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DWELLING AND THE WOMAN ARTIST

IN ANNE BRONTË'S

THE TENANT OF WILDFELL HALL

By

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BA, Houghton College, Houghton, New York, 2003

Thesis

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DWELLING, THE SUBLIME, AND THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY WOMAN
ARTIST IN *THE TENANT OF WILDFELL HALL*

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This thesis addresses the Heideggerean notion of dwelling in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* by analyzing the different ways the novel's protagonist, Helen Huntingdon, adapts to the harsh, sublime landscape of Wildfell Hall and the subsequent relationship that develops between her and Gilbert Markham. Escaping her violent and abusive husband, Helen flees to Wildfell Hall and uses her skills as an artist to support both herself and her son. In the first chapter, late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century aesthetics of the sublime and the picturesque are evaluated in relation to the aesthetic spaces of the novel. Helen enjoys an intimate connection to the landscape both at Grassdale and Wildfell Hall, and she finds solace and freedom in nature. But the aesthetics of the picturesque both provide a space for Helen and confine her. In the second chapter, these confines will be explored more fully. Helen remains under the gaze of those around her, both the individual males who wish to control her and the community members who try to judge her. The domestic sphere also confines her; the home becomes a site of imprisonment rather than the safe, nurturing space upheld by Victorian society. The second chapter also develops Helen's role as a sublime heroine, which is analyzed more fully in the third chapter, which primarily focuses on how Helen challenges the norms of the Victorian heroine. Gilbert also challenges the norms for the Victorian hero. Their roles in the novel emphasize reciprocal relationships, both with human beings as well as with the land and animals. The narrative structure of the novel suggests this sort of relationality as well and an analysis of its significance will form a part of the concluding chapter of the thesis.

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INTRODUCTION

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall chronicles the story of Helen Huntingdon, an artist with a mysterious past. The narrative begins from the perspective of a neighboring farmer and admirer, Gilbert Markham. But when Helen shares her journal with Markham, she shares her first-hand experiences of her miserable marriage and eventually her escape from that marriage to the old abandoned Wildfell Hall. Despite the foreboding appearance of the gothic mansion, Helen and her young son Arthur find peace there, and they delight in the freedom and space the place provides. Although the nosy neighbors and conventional Victorian ideology impinge upon their life at Wildfell, Helen and her son manage to live a relatively happy existence. Helen nurtures her young son, engages in her painting, and plants a garden—in other words, she and her son begin to dwell.

Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* has lacked the critical acclaim and scholarship that her sisters' works have received, though over the years it has gradually achieved greater attention. Many scholars focus on the unique narrative structure, making claims about whether or not the structure supports or negates a feminist reading of the text. Others have analyzed how the novel critiques the historical lack of legal rights women possessed in the nineteenth century, including their inability to have custody of their children if they were separated from their husband or their lack of basic property rights. Other criticism of the novel centers on Helen's role as a professional artist, an atypical occupation for the heroine of a mid-nineteenth-century novel.

However, very few studies of the novel analyze the way Helen adapts and changes throughout the novel as she moves from one environment to another—how she manages to dwell as an individual, but as an individual intimately connected to those around her. She evolves from an amateur artist to a professional one; from privileged niece to despised wife to ostracized single mother; from tenant to landowner; from young girl to young mother. Her relationship to nature sustains her throughout the dynamic flow of her life, and very few critics have noted this relationship either. Enid L. Duthie's book *The Brontës and Nature* provides background on the biographical significance of nature in the lives of the Brontë sisters, relating this to their works. Duthie views nature as a rather insignificant theme in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* overall, focusing mainly on the nature metaphors and symbols rather than on Helen's embodied experiences in nature, which will be an important part of my own study. The spaces of the novel inform and affect Helen's mode of existence.

Using Heidegger's concept of dwelling, I will analyze how Helen adapts and changes in order to live life more fully, and how the environments and spaces in which she lives affect her ability to dwell. In the first chapter of my thesis, I will look at how aesthetics serve as a means of escape for Helen Graham, providing a space of freedom and liberation from the repressive society that impinges upon her. Helen appears to feel most free when she pursues her art and when she engages with her natural environment, and her life at Wildfell Hall allows her to do both. Analyzing Edmund Burke's aesthetics of the sublime and beautiful, as well as the late 18th and early 19th century concepts of the picturesque and landscapes, I will focus on how Helen's view of the natural world as an artist converges and diverges from her contemporary aesthetics. Specifically, I will

analyze how Helen attempts to appropriate elements of the picturesque to create a feminist dwelling place. Her ability to “find herself” in nature, juxtaposed with her attempts to “capture” the landscape in her art, provides an interesting access point into analyzing how 19th century women may have countered the often oppressive patriarchal structure of society. Analyzing the domination of nature that Helen’s husband Arthur enacts and his lack of any sense of dwelling whatsoever, as well as their incredibly different views on parenting, also gestures toward how Helen’s own actions seek to establish an ecofeminist idea of building, dwelling, and thinking. Christopher Hussey’s *The Picturesque*, Elizabeth Bohl’s *Women Travel Writers and the Language of Aesthetics, 1716-1818* and other texts will provide supplementary contemporary critiques of the late 18th and early 19th century views on art and nature. This discussion of aesthetics will serve as a springboard into an analysis of Helen’s relationship with nature and her ability to create a dwelling space of her own at Wildfell Hall.

In the second chapter, I will be evaluating how Helen Graham’s situation as both an artist and a single mother in the early 19th century problematizes her ability to dwell at Wildfell Hall. Although she attempts to create a dwelling space, Helen Graham only partially succeeds, for her status as a single mother and an artist put her at odds with the highly structured patriarchal and parochial Victorian society that surrounds her. Her status as a female artist and the fact that she sells her paintings to sustain herself and her son economically also ostracize her within the community. I will analyze how her status as “tenant” limits her and how even the aesthetic of the picturesque prevents her from fully dwelling. Iris Marion Young’s feminist critique of Heidegger will provide further evidence of the difficulties women face as they attempt to dwell. The gaze becomes

important here as well, confining Helen and at times even objectifying her and transforming her into an artistic composition as well. Helen's experiences attest to these difficulties, and she responds in a manner atypical of the Victorian heroine. Helen's rationality and her ability to present her opinion logically challenge the angel in the house ideology, while her ability to forcefully and passionately express her opinion challenges the Victorian model of womanhood as well. The combination creates a sublime heroine. Using the scholarly work of Antonia Losano, Patricia Yaeger, Anne K. Mellor and others, I'll explore the strictures placed on 19th-century women as they attempt to be economically independent individuals.

In the final chapter of my thesis, I will turn to how the characterization of Helen and Gilbert as well as the unique narrative structure of the novel both display an emphasis on relationship, and ultimately a Heideggerean sense of dwelling. Helen's character avoids the neat categories of the Victorian heroine, and Gilbert challenges the model of the Victorian hero as well, and though some critics argue that Gilbert seems an inadequate match for Helen, my analysis shows how they complement one another. Then I will link the development of their relationship to the narrative structure of the novel. A significant amount of commentary on the novel analyzes the rather odd structure of the narrative, where Helen's private journal is embedded in Gilbert Markham's narrative, and Gilbert's own narrative takes the form of a letter to a male friend. Anne Brontë manipulates the structure of her narrative as a means of expressing her views on domestic life, and as a result the novel itself becomes an aesthetic space for Brontë's own expression of her ideas about the ideal relationship—a relationship that emphasizes

mutuality, equality, and shared interests, and one in which both members are committed to the building and cultivating that define the act of dwelling.

CHAPTER ONE—**DWELLING AND THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY WOMAN ARTIST**

In his essay “Building, Dwelling, Thinking,” Martin Heidegger suggests that our relationship with the earth and our ability to dwell on the earth directly corresponds with our ability to build. Building, for Heidegger, is really dwelling, and dwelling “is the manner in which mortals are on the earth” (146). Dwelling, then, consists of both caring for growing things around us as well as creating objects for either our use (tools) or for our enjoyment (art). Involving both cultivating and crafting, dwelling remains closely linked to the land and spaces which we inhabit. Dwelling means “to cherish and protect, to preserve and care for, specifically to till the soil, to cultivate the vine” (145). The term dwelling thus becomes linked intimately to an ethic of care and reciprocity.

Bruce V. Foltz explains that Heidegger’s concept of dwelling provides a radical way of looking at the way we live and how our living affects the earth, and urges us “learn to dwell upon [the earth], to cultivate and tend the earth instead of exploiting it, preserving its mutually conditioning qualities of sustaining and self-seclusion” (15). Foltz continues by explaining, “Inhabitation or dwelling (*das Whonen*), ‘staying with things’ (*der Aufenthalt bei den Dingen*), is necessarily an act of tending and attending that grants things the leeway to disclose themselves and endure; an inhabitant in this sense is a genuine ‘care-taker’” (15). Dwelling, then, helps us learn how to develop vital, reciprocal relationships with animals, plants, and the land in which we live.

This emphasis on cultivating and building relationships with the spaces and beings that surround us provides an ethics of dwelling. As John Gray explains, dwelling

“entails people’s relationship to the world, motivated by concern and consequent involvement” (449). Dwelling requires concern and involvement, and results in a way of living that prioritizes relationship. The ethics of dwelling that I would like to employ in this thesis thus seeks to develop this sense of relational living, nurturing a sense of engagement and reciprocity between individuals, their environment, other beings, and objects. An ethics of dwelling requires the ability to “let be” rather than attempting to control or manipulate. Heidegger links dwelling directly to being and, as Greg Garrard explains, “It is not a case of going looking for Being; rather, we must be appropriate, or open to it, and it (though it is not itself a thing of any kind) will then appropriate *us*” (169). Dwelling entails a sensitivity and openness to environment and surroundings, other beings and things. Bruce Foltz explains how dwelling influences ethics: “Ethics is the understanding of what it means to dwell within the midst of beings as a whole, and thus it concerns our bearing and comportment, *as a whole*, toward beings” (168). Heidegger stresses the profound interrelatedness of things and beings and places, and connects this interrelatedness to dwelling, and Foltz’s words reveal how this directly relates to the way individuals relate ethically to one another and their world. I will employ this view of dwelling, as directly influencing ethical responses to others and a cultivation of relationships with others, throughout this work.

How does the female artist in the nineteenth century dwell? By analyzing Helen Graham, the protagonist of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, I would like to contemplate how the female artist dwells in the restrictive social structure of the early Victorian era. Situating the novel in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century views on aesthetics and taste, I will examine how Helen Graham moves within the social and

physical spaces of the novel, and how her movements impact her creative and painterly impulses. Throughout the novel, Helen seems to find liberation when she is engaging in artistic pursuits in the natural environment, but she also finds solace and comfort in natural spaces as a respite from the enclosure and violence of her abusive domestic life. Her relationship with nature and animals forms an integral theme in the novel. Only when she leaves the confinement of Grassdale, her estranged husband Arthur's estate, can she begin to dwell more fully and freely. Returning to her abandoned childhood home, the gothic and sublime Wildfell Hall, provides Helen with a space to dwell and allows her to engage in all that she loves best—being a mother, painting, and enjoying nature.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall displays how Helen dwells, in the Heideggerian sense, in wild, liminal spaces, and how this dwelling remains intimately tied to her perception of her physical environment. Helen's ability to find solace in her natural surroundings, her painter's eye that allows her to view the world with perception, and her desire to engage the wild and liminal natural environments surrounding Wildfell Hall reveal her embodied experience of her surroundings. The sublime structure of Wildfell Hall, Helen's abandoned childhood home, rises above the pastoral farmlands and idyllic village of Linden-Car, creating a picturesque setting that informs the artistic vision of the novel. Helen appropriates the picturesque space, manipulating and adapting it to suit her needs. In this setting, Helen begins to thrive: she nurtures her son, engages in her art, and begins cultivating a garden. Even within the confines of the picturesque, Helen finds space to move, create and, ultimately if marginally, to dwell.

“Venerable and Picturesque”: Wildfell Hall as Dwelling Place

Wildfell Hall possesses a commanding presence in the novel. The narratorial voice of Gilbert Markham provides several detailed descriptions of the edifice, painting a vivid picture of the structure for the reader. In his first description of the abandoned house, Gilbert emphasizes the rugged landscape surrounding the Hall:

[...] I left the more frequented regions, the wooded valleys, the cornfields, and the meadow lands, and proceeded to mount the steep acclivity of Wildfell, the wildest and loftiest eminence in our neighbourhood, where, as you ascend, the hedges, as well as the trees, become scanty and stunted, the former, at length, giving place to rough stone fences, partly greened over with ivy and moss, the latter to larches and Scotch fir-trees, or isolated black thorns. The fields, being rough and stony and wholly unfit for the plough, were mostly devoted to the pasturing of sheep and cattle; the soil was thin and poor: bits of grey rock here and there peeped out from the grassy hillocks; bilberry plants and heather—relics of more savage wildness,—grew under the walls; and in many of the enclosures, ragweeds and rushes usurped supremacy over the scanty herbage;—but these were not my property. (19)

Gilbert first emphasizes how he must leave the cultivated, domesticated agricultural landscape to reach Wildfell Hall and as he climbs the steep hill, he enters a different space where humans have far less control over the land and where the natural elements become much more formidable. Gilbert views this harsh environment, where weeds and thorns have “usurped supremacy” over plants cultivated by human beings, as being “unfit for the plough.” As a farmer, Gilbert focuses on the utilitarian, productive aspects of the land and thus judges the place as unfit for living and dwelling by “civilized” standards.

