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To Love and Protect: The Criminalization of Maternal Duty in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

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Abstract

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall (1848) can be read as a protofeminist text and a radical novel for its time, as it confronted the lack of maternal rights and protection for children. In this paper I discuss the portrayal of motherhood, and the factors that empower and restrict Helen. Using Sarah Lewis's *Woman's Mission* (1839) and her contemporary views of maternal duty, this paper explores the complexities of motherhood in 19th century England. Religion and the sense of duty Helen feels towards her son empowers her to break both conventions and the law. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* offers a raw picture of the realities of a woman imprisoned by marriage, doing everything in her power to save her son.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Background	2
2.1 Protofeminism and <i>Woman's Mission</i>	2
2.2 Maternal rights	3
3. Legal Framework and Abuse	5
3.1 The emotional, physical and financial abuse	5
3.1.1 The emotional abuse	5
3.1.2 The physical abuse	6
3.1.3 The financial abuse	8
3.2 The normalisation of marital abuse	9
3.3. The corrupt system	11
4. The Strong Woman	12
4.1 The radical nature of the book	13
4.2 Religion	14
4.3 Motherhood and identity	16
5. Motherhood and Duty	17
5.1 Matrimonial duty	17
5.2 Maternal duty	18
6. Conclusion	21
Note	22
Works Cited	23

1.Introduction

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, first published in 1848, was written by English author Anne Brontë and is considered to be an important piece of feminist literature. The novel depicts Helen Huntingdon who, in the best interests of her son, decides to violate the law; escaping her abusive husband with her child. It has been praised for its exploration of important themes such as duty, maternal rights and the need for reformation in the legal framework of the time. However, although the book quickly gained popularity at the time of its publication, the novel received a lot of criticism for its coarseness; how it exposed and examined the various forms of marital abuse which was perceived as vulgar.

Previous research on the novel is extensive. Some researchers such as Marianne Thormählen (*The Brontës and Religion*) have focused on investigating religious themes, while others have chosen to delve deeper into subjects such as Helen's artistic skills (Diederich) and the legal framework (Abramowicz). Despite the interest in exploring the novel using feminist perspectives,¹ the area lacks further exploration on the subject of motherhood. There are areas within this subject that deserve continued research, such as how different factors impact her maternal identity, religion and duty. Religion as a tool to enforce gender roles also has a radical potential to empower women. Using Sarah Lewis's book *Woman's Mission* (1839), a contemporary work, these subjects will be further examined. While *Woman's Mission* has been mentioned shortly in previous research, no one to my knowledge has examined her work on a deeper level in relation to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

The aim of this paper is to provide a feminist-historical reading of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, and answering these questions: How are the social and financial struggles of motherhood represented in the novel? What compels Helen to leave her husband? How does the novel discuss the problem surrounding maternal rights in this time period? The paper will use the legal framework of this time and Sarah Lewis's work *Woman's Mission* (1839), which argues that a woman's greatest duty in life is to be a mother. Many of Lewis's ideals can be found in

¹For further reading on feminist interpretations of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, see works by Rachel K. Carnell, Ecevit Bekler and Meghan Bullock.

the novel as a way to enforce Helen's maternal identity. *Woman's Mission* therefore helps create an understanding of the Victorian ideals of motherhood.

This paper consists of four sections. Firstly, there will be a section containing background information on protofeminism since it has been a framework in earlier research, *Woman's Mission*, as well as the legal system. The second section will discuss abuse and contemporary laws, in order to give a deeper understanding of Helen's situation and societal norms. The third section will examine Helen as a strong woman with the intention to discuss the ways her abusive marriage has shaped her as a mother and person. The last section will discuss how her duty as a mother takes precedence over her marital duty, as a final discussion point in the maternal struggle that is displayed in the novel. In my essay I will argue that *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* contributed to the development of feminist discussions, by making the lack of maternal rights more visible in the patriarchal society. The various forms of abuse are ways to control and diminish those rights. Brontë uses Helen's sense of duty and Christian values as a moral compass, helping her escape from her husband.

2. Background

This section will provide information on protofeminism, *Woman's Mission* and maternal rights.

2.1 Protofeminism and *Woman's Mission*

Protofeminism is defined by Gill Plain as "the diverse text, voices and lives that articulated feminist ideas and feminist critical positions before such categories existed" (6). In previous research, this theoretical framework has been used when analysing *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, highlighting Helen as a heroine. However, some research argues that Helen Huntingdon is ultimately restricted in her own story. Russell Poole suggests that "[w]e could conclude simply that Brontë, as a protofeminist author, writes from a traditionally male perspective, bestowing a regressive kind of attention upon her heroine, and this would be partly true" (868). His reasoning is that Helen's story is narrated from Gilbert's perspective, who is her second husband (Poole 867-868). Poole has a fair point with this argument since it could also be connected to the legal framework - a sphere where women's rights were limited based on how it affected men's power.

