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‘The spell was broken’: Defying Petrifying Patriarchy in Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848)

Abstract

From Pygmalion’s Galatea to Shakespeare’s Hermione, patriarchal narratives have confined women to marble as their only means of redemption. Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* emblematises a radical shift from the petrifying surface aesthetics of patriarchy to the complexities of vital spiritual depth. Brontë achieves this through innovative literary techniques anticipating Nietzschean perspectivism alongside the twentieth-century feminist literary theories of Virginia Woolf, Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar. Through this, Brontë’s novel asserts a radical egalitarian revision of Victorian values surrounding gender, theology, marriage, and romantic love. Consequently, such representations of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* as unimaginatively didactic, ‘dour and conventional’, ignore its revolutionary potential (Maynard 2002, 196).

First, with reference to Nietzsche, I discuss how Brontë’s literary innovations work structurally; then I will outline how Brontë anticipates modern feminist literary criticism through her central themes, relating this back to her structural innovations. Here, I discuss Helen’s spiritual liberation and the death of the ‘Angel in the House’ ideal alongside the egalitarian spiritual love she develops with Gilbert. I will conclude by reflecting upon this

form of love, offering a new interpretation of how the text may be seen to respond to Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*.

Scholarly Background

Elizabeth Langland has studied the ways in which *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* shows truth 'as a complex interpretation, inevitably coloured by individual personalities' (Langland 1989, 118). She draws attention to Brontë's periods of religious crisis and argues this speaks to Brontë's concern with the complex nature of truth (126-7). The text's formal structure thus enacts its central didactic themes of 'discernment, interpretation, and re-education' (147): both Gilbert and the reader learn that appearances are not what they seem (58, 134). Moreover, this depth of understanding enables the intellectual, perspectival union of Gilbert and Helen, embodied through the free indirect fusing of their narrative subjectivities by the novel's end (135).

Elizabeth Shand analyses the nineteenth-century debates between painting and fiction, noting that Brontë's text may be seen as a reactive work against the aesthetic evaluations of novels (Shand 2019, 292-4). Commenting on Brontë's preface, she notes Brontë's refusing to create 'a perfect work of art':

> The aesthetic predicate 'perfect' implies formal mastery, representative characterization and pleasurable effects — all traits that Anne Brontë deemed constrictive [...] As a defence of *Tenant*, the preface reveals a tone of critical conviction against aesthetic standards rather than an apology for her production. It articulates the aesthetic theories her novel sought to narrate, but which were lost on the public (294).

Thus, Shand writes, Brontë advocates for 'the novel's unique potential to deepen surface aesthetics' (292); her text is 'dynamic', refusing 'simple aesthetic distillation' (ibid.), as many contemporary reviewers lamented.[1] Like Langland, Shand is interested in Helen and Gilbert's relationship and the central theme of perspective. Shand takes several examples of static, aesthetic, 'painterly' moments of the novel, showing how they are displaced by dynamic reality (297-8). Shand notes the novel's progression away from a restrictive, painterly perspective towards a dynamic form of understanding: Gilbert and Helen's relationship must defy 'static romance' and 'develop through uncovering the layers beneath surface depictions' (299-300). This theme is reflected in the novel at large: Brontë's writing provokes a 'circular mode of reading' in which our understanding of characters and the story are continually complicated, evading aesthetic simplicity and demanding active readerly engagement (302-3). Like Langland, Shand, notes that the perspectival union of Gilbert and Helen by the novel's end formally reflects the profundity of their connection (303). Shand contrasts this throughout with examples of the shortcomings of aesthetical presentations alone, as evidenced through Helen's own paintings (297, 302).

Elizabeth Berry is interested in the dynamic, psychological depth of Brontë's writing (Berry 1994, 73). She notes the radical 'courtship reversal' of the scene, in which Helen offers Gilbert a Christmas rose as an emblem of her heart (105); here, Helen is 'the picture of vitality', reaching beyond the interior space, 'to break through the state icon of angelic submission and become wholly alive' (106). This mirrors Helen's revival from 'spiritual and emotional entombment' upon Arthur's death (79). Thus, the novel ends with 'an egalitarian symbiosis between man and woman' (109), beyond the alienating dehumanisation of the angelic paradigm in which Arthur places Helen (77-8).

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[1] *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. *Hood's Magazine*; Dec 1848, 10; 6; *British Periodicals* p. 555; *The Literary Examiner. Examiner*; Jul 29, 1848; 2113; *British Periodicals* p. 483.

This latter point of Berry relates to the 'Angel in the House' paradigm outlined by Virginia Woolf and Gilbert and Gubar. In 'Professions for Women', Woolf describes a hindering presence that haunted her career as a woman writer. She called this phantom, 'The Angel in the House', after the 1854 poem by Coventry Patmore. The angelic feminine ideal of his poem, moreover, becomes emblematic of gender conventions reflected throughout the century. As Woolf describes, the Angel was 'intensely sympathetic', 'immensely charming', and 'utterly unselfish', 'she sacrificed herself daily'; 'she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathise always with the minds and wishes of others'; her crowning feature was her 'purity'. Woolf writes, 'it was she who used to come between me and my paper'; '[she] so tormented me that at last I killed her'. Woolf continues, 'had I not killed her she would have killed me. She would have plucked the heart out of my writing', making her words nothing more than a reflection of the evasive, charming feminine ideal. Crucially, 'her fictitious nature was of great assistance to her. It is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality'. Thus, the essential, but problematic task of the woman writer is finding a way to kill the Angel. Woolf notes that the debilitating subconsciousness of the Angel in the woman writer is one that lingers, one that hinders the writer's voice and limits her freedom in 'telling the truth about [her] own experiences as a body'.[2]

The writings of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar are central to my paper. They provide an elucidating study of how women are conceived under patriarchy within the binary of lifeless, aesthetic angels and subversive, mortal monsters. I will provide a brief summary of their central thesis.

Gilbert and Gubar open by referring to psychoanalytical studies on gender relations that 'lead men to want to figuratively "kill" women'. In this vein, they note Simone de

[2] Virginia Woolf, 'Professions for Women (1931)', *Literature Cambridge*, https://www.literaturecambridge.co.uk/news/professions-women.

Beauvoir's 'thesis that woman has been made to represent all of man's ambivalent feelings about his own inability to control his own physical existence, his own birth and death' (Gilbert and Gubar 2020, 34). As Berry notes, to Jung, the polarised conception of women as both 'divine and threatening reflects primitive man's ambivalence towards the monstrous power of the creating (and uncreating) universe' (Berry 1994, 78). Thus, the male 'dread' of the female is emblematised through the creation of two polar 'eternal types' of femininity (17). Wolfgang Lederer, Gilbert and Gubar note, builds upon Beauvoir's idea that a woman's 'first treason' is her connection to mortal life, 'life which ferments of age and death' (Gilbert and Gubar 2020, 34). Thus, Lederer notes 'woman's own tendency to "kill" *herself* into art in order "to appeal to man"' (Lederer 1968, 42 qtd in Gilbert and Gubar 2020, 14). Discussing Albert Gelpi, Gilbert and Gubar note how 'the fixity of "life" in art and fluidity of "life" in nature are incompatible' (14); thus, the artistic ideal of the angelic woman is static and 'life-less' (15). Further, they outline how the 'Angel in the House' ideal came to prominence in the nineteenth-century. They relate the unmoving, 'life-less' Angel ideal of 'slim, pale, passive beings whose "charms" eerily recalled the snowy, porcelain immobility of the dead' to the nineteenth-century aesthetic cult of 'ladylike fragility and delicate beauty' (15, 25). The female condition of anxiety and loathing of one's own body, which Gilbert and Gubar terms as a kind of 'mirror madness', then 'testifies to the efforts women have expended not just trying to be angels but trying *not* to become female monsters' (34).

Gilbert and Gubar argue that the woman writer must kill the Angel, the 'aesthetic ideal through which they themselves have been "killed" into art', as well as 'the angel's necessary opposite and double, the "monster"' (17). It is the woman writer's task to replace the patriarchal 'copy' of the woman with the 'individuality' of her real self (19). She must reject the static, 'self-less' Angel with 'no story of her own' (21-2) and seek a cure to 'female

despair' through 'spiritual as well as physical means' (59, 92). Thus, just as Woolf is concerned with the subconscious debilitations of the woman writer, Gilbert and Gubar argue that women must seek spiritual and emotional liberation from the imprisoning mirror-images perpetuated by patriarchy. The issue of spiritual entrapment for women is a central concern of Brontë and one which relates to her theological feminism, as I shall soon discuss.