Situating Wildfell Hall at such an elevation separates the dwelling from the rest of civilized society. According to George Levine, “The literature of manners, of social order and social accommodation—the Victorian novel—found its metaphors not in wild and extreme Nature but by the glowing hearth and in the cultivated fields” (137). Anne,

as well as Charlotte and, especially, Emily Brontë, depart from the Victorian norm in their novels, clinging to vestiges of the Romantic sublime in their works and exploring the tension between the hearth and the wilds. Mountain heights and elevations represented the grandeur of the sublime, and the nineteenth-century art and social critic John Ruskin sought to perpetuate the Romantic sublime into the Victorian era (Levine 138). The contrast of valleys and highlands, absent in Charlotte's works (though they contain "storms and dreams and even oceans, but there are no important heights"), remain most present in Emily's *Wuthering Heights*, "the novel in which the contrast between heights and lowland is most vividly and metaphorically insistent" (148). Anne seems to follow in her sister Emily's footsteps by emphasizing the craggy elevation of Wildfell Hall.

But Wildfell Hall not only rises above the other structures of the area, but also lies in a state of ruin. Gilbert explains how the "superannuated mansion of the Elizabethan era, built of dark grey stone" was

—venerable and picturesque to look at, but, doubtless, cold and gloomy enough to inhabit, with its thick stone mullion 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. (19)

The house and the landscape seem to blend together, depicted as expressively reflecting one another as the Scotch firs seem as worn by the harsh environment as the building itself. Paul Zucker views ruins as an "aesthetic hybrid":

Devastated by time or willful destruction, incomplete as they are, they represent a combination of man-made forms and of organic nature. Thus the emotional impact of ruins is ambiguous: we cannot say whether they belong aesthetically in the realm of art or in the realm of nature. They can

no longer be considered genuine works of art since the original intention of the building has been more or less lost. Neither can they be taken as an outgrowth of nature since man-made elements continue to exist as a basis for what nature later on has contributed. (119)

As an aesthetic hybrid, the ruin shows how delineations between natural and created can begin to blur, and the viewer becomes susceptible to uncertainty about the design and purpose of the construction. The ruins become a source of mystery and ambiguity, as the origins of the edifice become obfuscated and the man-made blurs with the natural.

As a result, ruins were also linked to Edmund Burke's concept of the sublime, and the mystery and uncertainty they often represent explains to some extent why. Burke linked the sublime to power, vastness, and infinity, while the beautiful he defined as characteristically smooth, small, and delicate in form and color (Hussey 60). When the viewer apprehends something inexplicable and difficult to fully grasp, the ego begins to feel the effects of the sublime. Florence Hetzler defines the ruin as "the disjunctive product of the intrusion of nature without loss of the unity that man produced," and explains:

We do not have here only natural beauty or only artistic beauty, but we have a *third kind of beauty: a ruin beauty, which is a new category of being*. In it we come closer to the sublime, the ineffable, and the indescribable than we do in natural beauty or in artistic beauty only. In a ruin, so-called natural beauty intersects with human-made beauty in a unique manner. Both natural and artistic beauty are limited and qualified. Together they yield a new kind of beauty, a new immateriality that is neither human nor natural but both. We might call the aesthetics of ruins the aesthetics of sublimity par excellence. There is nothing in the world that is neither natural as we commonly understand the term nor man-made except man. The ruin brings all together: nature, the man-made, and man. There is a new integrity of the three. (105)

Since ruins are beyond any rigid categories, their ambiguity positions the viewer in a precarious position as well. Many viewers felt unable to classify and organize ruins aesthetically, and as a result the ruin symbolizes a deterioration of rigid binaries and easy definitions, a cause for fear and terror for the ego of the viewer.

Elizabeth Bohls explains that many women writers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries often depicted ruins in their novels, and she suggests that women writers enjoyed the empowerment of writing in sublime modes often relegated only to males. According to Bohls, women writers were drawn to the aesthetic of the sublime because the sublime landscape fired the “passions of self-preservation.” She states that “If the extremes of solitude and self-absorption demanded by the sublime were regarded with suspicion by a male poet like Wordsworth, [...] one suspects they were exponentially more dangerous—and more exhilarating—to women” (15). Helen’s character reveals this tension as well, for she desires the artistic solitude with nature and even isolation from the community as a means of self-preservation—desiring both safety from Arthur and the ability to do as she wishes, painting and playing with her son in the open air. But Bohls also suggests that

As a feature in a landscape, the ruin could work at two levels. Its formal features of irregularity in outline and texture (aided by moss and vines, the agents of its return to nature) perfectly answered the criteria of picturesque composition. But affective responses to the ruin’s combination of sublimity and decay could also contribute to the mood of a scene, diffusing the atmosphere or ‘effect’ that was the key to a landscape’s unity. (99)

Bohls suggests that the ruin can function both as a part of the picturesque composition while simultaneously triggering an affective response in the viewer. In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, the crumbling hall seems to work on both of these levels. The descriptions

of the house do create an affective mood within the novel; Gilbert and Helen each mention the Gothic aspects of Wildfell Hall that create an aura of mystery around the old abandoned manse. Gilbert describes it as “a ruinous mass” with windows like “black, cavernous gulfs,” and unpruned bushes that have taken on a “goblinish appearance, that harmonized well with the ghostly legends and dark traditions our old nurse had told us respecting the haunted Hall and its departed occupants (375, 51, 19). Helen admits that at times when she is “sitting alone, hearing the bleak wind moaning round me and howling through the ruinous old chambers, no books or occupations can repress the dismal thoughts and apprehensions that come crowding in (375, 51). The gothic elements of the place emphasize its liminal status, separated from the rational world and civilized humanity, and the permeability of the structure, caused by the “time-eaten airholes,” exposes the inhabitants to the natural elements and connotes a lack of rigid demarcation between the purportedly civilized, ordered world of the domestic and the wild, unpredictable world of nature (19).

But as Bohls suggests, the description of the deteriorating mansion also creates a picturesque composition in the novel. Gilbert describes Wildfell Hall specifically as “venerable and picturesque to look at” (19). He views the landscape with the disdain of a farmer who orders, controls and shapes the land in utilitarian ways, as this passage illustrates:

Behind [Wildfell Hall] 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 hardy plants and flowers 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 principle 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 [...] (19)

The sublime ruin of Wildfell Hall rises above the pastoral countryside with its “wooded valleys, the cornfields, and the meadow lands,” resulting in a picturesque scene. The picturesque landscape of the late eighteenth century consisted of a carefully framed composition, and the term picturesque came into existence because certain aesthetic theorists believed that some eye-pleasing compositions were neither sublime nor beautiful as Edmund Burke had defined these categories. Uvedale Price, one of the first major theorists of the picturesque, states in *An Essay on the Picturesque, as Compared with the Sublime and Beautiful*:

The principles of those two leading characters in nature, the sublime and the beautiful, have been fully illustrated and discriminated by a great master [Burke]; but even when I first read that most original work, I felt that there were numberless objects which give great delight to the eye, and yet differ as widely from the beautiful as from the sublime. The reflections I have since been led to make have convinced me that these objects form a distinct class, and belong to what may be properly called the picturesque. (Ashfield and De Bolla 271)

Price deems Burke’s theories of the beautiful and sublime inadequate, and offers the picturesque as a third aesthetic category. Price explains that “we may conclude, that where an object, or set of objects, is without smoothness or grandeur, but from its intricacy, its sudden and irregular deviations, its variety of forms, tints, and lights and shadows, is interesting to a cultivated eye, it is simply picturesque” (Ashfield and De Bolla 275). He states that the picturesque “by its variety, its intricacy, its partial concealments, it excites that active curiosity which gives play to the mind” (Ashfield and

De Bolla 274). The imposing gothic structure of Wildfell Hall rises above the peaceful farmlands of Linden-car and creates a picturesque scene that certainly excites the curiosity of both the surrounding community and the reader.

Proponents of the aesthetic of the picturesque valued landscapes that included variation, intricacy, and concealment, and, especially, roughness and ruggedness that visually stimulated and surprised the viewer, and the description of the harsh landscape surrounding the crumbling Wildfell Hall, specifically in contrast with the cultivated agrarian landscape which it rises above, fits the definition of the picturesque landscape. Ruins then could be linked to either the sublime or the picturesque, as John Dixon Hunt notes:

Whereas the sublime invocation of ruins stressed their inexplicitness, their relieving the spectator or his habitual recourse to precise explanation, the picturesque, the aesthetics of which developed out of a need to label experiences which eluded Burke's definitions for the sublime and the beautiful, chose rather to colonize that emptiness. (797)

The picturesque, arising from this desire to classify, shape and order the landscape, transformed the ruin from its original sublime status to just an aesthetic component, needed to fulfill the requirements of the picturesque.

Though the Reverend William Gilpin introduced the word picturesque as a classifiable aesthetic term, Richard Payne Knight and Uvedale Price became the main theorists of the picturesque in the late eighteenth century. While Gilpin wrote mainly for tourists who traveled around Britain searching for ideal landscapes to paint, both Knight and Price were gentlemen landowners who sought to 'improve' the landscapes of their estates, and their theories caused a turn from formal Neoclassical gardens of the Enlightenment to the Romantic English garden of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth

century. Knight, Price, and others encouraged, “the partial concealment of the regularity by vines, shrubs, and ivy; the contrast of stone with vegetation, the richness of the lights and shades” (Hussey 179). Knight and Price wrote specifically for other gentlemen who sought to manage the aesthetic appearance of their estates, shaping and ordering them to fulfill the rules of the picturesque. Kim Ian Michasiw explains, “It is to the local improver that Knight and Price, improvers themselves, address their works” (83).

But Elizabeth Bohls explains that whether employed by traveling painters or gentleman gardeners (or, more accurately, gentlemen who give orders to their gardeners), the picturesque required the manipulation of the landscape being viewed, for the artist sought to “package” the land into an attractive compositional unit (93). Methods of gardening and shaping the land influenced the depiction of the landscape in paintings, and “The analogy [of gardening] with painting situates both discourses in a long-standing cultural nexus of vision, power, and possession” (92). Landscape aesthetics of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries “constructed its subject as masculine and property-owning, ‘improving’ a feminized land in a tasteful display of power and privilege,” and the picturesque bequests upon the artist complete power over the landscape being created (92).

Further, the picturesque landscape “elides or sublates the conflicting interests of history in favor of pure form” (Bohls 100). Bohls explains that in Britain, the picturesque work of art became devoid of any political or historical markers that would situate it in a specific time or place or would gesture toward conflicts of gender, class, or status, and the artist focuses wholly on the aesthetic, “effects like roughness, intricacy, and variety” (Bohls 100). The artist disregards the history and temporality of the landscape, seeking

to capture and shape the scene that they view in an attempt to create a pleasing scene.

William Gilpin states in his *Three Essays* that the “province of the picturesque eye is to *survey nature*; not to *anatomize matter*,” and he also notes, “the anatomical study of figures is not attended to: we regard them merely as the ornament of scenes” (26, 44).

The picturesque scene often included banditti, gypsies, or working class peasants, but their presence in the picturesque art work was aestheticized and distanced from the viewer. The bodies of the figures become only “ornaments,” and a deliberate omission of any connection to labor occurs. The viewer of the picturesque work becomes a tourist, for the scene becomes valued only for its pleasing composition, not for reflecting any actual reality. Such a blatant “denial of the particular,” according to Bohls, becomes a basis for the reification of social norms that exclude women, the working class, and non-Europeans from any means of agency or power (93). The aesthetics of the picturesque distances the artist from the natural, organic landscape even as picturesque painting “peoples its landscapes with marginal characters” (Townsend 369). Thus, these gendered notions of aesthetics problematize the relationship between the female artist, her art, and the natural landscape from which she often found the inspiration for her works.

Helen’s Dwelling at the Hall: Liminality, Sublimity, and Nature

But Helen Huntingdon, though definitely a marginal member within her community, remains intimately attuned to her environment and moves with surprising ease within the picturesque space of the novel. Resisting the confines of the picturesque, Helen appropriates the space of the picturesque by transforming it from a space of social exile to a space of freedom. She paints, plays with her son on the moors, cultivates a

garden, and enjoys a close relationship with her natural environment. Within the space of the abandoned mansion, Helen creates an art studio, transforming the musty interior of the house into a place of artistic creation. She engages in the poetic dwelling that Heidegger writes about when he directly connects poetry and dwelling: “Poetry is what really lets us dwell. But through what do we attain to a dwelling place? Through building. Poetic creation, which lets us dwell, is a kind of building” (213). Helen’s radical transformation of her home and her active engagement with her environment are directly related to her “poetry”—her painting, writing in her journal, and nurturing her son.

Helen’s acceptance of the place she inhabits reveals her ability, and at times her desire, to live, literally, on the edge of ‘civilized’ society. Gilbert’s brother Fergus asks her how she could “choose such a dilapidated, rickety old place as this to live in. If you couldn’t afford to occupy the whole house, and have it mended up, why couldn’t you take a neat little cottage?”, and Helen responds by stating that

perhaps I took a particular fancy for this romantic, old-fashioned place—but indeed, it has many advantages over a cottage—in the first place, you see, the rooms are larger and more airy; in the second place, the unoccupied apartments, which I don’t pay for, may serve as lumber-rooms, if I have anything to put in them; and they are useful for my little boy to run about in on rainy days when he can’t go out; and then there is the garden for him to play in, and for me to work in. (57)

First Helen emphasizes the space that the hall provides, prioritizing that above all other considerations. The “larger and more airy” rooms provide a space of freedom, for both Helen and her son. But the rooms also have a utilitarian aspect; they allow her to store the lumber for her canvas frames, enabling her to provide for her family as an artist.