Sarah Lewis wrote the book *Woman's Mission*, published in 1839. The book heavily features Christian values, and advocates for maternal influence as the greatest tool to educate boys into becoming great men. It further focuses on women's position in society, which would be the domestic sphere, and the importance of motherhood. Reading *Woman's Mission* as a protofeminist text could be difficult since it contains ideals that do not align with modern society's values. Therefore, the book may not be seen as a feminist text. However, given the time it was written in, the work does engage with protofeminist ideals.

Woman's Mission offers a new perspective on *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* by depicting contemporary views on mother ideals and gender roles. Lewis advocates for - in modern standards - more conservative ideals, which are also present in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Furthermore, the two authors lived and published their work during the same time, and interacted with contemporary society's values in their work. Therefore, I believe *Woman's Mission*, compared to other works, is more suitable to use when investigating the novel in question.

2.2 Maternal rights

Prior to the Custody of Infants Act (1839), in the case of a separation or a divorce between spouses, a mother's maternal rights were largely non-existent (Berry 33-34). Custody rights were retained by the father, who was the head of the family by default. Family matters were considered to be private, and therefore addressed by the husband and father. Furthermore, the man held all the rights to property in the marriage, which children were equated to.

During the 19th century the mother's role in the family became more important (Berry 34-35). While a woman's role had previously been primarily about being a wife, which was tied to financial and legal responsibilities, it had shifted over time (Berry 34). A mother's role was now seen as more nurturing. However, this was not reflected in the laws regarding maternal rights. Although the Custody of Infants Act had a significant impact on a mother's access to her children as it recognized her importance to their development, it still had limitations (Berry 35). Some feared that changing the law would encourage women to leave their marriages, and that it should not be acknowledged with rewards, such as access to their children.

Sarah Abramowicz states that fathers' rights took precedence in custody disputes between parents (1359). Abramowicz further writes that the courts did remove children from their father's care when it was deemed necessary, but were hesitant to do so in cases where mothers might "think that they had a right to their child's custody" (1359). Even when fathers acted in ways that would cause them to lose custody of their children; the courts ruled in their favour when mothers argued on the grounds of mother's rights (Abramowicz 1358-1359).

One example is Caroline Norton, who wanted access to her children after she had separated. She decided to appeal to the Parliament, bringing attention to the lack of maternal rights (Abramowicz 1360). Norton proposed a bill that would later be passed: The Custody of Infants Act. In her campaign Norton focused on custody cases from the point of view of women and highlighted the anguish of making an impossible choice. If a woman chose to leave her abusive husband, that would mean leaving her children (Abramowicz 1360-1361). The bill received a lot of criticism with lawmakers fearing that it would undermine the husband's authority and allow marital disputes to become public (Abramowicz 1362). The eventual acceptance of the bill allowed the Court of Chancery the power to give custody to mothers, in cases where the children were under the age of seven (1360). In regards to children over the age of seven they could be granted access, all of this on the basis that the mother had remained faithful in the marriage. With this information in mind, it could then be argued that women's maternal rights were determined by how well society deemed that she had performed her marital duty.

3. Legal Framework and Abuse

This section discusses forms of abuse that Helen endured, as well as the normalisation of it. The latter part of this section argues that the system was corrupt, failing mothers and favouring fathers. Ideas explored in Sarah Lewis' work *Woman's Mission* will also be discussed.

3.1 The emotional, physical and financial abuse

The following discussion will focus on various forms of abuse: emotional, physical and financial. This in order to provide context of Helen and Arthur's marriage, as well as the financial and social struggles of motherhood.

3.1.1 The emotional abuse

Although Helen's story begins as a woman in love, different forms of abuse emerge as the novel progresses. The emotional abuse gets progressively worse as the marriage starts to collapse. Arthur calls her names such as "confounded slut" (Brontë 131), "you little exorbitant tyrant" (Brontë 143) and "my pretty tyrant" (Brontë 155). At other times he withholds emotional presence and companionship towards his wife in an effort to punish her behaviour. An example of this is when Helen's father passes away: he offers no sympathy, and instead remarks that he was a stranger that died by drinking himself to death (Brontë 160). He further implies he will not be made uncomfortable by her grieving her loss, and by reducing her father to a stranger he dismisses her family's importance to her. This passage highlights how emotionally manipulative Arthur is, with complete emotional detachment and disregard for her feelings. His priorities are self-centred in which Helen's grief becomes an inconvenience for him. He reduces her purpose to serving him, a person stripped of any emotional needs of their own: forced to hide her mourning. This becomes evident in his response to Helen's wish to go to her own father's funeral: "It was quite unnecessary, he said, and I was unreasonable to wish it" (Brontë 160). He further states that he cannot be without her for a day, to which in response Helen points out the hypocrisy that he manages fine when he travels. "Ah! then I was knocking about the world, now I am at home; and home without you, my household deity, would be intolerable", responds Arthur (Brontë 160). This further reinforces the position that he puts Helen in: an object whose purpose in life is to attend to his emotional needs. His reference to "household deity" is also an interesting choice of words. He uses it in a way meant to be a compliment, while it

simultaneously degrades her as it strips her of her own autonomy and reduces her purpose to the home. It becomes obvious that their marriage is destructive due to the emotional abuse and manipulation that Arthur inflicts upon Helen.