A central consideration of mine in line with this will be the death of Arthur Huntington. By externalising the 'eternal types' of angelism and monstrosity in Arthur's corrupt perception of Helen, Brontë is able to 'kill' both figures with Arthur's death, in a powerfully figured scene that allows Helen to finally overcome her emotional 'entombment', as Berry writes (Berry 1994, 79). The arbitrary and corrupt nature of Arthur's perception of Helen is revealed through the novel's themes of perspective, which I will soon outline. This relates to another aspect of Gilbert and Gubar's discussion of the Angel: Alexander Welsh's analysis of the Victorian 'Angel of Death'. Welsh describes how the 'spiritualized heroine' (Gilbert and Gubar 2020, 24) becomes a liminal figure who 'assists in the translation of the dying to a future state' (Welsh 1971, 184 qtd in Gilbert and Gubar 2020, 24). Building upon Welsh, Gilbert and Gubar reflect, 'if the angel-woman in some curious way simultaneously inhabits both this world and the next, then there is a sense in which, besides ministering to the dying, she is herself already dead' (Gilbert and Gubar 2020, 24). In this vein, Welsh describes 'the apparent reversibility of the heroine's role, whereby acts of dying and of saving someone from death seem confused' (Welsh 1971, 187, 190 qtd in Gilbert and Gubar 2020, 24). Indeed, Arthur's fervent desperation not to be separated from Helen in death, his desire 'to take [her] with [him] now!' reflects a desperation to make her into such an 'Angel of Death' (446). Further, Helen herself, through acute physical and emotional turmoil, seems herself near death: Arthur's suffering and death were 'awful realities' she both 'had seen and felt'

(450).[3] Earlier in the novel, Arthur says to Helen, 'you cannot love me as long as I love you' (Brontë 1996, 235). Now, towards the end of the text, his desperate belief in her 'self-less' contingency upon his own life ripples on. Arthur's 'idea' of a wife and his dehumanising perception of Helen, as I will later develop, make him a symbol of oppressive, patriarchal ideology. Moreover, when Arthur dies, the ideal it is impossible for Helen to sustain, dies with him. Ultimately, Anne undermines the conventional 'reversibility' of the heroine's role alongside death by making her heroine escape the spiritualised ideal, the death in life of the 'life-less', 'self-less' Angel (Gilbert and Gubar 2020, 15, 21). The patriarchal mirror-images of woman are finally killed and Helen's egalitarian spiritual love with Gilbert may be realised. As Langland notes, in Helen's marriage to Arthur, she is circumscribed as his 'moral superior' (Langland 1989, 143-4), in her marriage to Gilbert, she finds an intellectual partner (134-5).

Nietzschean Perspectivism

Nietszche's concept of perspectivism hinges upon his characterisation of objectivity as a 'non-concept and absurdity'; he contends that we have only the ability to consider the merits of 'perspectives and affective interpretations useful for knowledge' (*GM* III, 12 qtd in Lanier 2017). Crucially, his philosophical account suggests ideas can be seen as 'symptoms', with threads leading back to the thinker in consideration with the 'complex configurations of drive and effect' associated with them.[4] This is not unlike Gilbert and Gubar's discussion of the patriarchal projections that envision women as monsters and angels. Both perspectivism and the monster and angel phenomenon show how ideology is 'symptomatic' of its thinker and context. Thus, the nature of perspective is keenly associated with configurations of identity. A

[3] All quotations from *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* will be taken from Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell* Hall. London: Penguin, 1996.

[4] Anderson R Lanier, 'Friedrich Nietzsche', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2024 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, 17 March 2017, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2024/entries/nietzsche.

singular dogmatic perspective is detrimentally unreliable and undermines a full, perspectivist conception of reality. Vitally, then, the fallibility of Arthur's patriarchal perspective of Helen as angelic and monstrous, as I will later outline, is revealed through the novel's innovative use of perspective. Considering this, I build upon earlier work concerning Brontë's interest in perspective by relating it to her radical anticipations of twentieth-century feminist literary criticism.

Theological Feminism

Finally, my reading is concerned with spirituality. As Stevie Davies notes, Brontë's feminism closely tied to her radical Protestantism: Brontë believed in an individual's right and responsibility to form their own independent interpretation of scripture (Davies 1996, xx). Caroline Franklin draws convincing parallels between the story of the Lady Byron affair and that of Brontë's Helen: both women were victims to oppressive, aristocratic, and profligate husbands. Through this, Brontë engages with a central cultural event that provoked many questions surrounding the injustice of the marriage institution and the subordinate legal position of women (Franklin 2013, 107-110). Critically, Franklin notes that both Lady Byron and Mary Wollstonecraft, the writer of the seminal feminist text, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), were spiritual feminists; their feminism was armed by their 'rational Unitarian' belief in universal reason in women and men alike (106, 109). Wollstonecraft's belief in spiritual independence and the universal reason of women and men alike was central to her arguments towards gender equality (Wollstonecraft 1995, 69). Brontë, too, develops a theological feminism in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, very much in the vein of Wollstonecraft. It is Helen's spiritual independence, her individual sense of religion, that fortifies her so powerfully against the oppressive, abusive marriage in which she is entrapped: this juxtaposition of individual faith and societal immortality is a vital concern of Wollstonecraft.

She highlights the destructive social impact of the subordination of women to both women and men (ibid.).[5] Armed by her religious convictions, amidst marital and patriarchal entrapment, Helen's 'vision' is 'cleared' and she is able to breathe more 'freely' in the knowledge that 'God was mine' (303). Her faith and the strength of her spiritual self fortifies her against the abuses of Arthur and his corrupt friends. Moreover, Helen confronts the 'leering' suggestion of Grimsby: 'I looked him in the face, till he sullenly turned away'; 'at the glance [she] gave them in passing, Hattersley stopped short in his animadversions and stared like a bull calf' (345). Her 'clear', divinely sustained 'vision', in both senses of the word, is emblematic of her spiritual independence (303). This spiritual independence fortifies her against corrupt patriarchal assumptions of power: 'what are *you*, sir, that you should set yourself up as a god?' (205). Thus, Brontë, upon killing one Angel, arms women with the means to kill angels and monsters everywhere. As Helen advises a grief-stricken Lowborough, 'abstract yourself [...] and stand alone' (342): the individual, independent mind is valourised against an oppressive, unjust external world.

Thesis

As Shand has described, Brontë's refusal to write 'a perfect work of art' relates to her novelistic techniques. Her contemporary reviewers defined a successful novel by its adherence to harmony and balance, but Brontë sought to show the complex, uniquely dynamic potential of fiction through her attention to various, conflicting perspectives (Shand 2019, 292). As aforementioned, drawing upon the contemporary rivalry of fiction and visual art, Shand contrasts the static nature of art to Brontë's dynamic narrative and her rejection of the ideal of 'perfect' aesthetics. I will borrow this language and the polarised ideas of the

[5] An example Wollstonecraft gives is how women, not being taught rational virtue, become destructive mothers to the future generation. She describes the cyclical, interrelated nature of society's gravest ills, across both genders: 'let men grow chaste and modest, and if women do not grow wiser in the same ratio, it will be clear that they have weaker understanding'. Universal rationalism would thus reform society while affirming intellectual gender equality (Wollstonecraft 1995, 75-8).

static aesthetics and dynamic truth throughout my essay (Shand 2019, 293, 298). Indeed, Brontë describes the journey to 'truth' in her 'Preface to the Second Edition' as an active, dynamic process: 'it needs some courage to dive for it' (Brontë 1996, 3). The multifaceted and vital nature of true life cannot be confined by static aesthetics: 'the fixity of "life" in art and fluidity of "life" in nature are incompatible' (Gilbert and Gubar 2020, 14). Freeing her novel and her heroine from expectations of aesthetic, static fixity, Brontë creates a constantly rippling, ever-dynamic work of artistic truth. Complicating individual perspective, Brontë is careful to stage a myriad of storytellers throughout the narrative, beyond Helen and Gilbert.[6] Through this, Brontë spoke far beyond literary conventions. Her realism shocked reviews with its 'disgustingly truthful minuteness'[7] while her perspectivist innovations disconcerted contemporary reviewers who stressed the novel's 'difference of style' as among its chief defects:[8] tellingly, one reviewer complained, they could not 'analyze it, for the information of the reader'.[9] Brontë's novel defied cursory analysis and demanded readerly engagement.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall demonstrates an attention to how patriarchal constructs exist not only physically, but emotionally; Helen's spiritual resistance through her theological beliefs is her only means of safeguarding her sense of self against the oppressive patriarchal structures that seek to subsume her. Further, the novel shows how a marriage of equals is possible, one of true, egalitarian love, reinforced through dynamism and equality, far from the static and projective aesthetic ideal of an uninterrupted patriarchal narrative. The radical revisionary nature of the text is, therefore, far beyond the conventionality to which critics such as John Maynard condemn it (Maynard 2002, 196); indeed, it is telling to the novel's