Helen’s precarious financial situation and her role as sole provider for herself and her son

explain the significance of her statement that she does not pay for this extra space. Fergus and the other community members value new, fastidiously manicured homes which reflect status and wealth as well as control—control over the land and control over the servants required for the upkeep of the land. Helen’s priorities reflect a different ethic, for she glories in the space and freedom that the old crumbling building provides for her and her son. Both free and freeing, the space of Wildfell Hall gives little Arthur a space in which to play, and Helen a space to pursue her work.

Helen’s studio within Wildfell Hall forms the living heart of the house. When Gilbert and his sister Rose visit Helen, she ushers them into her studio, stating, “ ‘I must make you welcome to my studio’ [...] ‘there is no fire in the sitting room to-day, and it is rather too cold to shew you into a place with an empty grate’” (42). Helen’s decision to heat the studio rather than the sitting room reveals her priorities. Antonia Losano explains how most female artists did not have the luxury of their own studio space, and were forced to create a place to paint on the fringes of their domestic space (30). Usually this space was screened off, relegated to the margins of the home so the creative space would not impinge upon the domestic. When Helen decides to resume her art again in order to escape her husband, she must relegate her artistic endeavors to the secrecy and solitude of the library at Grassdale Manor:

Since Lord Lowborough’s departure, I had regarded the library as entirely my own, a secure retreat at all hours of the day. [...] Here, then, I set up my easel, and here I worked at my canvass from daylight till dusk, with very little intermission saving when pure necessity, or my duties to little Arthur called me away— (Brontë 338)

But when she moves to Wildfell Hall, Helen radically challenges the status quo by making her studio the center of her home, as Antonia Losano explains:

In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* these positions are reversed: Helen must unwillingly make space in her studio for the duties of the parlor. Brontë represents Helen not in the feminine role of hostess but in the decidedly unfeminine role of preoccupied and grumpy genius, toiling away at painting, with no time for society. The entire chapter in which this scene with Gilbert takes place—a chapter called simply and pointedly ‘The Studio’—forges a radical professional female identity for Helen: she paints for money, has a studio of her own and a recognizable style, and evinces a commitment to art rather than to the self. (30-31)

As Losano states, this scene emphasizes Helen’s “radical professional identity,” and her radical status is reflected in her extreme transformation of the domestic space of the home. Helen alters the domestic sphere dramatically—the large and airy creative space of the studio at the center of Wildfell Hall challenges the enclosed domestic world that often confined Victorian women and denotes a concerted effort to dwell on her own terms.

At the heart of the studio stands Helen’s easel. Gilbert notes that “the first object that met the eye was a painter’s easel,” and Helen’s attention remains focused on her easel throughout her visit with Gilbert and Rose. Though Gilbert observes that Helen’s “heart is in [her] work,” the centrality of her studio and her easel suggest that her work is her passion, the heart of her existence (42). “Disengaging a couple of chairs from the artistical lumber that usurped them,” Helen attempts to make her guests comfortable, but she remains preoccupied with the work at her easel, “glancing at the picture upon it while she conversed, and giving it an occasional touch with her brush, as if she found it impossible to wean her attention entirely from her occupation to fix it upon her guests” (42). The easel supports her work, enables her work, and this structure, like the lumber she presumably builds into frames for her canvases, highlights the visceral connection Helen has with her craftsmanship, and emphasizes the Heideggerian notion that dwelling

remains intimately connected to building. The use of the word “occupation” in this passage also carries significance, as Losano notes, due to “the interconnected connotations of the term—professional occupation, occupation of land or space, and occupation as something that captures the attention” (26). These interconnected concerns highlight Helen’s tenuous status, for she lacks the status the position of wife provides, living as a tenant rather than as a (wife of a) homeowner. Her socially unacceptable occupation as a professional artist further complicates matters. Helen’s tenuous status, simultaneously a tenant, female artist, and single mother, positions her on the edge of society. The scene in the studio makes this explicit, for Helen’s focus on her easel rather than succumbing to the expected role of dutiful hostess exhibits the challenge she poses to the traditional roles of women.

Helen enjoys the isolation Wildfell Hall provides, in part due to her desire to keep her whereabouts secret from her estranged husband, but also because she claims to “take no pleasure in watching people pass the windows” and adds that she “like[s] the quiet” (57). Helen’s antisocial behavior estranges her even more within society, and her liminal social status and subsequent anxiety over her marginalization within the larger society reflect what Roberta White reveals are “some remarkably consistent patterns of recurring imagery in the depiction of women artists and their work. This imagery consists of variations on a theme that can be called the *liminal*, the *suspended*, and the *unfinished*” (19). Woman artists often occupy liminal spaces, both socially and physically. Helen and her son and their housekeeper, Rachel, live quietly and in relative solitude. Wildfell Hall’s elevation physically removes it from the rest of the community and the “steep acclivity” and “a terribly steep and stony lane” make the ascent to the Hall an arduous

task (19, 374). Though they do receive visitors, the ominous appearance of the house frightens many of them. The harsh weather and stunted trees growing on the hill further emphasizes how Helen remains on the margins and edges of civilized society. The liminality of her environment emphasizes her social liminality.

Helen's love for the sea also suggests the liminal status of the female artist.

White explains that liminality

is given local habitation and specificity by the persistence of imagery of seashore and sea throughout the novels discussed here, from Charlotte Brontë to Mary Gordon. [...] The seashore is the place where the painters work, not necessarily what they paint, and as such it can symbolize their social status. The literal seashore, as a line of demarcation between two separate realms, frequently symbolizes the liminality of the life of the woman artist. The seashore also serves as a nexus from which one can examine the connection (or the opposition) of the aesthetic and the political. Images of the seashore relate to the marginality of women in society—the possible exclusion from or unwillingness to participate in the body politic, with the city and the coast as opposite poles. (19-20)

The coast, the ambiguous boundary between sea and land, symbolizes the dialectic of the female artist with society, often withdrawing from the body politic into their own creative depths. When Gilbert and his sister Rose first visit Helen in her studio, Helen inquires about a certain view of the sea: "I have been told that you have a fine view of the sea somewhere in the neighborhood—is it true?—and is it within walking distance?" (43). Gilbert begins to describe how to get there, but it is winter. Later in the spring, Helen questions Gilbert again:

'Have you forgotten the fine sea view we were speaking of some time ago? I think I must trouble you, now, to tell me the nearest way to it; for if this beautiful weather continue, I shall, perhaps, be able to walk there, and take my sketch; I have exhausted every other subject for painting, and I long to see it.' (58)

The sea will provide Helen with new inspiration for her paintings, but she also possesses a longing to view the ocean as well. Her persistence in asking Gilbert how to find this view of the sea as well as her disappointment when Rose suggests they go together in a few days discloses her longing for the sea and also suggests her desire to go there alone with her son and her sketchbook rather than en masse for “a pic-nic” (59). But she succumbs to the group outing, but rather than riding in the carriage with the other ladies, Helen insists on walking “all the way to the cliffs,” actively and physically engaged in her perception of the landscape (60).

As Gilbert’s narratorial voice describes how the “increasing height and boldness of the hills had for some time intercepted the prospect,” the narrative valorizes once again the sublimity of monumental heights (61). The view, Gilbert explains,

on gaining the summit of a steep acclivity [...] lay before us—and the blue sea burst upon our sight!—deep violet blue—not deadly calm, but covered with glinting breakers—diminutive white specks twinkling on its bosom, and scarcely to be distinguished by the keenest vision, from the little sea-mews that sported above, their white wings glittering in the sunshine: only one or two vessels were visible; and those were far away. (61)

Gilbert’s views of the landscape throughout the novel consistently reflect Anne Brontë’s own painterly view of the world, and this description typifies her focus on the specificity of color and form¹. Brontë’s pencil sketches and watercolors depict landscapes and scenes from nature as well as pictures of the family dog, Flossie. But one sketch seems particularly pertinent to this scene, portraying a young woman staring out to sea, much as Helen does in this scene from the novel (see Appendix A, page 34). Jane Sellars notes that this “symbolic drawing” of “the solitary girl with her back to the viewer, gazing

¹ For a detailed description and numerous examples of Anne Brontë’s watercolor paintings and pencil sketches as well as the art works of Charlotte, Emily, and Branwell Brontë, refer to *The Art of the Brontës* by Christine Alexander and Jane Sellars, Cambridge U P, 1995.

towards a far horizon, is one that is often found in nineteenth-century northern European romantic art, notably in the melancholy *Rückenfiguren* in the work of German landscape painter Caspar David Friedrich” (142). Brontë’s work could be considered an amateur version of Caspar David Friedrich’s famous painting “Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog,” a work that typifies the Romantic concept of the solitary individual encountering the sublime.

Helen’s physical reaction to her view of the land, caught by Gilbert’s gaze, shows her embodied connection to her environment and her companion:

I looked at my companion to see what she thought of this glorious scene. She said nothing: but she stood still, and fixed her eyes upon it with a gaze that assured me she was not disappointed. [...] A cool reviving breeze blew from the sea—soft, pure, salubrious: it waved her drooping ringlets, and imparted a livelier color to her usually too pallid lip and cheek. She felt its exhilarating influence, and so did I—I felt it tingling through my frame, but dared not give way to it while she remained so quiet. There was an aspect of subdued exhilaration in her face, that kindled into almost a smile of exalted glad intelligence as her eye met mine. Never had she looked so lovely. (61)

The focus of Gilbert’s attention is on Helen’s beauty enhanced by the brisk sea air. Caught in his gaze, Helen becomes an artistic composition that he finds pleasure in viewing, an aspect of the novel that will be evaluated in greater depth in the third chapter. But Helen also meets his gaze when they share a fleeting moment of “exalted, glad intelligence” as they both feel the “exhilarating influence” of the moment. The sublime landscape results in a moment of sharing for Gilbert and Helen, however vague and complex that sharing may be.

Anne K. Mellor claims that Romantic women writers employ the sublime in their writing in two distinct manners. Either they focus on the sublime as the subsuming force of “patriarchal tyranny” within the domestic sphere, an aspect that will be discussed in

the following chapter, or they develop the sublime as an intimate relationship as well as an “ecstatic experience of co-participation” with nature, an “experience [of] heightened sensibility, not of anxiety, but of love, reverence, and mutual relationship” (97). In the preceding passage where Gilbert and Helen view the sea, they share the moment of co-participation with nature together, with Gilbert as more of a witness to Helen’s co-participation than an actual co-participant himself.

Helen actively seeks this “experience of heightened sensibility” to which Mellor refers. Yet as a woman artist, Helen must concern herself with her son and conventions in order to pursue her art. Helen excuses herself from the group to sketch, “took her campstool and drawing materials,” and, reluctantly leaving her son in Miss Millward’s care, “proceeded along the steep, stony hill, to a loftier, more precipitous eminence at some distance, whence a still finer prospect was to be had, where she preferred taking her sketch, though some of the ladies told her it was a frightful place, and advised her not to attempt it” (62). Once again, the sublime heights become the supreme vantage point to view the landscape and create her art, and Helen transgresses the bounds of propriety and domestic safety to acquire this view. Her transgression receives further emphasis because she defies some of the ladies of the party, who “told her it was a frightful place, and advised her not to attempt it” (62). In pursuing her art, Helen will not heed the Victorian rules of feminine propriety. Here, Helen appropriates the masculine role, bravely clambering over the rocks, and becoming the picturesque tourist, seeking a vantage point that will provide a better view of the landscape she wants to capture.

But Helen displays an embodied sense of respect for nature and the “mutual respect” for nature that Mellor mentions. Painting *en plein aire* allows the artist to more

fully perceive their surroundings, and this manner of painting began to gain in popularity during the early nineteenth century. But Helen's desire to pursue her art outdoors also reflects her love of the outdoors and the communion she seems to enjoy in nature.

Throughout the novel, Gilbert often mentions how he crosses Helen's path out of doors:

But sometimes, I saw her myself,--not only when she came to church, but when she was out on the hills with her son, whether taking a long, purpose-like walk, or—on specially fine days—leisurely rambling over the moor or the bleak pasture-lands, surrounding the old Hall, herself with a book in her hand, her son gamboling about her; and, on any of these occasions, when I caught sight of her in my solitary walks or rides, or while following my agricultural pursuits, I generally contrived to meet or overtake her [...] (47)

Helen's jaunts with her son across the moors show her desire to escape the confinements of the domestic sphere. Sometimes Helen just wanders with her son, and other times Gilbert finds her "with a sketch-book in her hand, absorbed in the exercise of her favorite art" (49). On their excursions, little Arthur constructs "dams and breakwaters in the shallow, stony stream" and frolics with Gilbert's dog Sancho, and over time the young boy becomes "much more hardy and active, than when he first entered the neighbourhood" (49, 60). Both he and his mother seem to thrive in their new life at Wildfell Hall, and Helen, whether she is engrossed in art or meandering over the moors with her son, enjoys the freedom to roam around the abandoned old mansion at will. This freedom allows her to freely nurture her son, create her art, and cultivate a life of her own. Helen begins, in fact, to dwell.