After the birth of their child, Arthur finds more intricate ways of injuring Helen. As another year has passed, Helen reflects on her burdens, since at this time her husband's affair has been revealed. Even though she feels tired and wishes to leave this life, she cannot do that since she is devoted to protecting and giving her son a moral upbringing. She writes about her own influences on her son, and how she feels inadequate as his guardian. Helen is concerned about the fact that she is her child's sole companion, and that she does not fill the role completely. Furthermore, she fears his father's influence on his mind as she can already see Arthur's immoral behaviour and thoughts in her child. Helen describes how he deliberately, in order to hurt her and bring her distress, tries to corrupt their child: "... for very spite his father delights to rob me of, and, from motives of mere idle egotism, is pleased to win to himself; making no use of it but to torment me and ruin the child" (Brontë 196). Marianne Thormählen reflects that: "Whatever physical pain he might have been able to inflict on her would hurt her far less than his deliberate attempts to destroy the child who matters more to her than anything else — he knows that all right" (16). It is therefore clear, with Thormählen's argument in mind, that his intentions are to hurt her. However, since she is a stoic person and it is her nature to be sacrificial it does not work. He has found a pressure point where she cannot defend herself, and that is her son.

3.1.2 The physical abuse

The novel portrays elements of physical abuse. In Helen and Arthur's marriage, we can see an example of this when he becomes enraged at their dog and aims a book at its head. Not only does it hit the dog, but it also injures Helen's hand. In response, she questions him "perhaps it was intended for me?" (Brontë 131). Helen describes that while he is bad-tempered with the animals and servants, he remains kind to her so long as she does not do anything which may anger him (Brontë 138). Arthur's love and kindness for others is conditional, and based on how submissive they are to him.

Arthur also finds amusement in the abuse of others. At a dinner party Ralph Hattersley, and the other husbands, share a few drinks between them. Millicent, Ralph's wife, becomes embarrassed

at his behaviour and starts to cry when he stops her escape from the room. She tries to remind him that they are not alone, nor at home. Ralph, enraged that she will not tell him why she is crying, physically grabs Millicent and shakes her before throwing her towards the ground. He does so in front of all of the guests present, as well as Millicent's brother, who solely reacts when Helen tells him to. She is the only person, out of everybody that is present, who does react to the scene. The likely reason that the other people chose not to interfere was the prevailing belief that shaped the societal structure: matters between a husband and wife were private. Millicent's brother, Mr Hargrave, is punched by Ralph when he intervenes. He is told "learn to interfere between me and mine again" (Brontë 166). As Helen tries to defend Millicent, she tells him that the reason why she is crying is "from pure shame and humiliation for you; because she could not bear to see you conduct yourself so disgracefully" (Brontë 166). Instead of having sympathy for Millicent who was physically abused by his friend, or making any attempts to stop it, Arthur laughs at the scene that has unfolded before him. To find enjoyment in Millicent's pain, is an indication of his views on the other sex.

The novel takes the physical abuse further by introducing a scene that implies that Arthur can give away Helen to his friends, in a sexual context. This scene is introduced when it is revealed that Lord Lowborough and his wife separated. This is the woman who Arthur had an affair with, and who was also his friend's wife. Arthur remarks to his friends that he will not make an effort to go see her. Ralph Hatterslay, surprised at this, questions him if he will aim to be a better person, as well as father and husband. Ralph comments that "...your wife is fifty times too good for you, you know" (Brontë 212). Arthur, angered at Ralph's suggestion, exclaims that he has no wife and offers her up to his friends: "...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!" (Brontë 212). It is ironic that value is placed on marriage as a sacred and holy union while it simultaneously restricts Helen and allows Arthur to perform these acts of abuse with no repercussions. Offering his wife to his friends is the ultimate act of abuse - rape - and practically reduces her to property or an object that he can give away. Furthermore, it highlights how a woman's position is socially and legally vulnerable. In his journal article Ian Ward argues similar points and likens it with "petty pimping" since Arthur's friend, Mr Hargrave, attempts to take her up on the offer (156). As Ward further points out, the legal framework fails women since "the offering of an unwilling wife to other men, was not held to represent a form of mental cruelty" (156). According to Ward, even though there were some grounds for divorce, physical abuse was not one of them (157).

Kommenterad [1]: om jag kan, avslutande mening

3.1.3 The financial abuse

Arthur inflicts financial abuse upon Helen. This is most clearly illustrated in chapter 40, in which Arthur seizes her property and orders their servants to burn her painting material. The financial abuse does not only prevent Helen from escaping but also highlights his control over different aspects of her life. The abuse has shaped parts of her identity, limits her autonomy over her own mind and body, as well as keep her dependent on him.

