carol Senf even observes that “Gilbert toys with the vicar’s pretty daughter even though he has no serious interest in marrying her,” which evokes the memory of Arthur’s playfulness when he teases Helen about her sketches of him (451). Markham’s true character is never fully exposed in Anne’s story and although he seems promising when he declares his love and admiration to Helen there is no way of truly telling how their marriage will work out. It is certainly interesting that Anne Brontë makes sure that nothing is revealed about Helen’s own feelings towards their marriage at the end of the story.

As Senf points out, “Whether Gilbert Markham brings a similar joy to Helen’s life remains unanswered, for Helen’s silence [in the narrative] is unbroken after she proposes to Gilbert” (455). We only have Markham’s own words to his friend to fall back on: “As for myself? I need not tell you how happily my Helen and I have lived and loved together, and how blessed we still are in each other’s society . . . We are just now looking forward to the advent of you and Rose, for the time of your annual visit draws nigh . . .” (383). Markham’s words can indeed be seen as true but the mentioning of this annual visit, right at the end of the entire story, brings an eerie recollection of the visits that Huntingdon himself made to London and the visits his friends paid him and Helen to Grassdale Manor. Perhaps Mrs Markham’s advice has found a footing in Gilbert’s mind after all and managed to convince him of his own superiority.

There is no textual evidence in the novel that proves that Markham would allow Helen to continue pursuing her art and thus her independence once they are married. In fact, it is quite possible that he would want Helen to be his “household deity . . .” or his angel, as his mother strived to imprint in his mind (211). Helen herself remarks that Gilbert seems altered and declares “You are changed . . . you are grown either very proud or very indifferent,” just like
Huntingdon had been (379). Markham’s obsessive behaviour to secure Helen as his wife towards the end also brings back to mind Mr Hargrave’s marriage plea to Helen. After all, Mr Hargrave was so infatuated with Helen and promised to protect and love her, but he finally revealed his true nature when he saw that she did not want to elope with him: “God has designed me to be your comfort and protector – I feel it – . . . . I worship you. You are my angel – my divinity! I lay my powers at your feet – and you must and shall accept them! . . . I will be your consoler and defender! And if your conscience upbraid you for it say I overcame you and you could not choose but yield!” (279). Does Markham not also show this desperate longing to possess Helen at the end of the novel?

It is almost impossible not to consider the possibility that Markham turns out as another oppressive husband for Helen. Culminating the story with such a powerful ending seems to be exactly what Anne intends; it is simultaneously very ironic and more importantly, literally brings her criticism on women’s status in a male controlling society to a full circle. Peter Merchant states that “Wildfell Hall is [thus] quite consistent both in offering a peculiarly dim and disillusioned view of male cliques and in making the isolation of its heroine’s integrity the fulcrum of the narrative” (xxi). Perhaps Anne Brontë does not see marriage as a feasible choice for women until they have gained equal status to men within the legal frame; only then can they be truly equal in their union. Diederich certainly seems to support that view:

Brontë’s criticism of the domestic ideal and her implicit support for legal change—including divorce—ran contrary to more conventional views, as indicated by both her own preface to the second edition and her sister’s denunciation of the novel. In order to offer this social attack to a less than receptive audience, Brontë, it has been said, veils it, [by] framing Helen’s narrative within Gilbert’s letter to Halford. (36)

This abrupt and equivocal ending is certainly very different from the happily-ever-after ending that Charlotte Brontë offers in Jane Eyre, but it is exactly what makes Anne Brontë’s
Wildfell Hall so haunting and powerful and sets it distinctly apart from other nineteenth century novels.

Conclusion

John Stuart Mill wrote: “It is but of yesterday that women have . . . been . . . permitted by society, to tell anything to the general public. As yet very few of them dare tell anything, which men . . . are unwilling to hear. . . . [but] Literary women are becoming more freespoken [sic], and more willing to express their real sentiments” (142-143). In my view, the Brontës belong to this small group of literary women who dared to act and speak up against injustice and male dominance and like their own female protagonists the sisters find an outlet for expression in their art.

It is irrelevant whether the events and feelings that their two novels describe are fictional or not, because the Brontës effectively reveal and criticise the wrongs of female subjection, not only during the Victorian but in general. Anne and Charlotte Brontë both show that what early Victorian society needs is what Christ and Robson refer to as “a break with the past” ("Victorian" 981). Only by having men release their firm grasp of control and relinquishing half of their power to women can society be bettered and marriage can cease to be a mere institution and a prison and become a pleasant tie between worthy and equal counterparts.

Wildfell Hall and Jane Eyre are both excellent in their criticism on male dominance. While Charlotte Brontë offers a hopeful solution to the eventual decline of patriarchy, I believe that Anne Brontë’s subtle and ironic ending is what women needed. Anne Brontë shows her female readers that in order to reach the ultimate goal of equality and independence they need to fight; relying on a man to save the day does not cut it.
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