[6] Consider the tonal and perspectival subtleties of Milicent's letter (221-3), Helen's honest discussions with Ralph (289-91, 378-381), Arthur's striking narrative voice (193), the narrative of the carriage-driver (468-71), and the dialogue of the passengers (473).
[7] *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall. Sharpe's London Magazine*, Nov. 1845-Feb. 1849; Jul 1848; 7, *British Periodicals* pg. 181; see also, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall. Critic of books, society, pictures, music and decorative art*, 1848-1849; Sep 15, 1848; 7, 179; *British Periodicals* p. 383.
[8] *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall. Hood's Magazine*; Dec 1848; 10, 6; *British Periodicals* p. 555.
[9] *The Literary Examiner. Examiner*; Jul 29, 1848; 2113; *British Periodicals* p. 483.

radicalism that one contemporary review advised the author to entirely change their 'notions of all human and divine things'.[10]

First, I will study the perspectivist structural and generic interplay of Gilbert and Helen's narratives, considering how his aesthetical, literary Gothic is complicated by her confessional, realist Gothic. Then, I will consider the shift occasioned by Helen's, living, breathing narrative upon the aesthetical Gilbert, anticipating the dismantling of the aesthetical Angel. Then, I will discuss the death of Arthur and the Angel, concluding with an analysis of the egalitarian spiritual love Brontë envisions, reflecting on how this may be read anew as a response to Emily Brontë's novel, *Wuthering Heights*.

An Aesthetical Gothic

Brontë's narrative experiments with various tonal inflections of the Gothic, innovatively engaging with and defying the male-dominated perspectives of her Gothic precursors. Through this, Brontë's careful delineation of the complex multiplicities of meaning and the individualistic nuances of language anticipate Nietzschean perspectivism. As the two Gothic narratives eclipse by the novel's end, Brontë's structure allows for a literary actualisation of the egalitarian, intellectual, and spiritual communion she represents in the novel. Thus, a synthesis of philosophical, feminist, and literary innovation is affected.

To begin exploring this, we may turn to the first Gothic narrative: Gilbert's 'literary' Gothic. This inflection of the Gothic works in the tradition of the eighteenth-century comedy of manners. Gilbert's declaratively literary persona is evidenced by his own consciousness of his literary task, taking up 'my pen' (9) for a 'full and faithful account' (10), recalling 'this long letter' (20) to his friend, Halford. This is both a nod to Gothic tropes of the long-lost letter and a reflection of Gilbert's humorously refined narrative style. A key aspect of

[10] *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. *The Rambler*, Jan. 1848-May 1862; Sep 1848; 3, *British Periodicals* p. 65.

Gilbert's narrative is a Wildean balance of aesthetics and wit. His narrative is, perhaps, the 'perfect work of art' Brontë rejects in her opening preface (Brontë 1996, 3). The syntactically balanced, bound, harmonious humour and irony of his account makes for a wonderfully pleasing read. The opening paragraph, for instance, is a mere three sentences, but flourishes on with the syntactical dexterity and flawless ease the confidential epistolary form requires. The literarily skilled but conversational, nearly careless tone with which Gilbert writes to his friend recalls the humorous formality of popular eighteenth-century fiction. Gilbert's narrative is polished with a touch of literary detachment as well as infused with the personable, confidential, and retrospective reflectivity of Charles Dickens' narrators. 'For I was young then, remember', he write, 'and had not acquired half the rule over my spirit, that I now possess' (12). An elucidating instance of Gilbert's interrelated narrative style and persona occurs early in the novel. Here, Gilbert's family is discussing the new tenant of Wildfell Hall. Gilbert's mother and sister are debating calling upon her; Fergus, Gilbert's brother and one of the novel's best comic voices, speaks up:

> 'And pray, be quick about it; and mind you bring me word how much sugar she puts in her tea, and what sort of caps and aprons she wears, and all about it; for I don't know how I can live till I know,' said Fergus, very gravely.
>
> But if he intended the speech to be hailed as a master-stroke of wit, he signally failed, for nobody laughed. However, he was not much disconcerted at that; for when he had taken a mouthful of bread and butter and was about to swallow a gulp of tea, the humour of the thing burst upon him with such irresistible force, that he was obliged to jump up from the table, and rush snorting and choking from the room; and a minute after, was heard screaming in fearful agony in the garden.

> As for me, I was hungry, and contented myself with silently demolishing the tea, ham, and toast, while my mother and sister went on talking, and continued to discuss the apparent or non-apparent circumstances, and probable or improbable history of the mysterious lady; but I must confess that, after my brother's misadventure, I once or twice raised the cup to my lips, and put it down again without daring to taste the contents, lest I should injure my dignity by a similar explosion (15).

In 'The English Renaissance of Art', Oscar Wilde emphasises the aesthete's concern with the momentary perfections and harmonies within life, not life itself as it is, but an artistic rendition of life, inspired and refined from reality. Discordance, he impresses, is for political pamphlets and not the task of the artist: 'for the aim of culture is not rebellion but peace'. Thus the, 'social idea' of art is 'the meaning of joy in art', 'being justified' by 'the flawless beauty and perfect form of its expression'.[11] This passage can be analysed precisely so. Fergus' remark is particularly humorous because it is deeply ironic but uttered with the linguistic and performative gravity of social seriousness. Gilbert's own narration mirrors this, creating a harmonious tone of irony, delicately restrained within the paragraph enacted by his own social performance of restraint, 'lest I should injure my dignity'. As critics often note of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, its inexplicable charm lies in its precise, nearly mathematically balanced inversion of everyday life. Gilbert's charming humour, too, is precise in its harmonious irony. Harmonising his literary tone and persona, Gilbert's ironic humour is carefully enclosed within the theatrically grave formality of his overarching tone, mirroring his social performativity in the scene itself as he refrains from a comical outburst to safeguard his outer 'dignity'. His artistic tone harmonises with his character's conduct: both adopt the outward gravity of social performance while internally ironising it. The social

[11] Oscar Wilde, 'The English Renaissance of Art'. *Oscar Wilde Online*, https://www.wilde-online.info/the-english-renaissance-of-art.html.

performativity of the ‘character Gilbert’ restrainedly controlling himself from outburst mirrors the elevated tone and restrained, grave formality of the ‘narratorial Gilbert’, loftily describing Fergus’ hysterical laughter as a moment of ‘fearful agony’ which he wisely navigates, prudently avoiding ‘a similar explosion’. His own professed seriousness is thus undermined as an act of comical social performance, but he, like his character, sustains a tonal harmony of professed seriousness, achieving the synchrony of Wildean comedy (15).

The syntactical ease and balance through the short, rhythmical clauses as well as the theatricality of the telling make Gilbert’s narrative a wonderful piece of comic writing, especially literary in nature: the very particular selection and arrangement of the words make the joke. Indeed, as when he details ‘the company’ of the seaside trip, listing ‘Gilbert Markham’ among them, one may sense that Gilbert is not nearly so much a chronicler as an artist and literary character in his own artistic making. Indeed, with a Wildean attention to ‘definite conception’, ‘clearness of vision’, and ‘a purely artistic effect’,[12] Gilbert stops himself from lapsing into psychological complexity and a truth-telling narrative. The complex inharmony of his thoughts and feelings are loftily glossed over as ‘conflicting hopes and fears’, ‘serious cognitions and resolves’ to which he will be careful to ‘halt’ before so as to not ‘bore’ the reader (76). This is quite unlike Helen’s shifting indecision and insecurity captured in the lived reality of her diary: ‘I trust we shall be happy yet’ she writes far before the worst is yet to come (216). Gilbert’s opening narrative, rather, is careful and deliberate: ‘I must not anticipate’ (44).