The portrayal of the economic relationship between Arthur and Helen, where she remains dependent on him, reflects the broader implications in contemporary society. It highlights how the larger patriarchal system in which men are granted control over finances, by extension also exerts control over women. The resulting issue then becomes that wives are at the mercy of her husband's kindness and generosity, and have no way to separate from them if they find themselves in a similar situation to Helen. Her skills in painting, and selling her work, is the only reason, with the help of Rachel, that she is able to save up enough money to leave. Not everybody has the talent or skills to be able to create art, nor the social network to be able to sell it. Helen is therefore in a unique position, with talents that she can turn to profit, which is something that most women in her position do not have. Thus, women who do not possess skills similar to Helen are much more limited in their opportunities to leave an abusive situation.

Helen remains at Arthur's mercy both in terms of finances and independence. In chapter 40, it is revealed that Arthur has discovered her plan to escape and destroys her studio as revenge. However, the action of destroying her painting material also has larger implications. It can be seen as a way to erase her identity, since the creative aspects of painting were a huge part of her life. By destroying her studio, he essentially controls what she is allowed to do and not do. In other words, he restricts her autonomy and limits her way to express parts of her identity. Painting gave Helen not only a way to financially support herself, but also a role outside of being a mother and wife. Therefore, this act could be seen as a way to prevent her from leaving the domestic sphere.

Despite the control Arthur wields, he appears deeply insecure in his interactions with Helen. She questions Arthur, after he has ransacked her room, if she had attempted to defraud him. His answer to that question is that she had not, not in relation to money matters. Instead, he says "...you thought to disgrace me, did you, by running away and turning artist, and supporting

yourself by the labour of your hands, forsooth?" (Brontë 219). Despite the fact that he himself claims that she does not defraud him in terms of money, there is a deeper significance to this scene. As stated, men had financial control and by becoming financially independent she undermines this societal principle. In essence, she undermines the control that he has over her, making him insecure. This is something that cannot be tolerated; he must ruin her aspects of becoming independent, and break her spirit.

As Arthur's escalation of abuse reaches the point of being damaging to their son, Helen finds that she has been brought to a dead end, where there is no way out:

I know that day after day such feelings will return upon me. I am - a slave - a prisoner but that is nothing; if it were myself alone, I would not complain, but I am forbidden to rescue my son from ruin, and what was once my only consolation is become the crowning source of my despair. (Brontë 220)

This passage is quite powerful as it describes how she perceives her circumstances: as a life in captivity. The words she uses are forceful since she compares herself to a slave and prisoner. The analogy to slavery implies that she feels powerless in her situation, and has little to no authority. She is restricted in making decisions over her property, body and child: exemplifying how she lives under her husband's control and ownership. The second word, prisoner, is also used in order to describe her situation. This word alludes to the fact that she is forced into the role of Arthur's wife, as well as her domestic duties and upholding the household. This is a domestic sphere where he can survey her every move, further exerting control over her financial freedom. These are powerful metaphors, and essentially reflect how she feels that she is deprived of her own autonomy. It is also a reference to both the social and legal constraints that she lived under as a woman during the Victorian age. Furthermore, it could be argued that Brontë uses this passage in a way to compare marriage to a form of legal enslavement, as all of her money and property belongs to her husband. She even lacks parental rights to her son. Without her husband she has nothing, which makes it impossible for her to leave him.

3.2 The normalisation of marital abuse

Even when all of the marital abuse that Helen goes through is exposed it is still somewhat normalised in 19th century society. Helen is the one who is criticized for making the decision to

leave, even though she is the victim and her only goal is to protect her son. Helen's brother, even before all of the abuse came to light, had some knowledge of the true nature of her marriage (Brontë 222-223). However, he still does not take any action with this knowledge; he does not question it nor does he express any sympathy for his sister. He initially disapproves of her plan to leave Arthur, and Helen is forced to describe at length the abuse that she has suffered. It is only then that he agrees to help her escape. Monika Hope Lee points out that, to explain this behaviour, it is important to acknowledge how powerful social norms were during this time, as well as the fact that her choices "though morally justifiable, are in fact illegal" (paragraph 7). Her brother is not the only one who is sceptical of her escape. Her uncle who helped raise her, a man that has known her for her whole life, chose to believe Mr Huntingdon's lies and wished for her to go back to her husband after she had escaped (Brontë 237). While the men are inclined to oppose Helen's escape, her aunt believes her. She as a woman can relate to Helen's experiences in a different way than a man can, perhaps due to her lived experiences and her social position. She is much more aware, compared to how a man would be, of how vulnerable women are in society when considering marriage and maternal rights. In a time period where men's and women's positions in society were vastly different, a woman has to carefully consider her decisions and the consequences they may have.