Helen's embodied experience of her natural surroundings remains central to her independent sense of self. Though she expresses the meditative aspects of her art, a sense that her "drawing suits" her best for she can "draw and think at the same time," Helen

often engages in a meditative communion with nature without her artistic tools, her sketchpad and pencil (123). Before her marriage to Arthur Huntingdon, Helen describes in her journal how she goes on morning walks, “a quiet ramble in company with my own blissful thoughts” (162). After her marriage, Helen no longer invests time in her art but still seems to find intense comfort in the natural world. When she discovers Arthur’s affair with Annabella Wilmot, Helen finds consolation in nature:

‘God help me now!’ I murmured, sinking on my knees among the damp weeds and brushwood that surrounded me and looking up at the moonlit sky, through the scant foliage above. It seemed all dim and quivering now to my darkened sight. My burning, bursting heart strove to pour forth its agony to God, but could not frame its anguish into prayer; until a gust of wind swept over me, which, while it scattered the dead leaves, like blighted hopes, around, cooled my forehead, and seemed a little to revive my sinking frame. Then, while I lifted up my soul in speechless, earnest supplication, some heavenly influence seemed to strengthen me within: I breathed more freely; my vision cleared [...] (292)

In this scene, Helen clearly views nature “not [as] an overwhelming power, not even an all-bountiful mother. Instead nature is a *female friend*, a sister, with whom they share their most intimate experiences and with whom they cooperate in the daily business of life, the mutual advantage of each” (Mellor 97). Helen finds comfort and consolation in nature and often escapes into it for respite from the violence of the interior domestic realm of her husband Arthur’s home, Grassdale Manor.

When she finally resolves to leave Grassdale and remove her son from her husband’s harmful influence, Helen reconnects with her artistic passion, laboring “hard to improve my talent and produce something worth while as a specimen of my powers” (337). Reconnecting with the art that previously provided an outlet, Helen begins to view her art as a craft, a toll that enables her to flee Grassdale and Arthur’s oppressive tyranny.

Helen continually uses the word “asylum” when she writes of her desire to leave Grassdale, and she even considers fleeing to the United States to “seek a quite, humble home in New England, where I would support myself and him by the labour of my hands” (337). Helen desires a place of peace where she can dwell—a place where she can raise her son without the threat of violence. She continues:

The palette and the easel, my darling playmates once, must be my sober toil-fellows now. But was I sufficiently skilful as an artist to obtain my livelihood in a strange land, without friends and without recommendation? No; I must wait a little; I must labour hard to improve my talent and to produce something worth while as a specimen of my powers, something to speak favourably for me, whether as an actual painter or a teacher. Brilliant success, of course, I did not look for, but some degree of security from positive failure was indispensable—I must not take my son to starve. (337)

Helen’s art thus becomes a means of survival, rather than an outlet for expression. She seeks to improve her technique, not for the attention of critics or to gain some sort of achievements, but in order to market and sell her works. Helen’s picturesque artwork becomes a pragmatic means of survival, and as a result her artistic pursuits become a dwelling space for her as well because she views her creative abilities as a life line for herself and her son.

Arthur ultimately thwarts her attempts to create art at Grassdale, and this will be explored in greater detail in the next chapter. But Helen remains determined to escape, and when she finally does she feels intense elation at her newfound freedom. She expresses in her journal the liberation she experiences in the stage coach that transports her to Wildfell Hall:

Oh, what a delight it was to be thus seated aloft, rumbling along the broad, sunshiny road, with the fresh morning breeze in my face, surrounded by an unknown country all smiling—cheerfully, gloriously, smiling in the

yellow lustre of those early beams,--with my darling child in my arms, almost as happy as myself and my faithful friend beside me; a prison and despair behind me, receding farther, farther back at every clatter of the horses' feet,--and liberty and hope before! (374)

When she arrives at Wildfell Hall, Helen must remain unknown to keep her location secret from her husband, but even in this state of secrecy, she begins to dwell more independently. Wildfell and the landscape surrounding the house provide Helen and little Arthur with space to work and play. Helen can openly and actively pursue her art, and she tells Gilbert, “ ‘few people gain their livelihood with so much pleasure in their toil as I do’ ” (80). Now they are no longer trapped in a home where Arthur Huntingdon’s alcoholic raging disturbs the peace and where his “peevish and testy” treatment of the “servants and the dogs” often ends in violence and puts everyone on edge (213).

At Wildfell, Helen and her son enjoy liberation from the oppressive domestic enclosure of Grassdale Manor. She creates her art, her son plays, and, engaging in their natural world, they begin to thrive. In the midst of Wildfell’s ruins, the “dilapidated, rickety old place,” Helen and her son begin a new life. Helen begins to instill her values in her son, values that reflect reciprocity and nurturance. She states:

Here was Arthur left to me at last; and rousing from my despondent apathy, I exerted all my powers to eradicate the weeds that had been fostered in his infant mind, and sow again the good seed they had rendered unproductive. Thank Heaven, it is not barren or a stony soil; if weeds spring fast there, so do better plants. His apprehensions are more quick, his heart more overflowing with affection than ever his father’s could have been; and it is no hopeless task to bend him to obedience and win him to love and know his own true friend, as long as there is no one to counteract my efforts. (354)

The emphasis on Helen’s role as a nurturing mother, the recurrence of plant metaphors throughout the novel in relationship to parenting and community life, as well as Gilbert’s

status as a farmer and animal lover, create a deftly woven theme in the novel, a theme that will be explored in greater detail in Chapter Three. When Helen hosts several visitors at Wildfell Hall, she proudly displays the work she has accomplished: “ ‘You see I have effected some little improvement already [...] There is a bed of young vegetables in that corner, and here are some snowdrops and primroses already in bloom—and there, too, is a yellow crocus just opening in the sunshine’ ” (57). Her work produces a sense of self-sufficiency and independence, providing sustenance as well as beauty. Helen emphasizes the beauty of the flowers, the direct result of her efforts to cultivate her dwelling space. She witnesses and acknowledges the beauty that surrounds her.

In “Building, Dwelling, Thinking,” Heidegger emphasizes how, “Man’s relation to locations, and through locations to spaces, inheres in his dwelling” (155). I’ll excuse Heidegger’s exclusionary language and extend his statement—a woman’s relation to locations, and through locations to spaces, inheres in her dwelling as well, and, in Helen’s case, in specific ways. Her ability to find solace in her connection with the landscape provides her with hope and self-sufficiency. Her artistic vision of the world allows her to view the landscape in a meaningful way that enriches her life and influences the lives of those around her. Her care for her child and her intimate cultivation of the land, not for mastery, but for sustenance and beauty, indicate a healthy, reciprocal relationship between herself, other human beings, and the land. Heidegger defines in “Building Dwelling Thinking” the term “the fourfold”—the earth, the sky, divinities and mortals. He states:

Dwelling preserves the fourfold by bringing the presencing of the fourfold into things. But things themselves secure the four-fold *only when* they themselves *as* things are let be in their presencing. How is this done? In

this way, that mortals nurse and nurture the things that grow, and specially construct things that do not grow. (149)

Thus the nurturing and building of dwelling bring significance and meaning to life, significance that brings both the spiritual (sky and divinities) and elemental (earth and mortals) together. For Heidegger, the four become one, and we recognize the oneness in conscientious dwelling. But this task remains difficult, for “mortals ever search anew for the nature of dwelling” (159). Helen Huntingdon displays that tension, for despite the freedom she finds at Wildfell Hall, she still remains unable to dwell in complete freedom, an aspect of the novel that will be explored in the next chapter.



Appendix A

CHAPTER 2—
LIMITS TO DWELLING FOR
THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY WOMAN ARTIST

Helen Huntingdon's ability to dwell and create a space for her own artistic pursuits remains under the prescription of "proper" Regency and Victorian society. The close-knit community in which Helen Huntingdon lives imposes strictures upon her that prevent her from fully dwelling. In this chapter, I would like to explore the constraints Helen feels as she attempts to dwell, both in her marriage to Arthur and their life at Grassdale, and later when she becomes a tenant and single mother at Wildfell Hall. In analyzing this progression and the changes that Helen faces, the notion of the gaze becomes an important motif in the novel, specifically how its claustrophobic confines impinge upon Helen. But once again, the sublime seems central as well. Turning to theories of how Romantic and Victorian women writers used the sublime in their works, Patricia Yaeger and Anne Mellor's studies structure an evaluation of the then-controversial quality of the radical heroine Helen Huntingdon in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Evaluating the limits of Helen's ability to dwell reveal the challenges a nineteenth-century woman artist faced and also provide insight into the necessities required for dwelling.

Though Heidegger's concept of dwelling provides us with an access point into understanding more fully Helen Huntingdon's desire to create and construct a healthy and spacious environment in which she can both nurture her son and cultivate her own artistic

pursuits, a feminist critique of his theory of dwelling reveals the limits that women may face. Iris Marion Young provides a nuanced critique of the limits of Heidegger's concept of dwelling. Analyzing Heidegger's division of dwelling into building and preservation, Young notes that Heidegger, "seems to privilege building as the world-founding of an active subject, and I suggest that this privileging is male-biased" (253). She explains:

Through building, man establishes a world and his place in the world, according to Heidegger, establishes himself as somebody, with an identity and history. People inhabit the world by erecting material supports for their routines and rituals and then see the specificity of their lives reflected in the environment, the materiality of things gathered together with historical meaning. If building in this way is basic to the emergence of subjectivity, to dwelling in the world with identity and history, then it would appear that only men are subjects. On the whole, women do not build. (255)

If women, on the whole, do not build, then they lack the ability to establish their own identity and sense of self. Using the work of Luce Irigaray and Simone de Beauvoir, Young discusses how Heidegger's prioritization of building (traditionally a masculine pursuit) above preservation (often relegated to the domestic world of women) is implicitly male-biased. She states:

Man seeks nostalgically to return to the lost home by making buildings and putting things in them that will substitute for that original home. He creates property, things he owns and controls. But because the property doesn't satisfy the longing for lost home, he is launched on an acquisitive quest for more property. In this acquisitive economy women serve as raw materials, caretakers, and goods themselves to be traded. Her role is to be the home by being at home. Her being home gives him comfort and allows him to open on the expanse of the world to build and create. For her however, the placement is imprisonment. (259)

Young acknowledges the feminist view of the home as a site of imprisonment and disempowerment for women, but she resists relegating the home and dwelling as entirely

damaging to women. She poses this question: “Is it possible to retain an idea of home as supporting the individual subjectivity of the person, where the subject is understood as fluid, partial, shifting, and in relations of reciprocal support with others?” (260).

The Confines of Dwelling for the Nineteenth-Century Woman

Young’s description of women in Heidegger’s schema as “raw materials, caretakers, and goods themselves to be traded,” basically as reflectors of the male ego, vividly describes the status of many women in the nineteenth-century. Women in the early nineteenth-century were literally second-class citizens, lacking the right to vote, own property, or have custody of their own children if separated from their husband.

Young notes that women also deal with the homelessness that Heidegger describes for men, but women must resort to the following:

She tries to take her subjectivity from being-for-him. She tries to envelop herself with decoration. She covers herself with jewelry, makeup, clothing, in the attempt to make an envelope, to give herself a place. But in the end she is left homeless, derelict, with no room of her own, since he makes room for himself by using her as his envelope. (260)

Helen Huntingdon reacts specifically against these conventional methods of “pleasing” men as a means of identity-making, and vociferously renounces such shallow attempts to attract and keep male attention. Helen exposes the superficiality of most women’s lives, and even acknowledges how she herself, at the beginning of her marriage, attempts to make her husband happy in this way:

He seemed bent upon displaying me to his friends and acquaintances in particular, and the public in general, on every possible occasion and to the greatest possible advantages. It was something to feel that he considered me a worthy object of pride; but I paid dear for the gratification, for in the first place, to please him, I had to violate my cherished predilections—my

almost rooted principles in favour of a plain, dark, sober style of dress; I must sparkle in costly jewels and deck myself out like a painted butterfly, just as I had, long since, determined I never would do—and this was no trifling sacrifice;—in the second place, I was continually straining to satisfy his sanguine expectations and do honour to his choice, by my general conduct and deportment, and fearing to disappoint him by some awkward misdemeanour, or some trait of inexperienced ignorance about the customs of society [...] (206)

Against her own will, Helen attempts to please her husband by arraying herself “like a painted butterfly,” but she realizes that in doing so she becomes nothing more than a hollow object for Arthur to display to society. As Young emphasizes, borrowing Irigaray’s phrase, women in this position become derelict, lacking an identity or dwelling of their own.

The Confines of the Gaze: Woman, Artist, Object

But this emphasis on display and being continually caught in the male gaze resonates throughout *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Subject to scrutiny and social censure, women lack their own sense of identity and remain caught in the male gaze and imprisoned within the domestic sphere where, as Helen phrases it in her journal, they can be “safely installed” as mistresses of the manor (192). The novel contains many scenes of women caught in the gaze of men. Feminist film theorists emphasize the confines of the male gaze on women, and Laura Mulvey’s seminal essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” explains the stifling influence of the gaze:

The determining male gaze projects its fantasy on the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. (19)

This emphasis on display was certainly amplified for Victorian women. As Beth Newman explains, women in the nineteenth century felt the tension between inconspicuousness and display continually:

Nineteenth-century fiction articulates this desire to be seen, and expresses the struggle between it and the code of ideal feminine inconspicuousness, by pitting characters who embody some version of this inconspicuousness (often coupled with an emphasis on their capacity for supervision, for seeing what eludes others eyes) against female characters who actively and sometimes aggressively court the look. (21)

The gaze and this emphasis on display prevent women from fully dwelling. Constantly performing and displaying themselves in order to please men, they remain unable to fully engage in the creative or nurturing pursuits that would provide fulfillment for themselves.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall vividly portrays this through its juxtaposition of the young Helen Huntingdon, naturally shy and naïve in disposition, with Annabella Wilmot, who engages in “vehemently coquetting” the men who surround her (147). From the first time they interact socially, Annabella and Helen compete over capturing Arthur’s attention and the novel conveys this competition most symbolically: “In the course of the evening, Miss Wilmot was called upon to sing and play for the amusement of the company, and I to exhibit my drawings, and, though he likes music, and she is an accomplished musician, I think I am right in affirming that he paid more attention to my drawings than to her music” (148). At this time in the novel, Helen wants nothing more than to capture Arthur’s eye. Helen languishes over Annabella’s beauty and her ability to capture the attention of men. Annabella thrives on male attention and acquires it primarily through flattery—the ultimate method of reflecting and inflating the ego of the men around her. Helen describes how she manipulates men with her words: “She knows

her power, and she uses it too; but well knowing that to wheedle and coax is safer than to command, she judiciously tempers her despotism with flattery and blandishments” (215). Eventually she catches the eye of Lord Lowborough, and after a battle to win his affection, Annabella, much to her own delight, climbs the social ladder and becomes Lady Lowborough.