Much critical unease has been expressed on Gilbert’s assault of Helen’s brother Lawrence and the consequent implications of this upon his character development (Hervouet 2023, par. 4). I wonder, however, if this scene may be read considering his humorously

[12] ibid.

literary persona, here, acting with the excessive abandon of sensation fiction. Indeed, in this light, the scene becomes rather ludicrous than horrific. It is as if the older Gilbert, the artist, narrates an episode of the life of the younger Gilbert, the character, with keen sensationalised relish. Further, I believe this episode of the narrative may be particularly telling in illustrating the position of Gilbert as artist over his self-presentation as character. After all, his professed 'exultation' and 'effervescence' upon striking down poor Lawrence makes for a far more incredulous and striking effect upon the reader than an emphasis on Gilbert's pious self-reproach. Rather than presenting himself more favourably, Gilbert is foremost committed to the reader's experience of his text. Gilbert's incredulity at Mr Lawrence's 'spiteful motives' at refusing his swear-ridden offerings of service are nearly preposterous (118). Why would Gilbert present himself as so daft? In line with his keenly literary narrative, I suggest, Gilbert emphasises his own literary performativity and conscious artistic purpose by making himself an unreliable narrator of his own character. Indeed, he recalls the reader during the description itself: 'it must have been a powerful blow; but half the credit—or the blame of it (which you please) must be attributed to the whip' (117). Portraying himself as a half-hapless and comically insensible villain, Gilbert writes understatedly and irreverently of his complete lack of guilt (117-9). Further, rather than the horrific Gothic immediacy one might expect, of cataclysmic violence and cruel abandonment, Gilbert resentfully loiters about the site of his assault for some time, comically trespassing on generic tropes. He figures the laughably pitiable situation Mr Lawrence is in, muddy and rainy, looking 'wistfully' to his tranquil pony who has, pottered a little way off. The ironical balance and descriptive precision of Gilbert, the artist, does a complete disservice to, but produces a perfect humorous satire of the youthful arrogance of Gilbert, the character:

Mr. Lawrence and his pony had both altered their positions in some degree. The pony had wandered eight or ten yards further away; and he had managed, somehow, to remove himself from the middle of the road: I found him seated in a recumbent position on the bank,—looking very white and sickly still, and holding his cambric handkerchief (now more red than white) to his head. It must have been a powerful blow; but half the credit—or the blame of it (which you please) must be attributed to the whip, which was garnished with a massive horse's head of plated metal. The grass, being sodden with rain, afforded the young gentleman a rather inhospitable couch; his clothes were considerably bemired; and his hat was rolling in the mud on the other side of the road. But his thoughts seemed chiefly bent upon his pony, on which he was wistfully gazing—half in helpless anxiety, and half in hopeless abandonment to his fate.

I dismounted, however, and having fastened my own animal to the nearest tree, first picked up his hat, intending to clap it on his head; but either he considered his head unfit for a hat, or the hat, in its present condition, unfit for his head; for shrinking away the one, he took the other from my hand, and scornfully cast it aside.

'It's good enough for you,' I muttered.

My next good office was to catch his pony and bring it to him, which was soon accomplished; for the beast was quiet enough in the main, and only winced and flirted a trifle till I got hold of the bridle—but then, I must see him in the saddle.

'Here, you fellow—scoundrel—dog—give me your hand, and I'll help you to mount.'

No; he turned from me in disgust. I attempted to take him by the arm. He shrank away as if there had been contamination in my touch.

> ‘What, you won’t! Well! you may sit there till doomsday, for what I care. But I suppose you don’t want to lose all the blood in your body—I’ll just condescend to bind that up for you.’
>
> ‘Let me alone, if you please.’
>
> ‘Humph; with all my heart. You may go to the d—l, if you choose—and say I sent you’ (117-8).

The irony and humour surely cannot be lost in the debacle and commentary of Gilbert attempting to put Lawrence’s hat upon his head, Gilbert’s self-lauding self-awareness, and his abundantly misplaced resentment at Lawrence’s distrustful response. Gilbert is nothing if not a self-consciously, controlled, and exact artist. His entitling a chapter of Helen’s diary as ‘An Encounter and its Consequences’ is a clear instance of this nearly overdone awareness of literary presentation (122). The self-conscious artistic control of Gilbert seen throughout is thus, here, on full display. With neatly-bound humour and irony, Gilbert creates a carefully staged persona of his younger self. His narrative is a harmlessly entertaining one rife with literary artifice and satirical attention to literary formal and generic conventions, recalling the epistolary narrative, the social comedy, and the Gothic novel.

Comic renditions of Gothicism may be seen in the above paragraph, but this strain of Gilbert’s artistry is most pronounced in his early encounter of Wildfell. Indeed, this passage was the most cited paragraph in contemporary reviewers. It seems to have offered the perfect extract for an aestheticised Gothic conception of the Brontës and of Anne’s novel as simply another curious echo of the mythic ‘Bell’ universe.[13]

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[13] *The Literary Examiner. Examiner*; Jul 29, 1848; 2113; *British Periodicals* p. 483; *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall. Critic of books, society, pictures, music and decorative art*, 1848-1849; Sep 15, 1848; 7, 179; *British Periodicals* p. 383; *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall. The Athenaeum*; Jul 8, 1848; 1080; *British Periodicals* p. 670.

Near the top of this hill, about two miles from Linden-Car, stood Wildfell Hall, a superannuated mansion of the Elizabethan era, built of dark grey stone, venerable and picturesque to look at, but doubtless, cold and gloomy enough to inhabit, with its thick stone mullions and little latticed panes, its time-eaten air-holes, and its too lonely, too unsheltered situation,—only shielded from the war of wind and weather by a group of Scotch firs, themselves half blighted with storms, and looking as stern and gloomy as the Hall itself. Behind it lay a few desolate fields, and then the brown heath-clad summit of the hill; before it (enclosed by stone walls, and entered by an iron gate, with large balls of grey granite—similar to those which decorated the roof and gables—surmounting the gate-posts) was a garden,—once stocked with such hard plants and flowers as could best brook the soil and climate, and such trees and shrubs as could best endure the gardener's torturing shears, and most readily assume the shapes he chose to give them,—now, having been left so many years untilled and untrimmed, abandoned to the weeds and the grass, to the frost and the wind, the rain and the drought, it presented a very singular appearance indeed. The close green walls of privet, that had bordered the principal walk, were two-thirds withered away, and the rest grown beyond all reasonable bounds; the old boxwood swan, that sat beside the scraper, had lost its neck and half its body: the castellated towers of laurel in the middle of the garden, the gigantic warrior that stood on one side of the gateway, and the lion that guarded the other, were sprouted into such fantastic shapes as resembled nothing either in heaven or earth, or in the waters under the earth; but, to my young imagination, they presented all of them a goblinish appearance, that harmonised well with the ghostly legions and dark traditions our old nurse had told us respecting the haunted hall and its departed occupants (22-3).

Here, Nietszchean perspectivism comes into play. The Gothicised perspective of Gilbert here, is consciously due to his 'young imagination' which draws the Hall to 'harmonise[...] with the ghostly legions and dark traditions' he had heard as a child. This draws a fascinating connection between Gilbert the artist and Gilbert the character. Gilbert's aforementioned artistic construction of himself reflects his youthful sensibilities. Both Gilbert's early narrative and his youthful perceptions are hinged upon a literary, aestheticising perspective. Both are individually unique and symptomatic (recalling Nietszche) of Gilbert's upbringing and imaginative sensibilities. Andrew Smith discusses *Jane Eyre* as a misleadingly realist text. The novel, he writes, is overcast by Jane's Gothic sensibilities, a perspective with which her mind is infused and a manner in which she sees the world due to her childhood experiences of isolation and terror (Smith 2007, 82). Gilbert's literarily conscious narrative is similarly reflected in his youthful subjectivity, his keen naivete and artistic, aestheticising understanding of the world around him. In the world, he conjures fantasies in place of reality; in the text, he is disposed to artistic glosses over emotional and psychological complexities. This, however, as I shall discuss, markedly shifts upon his maturity. This shift occurs at once at the level of character and within the novelistic form as the text acquires new complexity and depth as Gilbert's literary Gothic encounters Helen's realist one. As discussed in the introduction, the insufficiency of the singularity of perspective is a concern Brontë develops throughout the novel. It is only upon engaging with Helen's literary perspective that the novel gains an account of reality that goes beyond a singular aesthetic perspective and tone of literary artifice, achieving not realism alone but 'truth' as a multifaceted appreciation of the variable nature of experience. For 'truth' goes beyond literal fact. As Marianne Thormählen describes, Brontë's text develops an understanding of truth that goes beyond mere replication of reality (Thormählen 2023, 284-5): Thormählen refers to Erich Auerbach's idea of realism as the 'means' towards 'truth'

in the Old Testament, not the synonymous equivalent (Auerbach 1946, 14 qtd in Thormählen 283).