Reverend Millward also criticizes her actions and her failings as a wife. He does not rebuke that abuse, even that of emotional and financial, should warrant a separation. He further maintains that in the case of physical abuse, Helen should have gone the legal route. Gilbert reflects over the fact that, after Helen is revealed to have fled her abusive husband, Reverend Millward:

...still maintained that she had done wrong to leave her husband; it was a violation of her sacred duties as a wife, and a tempting of Providence by laying herself open to temptation; and nothing short of bodily ill-usage (and that of no trifling nature) could excuse such a step nor even that, for in such a case she ought to appeal to the laws for protection. (Brontë 280)

Pursuing legal action in a time where women had limited maternal rights, and children were considered the property of the father, could have meant that Helen would have lost all access to her son. Therefore, if Helen would have gone the legal route as Reverend Millward maintains that she should have, the cycle of abuse would have continued.

Sarah Lewis explores these ideas in *Woman's Mission* (26-27). A man, with no morals or virtue, can cause a great deal of distress upon his wife and children but still remain a man with a good name and reputation, although a woman faces harsh scrutiny and criticism if she were to do the same. Lewis further points out that a man has more power than women do when it comes to marriage and separation, and therefore has less excuse to behave in such an ill-mannered way.

A woman with such a temper is deservedly called a vice, but a man is "a good-hearted fellow"; except it can be proved that there is a different moral code for the two sexes, it can be very puzzling to simple-minded people to know why that which excites merited dislike in a woman, is so leniently passed over in a man: nay, of the two, we should say that the ill temper of a man has less excuse than that of a woman, because he has more power to escape from domestic annoyances. (Lewis 27)

These ideas that Lewis argues are reflected in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Without a mother's moral influence to guide him, a boy will grow up to be a troubled man who will take it out on the people in his surroundings. This is illustrated in the character Arthur Huntingdon who torments his wife and corrupts his son's mind. It is therefore of utmost importance to correct this behaviour in early childhood, when there is still time to build a good character. This is evident as Helen seeks to cleanse her son's mind of the ideas that his father has put there, for instance the love of wine. In the novel we can see that as Arthur's alcohol abuse progresses, so does the domestic abuse. This is also exemplified by the abuse scene when Ralph becomes physically abusive after consuming alcohol. It is therefore crucial to make her son averse to the taste of alcohol, as it has proven in Helen's mind to make men violent.

3.3. The corrupt system

The novel appears to show that the legal system is corrupt and fails both mothers and children. Lee argues an important point: "Ironically, it is Helen's attempts to support, care for and protect her son which are illegal, whereas her husband's abuse of her and his son is legally sanctioned" (paragraph 8). This quote exposes the legal and social injustice in Victorian society that affected mothers. The legal framework seeks to uphold a system in which a father is granted full authority over the family, even in situations where it is not in the best interest of the children. However, a mother who seeks to protect her child from an abusive or negligent father is under

the same system criminalized. A father's neglect and moral endangerment is therefore legal even though it goes against the values of the family unit.

In the case of Helen and Arthur's separation, she would forfeit all rights and access to her son. Motherhood, which was such a big part of her identity and purpose in life, made this impossible to even consider. This is reflected in Helen's diary where she writes:

Another year is past; and I am weary of this life. And yet I cannot wish to leave it: whatever afflictions assail me here, I cannot wish to go and leave my darling in this dark and wicked world alone, without a friend to guide him through its weary mazes, to warn him of its thousand snares, and guard him from the perils that beset him on every hand. (Brontë 196)

Her refusal to be separated from her son and her strong maternal identity, reflects a point which is observed in *Woman's Mission* - that a woman's role is defined by her male relations. According to Lewis women make men. She therefore argues that "...man cannot degrade woman without himself falling into degradation: he cannot elevate her without at the same time elevating himself" (Lewis 37). This idea is reflected in Arthur Huntingdon and society as a whole. In the progression of his moral decay - the abuse, his affair and the parental neglect - he not only degrades Helen, but also himself. This decay impacts several parts of his life. This is exemplified in his difficulty in forming and maintaining relationships, developing a good moral agency, as well as the legacy that he leaves behind. The system in which Helen's maternal duty to protect her son is criminalized, and Arthur's parental neglect accepted, degrades the society that strives to uphold it.

4. The Strong Woman

This section argues that though Helen may appear to be subservient to her husband, she rebels against her husband's authority in various ways. I will do so by discussing the radical nature of the book, the power of religion, and her identity. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* was a bold novel for its time, challenging the idea of men being the sole provider and the idea of religion as a tool to restrict women. Brontë explores various aspects in which Helen Huntingdon is a strong woman, and breaks societal norms. Ideas in *Woman's Mission* will be analysed in relation to these subjects as well.

4.1 The radical nature of the book

Helen Huntingdon's strong character was seen as radical as she stood up to the patriarchal society which threatened to take away her son. After the novel quickly became famous, Brontë received both praise and criticism. As a response, in the second edition of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* she wrote:

I would not be understood to suppose that the proceedings of the unhappy scapegrace, with his few profligate companions I have here introduced, are a specimen of the common practices of society the case is an extreme one, as I trusted none would fail to perceive; but I know that such characters do exist, and if I have warned one rash youth from following in their steps, or prevented one thoughtless girl from falling into the very natural error of my heroine, the book has not been written in vain. (Brontë Preface)

Here, Brontë highlights the fact that the story of Helen is a harsh reality for some women. While not all women are abused by their husbands, it is a social issue that should be exposed. With this in mind, it is clear why Brontë chooses to portray Helen as she does. A woman faced with such life circumstances must be strong, if not for her then for her child. Perhaps not all women lived with the fear of abuse, but all lived under the British law which favoured the father and restricted the mother's access.