But Annabella’s musical performances also draw the gaze of those around her, and these moments of display trigger Helen’s jealousy the most. Helen observes that “Miss Wilmot never likes to waste her musical efforts on ladies’ ears alone,” and when Arthur requests that Annabella play the piano for the group, Helen admits, “I knew Annabella’s musical talents were superior to mine, but that was no reason why I should be treated as a perfect nonentity” (155-56). Annabella “exultantly seated herself at the piano, and favoured [Arthur] with two songs,” and then she proceeds to bask in the glory of the enamored looks she receives from Arthur, Lord Lowborough, and the rest of the gentlemen in her audience. Helen despairs over her loss of Arthur’s attention, her loss of his gaze, but consoles herself with the pleasure she can see he receives from listening to Annabella’s music. This self-sacrificing attitude seems particularly linked to evangelical Christianity and the abnegation expected of women in the nineteenth century.

But Helen soon realizes that these “feminine accomplishments” are merely a means of capturing the male gaze, and such accomplishments cannot function as a mode for self-expression or self-fulfillment. Annabella uses her power to capture the male gaze to achieve her own goals of higher social status through marriage, but Helen begins to realize that this “power” is not really power at all, for as soon as a woman has “conquered,” she finds herself shuttled off into her husband’s home and installed in the

domestic sphere, allowed to emerge only for display. Helen feels objectified by the gaze, and as Alisa Clapp makes clear, “Helen is learning the sexual power play inherent in women’s art, of when to hide and when to publicize art” (119). Later after she marries Arthur, Helen recognizes how he uses her as a showcase, as a means of reflecting his own wealth and status. After the completion of their courtship, her art means nothing to him and neither does her appreciation of nature—she exists only to reflect his own image. Like the carefully framed and scrutinized picturesque landscape, Helen feels trapped and confined by the male gaze, an object of beauty made available solely for his appreciation.

Helen describes several examples of the male gaze in her journal. During a hot day in July, Helen and little Arthur find respite from the heat under a large oak tree on the edge of the woods. Helen plucks some flowers and gives them to her young son, and

[...] enjoying the heavenly beauty of the flowers, through the medium of his smiling eyes; forgetting, for the moment, all my cares, laughing at his gleeful laughter, and delighting myself with his delight,—when a shadow suddenly eclipsed the little space of sunshine on the grass before us; and looking up, I beheld Walter Hargrave standing and gazing upon us.

‘Excuse me, Mrs. Huntingdon,’ said he, ‘but I was spell-bound; I had neither the power to come forward and interrupt you, nor to withdraw from the contemplation of such a scene.’ (239-240)

Here Helen and her son become a pastoral scene for the male gaze, a striking image that captivates Hargrave. His feelings of attraction for Helen and his subtle hints that he wants her as his mistress inform this scene, and the shadow cast by Hargrave’s body seems foreboding and, in some sense, threatening to the maternal tranquility of the scene. The shadow indicates the transgressive presence of adulterous desire as well as the possessive nature of the male gaze as a subsuming force, owning, or at the very least

imposing upon, what it sees. Like the picturesque scene, Helen becomes a pleasing aesthetic arrangement on which Walter Hargrave can project his desire for mastery.

Many scholars have discussed how Helen's status as a woman artist further objectifies her. Antonia Losano's nuanced analysis of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* evaluates depictions of woman artists in nineteenth-century novels, and she states

[...] the remarkably common scene or spectacle of a woman in the act of painting becomes a way for women writers to express complex and contradictory aesthetic theories, political analysis, and cultural critique. Women novelists who wrote about women painters engaged in a reevaluation and, often, an upheaval of the traditional discourse of aesthetics. These women writers struggled to rewrite the relations of gender and art in order to make a space for female artistic production, but doing so required them to explode one of the seminal ideological constructions in art: the image of the woman as art object, an object of desire rather than a productive aesthetic subject. (15)

Though Losano does not provide specific examples and instead explores other aspects of the text, *The Tenant of Wildfell* confronts this ideological construction of woman as art object in various scenes throughout the novel. The scene when Gilbert and his sister first visit Wildfell Hall comes to mind, as well as the various scenes at the beginning of the novel when Gilbert either stumbles upon or actively seeks Helen out and finds her sketching or painting en plein aire. Gilbert admits,

But I could not help stealing a glance, now and then, from the splendid view at our feet to the elegant white hand that held the pencil, and the graceful neck and glossy raven curls that drooped over her paper.

'Now,' thought I, 'if I had but a pencil and a morsel of paper, I could make a lovelier sketch than hers, admitting I had the power to delineate faithfully what is before me.' (63)

At this particular moment, Gilbert views Helen as an object of beauty with an "elegant white hand" and a "graceful neck and glossy raven curls," not as a creative being. Gilbert

creates a picture of Helen that negates her agency and creativity. His presence, particularly his gaze, makes Helen nervous and uncomfortable, and though she expresses her feelings to him, he blatantly disregards her wishes in order to gratify his own desires. Helen remains unable to build, in the Heideggerian sense, because of the restrictive gaze that bores down on her, and her ability to dwell is jeopardized.

Arthur's gaze also prevents Helen from dwelling. He finds her role as an artist titillating, especially considering his self-satisfaction when he discovers the faint sketches of his own portrait on the back of some Helen's drawings. Realizing that these sketches represent Helen's own repressed desire for him gratifies his ego and confirms his own power over her, and his scrutiny of each of her drawings, "holding them so close to the candle, and poring so intently over the seeming blanks," creates a disturbing and invasive scene of Arthur dramatically flexing this power over her (147).

Arthur's gaze continues to threaten Helen even after she leaves him. She must change her name from Huntingdon to Graham, her mother's maiden name for fear of him tracking her down (372). Helen must also, despite her desire for artistic expression, censor her art. Her method of inscribing her works with false locations to prevent Arthur from learning of her whereabouts symbolically represents her failed marriage and estranged relationship with her abusive husband, and also reflects her alienation from an overtly patriarchal society that expects her to suffer through such misery. In *The*

Madwoman in the Attic, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar observe:

What distinguishes Helen Graham (and all the women authors who resemble her) from male Romantics, however, is precisely her anxiety about her own artistry, together with the duplicity that anxiety necessitates. Even when she becomes a professional artist, Helen continues to fear the social implications of her vocation. Associating female creativity with freedom from male domination, and dreading the

misogynistic censure of her community, she produces art that at least partly hides her experience of her actual place in the world. Because her audience potentially includes the man from whom she is trying to escape, she must balance her need to paint her own condition against her need to circumvent detection. Her strained relationship to her art is thus determined almost entirely by her gender, so that from both her anxieties and her strategies for overcoming them we can extrapolate a number of the crucial ways in which women's art has been radically qualified by their femaleness. (82)

Her art suffers as a result of Arthur's hovering presence, his phantom-gaze over her shoulder as she paints. Helen's internalization symbolizes the censoring so many creative women faced during the nineteenth century, and still face, in some ways, today.

Though this internalized gaze causes Helen to repress her full artistic expression, the gaze also results in displays of Helen's anger and agency at specific points in the novel. At the beginning of the novel, she responds to Gilbert's persistent gaze with her own "momentary, indefinable expression of quiet scorn" (15). Nancy Armstrong's analysis of Catherine in *Wuthering Heights* seems to apply here as well: "The woman does not behave like the docile object of the gaze, but returns the gaze in a manner—this time not sweetly, but with scorn and desperation—that displays the presence of subjectivity. Her eyes violate his aesthetically grounded notion of desire as they become signs of an active female self" (196). But later in the novel, Helen reveals her rage at the gaze through a physical display. Walter Hargrave's gaze intrudes once more, this time as Helen paints. Attempting to improve her skills as a painter in order to gain economic emancipation from her husband, Helen sets up her easel in the library, "a secure retreat," which the men rarely enter for "[n]one or our gentleman had the smallest pretensions to a literary taste" (338). But "contrary to [her] expectation," Helen explains in her journal,

[...] Mr. Hargrave *did* look in, and did *not* immediately withdraw on seeing me. He apologized for his intrusion, and said he was only come for a book; but when he had got it, he condescended to cast a glance over my picture. Being a man of taste, he had something to say on this subject as well as another, and having modestly commented on it, without much encouragement from me, he proceeded to expatiate on the art in general. Receiving no encouragement in that either, he dropped it, but did not depart. (338)

Helen attempts to discourage Hargrave's attentions by giving him the silent treatment, a technique that fails miserably. As Helen "went on coolly mixing and tempering my colours," Hargrave continues to talk at her and then he,

[...] advanced one step towards me, looked me in the face, and drew in his breath to speak; but that look, that heightened colour, that sudden sparkle of the eye made my blood rise in wrath: I abruptly turned away, and, snatching up my brush, began to dash away at my canvass with rather too much energy for the good of the picture. (341)

Here the gaze does not objectify Helen by making her into a scene or picture, but instead becomes coercive. Reading the desire to own her and to "rescue" her from Grassdale in his eyes enrages Helen, mainly because his suggestion violates her moral code and also because Hargrave's proposition removes her own independence and agency from the equation. Helen wants to act on her own volition, acquiring what she desires by her own means, not under the watchful eyes and patronizing auspices of a male protector.

Marilyn Frye's discussion of the arrogant and loving eye further elucidates Helen's dilemma. Frye explains that the arrogant perceiver

coerces the objects of his perception into satisfying the conditions his perception imposes. He tries to accomplish in a glance what the slave masters and batterers accomplish by extended use of physical force, and to a great extent he succeeds. He manipulates the environment, perception and judgment of her whom he perceives so that her recognized options are limited, and the course she chooses will be such as coheres with his purposes. (67)

As Frye points out, the arrogant eye carries a potent force, manipulating and controlling its object. Helen's refusal to submit to this coercive gaze shows the challenges she faces as she attempts to dwell more freely.

The Confines of Husband and Home: Patriarchal Tyranny and Imprisonment

The gaze displays the physical, aesthetic coercion felt by nineteenth-century women. Anne Mellor notes that Romantic woman writers also express what she terms the feminine sublime in a drastically different way—through their explorations of patriarchal tyranny. She states that these authors move “the exercise of sublime power into the household”:

Their novels expose the dark underside of the doctrine of the separate spheres, the sexual division of labor, and the domestic ideology of patriarchal capitalism. The father, whether as patriarch or priest, is unmasked as the author of violence against women, as the perpetrator of sadistic tortures and even incest, and thus as the violator of the very bonds of affection and responsibility that constitute the bourgeois family. (91)

Arthur's role as a figure of patriarchal tyranny recurs throughout the novel and will be analyzed further later in this chapter. His home becomes a site of imprisonment and confinement for Helen, and his incessant attempts to control her behavior to suit his own needs results in a stifling of her creativity and personhood. Violence often erupts at Grassdale as a result of his inability to control his temper, and his moral dissolution finally forces Helen to escape with her son. Beatriz Villacañas Palomo claims that Anne Brontë's depiction of Arthur Huntingdon reflects a challenge to the existing fascination with the Byronic hero, a fascination that Charlotte and Emily Brontë display in their creations of Rochester and Heathcliff. Palomo states that “Helen “*rationaly* rejects the

‘romantic’ masculine type in his lack of restraint, self-indulgence and aggressivity,” and she continues to explain that

Unlike Heathcliff, and unlike Rochester as well, Huntingdon is not Byronic hero. There is no grandeur or fascination in him. He is just a selfish, shallow man, whom alcohol has made brutal and stupid. It is this de-romanticization, this refusal to be fascinated by the demon-hero who lives inside her two elder sisters’ most famous masculine creations, that contributes greatly to making *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* such a powerful artifact of social criticism. (192)

But Deborah Lutz points out that in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Anne Brontë “has created a plausible female Byronic hero,” for *Helen* plays the role of the Byronic hero in this Brontë tale (xi). She is the mysterious and melancholic occupant of a ruined estate, haunted by a blighted past, with reclusive tendencies and raging passions. Palomo and Lutz’s claims become even more important considering the nuanced and complex feelings that Helen has about Arthur. As she matures, she views him as a *real* person and she loses her romantic, idealized, and ultimately false view of him. Even though she fears him and the violence and profligacy that he represents, her view of him remains rather sympathetic, especially toward the end of the novel when he becomes ill. The power differential has shifted, and Helen realizes that she can wield her own moral authority over Arthur as she attempts to evangelize and bring him back into the fold of Christianity.