The nature of Gilbert's aesthetical mind is also, crucially, evidenced in his perception of Helen, making his initial admiration of her problematised by ideals reminiscent of the aesthetical Angel; as Elizabeth Shand writes, their relationship is initially threatened by 'static romance' only overcome through 'uncovering the layers beneath surface depictions' (Shand 2019, 299-300). Consider the aestheticised description of Helen as the 'fair lady' whom he can 'admire' from a cool distance at church without knowing her as a 'partner' (17). The extended description of Helen's 'complexion' and appearance without, indeed, with a refusal, to know her as a fellow human, reflects the static, artistic preoccupations of Gilbert's perspective. She, however, directly disrupts his detached musings upon her features, looking directly at him and disturbing him with an impression of her 'quiet scorn' (15). When he later muses on her 'pale face and lofty brow, where thought and suffering seem equally to have stamped their impress', he, as earlier discussed, resorts to a literary, eloquent glossing over the complexities of the truth. Gilbert, from his distanced, observational pose cannot yet know the truth of Helen's mind (29). He perceives Helen and little Arthur as a 'picture' (60). He romantically muses on 'the virtues and wrongs of the lady of Wildfell Hall' (83). In the former case, the 'picture' is momentary and tellingly displaced by Helen and Arthur's movement (Shand 2019, 98-9); in the latter, Gilbert is, disturbed, much to his dismay, until he realises it is Helen, the 'real' Helen, who has tellingly come to replace the 'lady' of his daydream. Another instance in which Helen disturbs Gilbert's Romantic fantasies occurs later in the text. Gilbert, in a rush of passion, has left the Hall only to wander back, looking upon it and reflecting,

> might I not benefit more in contemplation of that venerable pile with the full moon in the cloudless heaven shining so calmly above [...] and the mistress of my soul within [...] ? (105)

He ventures to look in, for 'if I found her still in deep distress, perhaps I might venture a word of comfort'. Crucially, Gilbert relates Helen, the Romantically conceived 'mistress of [his] soul' to the perusal of the 'full moon'. Displacing Gilbert's aesthetical assumptions and narrative, however, the picturesque spectacle is abandoned: 'her chair was vacant: so was the room' (106). As in the earlier examples, Helen abandons or transgresses upon Gilbert's detached, staticising image of her. It is at this stage in the narrative that her diary becomes essential. Gilbert's perspective is evidently insufficiently circumscribed. His shallow perspective and problematic deification of her will be displaced by her own voice.[14] Through this, the initial challenge to the Angel in the House will be affected before her complete demise at the end of the text.

A Realist Gothic

I will now turn to Helen's narrative to show how her narrative may be seen as a realist Gothic, transforming the aesthetical, static sensibilities of Gilbert into a world of spiritual and psychological complexity. Firstly, unlike Gilbert's self-conscious presentation of himself to Halford as a witty man of letters, Helen addresses her page as 'a confidential friend' (154). Through her honest, confidential tone, she directly complicates Gilbert's deification of her: 'I am no angel' (267).[15] Indeed, the fallibility of such a perspective is reinforced through Helen's parallel initial deification of Arthur: she is irresistibly attracted to his 'ineffable but indefinite charm, which casts a halo over all he did and said' (145). The text psychologically studies the universal human risk towards moral corruption, an essential fallibility that directly

[14] For instances of Gilbert's deification of Helen, see 53, 74, 62-3.
[15] For more examples see 142, 183, 267, 329.

refutes the static angelic paradigm: Helen realises, 'I am gradually losing that instinctive horror and repulsion' towards that which she ought to morally condemn (262). Unlike Gilbert's awareness that his text will be perused and his subsequent polished and amiable addresses to Halford, Helen's realist text emblematises the voiceless of her position in an oppressive marriage. Her apostrophe to Arthur is one unsaid beyond the page, one, by rhetorical necessity, to be left unheard and unanswered. (220). It is to a 'silent paper' she 'confess[es]' (243). This characterises the true Gothic horrors of her captive position and draws attention to the unflinching honesty of her account, markedly unlike the deliberately refined writings of Gilbert. The significance of Gilbert accessing the inner-workings of Helen's mind and soul is central in the process of his coming to appreciate her as a human being, far beyond the unmoving, mindless angel. The 'lurking drollery' Gilbert composedly perceives in Helen's static painting of Arthur is infused with chilling meaning through her diary (49). It becomes the 'the merry smile just lurking' in Arthur's most manipulative moments (215, 234). Arthur's laughing apologies and 'mock humiliation' are anything but harmless (233). Rather, these traits illustrate the tragic lapse between him and Helen, the fundamental inequality of their relationship in which Arthur perceives her as a 'pet' (202) and 'silly girl' (245) rather than with the dignity of an equal, of a 'friend' (202).

Helen's realist Gothic is further developed through her account of her experiences. Displacing the Gothic motif of imprisonment, she highlights the horrors of emotional imprisonment. Arthur's manipulative proposal and emotional coercion is reinforced by Helen's complete entrapment: 'I made an effort to rise, but he was kneeling on my dress' (167).[16] As will be later developed, she is entrapped in his 'angel' image of her (169) and made voiceless, 'lest I should disgust him' (207). 'How little real sympathy there exists between us', she laments, 'how many of my own thoughts and feelings are gloomily

[16] See 157 for a similar example.

cloistered within my own mind' (243). The Gothic archetype of the imprisoned maiden and fearful, haunted abbeys, satirised in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, is flipped internally. Manipulating the Gothic interest in intricate, double identities, Helen's marriage leaves her mind 'unmarried' and imprisoned within herself, lost in a Gothic nightmare she cannot escape (243). She is entrapped within a marriage and made to be spiritually united with one she cannot love or respect. She tells Arthur, 'don't you know that you are a part of myself? And do you think you can injure and degrade yourself, and I not feel it?': a realist inversion of the famous *Wuthering Heights* Romantic proclamation, 'he's more myself than I am' (Brontë 2002, 41). The Victorian ideal of the domestic heaven becomes 'a prison and despair'. The Gothic, melodramatic Wildfell Hall Gilbert saw becomes a 'liberty and hope' (390). Helen looks to the liberty of 'wild-fell', a free, uncultivated realm, over the refined, picturesque image of 'grass-dale'. The picturesque, moreover, becomes synonymous with patriarchal suppression, a space of emotional entrapment and the aesthetic, silencing Angel image. In Grassdale, she writes, 'I am a slave, a prisoner' (368), recalling Wollstonecraft's comparison of the condition of married women to slaves (Wollstonecraft 1995, 69). Through the maternal connection to Wildfell as the place of Helen's mother's death (370) and her adopting her mother's name (388), Helen's narrative takes on concerns of the female Gothic (Smith 2007, 96); she escapes the imprisoning space of 'patriarchal poetics' to discover her 'matrilineal heritage of strength' (Gilbert and Gubar 2020, 59).

Helen's realist Gothic is further developed through her unflinching account of the horrors of alcoholism (272). In Arthur's chilling account of Lowborough's alcoholism; he describes Lowborough as 'ghastly' (188), 'the ghost in Macbeth', and 'the spectre' (192) for his attempts to resist the impulse towards alcohol. His manipulations of the Gothic characterise Lowborough as the Gothic 'Other'. Helen's narrative flips this back onto Arthur

and his degenerate companions precisely for their drunkenness. The harrowing spectacle of Arthur, 'with feeble laughter, with the tears running down his face' (279) rings with the same uncanny horror of Homer's *Odyssey* in which the suitors, minutes before their brutal death laugh, as 'their eyes were bursting full with tears, and their laughter sounded like lamentation' (Lattimore 2013, 307). The acute alienation and disempowered position of Helen in a patriarchal prison is reinforced through Gothic language: Grimsby's 'fiendish satisfaction' and 'leer of malignant ferocity'; Arthur's 'coarse and brutal malediction' (345). The Gothic is therefore no longer a means of readerly entertainment and sensationalism as in Gilbert's narrative; it is a means of harrowing and shocking the reader through the vivid, realist testimony of Helen's experience.