Due to the backlash that *The Tenant of Wildfell* received with it being described as too coarse, as evident in the vice depicted, Brontë engages with readers in the preface. Thormählen discusses criticism that the novel received, both at the time of its release and in the 20th century (5-6). While the preface was used to defend the novel from this critique, it was later in the 20th century received as "preaching" (5). With Thormählen's discussions about the coarseness of the novel, and how it was received by contemporary society, it becomes clear how radical the novel was for its time.

Helen's strong independence was also seen as radical for its time. Her choice to work, making and selling paintings, is not a necessary one. As she is upper class, and has a husband that financially supports her, she does not have to work if she does not want to. It sets her apart from the other female characters of her class, who instead contain their labour to the home and

Kommenterad [2]: ingen parantes

dedicate their time to their husbands and children. It is a choice she makes, while simultaneously performing labour relating to the home, for the welfare of her child.

After she and her son have escaped, she reflects in her new home that: "... I shall have so much more pleasure in my labour, my earnings, my frugal fare, and household economy, when I know that I am paying my way honestly, and that what little I possess is legitimately all my own..." (Brontë 236). In reference to this quote, Lee highlights the fact that Helen considers the money to be her own (paragraph 6). However, as Lee points out, the money that she makes does not belong to her. In fact, as her husband, Mr Huntingdon has the legal right to it. I argue that this further strengthens the radical nature of her character, as she knowingly breaks the law in order to escape and protect her child. Not only that, but it also highlights her independent thinking. She must not rely on a man; she can be her own provider. It emphasises a financial separation from her husband at a time when women relied on them to survive.

4.2 Religion

The novel uses religion to highlight Helen's inner conflict to fulfil her duty as a married woman and to embrace the Victorian ideals. The most striking example of this is when they come home from their honeymoon, and are walking home from church. Arthur expresses his dismay with her devotion to religion and wants her to change, to dedicate her entire heart and love to him: something he does not think is possible when she is "too religious" (Brontë 125). Earlier sections have discussed the emotional, financial and physical abuse that takes place in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. The last thing to control is her spirituality, which is the one thing he cannot do as Helen remains a devout Christian throughout the novel. As his wife she is bound by vows to be loyal to him, but her duty towards God also remains a core part of her. There are two perspectives on religion here. On one hand, the social norms associated with religion - to be a devout wife - benefits Arthur. To be a good Christian is to be a good wife and mother, to listen to your husband and submit to him. Arthur uses this to his advantage to try to shape her into the wife he wants her to be. However, religion also limits his power over her because he cannot place himself over God. This is seen when Arthur says to Helen:

'It is nothing you have done or said; it is something that you are - you are too religious. Now I like a woman to be religious, and I think your piety one of your greatest charms; but then, like all other good things, it may be carried

too far. To my thinking, a woman's religion ought not to lessen her devotion to her earthly lord. She should have enough to purify and etherealise her soul, but not enough to refine away her heart, and raise her above all human sympathies. (Brontë 125)

Her refusal to become less religious highlights her own moral agency, and how important it is to her even when it comes into conflict with her duty towards her husband. Her relationship with God, in a time where religious norms were used to control women, is what allows her to stand up for herself. Lewis expresses that “It seems to be particularly a part of women's mission to exhibit Christianity in its beauty and purity, and to disseminate it by example and culture” (140). This passage aligns with Helen’s moral compass, and her decision to leave Arthur.

Thormählen also discusses Helen’s situation in relation to religion and God (54). She argues that while Helen does not want to initially, she can live without Arthur, the man that she loves. However, she cannot live without God as it is not possible to do so. Thormählen, referring to Arthur, states that “incapable of loving God, this impious man cannot love any human being either; even his infatuation with Annabella Lowborough does not last” (59). As this passage suggests he is incapable of having feelings for other people, and this implies that he cannot even feel love for his son. His child is simply a tool used to hurt Helen.

4.3 Motherhood and identity

As stated, motherhood is a big part of Helen's identity and when discussing this it is also important to do so in relation to her artistic side. Diederich discusses Helen as an artist, and how she expresses herself through her paintings in his research. Being an artist is a big part of who she is, and how she processes feelings. She brings to attention that after her marriage to Arthur and becoming a mother, she scarcely describes herself as an artist anymore (Diederich 26). Furthermore, Diederich highlights that due to the laws at that time, all of her paintings become her husband's property even though she creates them. She therefore argues that it has a negative impact on her self-expression (25). When Helen flees and disguises herself as a widow, she regains control over her paintings and self-expression (Diederich 30-31). However, as noted by Diederich now "she paints to survive" (31). By entering her second marriage, Helen yet again gives up her ownership and self-expression over her paintings. As is learned by the end of the book, she continues to have more children. It could therefore be assumed, as pointed out by Diederich, that Helen has now completely given up her artistic side to resume her role as a wife and mother, as with only one child she barely had time for it (36). As Helen's maternal identity expands, it could therefore be argued that it does so at the expense of other parts of herself. She lives not for herself, but for her children.