But prior to Arthur’s illness and death, Helen feels the confines of her marriage quite acutely. Though the name of her husband’s estate suggests peace, tranquility and civility, it becomes the opposite for Helen. Just as Wildfell Hall becomes a place of rest and respite despite its foreboding gothic exterior, Grassdale becomes a site of violence. During her time at Grassdale Manor, Helen’s art becomes relegated to fleeting references

in her journal. Her husband's home, which according to Victorian conventions should be a world of domestic bliss and happiness, becomes an unsafe environment for both Helen and her little Arthur. The domestic enclosure, both unsafe and immoral, challenges the Victorian assumptions of the home as a safe haven of feminine virtue. Helen's perception and sensitivity to her environment stand in stark contrast to her husband Arthur Huntingdon's lifestyle. Even before their marriage, Arthur shocks Helen with his aggressive and restless personality. When Arthur insists upon viewing Helen's unfinished sketches despite her adamant refusal, he snatches the portfolio and says, " 'Let me have its bowels then,' [and] he deftly abstracted the greater parts of its contents," perusing the drawings for sketches of himself that would reveal Helen's desire for him (151). After their marriage, Helen witnesses how his violent tendencies extend to two of his favorite pastimes at Grassdale Manor, hunting for sport and harassing the household servants and the family pets. Helen notes in her journal how "He is pleased with my attentions—it may be, grateful for them. He likes to have me near him; and though he is peevish and testy with his servants and his dogs, he is gentle and kind to me" (213). But when their son is born and Helen shifts her attention to the baby, Arthur's jealousy emerges and he begins to lash out at her as well, even to the extent of appalling threats about dropping the baby (230).

Helen traces Arthur's violence to boredom over the "idle, quiet life he leads" and because he has "so few sources of amusement" (197). Much like the picturesque tourist who searches for a pleasing scene, Arthur constantly searches for "amusement," but finds it only in drunken debacles and violent spectacles. Rather than creating any meaningful connection with his environment at Grassdale, Arthur travels to London for distraction.

While Helen absorbs herself in her duties as a mother and occupies herself reading novels and taking morning walks, Arthur's restlessness and his violently aggressive tendencies that develop as a result create friction and fear throughout the household. Agitating and aggravating Helen becomes a pastime for Arthur during his brief stays at Grassdale Manor, and she becomes exhausted by his constant haranguing. She finally suggests

a short residence by the seaside, for his recreation and further restoration, and for the benefit of our little one as well. But no; watering-places were so intolerably dull—besides, he had been invited by one of his friend to spend a month or two in Scotland for the better reaction of grouse-shooting and deer-stalking, and had promised to go. (251)

Arthur's anthropocentric view of the sea as a "watering-place," a site of tourist amusement, stands in stark juxtaposition with the awe and sublimity that Helen feels when she views the fathomless depths of the ocean. Arthur lacks the ability to appreciate his surroundings and views nature as a playground to indulge his own ego. Hunting remains only sport rather than a source of sustenance or an engagement with the natural environment, aspects that Arthur seems unable to fathom.

But the most disturbing depictions in the novel involve Arthur's sadistic enjoyment of the suffering or abuse of others. When Arthur hosts a group of his profligate friends at Grassdale, one of his friends, Ralph Hattersley, begins abusing his wife, Milicent, "throwing her from him with such violence that she fell on her side" (267). Helen is horrified by Hattersley's violence, but Arthur "had no doubt richly enjoyed the whole scene" (267). Arthur's reaction typifies his view of violence as a source of entertainment, an exciting diversion in his dissipated life. Arthur's atrocious behavior as a parent also attests to this:

My greatest source of uneasiness, in this time of trial, was my son, whom his father and his father's friends delighted to encourage in all the embryo vices a little child can show, and to instruct in all the evil habits he could acquire—in a word, to 'make a man of him' was one of their staple amusements; and I need say no more to justify my alarm on his account, and my determination to deliver him at any hazard from the hands of such instructors. [...] So the little fellow came down every evening, in spite of his cross mamma, and learnt to tipple wine like papa, to swear like Mr. Hattersley, and to have his own way like a man, and sent mamma to the devil when she tried to prevent him. (335)

This dissolution proves to be the driving force behind Helen's decision to leave her husband. Helen's determination that "my child must not be abandoned to this corruption: better far that he should live in poverty and obscurity with a fugitive mother, than in luxury and affluence with such a father" compels her to escape (336).

Arthur's "tyranny" climaxes when he confiscates her journal and the keys to her desk, then, upon learning her plan to escape, burns her art materials, her easel and her canvases (350). Helen concludes that she is "a slave, a prisoner" (352). She advises the young Esther Hargrave, "You might as well sell yourself to slavery at once, as marry a man you dislike" (359). Laura Berry explains how both Anne and Emily Brontë view the home as a place of incarceration, and states that *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*,

firmly asserts that the guardianship of home can easily collapse into imprisonment. The novel offers numerous identifications between home and prison, beginning with the gothic description of Helen Huntingdon's refuge at her "bleak ... asylum," Wildfell Hall itself, "enclosed by stone walls, and entered by an iron gate with large balls of grey granite." In narrating Helen's early history the novel moves through a series of imprisoning domestic structures: the proposed marriage to the aptly named Mr. Boarham; the constraints of life at home with her aunt and uncle, and then the literal confinements of marriage itself as it is experienced with the decadent Arthur Huntingdon. (39)

Though she acknowledges the imprisonment Helen faces at various stages throughout her life, Berry fails to acknowledge that Wildfell Hall does become a place of asylum and to some extent liberation for Helen, as I previously argued, while Grassdale becomes the site of imprisonment. As Elizabeth Leaver states eloquently,

Grassdale Manor, the elegant and beautiful country seat of Arthur and Helen Huntingdon, is the site of female suffering, humiliation and intense pain, and of male debauchery, lechery and infidelity. [...] Thus Wildfell Hall, far from being the locus of tyranny and imprisonment for a helpless female, shelters and becomes her sanctuary. (241)

According to Leaver, the fact that the crumbling ruins of Wildfell Hall become a sanctuary presents a “startling reversal of the Gothic convention,” the convention where the ruins of the gothic castle usually become a place of sublime suffering or patriarchal tyranny (241).

The Confines of Community: Helen as “Object of General Attraction”

Yet one must also acknowledge that even as a sanctuary, a place of asylum that provides her with an escape, Helen still remains unable to dwell fully and completely even at Wildfell Hall. Individuals in the community surrounding Wildfell constantly intrude, threatening Helen’s freedom with their moral judgments and their voyeuristic tendencies. She becomes an “object of general attraction” within the community at a point when she desires solitude and anonymity (15). At the beginning of the novel, Gilbert’s sister Rose describes to her family the community’s response to Helen’s arrival:

‘She is called Mrs. Graham, and she is in mourning—not widow’s weeds, but slightish mourning—and she is quite young, they say,—not above five or six and twenty,—but *so* reserved! They tried all they could to find out who she was, and where she came from, and all about her, but neither Mrs. Wilson, with her skillful manoeuvring, could manage to elicit a single

satisfactory answer, or even a casual remark, or chance expression calculated to allay their curiosity, or throw the faintest ray of light upon her history, circumstances, or connexions. Moreover, she was barely civil to them, and evidently better pleased to say “good bye,” than “how do you do.” (12)

Rose’s description reveals the intense scrutiny she undergoes. Her style of dress, which reveals her status of a woman in mourning, tells the surrounding community a small tidbit of information about her, but her silence and lack of engagement with the “friendly” interlopers generates a fervor in the community as they seek to get to the bottom of the enigma she presents. Rose’s use of the phrase “skillful manoeuvring” seems quite telling; the inquiring community member must deftly perform the role of friendly neighbor in order to penetrate the mysteries behind Helen’s dwelling at Wildfell Hall.

Uncovering secrets becomes a central motif in the novel. Gilbert describes how his mother and sister “discuss the apparent, or non-apparent circumstances, and the probable or improbable history of the mysterious lady” (13). When Mrs. Markham and Rose visit Helen, they arrive back at the home with a full report: “Her appearance, manners, and dress, and the very furniture of the room she inhabited, were all set before me, with rather more clearness and precision than I cared to see them” (14). Though Gilbert remains uninterested at first, he soon finds his own curiosity aroused as he becomes more attracted to Helen, and he soon joins in on the spying and judging that form a pastime for the members of the community. Gilbert’s younger brother Fergus teases him about his sudden interest in Helen when he addresses his older brother:

‘Go back to your fields and your cattle, you lubberly fellow; you’re not fit to associate with ladies and gentlemen, like us, that having nothing to do but to run snooking about to our neighbours’ houses, peeping into their

private corners; and scenting out there secrets, and picking holes in their coats, when we don't find them ready made to our hands—and you don't understand such refined sources of enjoyment.' (54)

Fergus's teasing plays on the leisurely life of the upper class, those who can afford to spend their time delving into the comings and goings of their neighbors, but his words also reveal how the process becomes a game, a challenge to uncover the "secrets" of the private domestic sphere.

Beyond uncovering secrets, the community members surrounding Wildfell Hall tend to make moralistic judgments about Helen. As Rose mentions, Helen was "barely civil" when the ladies visited and Gilbert comments throughout the novel about her coldness (12). Mrs. Markham observes Helen's lack of domestic skills, "[o]n household matters, and all the little niceties of cookery, that every lady ought to be familiar with," and she explains: "I gave her some useful pieces of information however, and several excellent recipes, the value of which, she evidently could not appreciate" (13). Mrs. Markham also criticizes Helen's ability as a mother, disparaging her for coddling him and accusing her of treating little Arthur, "like a girl—you'll spoil his spirit, and make a mere Miss Nancy of him" (29). This raises Helen's hackles, and she responds vehemently with her own view of the gender biases inherent in the educating and raising children. Mrs. Markham also critiques Helen for little Arthur's dislike of wine, claiming that "the poor child will be the veriest milksop that ever was sopped!" (28). She publicly lambasts Helen for the way she disciplines little Arthur, then later, at a party which Helen does not attend, Mrs. Markham retells the episode for everyone else to weigh in with judgments of their own. Helen's parenting skills become a topic of conversation, and she becomes a freakish spectacle.

But the ostracization that she experiences becomes far worse at a party that she does attend. At this party, the gossip circulating centers on Helen's relationship with Frederick Lawrence. Several members of the community have observed a resemblance between little Arthur and Frederick, and they begin speculating that Helen has had an affair with Frederick and Arthur is their illegitimate child. The attendees of the party refuse to speak to Helen, effectively forcing her into exile in the garden of the estate. The vicar catches word of this salacious rumor, and feels it to be his "painful duty" to inform Helen of her sin by visiting her home and accusing her of adultery (92). When the vicar shares his version of the story with the Markham family, he states that "there was a strong display of unchastened, misdirected passions" (92). Helen displays her anger at these false rumors, and the vicar criticizes her for being overly passionate. Her role as a sublime, Byronic heroine emerges again.

But her reputation as a "fallen" woman forces her to endure even more scrutiny and judgment, and she becomes further marginalized within the community. The vicar exclaims that "*my* daughters—shall—not—consort with her" and he urges Mrs. Markham to prevent her children from interacting with Helen as well. As the community actively ostracizes Helen and marginalizes her, she becomes an object of scandalous spectacle within the community. Her impassioned responses to the blatant discrimination she endures cause her to be marginalized even more.

Even though Helen handles the criticism and responds with rational arguments justifying her actions as a mother, this accusation angers and appalls her, especially because it calls her character into question. Helen feels the pressure of both the

voyeurism and judgment, of being an object of spectacle within her community, and she discusses her feelings with her brother Frederick:

‘But I must leave this place, Frederick,’ she said—‘I never can be happy here,—nor anywhere else, indeed,’ she added, with a mirthless laugh,—‘but I cannot rest here.’

‘But where could you find a better place?’ replied he,—‘so secluded—so near me, if you think any thing of that.’

‘Yes,’ interrupted she, ‘it is all I could wish, if they could only have left me alone.’ (100)

Ironically, Gilbert overhears this dialogue while hiding in the bushes surrounding Wildfell Hall, emphasizing the specularization of Helen within the gaze of the community. At the time he wrongly suspects that Frederick is Helen’s lover rather than her brother. Gilbert’s actions and assumptions accentuate the role that he plays in this voyeuristic and judgmental “game” as well.

Charlotte Brontë employs the trope of the domestic sphere as a site of voyeuristic imprisonment as well, for *Jane Eyre* explicitly links the home to confinement. Jane Eyre spends her childhood in a home where she is literally locked in the red room for punishment as a child, while the discovery of the imprisonment of Bertha Rochester forms one of the most shocking and crucial scenes of the novel. In an analysis of Charlotte Brontë’s juvenilia, Susan Carlson explains,

In the symbolic world represented in these novelettes, the house is a male preserve and a prison for women. Women characters are rarely seen out of their homes [...] If we accept the convention that a woman’s house can be a metaphor for her body, an analysis of woman’s space in the novels is both revealing and disturbing. No woman in Angria has private space; every room, including her bedroom, can be intruded upon, and often a woman is threatened after a man appears suddenly in her bedroom (*Passing Events*), or steals into a room she had run to for safety (*Caroline Vernon*). Even when a woman is physically alone, she is often being watched; when Elizabeth Hastings, for example, paces back and forth in front of a window, she is being scrutinized both by her brother and by the

male narrator, who is watching from the bushes. Women's bodies are property, open to the man or men who enter them. (Carlson 65)

Wuthering Heights also presents the home as a site of violence and abuse, as Heathcliff's maniacal psychological manipulation of the inhabitants of both *Wuthering Heights* and *Thrushcross Grange* attests. Thus these themes become a recurring motif throughout the works of the Brontë sisters, and the intertextuality that develops between their works has been analyzed by several critics.²

Radical Dwelling: Helen as a Sublime Heroine

This emphasis on confinement and incarceration remains deeply psychological, and psychological games—the objectifying gaze, blatant deception and lies (adultery), and displays of power (such as Arthur's destruction of her artistic tools and his confiscation of her possessions)—form the core of the abuse Helen faces. She is exposed to physical violence indirectly, when Mr. Hattersley throws his wife Milicent “from him with such violence that she fell on her side,” and also when he “clutched a handful of her light brown ringlets and appeared to twist them unmercifully” (267, 276). But *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* shows how psychological abuse proves just as harmful particularly because it becomes so difficult to detect and gauge. Helen attempts to cope with the neglect and mind games that become part of her everyday existence; only when her son is being psychologically manipulated as well does she draw the line. But Helen does not remain the innocent victim either, for she contributes to their volatile relationship as well, as Laura Berry brilliantly explains:

² See Margaret Mary Berg “*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*: Anne Brontë's *Jane Eyre*,” N. M. Jacobs “Gender and Layered Narrative in *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.”