Yet, Helen's experiential Gothic is nonetheless nuanced and complex. Arthur is not simply the Gothic villain and she is far from the porcelain maiden.[17] 'Arthur is not what is commonly called a *bad* man' (244), Helen writes, it is 'his idea of a wife' that is destructive to their marriage. This idea, strikingly reminiscent of the Woolfian Angel, is of one

> to love one devotedly, and to stay at home to wait upon her husband, and amuse him and minister to his comfort in every possible way, while he chooses to stay with her; and, when he is absent, to attend to his interests, domestic or otherwise, and patiently wait his return, no matter how he may be occupied in the meantime (244).

As will be further developed, the image of the Angel becomes a critical gulf in Helen and Arthur's relationship that will lead to the horrific degeneration of their marriage. Further, Helen's Gothic is interested in psychology. Psychological conditioning is a central concern throughout the text.[18] This relates to the concept of the 'fiend within', central to

[17] Recall, 'I am no angel'(113) and Helen's dreaded chronicling of her moral decline (262).
[18] Consider, Helen's consciousness of the threat the father's conduct poses to the child's moral development (324, 348, 369-70, 386) and Helen's attributing the faults of Arthur's character to his upbringing (149).

Lowborough's story (344, 346, 456-7); his form of Gothic strife is against his internal self, an internalised form of Gothic doubling. Helen's dissociative psychological response to her situation, 'a hardness taught by rough experience and despair alone' (361) leaves her chillingly 'speechless, tearless, and almost motionless' (366) in moments of acute emotional abuse. The haunting dissociative progress from Helen's early romantic, hopeful sensibilities, from 'the bride' to the hardened, emotionally paralysed 'wife' (239), infuses psychological complexity to the Gothic double identity paradigm and emphasises her complex, dynamic, human experience over the empty, unmoving, angelic image.[19] Helen's realist Gothic is a story of a human being; Gilbert's aesthetic Gothic was the story of an unknown angel.

Moreover, Gilbert's romantic narrative is undermined through Helen's realist account (Shand 2019, 301). Her Gothic revises his Gothic. The 'dark enlightenment' of Helen's narrative acts upon the surface level, careless biblical language of Gilbert, revealing 'the eternal implications of casual deeds and everyday language' (Davies 1996, xx-xxii). Gilbert's encounter with Helen's narrative alters his mind and leaves a stamp upon his thoughts; upon engaging with her spiritual medium, he, too, becomes preoccupied with questions of spirituality and the afterlife (Davies 1996, xx). Similarly, consider the chilling connotations of masculinity throughout the novel (Davies 1996, xxviii) and Gilbert's firm beliefs, early in the text, regarding traditional gender roles (31-5). Conversely, in the chapters following his reading of Helen's diary, he writes that he acted 'manfully' in his respectful adherence to Helen's wishes to not contact her (411). His initial possessive hatred of Arthur for Helen's sake (397) is touched by the compassion he admits to feeling upon reading Helen's account of his death (449).

[19] Recall, Gilbert and Gubar, who describe the self-splitting experiences of women in patriarchy (Gilbert and Gubar 2020, 77-8).

Similarly, our ‘return’ to Wildfell in Helen’s narrative (391), having encountered the ‘picturesque’ image of it through Gilbert (22-3) infuses the symbolic image of the Hall with greater complexity. It is no longer a Gothic spectacle but a complex symbol of Helen’s liberty and escape from the confines of patriarchal suppression. It becomes a return to maternal heritage and a Woolfian Room of One’s Own.[20] As Davies notes, Helen is significantly an ‘outlaw’ of society at Wildfell (Davies 1996, xviii). Moreover, in this liminal, secluded space, a place of freedom from patriarchal poetics and control, Helen is able to discover a new form of love, a love of equals. As Gilbert’s comes to understand Helen’s internal, spiritual self, his aesthetic image of her is replaced by the real, dynamic woman: he finds truth beyond his ‘fancied convictions’ (398). Just like Helen was tragically transfixed by the aesthetic image of Arthur, ‘that too fascinating physiognomy’ only to be shocked by its dynamic potential: ‘the cold, unfriendly look I thought him quite incapable of assuming’ (162). The distant, angelic image Gilbert once had of Helen is forever altered by the truth of her dynamic character. Importantly, however, he must encounter her again for this to be realised. Thus, when he first sees her, and she looks at him with eyes ‘so intensely earnest that they bound me like a spell’; she must replace the ‘copy’ with the ‘individuality’ (Gilbert and Gubar 2020, 19), identifying herself as the person of the diary, disallowing him to lapse into romanticisation of her: ‘have you looked it over?’ she asks, and thus, ‘the spell was broken’ (399).

Moreover, the shift to vitality and depth within the narrative structure is mirrored in Helen’s emerging freedom from static, patriarchal aesthetics and Gilbert’s own perspectival development. Our understanding of Gilbert’s aesthetic perceptions of Helen and Wildfell Hall are complicated beyond recognition; we are pushed, as readers, towards a perspectivist

[20] Consider a psychological reading of the house as the architecture of the mind (Gilbert and Gubar 2020, 87). Wildfell can perhaps be seen as an embodiment of Helen’s resilient spiritual and psychological independence.

sensitivity to meaning, one which reveals the unreliability of patriarchal discourse. Through the insufficiency of Gilbert's narrative, patriarchal narrative authority begins to crumble. To fully realise the 'spiritual' 'cure to female despair', however, Brontë cannot just remove Helen from the aesthetic, patriarchal space of Grassdale, Brontë must return to it, reclaim it, and kill the patriarchal prisoner-keeper, the entrancing Angel in the House (Gilbert and Gubar 2020, 92).

Killing 'The Angel in the House'

As the earlier quoted passage describes, Arthur's 'idea' of a wife is the quintessential, 'self-less' domestic angel (244; Gilbert and Gubar 2020, 21). Arthur's deification of Helen (169, 199, 236) builds their relationship upon a house of sand. His empty idolatry of her, in the place of true understanding, actualises Wollstonecraft's concern that the deification of women, societal immortality, and the shallowness of romantic relationships were interwoven issues (Wollstonecraft 1995, 68-70). As Helen reflects soon after their marriage, 'I only worry his affection loses depth where it gains in ardour'; 'I should like to be less of a pet and more of a friend' (202). Caught within the voiceless entrapment of the angel paradigm, Helen is afraid to even speak truthfully how she feels, 'lest I should disgust him' (207). Arthur's disturbing mock apology enacts this fundamental lapse between them: 'with his clasped hands uplifted in mock humiliation, he continued imploringly [...] and burying his face in his handkerchief, he affected to sob aloud (233). The disturbing scene recalls Wollstonecraft's idea that gender inequality degrades 'master' and 'slave' alike (Wollstonecraft 1995, 69). His performance is all melodrama without feeling. Upon her infuriated response, he is tellingly 'astonished at [her] warmth' (234); her vital, human spirit confronts his image of the death-like Angel. Though Arthur is 'very fond' of Helen, he cannot respect her as a fellow human being of free, independent will. When Helen warns him that his conduct may alienate

her from him, he denies her emotional agency, replying, ‘you cannot hate me as long as I love you’ (235). He is but a ‘fallible mortal’ but Helen, his ‘angel of heaven’, must love him ‘blindly, tenderly, and for ever’ (236). Her love must be everlasting; yet Arthur implicitly admits that he does not believe women possess genuine emotion. When Helen grieves the death of her father, he calls it ‘affectation’ (268). His image of a woman is therefore one both death-like in her angelic self-lessness and in her lack of human feeling. As we shall see, this statuesque concept of feminine virtue will be inverted and dramatised through Helen’s emotional petrification, a process which crystallises their final alienation from one another.

Helen’s emotional petrification is both a means of resistance and an uncanny fulfilment of the death-like angel, recalling Gilbert and Gubar on how women are forced into ‘life-less’ static aesthetics, forced to ‘kill’ themselves into art (Gilbert and Gubar 2020, 15). In this ironic fulfilment, Anne reveals how this deathly artistic ideal is, in reality, a state of dehumanisation. Arthur’s emotional abuse of Helen; his making her heart ‘his slave’ (210) push her towards her only means of self-protection, deadening her heart and emotions completely. Caught in a room with Arthur and his mistress, Helen writes, ‘I would have given way to my fury and said more but Arthur’s low laugh recalled me to myself’ (315).[21] She is thus forced to do ‘violence to [her] feelings’ (340) to safeguard herself from his manipulative control. ‘My nature was not originally calm’ (343), she writes, it is ‘a hardness taught’ (361). This further reveals the contradiction in terms of the unhuman Angel ideal and the living, breathing human woman. Helen is entrapped in an impossible position; to feel is to concede, but to not feel is to destroy herself into a deathlike state uncannily reminiscent of the Angel. Helen is forced to choose the latter; her momentary lapse to feeling only reinforces the vulnerability of her doing so:

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[21] A narrow-sighted contemporary review condemned this moment of Helen’s behaviour as ‘hard indifference’: *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. *The Athenaeum*; Jul 8, 1848; 1080; *British Periodicals* p. 670.