Lewis argues that women's education is important, and should be taken seriously (56-57). She refers to Aimé Martin, author of *The Education of Mothers: or the Civilization of Mankind by Women*, who states that: "The education of women is more important than that of men, since the latter is always their work" (54). These arguments align with protofeminist ideas since they value women's education, higher than that of men - a radical statement for its time. However, Lewis criticises education in the languages, art and music, and questions how these will benefit women (59, 62-63) *Woman's Mission* further proposes that education should solely be focused on future duties as a wife and mother. These ideas ultimately restrict women to the domestic sphere as they are unable to pursue other ambitions. These ideas restrict Helen who would have been unable to be educated in the art of painting. However, as argued in the passage above, Helen ultimately gives up her painting skills in favour of her children.

5. Motherhood and Duty

Duty is a central theme in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, and a core value for Helen. There are two duties that this essay will look further at: the marital duty and the maternal duty. Religion is an important part of Helen's beliefs. Therefore, marriage and her duty towards her husband becomes her life's purpose, that is until she gives birth to her son. Helen then becomes trapped in contradictory roles, wife and mother, which illustrates the oppressive nature of family ideals during the Victorian age. This section argues that her matrimonial and maternal duties are at conflict, but that her devotion towards her son takes precedence. *Woman's Mission* will be used to investigate expectations put on women to raise good men.

5.1 Matrimonial duty

Though Helen has doubts about whether it was right to marry Arthur, she concludes that "...my duty now is plainly to love him and to cleave to him, and this just tallies with my inclination" (Brontë 124). She admits that had she known him better, she would not have married him. After being married for two years, and welcoming a child together, Helen describes their marital struggles in her diary. Coming into the marriage, they seem to have different ideas on the roles of husband and wife. Helen states that his notion of marriage and what it entails differs from hers, and that his view on the role of a wife is to serve him. Her duty towards her husband means that she must conform to his idea of how a wife must behave, even at the loss of her own independent identity.

Judging from appearances, his idea of a wife is a thing 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. (Brontë 147)

In this section of the book, Arthur expresses his wishes to go to London, to which Helen is strongly opposed. She feels as though he is "weary" of her company, and wishes to avoid her (Brontë 148). Not only is she hurt that he prefers the company of friends, but he cannot give a date that he will return home. The last time he went to London he was away for months, and did

not take great care of himself under the bad influence of his friends (Brontë 148). She writes that she cannot trust him or the promises he makes. Perhaps this is why she wants to join him on the trip, as she knew from earlier experiences that this would happen again, despite his promises. Her strong sense of duty towards her husband becomes, at that moment, a higher priority than her maternal one. She writes:

I over ruled his objections as well as I could, for I trembled at the thoughts of his going alone, and would sacrifice almost anything for myself, **much even for my child**, to prevent it... (Brontë 148, my emphasis)

As a woman who is strongly dedicated to the duties she must perform, and the sacrifices this may entail, she tries to compromise with Arthur. However, it becomes clear that their marriage has an emotional imbalance. While Helen makes great effort to find accommodations that fit them both, Arthur completely refuses to cooperate or compromise. While she is willing to make sacrifices for both her and their child in order to keep him close and maintain a family unit, he is more concerned with his own comfort and desires. The contrast is stark: Helen who does her best to balance her duties, and Arthur who abandons his duties as a husband and father. The fact that she is willing to sacrifice so much, highlights how deeply she is committed to fulfilling her duty as a wife.

5.2 Maternal duty

Maternal ideas, that can be seen in the novel, are reflected in *Woman's Mission*. Lewis states that there are two principles in this world that men follow: power and influence (13). She argues that power is gained by authority and is limited. While it influences one's action, she also makes the claim that it cannot change men's minds or opinions. Influence, on the other hand, can have a great impact on men's character. Lewis argues that "the most powerful of all moral influences is the maternal" (21). She further states that "...good mothers make good men..." (Lewis 22). This claim opens up to the implication that women are responsible for men's actions. This could instead result in "bad" men. If men do not accept accountability for their behaviour, having a scapegoat in women, they will never develop their own moral code. Lewis discusses the former traditional roles relating to women in the family. Although she argues that these roles are not suitable for contemporary society, with women's intellectual development, she still maintains that the core belief that formed them is correct. This belief is, "...that women are meant to live

for others...” (Lewis 50). This creates different expectations on women versus men in regards to gender norms and values. This belief is also reflected in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, as Helen gives up parts of herself in order to be a more devoted mother, for example stop painting.