But if the Huntingdon marriage can be characterized as fundamentally cruel, then we must acknowledge that Helen generously returns the pain she has endured. Pleasure and cruelty are neither rigidly gendered nor consistent. In Huntingdon's decline, we witness an almost perfect reversal of the gendered power relations that dominated courtship. The literal restraints he placed on Helen become Huntingdon's own, as he increasingly feels marriage to be a prison. As much as he attempts to make Helen a captive, it is finally his imprisonment that we witness. (44)

This reversal suggests the sublime; here we see the weak and helpless woman overpower her incarcerator. But Helen, though at times vindictive, also admits that she's miserable in the relationship and that it makes her lash out in vengeance. She does not like the person she has become. She recognizes that Arthur's ill temper changes her own personality, explaining the change in her journal: "He returned three weeks ago [...] still worse in temper. And yet, perhaps, I am wrong: it is I that am less patient and forbearing. I am tired out with his injustice, his selfishness and hopeless *depravity*—I wish a milder word would do—; I am no angel and my corruption rises against it" (Brontë 256). Her realization that she's incapable to control her desire to lash back at Arthur and her inability to control her own actions becomes an even greater source of stress and shame for Helen.

But throughout the novel, Helen's anger manifests itself as a just and righteous response to egregious wrongs. Helen's response to Hargrave provides one of the most shocking scenes in the novel, especially to the nineteenth-century reader. Her anger and the spectacular display of the force of her own emotion as she threatens Hargrave with her palette knife demonstrate an incredible tenacity and strength markedly absent in the Victorian heroine. Helen refuses to depend on Hargrave to save her, just as she realizes that she can not save her own husband from his drinking and profligacy, and her use of

the palette knife to fend off the man who wishes to “save” her, “works symbolically to dramatize Helen’s self-reliance and autonomy through art” (Losano 23).

But Helen’s verbal sparring throughout the novel also exhibits her inability to suffer and be still. Helen openly addresses those who challenge her parenting methods, and she has no qualms about providing ample reasoning behind her decisions. In a manner that would have shocked the Victorian reader, Helen openly condemns the gender roles that she views weaken young women by sequestering them from experience, experience that may have given her the knowledge to avoid her marriage to Arthur Huntingdon in the first place, and this blatant condemnation would have been shocking for the Victorian reader. When Mrs. Markham accuses her of spoiling and doting on her son by sheltering him too much, Helen states

You would have us encourage our sons to prove all things by their own experience, while our daughters must not even profit by the experience of others. Now I would have both so to benefit by the experience of others, and the precepts of a higher authority, that they should know beforehand to refuse the evil and choose the good, and require no experimental proofs to teach them the evil of transgression. (31)

Helen continues providing more support for her argument, and, despite her tendency to preach, she refuses to suffer through insults in the way she raises little Arthur, choosing instead to rationally justify her actions as a mother. Rachel Carnell explains how Helen is able “to speak out in the manner of the exceptional eighteenth-century woman writer and to make broad claims about nature, culture, and education: Helen thus emblemizes the rationality of the public sphere” (10). In many ways, Anne Brontë’s novel mirrors Mary Wollstonecraft’s radical treatises advocating for the rights of women, both in its message and in the public uproar that occurs in response.

Helen's ability to wield her own opinions and to justify her own actions rationally challenges the Burkean dichotomy of men as rational and women as natural. Barbara Gates explains the extent of this dichotomy and the impact it held for women in the nineteenth century:

In the process of defining masculinity, the cultural categories of 'women' and 'nature' had become oppositions to 'men' and 'mind.' Without the pervasive feminization of nature and the naturalization of women, nineteenth-century Englishmen [...] could not have continued comfortably to relegate women to the realms of the erotic and the domestic and to exclude women from those of the public and political, nor could they have allowed themselves the powerful illusion of (male) mind over (female) matter. (Gates 3)

Helen Huntingdon challenges this dichotomy by fusing rationality with a sensitivity and attunement to her emotions and the natural environment that surrounds her. Helen continually confronts the ideas of community members with whom she comes in contact by rationally expressing her own ideas and opinions, but she also finds asylum and freedom in her own private world—a world of reading, writing, music, painting and communion with nature.

In her essay "Toward a Female Sublime," Patricia Yaeger calls for a reinvention of the sublime mode, a reinvention that would alleviate the social impediments to dwelling. Rather than longing for the grandiose heights of the "vertical sublime," the traditional Romantic sublime, where one desires or achieves a moment of transcendence or liberation from this world, Yaeger suggests that a feminist version of the sublime, a horizontal sublime, would allow "the other [to be] preserved in its otherness" instead of subsuming or being subsumed by the other (195). Yaeger explains how the traditional masculine version of the sublime, the vertical sublime, creates a quandary: "The problem

with entering the realm of the sublime is that we contract to participate in a power struggle that, even when it is resisted, involves grim forces of possession and domination” (198). She identifies the sublime as “not only [...] forbidden to women, but inimical to their needs” (198), and also emphasizes the lack of literary foremothers who grapple with the sublime: “The female poet accompanied by a halo, or fiery trail of language, is a dazzling image, and, with its premonition of *hypsos*—of power and influence, of transport and height—is an image conspicuously absent (with the exception of the poems of Emily Dickinson) from the poetic lexicon of the nineteenth century” (194). But I would argue that Helen Huntingdon, throughout *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, becomes that sublime image, the artist “accompanied by a halo, or fiery trail of language.” Helen challenges the proscribed gender roles of her time by articulating her opinions clearly, eloquently, and rationally. Helen’s refusal to reflect back to Arthur in the “proper” way and her desire to dwell as a living entity separate from his (or Hargrave’s) generates her own feelings of anger and contempt, ultimately resulting in a fever-pitch that fits Yaeger’s definition of the horizontal sublime. Here her role as a Byronic heroine seems most appropriate. Helen’s strong passions and vociferous opinions create a sublime force reserved primarily for men in Romantic and early Victorian literature. This anger, however, remains focused primarily at the injustice of the confines Helen faces, and her rage provides the impetus she needs to leave the imprisoning Grassdale for the freer, wilder environs of Wildfell Hall. Helen’s abhorrence for the domination and tyranny of men over women causes her to lash out vehemently in response, in ways so revolutionary that they verge on the sublime.

But Patricia Yaeger also emphasizes how the horizontal sublime ultimately focuses on *preserving* the other in its otherness, rather than subsuming or absorbing that otherness. This preservation directly connects to Heidegger's concept of dwelling because dwelling consists of both building and preservation. Yaeger's concept of the horizontal sublime generates the sense of community and reciprocity inherent in dwelling. Rather than subsuming others or viewing them with plans of mastery or manipulation, the horizontal sublime works with dwelling in creating a sense of care for the other. Since the sublime often results from viewing or gazing on an other, Marilyn Frye's concept of the loving eye seems pertinent as well. Frye explains that the loving eye,

knows the independence of the other. It is the eye of a seer who knows that nature is indifferent. It is the eye of one who knows that to know the seen, one must consult something other than one's own will and interests and fears and imagination. One must look at the thing. One must look and listen and check and question. (75)

Rather than assuming knowledge and mastery over the other, the loving eye requires reciprocity and interaction with the other. Frye continues her explication of the loving eye by emphasizing that

The loving eye is one that pays a certain sort of attention. This attention can require a discipline but *not* a self-denial. The discipline is one of self-knowledge, knowledge of the scope and boundary of the self. What is required is that one know what are one's interests, desires, and loathings, one's projects, hungers, fears and wishes, and that one know what is and what is not determined by these. In particular, it is a matter of being able to tell one's own interests from those of others and knowing where one's self leaves off and another begins. (75)

Preserving one's own sense of self becomes central to the program of dwelling because in this preservation of self one preserves the other as well.

Anne Mellor argues in her book *Romanticism and Gender* that late-eighteenth and early nineteenth-century women writers accomplish this preservation of the other in their writing. She claims:

[W]omen Romantic writers tended to celebrate, not the achievements of the imagination nor the overflow of powerful feelings, but rather the workings of the rational mind, a mind relocated—in a gesture of revolutionary gender implications—in the female as well as the male body. They thus insisted upon the fundamental equality of women and men. They typically endorsed a commitment to a construction of subjectivity based on alterity, and based their moral systems on what Carol Gilligan has recently taught us to call an ethic of care which insists on the primacy of family or the community and their attendant practical responsibilities. They grounded their notion of community on a cooperative rather than possessive interaction with a Nature troped as a female friend or sister, and promoted a politics of gradual rather than violent social change, a social change that extends the values of domesticity into the public realm. (2-3)

Helen's rational arguments, which often directly address gender inequality in the education of young children, and her habit of finding solace in nature corroborate Mellor's argument. Though *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* belongs to the Victorian period, Anne Brontë's work, as well as the work of the other Brontë sisters, has Romantic tendencies, especially in its emphasis on the relationship between the female protagonists and nature.³ Anne Brontë's other novel, *Agnes Grey*, also includes many scenes similar to *The Tenant* where the female protagonist finds joy and solace in nature. This aspect was mentioned briefly in the discussion of Helen's embodied relationship with nature in the first chapter and will be addressed further in the third chapter in an exploration of the way the narrative structure and the depictions of Helen and Gilbert emphasize the importance of love, reverence, and mutual relationship.

³ Many recent scholars question the arbitrary assignation of the terms Romantic and Victorian and ascribing strict delineations to these arbitrary periods. See Stephen Hancock's *The Romantic Sublime and Middle-Class Subjectivity in the Victorian Novel* (4).

Even prior to her relationship with Gilbert, Helen attempts to salvage her marriage by pleading with Arthur, saying, “ ‘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?’” (245). Returning to Anne Mellor’s ideas about Romantic women writers, the novel deals with the themes of connection and relationality. Reciprocity and healthy communication are Helen’s deepest desire for their marriage, and she finally realizes that she will never receive that in her relationship with Arthur. Helen states, “since he and I are one, I so identify myself with him, that I feel his degradation, his failings, and transgressions as my own; I blush for him, I fear for him; I repent for him, weep, pray, and feel for him as for myself; but I cannot act for him” (250). This conclusion, the inability to change another individual, becomes the central theme of the novel, a theme that will be analyzed more closely in the final chapter of this thesis.

These intimate depictions of domestic relationships provide readers with their own glimpse into the secret world of the Victorian British family, a world which at the time projected over-sentimentalized images of the devoted and industrious husband, doting and morally-pure mother caring for well-behaved children. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* radically challenges that view of the family and the domestic sphere, revealing the often violent and coercive power relationships inherent in family relationships. The home becomes a place where power struggles emerge, develop, and are played out. Tomoko Kuribayashi and Julie Tharp explain how women writers use novels as a “safe space” to stage these struggles, and often the novel centers on the space of the home as a result:

The concept of safe—or unsafe—home is inseparable from the act of writing for the purpose of creating safe space, because the home is a

central spatial element to many women's lives and also because much of the violence women experience takes place in their home, belying the social myth that the home is safe space for all residents. Home is supposed to be, but often is not, safe for women, as is attested by the number of women battered at home and children sexually and otherwise abused by their family members. (5)

Anne Brontë's novel seems to be such a space, where she attempts to present the reality of domestic life rather than a sentimentalized fairy-tale version. But telling these stories, exposing the façade, creates a space for dialogue as well. In presenting the violence that the domestic sphere attempts to hide, the novel shows that manipulative and controlling modes of existence only cause strife. Moving away from such modes of existence becomes necessary for Helen's survival, displaying for the reader the importance of nurturing relationships and conscious dwelling.