> And what was the result? No answering spark of kindness, no awakening penitence, but an unappeasable ill-humour, and a spirit of tyrannous exaction that increased with indulgence, and a lurking gleam of self-complacent triumph at every detection of relenting softness in my manner, that congealed me to marble again as often as it recurred; and this morning he finished the business:—I think the petrifaction is so completely effected at last that nothing can melt me again (323).

Her outward impenetrability is an ironic fulfilment of the death-like angel, yet it is at this point that Arthur's perception of her lapses to the 'monster' image, actualising Gilbert and Gubar's writings on the Angel and its monstrous, trailing double. Indeed, the true nature of the angel, Brontë proves, cannot but be uncannily monstrous in its deathlike hollowness. If we follow in the thought of Caroline Franklin, we may even see Helen as the voice of Bertha Mason; Franklin interprets Miss Myers as a gesture towards Jane Eyre (Franklin 2013, 127). Helen's narrative voice thereby at once speaks as the 'monster' figure of Charlotte's novel and dismantles the very concept through her poignantly human, realist subjectivity. To Arthur, however, his once untouchable angel becomes 'the very devil' (366). Brontë follows this shift with keen, psychological interest. In a telling drunken scene Arthur's friend, Ralph advises him to reform 'and beg your wife's pardon' (355). Arthur replies,

> My wife! What wife? I have no wife [...] or if I have, look you gentleman, I value her so highly that any one among you, that can fancy her, may have her and welcome─you may, by Jove and my blessing into the bargain!' (355)

The death-like unreality of Arthur's aesthetic ideal of Helen and its uncanny actualisation in her petrification occasions a psychologically harrowing result. Arthur has pushed Helen towards a state beyond dynamic, feeling humanity and despises her for it; 'the angel woman's pernicious potential' in the male psyche is interwoven in his evasive, dread-ridden words

(Gilbert and Gubar 2020, 26). Thus, externalised onto male projective attitudes towards women, Brontë reveals the illusionary edges of the angel/monster paradigm, recalling Nietsche's symptomatic perspectivist thesis.[22] Even Gilbert has an ebbing understanding of this. He describes Helen in a moment of passion with 'what the vicar would doubtless have called a savage smile' (102). Thus, unconsciously, perhaps, he draws attention to how male attitudes and fears surrounding women (in the vicar's case, Helen poses a threat to his conventional community order) directly inform their ostensibly objective characterisations of women. Additionally, this is a key reason and justification for Gilbert's frame narrative. His initial aesthetical deification of Helen and his subsequent development through engaging with Helen's spiritual, true self, foil the complete deterioration of Arthur's understanding of Helen and their alienation by his refusal to see her as fully human.

The decisive demise of the Angel in the House occurs through the death of Arthur. At this point in the story, the angel and monster doubles fascinatingly eclipse before being finally destroyed, together, through his death. Thus, it is significant that on his deathbed, Arthur conflates the angel and monster images he has had of Helen. Calling her his 'immaculate angel', he accuses her of pious hypocrisy and revelling in his suffering (441): 'it's an act of Christian charity, whereby you hope to gain a higher seat in Heaven for yourself, and scoop a deeper pit in hell for me' (425); 'oh, yes, you're wondrous gentle and obliging!—But you've driven me mad with it all!' (428). Her very angelic qualities of forgiveness and careful, unwavering, self-denying care are described by him as a source of monstrous torment, dread, and aversion within him. Brontë draws attention to the sheer terror Arthur has of seeing Helen at his deathbed,

[22] Lanier, 'Friedrich Nietzsche'.

> ‘I must be going mad,’ cried he—‘or something—delirious perhaps—but leave me, whoever you are—I can’t bear that white face, and those eyes—for God’s sake go, and send me somebody else, that doesn’t look like that! (424)

Here, Brontë anticipates twentieth-century feminist psychoanalysis. It is telling that the collapse of angel and monster and Arthur’s horrified dread at the deathlike, angelic spectre he perceives as Helen occurs in his dying state. The male dread of the female as a projection to his fears towards his powerlessness amidst the ‘creating and uncreating’ universe (Jung qtd in Berry 1994, 78) is dramatised through Arthur’s state, during which, imperatively, he is preoccupied by fears of death and self-dissolution (429, 446). This dynamic additionally reinforces the false, projective nature of the angel/monster idea: Arthur’s own guilt and anxieties surrounding his death *make* Helen fearsome to him. Anne thus anticipates psychoanalytical theories on the subconscious patriarchal dread of women due to their proximity to the life and death process (Gilbert and Gubar 2020, 34). Additionally, Arthur’s half-conscious horrified perception of a lifeless angelic being at the foot of his bed speaks to the subconscious, psychoanalytical male fear of the ‘angel woman’s pernicious potential’ (Gilbert and Gubar 2020, 26).

This scene in the text additionally confronts the concept of the ‘Angel of Death’. As Gilbert and Gubar note, the angelic ideal in its resemblance to lifelessness becomes a ‘memento mori’. This relates to the Victorian ‘Angel of Death’ discussed by Alexander Welsh: the Victorian motif of the angelic woman that is a ‘messenger of the mystical otherness of death’. This archetypal woman aids the individual through the transition of life to death, being a half-dead angelic being herself (Gilbert and Gubar 2020, 24-5). Helen’s position by Arthur’s deathbed, his ‘fancy to have [her] always by his side’ (442) and his tragically desperate words to her, ‘Helen, you *must* save me’ is suggestive of this Victorian

literary tradition (441). Helen, however, asserts the impossibility of a mortal adopting a supernatural, angelic role; she is heartbreakingly aware of the fact that she cannot be the Angel of Death. His words are all the more 'harrowing', because, she writes, 'I know I cannot help him' (446); 'he clings to me with unrelenting pertinacity—with a childish desperation, as if *I* could save him from the fate he dreads' (445). 'I do pray for you', she tells Arthur, 'but you must pray for yourself' (447). She tries to evoke his repentance, but it is useless, 'he only shook his head and sighed' (446). Furthermore, through Arthur's perception of Helen, angels and monsters descend from all angles, clashing and conflating upon one another before fading to oblivion with his death. Indeed, in his final moments he himself is torn and tormented by the discovered unreality of the Angel idea. This is pronounced in the acute pathos of his final, helpless moments (447) and Helen's grieved powerlessness to be the angelic vision he wishes for: 'I wish to God I could take you with me now!', he implores her in vain, 'you should plead for me' (446).

At this point in the narrative, we may say that Brontë has found a way to 'kill' the 'Angel in the House'. Woolf highlights that the great difficulty of this task relates to the phantom-like nature of the 'Angel': 'it is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality'.[23] The complex psychological study of Arthur and the externalisation of the angel/monster onto his perception of Helen allow for the angelic ideal to die with him, enabling Helen's freedom from the Angel and spiritual captivity. To recall my introduction, Welsh notes 'the apparent reversibility of the heroine's role, whereby acts of dying and of saving something from death seem confused' (Welsh 1971, 190 qtd in Gilbert and Gubar 2020, 24). Moreover, Brontë rejects this version of the 'self-less' Angel as Helen emerges free from the death-like angelic ideal which tragically fringed Arthur's vision to his final moments (Gilbert and Gubar 2020, 21). Generations ahead of her time, Brontë overcomes the Angel idea and the debilitations of

[23] Woolf, 'Professions for Women'.

‘patriarchal poetics’, finding a cure to ‘female despair’ that is both ‘spiritual’ and ‘physical’ (Gilbert and Gubar 2020, 59, 92). She thus envisions a world free of patriarchal inhibitions upon the free, human spirit of women, affirming the bold vision of intellectual gender equality she asserts in the novel’s preface (Brontë 1996, 5).