Helen’s maternal duty prompts her to leave her husband. She wants to protect her son from his father’s corrupt influence, and her maternal instincts give her the courage to do so. Her choice to leave her husband is radical, and deeply frowned upon by contemporary society. However, her choices are justified since it is her motherly duty to protect her son and shield him from the horrors of the world. It becomes clear for the readers that it is not a selfish choice that she makes, but a necessary one. To Helen, motherhood is a duty that she sees as a great responsibility. Even when she faces hardships and obstacles, she finds comfort and purpose in her son; to keep him both safe and raise him to be a better man than his father.

Her choices also reshape her identity. Helen is not merely a wife; she becomes so much more. She is her son's protector, provider and teacher. Motherhood is what shapes Helen at the deepest level, and influences her decisions. Her duty towards her husband and son is an internal fight; her marital duty comes in conflict with her maternal duty. As a wife, and a very religious person, Helen, bound by her vows, stays with him despite his moral flaws. Regardless of her best effort to morally influence him to become a better man, and to stop drinking, Arthur refuses to change. This changes when Arthur begins to have a negative impact on their son, and she finally comes to the conclusion that her maternal duty takes priority over her duty to Arthur. In their escape, Helen must be aware that she faces both legal and social consequences considering a mother’s limited legal rights. The lengths to which Helen is willing to go, proves how serious she takes her duty.

After Arthur finds out her plan to escape, and destroys her painting studio, Helen finds herself in despair knowing that her chance to save her son was gone. Deep in thought, she reflects:

I know that day after day such feelings will return upon me. I am a slave - a prisoner - but that is nothing; if it were myself alone I would not complain, but I am forbidden to rescue my son from ruin, and what was once my only consolation is become the crowning source of my despair. (Brontë 220)

This passage, as previously analysed, reflects Helen's lack of autonomy. It could also be analysed in relation to maternal duty. She describes that she is "forbidden" to rescue her son, meaning that she genuinely believes that her son is in danger. Her maternal duty is not only denied by her husband, but also by societal norms and laws. Later in the sentence she uses the word "rescue" in relation to her son, which shifts her earlier description of herself being a slave or prisoner, to a protector. She as his mother and moral influence must protect her son from Arthur's corruption. This is perhaps where the internal struggle between her marital and maternal duties becomes the clearest. She either chooses to become a dutiful wife and allow her child's mind to be morally corrupted by her husband, or she chooses to be a good mother who raises her son to be a good man. She cannot fulfil both duties, as they oppose each other.

Another passage highlights the anguish Helen feels in her motherhood, as she wishes that her son had never been born because she as his provider cannot protect him from his father. This is evidence of how much she values her sacred duty as a mother. She is afraid that she is failing her son and duty as a mother. Her pain is not directed at her son, but at the situation where she cannot do anything but see her husband destroy her son's moral agency. Furthermore, it is directed at the social and legal framework that this behaviour is allowed under. Society has failed Helen and her son.

...I have wandered about restless and objectless, shunning my husband, shrinking even from my child, knowing that I am unfit to be his teacher or companion, hoping nothing for his future life, and **fervently wishing he had never been born**, I felt the full extent of my calamity, and I feel it now.
(Brontë 220, my emphasis)

When Helen's son is born, she is overjoyed and states that "God has sent me a soul to educate for heaven, and give me a new and calmer bliss, and stronger hopes to comfort me" (Brontë 147). It is her greatest duty in life, and she raises him with moral agency. As Thormählen expresses in her work, it is her duty to raise Arthur in a way that allows him into heaven (14). Helen ultimately succeeds in her duty; she has raised a good man.

6. Conclusion

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall challenges existing social and religious norms that have been used to oppress and control women. The legal framework made it hard for women to leave abusive situations, and they were often forced to endure it. The situation would become more complicated if the couple had children since they were considered the property of the father. If a mother wanted to separate from her husband, this meant that she would most likely have to leave her children as well. In the novel spousal abuse was normalised, and even Helen's family reacted poorly to her choice to leave even though she was the victim.

Brontë portrays Helen as a strong woman: a provider for her son who financially provides for her son in a time where this was typically a father's role. The use of religion is a crucial point in Helen being able to leave her husband: it becomes a tool for empowerment. While religion helps her find her strength, her role as a mother is what ultimately makes the decision final. While she can endure her husband's abuse, her son will not. Her maternal duty is stronger than her marital duty. *Woman's Mission* informs this reading, as it demonstrates 19th century gender roles, and the expectations put on women versus men.

Motherhood in regards to religion, and how maternal ideals were shaped by Christianity, can be explored further in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. It would deepen our understanding of how religion was used both as a tool for oppression as well as a tool for liberation during the Victorian time period. Another area that could be further explored is themes of abuse. While it is clear how Arthur inflicts violence, it would be interesting to explore how Helen engages in acts of abuse (such as forcing her son to drink alcohol until he becomes ill). These ideas could be used to demonstrate the contradiction in Helen's maternal role - utilizing religion as a source of empowerment while simultaneously – in the eyes of a 21st century reader – harming her child.

Note

1. For further reading on feminist interpretations of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, see works by Rachel K. Carnell, Ecevit Bekler and Meghan Bullock.

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