Spiritual Love

Fernando Lloyd charts the emergence and influence of translations of French realist fiction in Victorian England alongside contemporary feminist concerns. He notes ‘common motives in the Victorian artistic and social conscience’ between the literary development and the tensions between ‘frankness and prudishness in social manners’ that inhibited women in joining Josephine Butler in her vocal opposition to the Contagious Diseases Act of 1864 (Lloyd 9). It rings true in more ways than one, perhaps, that May Sinclair compared Brontë’s writing to the realism of Balzac (Sinclair 54). Within this context, moreover, Brontë’s realism is intimately concerned with the feminist discourses of her day surrounding marriage and the subordinate legal position of women (Franklin 2013, 107-11). Crucially, she does this in two ways, offering both a criticism of Victorian marital conventions and hope for its reform. Brontë’s novel is not simply concerned with the emotional torture Helen experiences in her marriage to Arthur but her emotional renewal upon her freedom from the Angel, the patriarchal paradigm that dies with him. Upon this, Brontë explores the potential for a loving marriage of equals, for intellectual and spiritual partners, through Helen’s relationship with Gilbert.

When Milicent asks Helen to ensure young Esther is armed with ‘true notions’ over ‘romantic’ ones, Helen replies in a way one might not expect:

> what the world stigmatises as romantic, is often more nearly allied to the truth than is commonly supposed; for, if the generous ideas of youth are too often over-clouded by the sordid views of after-life, that scarcely proves them to be false (282).

Within a novel of marital tragedy, this may come as a surprise. Brontë, however, is determined to develop a concept of true romance. Helen's illusionary romance with Arthur is not the revolutionary form of romantic love Brontë is envisioning. Helen writes, during her marriage to Arthur, 'how much of my higher and better self is indeed unmarried' (243); 'what shall I do with the serious part of myself?' (201). Moreover, the relationship she has with Arthur is precisely the 'ignis fatuus' she uncannily predicts it to be (152). It is an illusion, the essential spiritual, intellectual connection is absent. With stunningly modern awareness, Brontë's text shows how this form of love is disastrously empty. Angelic adoration builds Helen and Arthur's marriage upon nothingness, for, 'adoration isn't love' (287). As I developed in part one of this essay, Gilbert's literarily detached perception of Helen is transformed to profound understanding through his engagement with Helen's spiritual realist truth: 'the spell was broken' (399). Helen's words give life to the distanced, artistic spectacle he was initially drawn to. As when the first time he sees her, looking to her as a romanticised 'fair lady', upon which she looks directly at him, confronting his fantasy with her real, human, dynamic immediacy (17); 'the picture' Gilbert perceives of Helen and Arthur only lingers for a 'few brief seconds' before they alter their positions (60); when Gilbert is romantically musing upon 'the virtues and wrongs of the lady of Wildfell Hall', he is abruptly disturbed by the real Helen, 'coming down the avenue' (83); and at the crucial point in the narrative and the climax of his aesthetic sensibilities, when he returns to Wildfell to take 'one glance through the window' of the picture of Helen in 'deep distress' it is only to see, 'her chair was vacant, so was the room' (106). Rather than her simply not being there, the chair is

tellingly ‘vacant’; Helen has abandoned the picturesque scene in which Gilbert envisions her; she has tellingly left the domestic space and stepped outside, in the wild, liberating space of the uncultivated garden paralleling the aforementioned associations of the freely unrefined ‘wild-fell’ over the stiflingly picturesque ‘grass-dale’. Thus, at this point in the narrative, Gilbert must learn to understand Helen in her own terms within this free, realist space, not within the aesthetic picture she has refused to remain within. Rejecting the artistic deathliness of the static Angel, it is significant that, as Berry notes, the reverse proposal scene between Helen and Gilbert is emphatically dynamic; Helen is ‘the picture of vitality’, reaching beyond the interior space, overcoming static ‘angelic submission’ (Berry 1994, 106). In this moment, Helen overcomes picturesque staticism, as her true, spiritual self, emblematised by its association to the natural world and highlighted by her dynamic movement, retrieves the rose to offer Gilbert an ‘emblem of [her] heart’ (483). It is moreover her, true, dynamic, spiritual self, the one of her diary, not the one of Gilbert’s picturesque musings, that proposes to him.

Further, Helen and Gilbert’s relationship is fundamentally equal. Consider, how Arthur holds Helen down, ‘kneeling on [her] dress’ during the scene in which their feelings are revealed (167), as opposed to the cosmic, complete force that draws Gilbert and Helen together during all at once, in a single moment:

> There was a sudden impulse that neither could resist. One moment I stood and looked into her face, the next I held her to my heart, and we seemed to grow together in a close embrace from which no physical or mental force could rend us [...] At length, however, by some heroic effort, we tore ourselves apart (406).

The cosmic force of this moment, a force of love that ‘no physical or mental force’ can overpower, is reminiscent of *Wuthering Heights*, a note to which I will return (406). As described in my introduction, Langland, Shand, and Berry have highlighted how the

free-indirect merging of Gilbert and Helen's narrative towards the end of the novel actualises their spiritual, perspectival communion.[24] In the moment together which Helen and Gilbert think will be their last, Gilbert hopes they may 'exchange our thoughts by letter': 'may not kindred spirits meet, and mingle in communion whatever be the fate and circumstances of their earthly tenements?'. With poignant romantic passion, Helen cries, 'with a momentary burst of glad enthusiasm' that they may indeed maintain 'a spiritual intercourse without hope or prospect of anything further'. As Gilbert replies, though their 'bodies' may part, 'let them not sunder our souls!' (403). Their form of love transcends the merely picturesque, the empty, static, aesthetic world of the Angel to the true, spiritual realm of Helen's narrative. Theirs is a spiritual love of profound depth that transcends the external world. As Helen tells Arthur, their class boundaries are 'dust in the balance compared with the unity of accordant thoughts and feelings, and truly loving, sympathizing hearts and souls' (485).

To conclude, I will offer a new interpretation of how Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* may be seen as a response to Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. That Anne's novel engages and refutes aspects of Emily's has been established (Chitham 1991, 134 qtd in Franklin 2013, 126). However, as Langland writes, 'what kind of response *Wildfell Hall* makes remains in dispute' (Langland 1989, 49). I suggest, Emily's self-enclosed 'utilitarian Romanticism' (Davies 1996, x), where Gothic fantasy and reality are 'competing monsters (Smith 2007, 70-1), is confronted by Anne's text in which true love is not a destructive, fantastical aspect of the preternatural alone. Rather, Anne develops an egalitarian spiritual love that is possible to all and, indeed, true to human nature.

Anne's text is similarly concerned with the partnership of the entire self, with the connection of souls that Emily explores through Catherine and Heathcliff: 'whatever our

[24] See 440.

souls are made of, his and I are the same' (Brontë 2002, 41). The destructive results of their separation in Catherine's split-identity (Brontë 2002, 62; Gilbert and Gubar 2020, 277-9) is similarly addressed in Helen's concern with solipsism and the impediments of a 'solitary life' (68). Both are concerned with how social conventions stand in the way of true love.[25] Anne, however, offers her heroine a form of escape. Rather than the fragmentation of the woman, as in Emily's Catherine, it is Arthur that is fragmented, speaking to Wollstonecraft's concern with the universal societal threat posed by gender inequality (Wollstonecraft 1995, 69, 78). Anne's text refutes the binary of fantastical love and reality Emily's text envisions; rather, Anne suggests that great romance is a real possibility once aesthetical perceptions are overcome and spiritual communion has the freedom to be realised. For, the aesthetical perspective is fundamentally destructive. If only Helen had been able to be 'more of a friend and less of a pet' (202) to Arthur, perhaps the lapse between them might have been overcome. Instead, they are divided by patriarchal ideals that deny Helen's humanity, and Arthur turns to alcohol, rather than a fellow human-being, for 'support' (260).[26] But true love may be found in reality, Anne suggests. Amongst intellectual, spiritual partners, there may be romance reminiscent of the great cosmic forces of literary Romanticism. A love all the more incredible because it transcends the illusionary, because it defies the unreal for reality as complex and dynamic as the human soul. Anne breaks Hermione's spell, she rewrites the age-long myth of Galatea. For is not the statue that comes to life, by the story's end, but the forgotten human being that was once its great inspiration.

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[25] Gilbert and Gubar discuss this aspect of Emily's novel (Gilbert and Gubar 2020, 269-70, 283-4, 299, 303).
[26] Consider the touch of tragic, precarious pathos during the scene in which Helen tries to connect to Arthur, to save him from his destructive path he follows, but the central absence of their connection, the lack of 'truly sympathising hearts and souls' (285) prevails; her words seem unheard, he says nothing, though, 'he smiled—thoughtfully and even sadly', leaving any thoughts and words tragically unsaid (225).

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