CHAPTER 3—
HELEN, GILBERT AND THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE:
RECIPROCAL AND RELATIONAL DWELLING

The notion of safe space seems central to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* when considering the exigency that brought the novel into existence. Anne Brontë explains in her preface to the second edition: “My object in writing the following pages, was not simply to amuse the Reader, neither was it to gratify my own taste, nor yet to ingratiate myself with the Press and the Public; I wished to tell the truth, for truth always conveys its own moral to those who are able to receive it” (3). The preface itself was a direct response to the censure that she had undergone as a result of her open and honest presentation of reality in the space of the novel, and Brontë believes it is her *responsibility* to share her views, as she states in her preface:

Such humble talents as God has given me I will endeavour to put to their greatest use; if I am able to amuse I will try to benefit too; and when I feel it my duty to speak an unpalatable truth, with the help of God, I *will* speak it, though it be to the prejudice of my name and to the detriment of my reader’s immediate pleasure as well as my own. (4)

Brontë knew the risk she faced in expressing so blatantly her view of society, but she chose quite deliberately to use the space of novel to express her radical critique of her society. Writing became a space where she felt called to present her most passionate feelings despite the risk involved. As Elizabeth Hollis Berry explains, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* “resounds with radical vigor and penetrating authenticity” (71). The novel’s space became a site of liberation for Brontë, but she came under intense criticism as a result, even from her own sister Charlotte. As Helen Huntingdon roams the

landscape with her son to paint *en plein aire* and as a result suffers under the scrutiny of the community, Anne Brontë faced censure from the nineteenth-century readership as she exercised her freedom as a writer as well. And Brontë responds to the criticism in a manner similar to her protagonist in her preface to the second edition of the novel—Anne verbalizes just as Helen does what she *feels* deepest and most passionately; she does so in a dazzling manner that Yaeger would define as a hallmark of the female sublime.

Anne Brontë views her novel as an expression of her dedication to truth-telling, and expresses via the voice of her narrator Gilbert that the story is not a mere sketch of reality, but a “full and faithful account,” fleshed out and three-dimensional (8). Brontë stresses in her preface her commitment to realistically portraying reality and avoiding assiduously the “delicate concealment of facts” that typified Victorian society (4). N. M. Jacobs explains that the narrative structure of both *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and *Wuthering Heights* mirrors the revelation of reality to which Anne Brontë refers, for the narrative structure of both novels

exemplifies a process, necessary for both writer and reader, of passing through or going behind the official version of reality in order to approach a truth that the culture prefers to deny; it exemplifies the ways in which domestic reality is obscured by layers of conventional ideology; and it replicates a cultural split between male and female spheres that is shown to be at least one source of the tragedy at the center of the fictional world. (204)

Both Brontës excavate the façade of domestic safety and retreat that the Victorian home was supposed to represent and reveal a darker, violent reality present in the domestic sphere.

But in addition to utilizing the space of the novel to reveal the harsh reality of domestic violence and abuse, Anne Brontë also uses the novel as a site of exploration.

Brontë's portrayal of Helen and Gilbert, as well as the unique structure of the novel, prove to be interesting ground for analysis, and these two areas will be the central focus of this chapter. Helen's characterization eludes any firm delineation within the Victorian period, for she fails to fit neatly into any of its categories. The novel's structure, with Helen's journal and letters embedded within Gilbert's letters to his friend Halford, resists glib categorization. Both of these aspects of the novel reveal the confluence of aesthetic and social concerns—Brontë revolts against her society's proprietary aesthetics, aesthetics that presume that women should perform certain domestic roles within society, and that they should write, if they dare to write, in a specific manner about certain topics with rigorously codified depictions of female characters, and never depart from these strictures. Anne Brontë, through her radical protagonist Helen Huntingdon, her atypical hero Gilbert Markham, and the unique structure of her novel, challenges the arbitrary restrictions her society imposes and critiques the attitude of mastery and domination held by Victorian culture.

Helen Huntingdon as Radical Heroine

Brontë's complex and nuanced depiction of Helen Huntingdon challenges the clearly demarcated Victorian character types allotted for women in the novel. Chapter Two focused on Helen's status as a sublime heroine, a revision of the Byronic hero, and this section will continue to elaborate on the radical nature of her character. Nina Auerbach explains that nineteenth-century female literary characters generally fell into four different categories recognized easily by the nineteenth-century reading public:

The towering woman who in so many guises possessed the Victorian imagination appears in art and literature as four central types: the angel,

the demon, the old maid, and the fallen woman. The first two appear to be emanations of eternity; the latter two rise from within Victorian society. Yet there is incessant interfusion among these four categories: none is undiluted by the others. (63)

Helen's character attests to this "incessant interfusion" of which Auerbach speaks—Helen spans the boundaries between fallen woman and old maid, angel and demon. Her marital status remains ambiguous in the eyes of her neighbors, and her position as a single mother invites many within her community to conclude that she must be a "fallen" woman. Her role as an artist suggests the same, for as a working woman earning money via her art, her society links her to prostitution. Her lack of interest in Gilbert's advances at first, as well as her disgust at his gaze and for the coquetry the women around her engage in, places her close to the position of the old maid, the woman who fails, or refuses, to "capture" a proper husband.

But Helen's ambiguous status as both angel and demon proves to be an interesting aspect of the novel as well. Throughout *The Tenant*, Helen strains against the ideology of the angel in the house. The formation of the nineteenth-century ideal, "the angel in the house," evolved from a submissive female character in a poem by Coventry Patmore, and was "an inspiring figure of purity and selflessness—ministering within the family sphere [...] During these decades [1840's-50's] the angelic image is rarely questioned as a guide for the attitudes of men toward women" (Helsing 81). Dependent and passive, the life of the angel revolved around selfless service to her family, dutifully accomplishing household chores or, at the very least, ordering the servants to do so. Moral superiority also accompanied the domesticity of the Angel. In her book *Victorian Women*, Joan Perkin explains that the

ideal of most middle-class wives was [...] to become the morally superior partner in the marriage. In the period 1800 to 1840, in Evangelical Christian circles in particular, women established the home as their own sphere, claiming moral authority over religious and sexual matters. Most women believed what Sarah Lewis wrote in her influential book, *Women's Mission* (1839), that they needed to guard the citadel of respectability, to control men's passions and eliminate male profligacy. (87)

As Perkin points out, the social conventions prescribed specifically for women remain closely entwined with the traditions of early nineteenth-century evangelical Christianity. In their domestic role, women were expected to be the moral arbiters of society, responsible for the spiritual edification of their husbands and children. The great importance of this duty led to an even more extreme version of the angel in the house, that of the female savior, who was, "leading the way to a fuller humanity and ushering in a new era of community and love" (Helsing 15).

Arthur Huntingdon fully buys into this ideology and views Helen as his very own female savior. Throughout the novel, he implores her to help him overcome his debauchery, effectively burdening her with the responsibility to improve *his* own behavior. During their courtship, Helen also believes that she can "deliver him from his faults" (Brontë 165), revealing that

Helen at first accepts the ideology of woman as man's helpmate—particularly his spiritual guide and companion—because it offers her a personal importance that amounts to an almost divine power. She sees her marriage as a god-ordained mission: not merely to civilize an undisciplined boy but to rescue an immortal soul. (Jacobs 210-11)

Before her marriage to Arthur, Helen tries to convince her aunt that she "might have influence sufficient to save him from some errors, and I should think my life well spent in the effort to preserve so noble a nature from destruction" (Brontë 141).

In this conversation with her aunt, Helen reveals that Arthur has told her that “if he had me always by his side he should never do or say a wicked thing, and that a little daily talk with me would make him quite a saint” (Brontë 141). Arthur, upholding the angel ideology, flatters her by suggesting that she has the power to save him. Tempting Helen’s pride in this way, Arthur seduces her to become his bride. He claims, “the very idea of having you to care for under my roof, would force me to moderate my expenses and live like a Christian—not to speak of all the prudence and virtue you would instill into my mind by your wise counsels and sweet, attractive goodness” (163). Unfortunately, the reader discovers that the “very idea” fails to reform Arthur and neither does their actual marriage. Helen discovers that her moral virtue and her efforts to reform her husband cannot change Arthur.

Arthur’s attitudes toward Helen display the inherent flaws of the angel ideal. Arthur tells Helen that she is, “an angel of Heaven; only be not too austere in your divinity” (Brontë 225). Arthur loves the angel in his house, except when Helen’s moralizing cramps his libertine lifestyle. Arthur enjoys the domestic benefits that Helen provides, as Helen describes:

[Arthur’s] 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. (233)

The real life of the angel consisted of constant service and domestic imprisonment, and the moral “power” allotted to women was not power at all. When Helen discovers Arthur’s philandering ways and threatens to leave him, he replies vehemently, “ ‘Do you

think I'm going to be made the talk of the country, for your fastidious caprices?" (294).

His pride in his "angel" wife extends only as far as her character reflects on his own.

When Helen begins to challenge the "bondage" that she endures as his "steward and housekeeper [...] without pay and thanks" and once again proposes a separation, he will not have it: "he was not going to be the talk of all the old gossips in the neighborhood: he would not have it said that he was such a brute his wife could not live with him" (308).

In a pathetic and futile attempt to maintain his reputation, Arthur tries to gloss over his debauchery with a thin veneer of Victorian conventionality, an attempt which lies in stark juxtaposition to the scrutiny Helen undergoes for *failing* to maintain appearances and trekking out on her own with her son to Wildfell Hall.

Helen's recognition of this veneer of propriety becomes her salvation. She realizes her inability to reform Arthur, and her recognition that she is no angel becomes her saving grace, for only after she acknowledges this fact can she give up her role of female savior and escape the imprisonment of the role of the angel in the house. In her relationship with Arthur, she realizes the importance of being able to accept the otherness of the other. Rather than continuing to engage in a coercive and manipulative relationship with Arthur, Helen recognizes that she must escape this relationship and regain her own bearings as an individual. The experience Helen undergoes, the gradual revelation of the angelic-savior ideal as nothing but a means of imprisonment for women, becomes a means of education and develops her character, and which, according to Brontë's preface, will help her readers avoid the "sin and misery for the young of both sexes who are left to wring their bitter knowledge from experience" (4).

Helen discovers independence and freedom while maintaining a commitment to “a truly moral life and not merely a socially proper or correct life” (Langland, *Anne Brontë* 126). Separating conventional propriety from ethical, biblically-based behavior, Helen confronts the double-standards that Victorian ideology imposes upon women.

Maria Frawley discusses this separation:

As Christine L. Krueger writes, ‘From the women preachers of the eighteenth century to the Victorian novelists who were their heirs, women’s writings testify to their ability to recognize the ideological conflicts in scripture that were suppressed in the patriarchal feminine ideal, and to interpret scripture as offering divinely sanctioned challenges to masculine authority.’ Thus, the moment when Helen Huntingdon literally becomes free of her husband is interwoven in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* with the moment when she finally divests herself of the missionary role endorsed by her society’s domestic ideology. (135-136)

Though I agree with Frawley’s analysis, her view that Helen divests herself of the “missionary role” seems inaccurate. Helen never fully divests herself of the missionary role, in my opinion, but she does rid herself of the belief that she remains *responsible*, as a woman and a wife, for Arthur’s salvation and his moral character. At Arthur’s deathbed, Helen’s behavior displays this knowledge. Although she serves her husband much in the same way as she did before she left, constantly attending to his needs and sacrificing her own, her care for him now, at least according to her journal, results from the desire to fulfill her duty as a Christian rather than any innate belief that she can reform or sanctify him. As she cares for Arthur, he asks her if she will return to live with him when he recuperates. She responds adamantly: “[...] if you wish me to feel kindly towards you, it is *deeds* not *words* that must purchase my affection and esteem” (418). Helen emphasizes that he must become an active agent in changing his own behavior because she realizes that nothing that she does can change him. Knowing this, Helen

refuses to return to Grassdale despite the scandal her status as a single mother may cause. She will not return to her unhealthy relationship with Arthur regardless of the hardships she may face as a result.

In her essay “The Power and Promise of Ecological Feminism,” Karen Warren discusses the ethical contrast between “an imposed conqueror-type relationship, and an emergent caring-type relationship,” a contrast that “grows out of, and is faithful to, felt, lived experience” (135-6). Warren stresses that this shift should apply not only to human relationships, but our relationships with animals and the land. Her emphasis on “felt, lived experience” seems most valuable pertaining to the narrative of *The Tenant*, for Helen realizes how unhealthy her marriage relationship has become only via her experiences living under Arthur’s roof. Recognizing the damaging effects of such “conqueror-type relationships,” where one person wields power over another becomes pivotal in Helen’s maturation and growth as an individual.

In many ways, Helen exhibits this “caring-type relationship”—she displays an intense love for her son, a concern for the welfare of animals, and an engaged and fulfilling relationship with nature. Her concern about maintaining her moral convictions without necessarily maintaining the arbitrary Victorian conventions reflect an ethic based on reciprocity rather than social duties. The “caring-type relationship” blends beautifully with Yaeger’s horizontal sublime and Frye’s concept of the loving eye, a concept which Warren mentions in this particular article. Each of these concepts become integral components in cultivating an ethic of dwelling.

But the battle between Helen’s desires to maintain “caring-type” behavior as she struggles against the “conqueror-type” mentality that has been ingrained in her by her

society remains a constant presence. Helen's volatility with Arthur while she lives at Grassdale, and even in her first interactions with the community members of Linden Car, the nearest hamlet to Wildfell Hall, reflect her tendency to vacillate between the two, as humans tend to do. Once again, we see the tension between these two sides of Helen, sides which the Victorian novel tended to reduce to the binary, but as Auerbach notes often conflated or blurred, categories of angel and demon. Elizabeth Langland notes the vacillation of Helen's character:

Is Helen Graham a witch-devil or an angel? Is she a wife or widow, amiable or ill tempered? Is she pure or corrupt, a saint or a sinner, faithful or fallen? Her identity is made more problematic because her decorous appearance and religious devotion coexist with her claims that she has no use for "such things that every lady ought to be familiar with" and "what every respectable female ought to know." Although civilized in manner, she appears to "wholly disregard the common observances of civilized life." ("The Voicing" 36)

Langland argues that Helen gives her journal to Gilbert in order to plead her innocence and enact her revenge against Arthur by exposing his villainous nature to Gilbert. Who could really blame her for desiring to expose the truth lying beneath the façade? And yet this action and this transgressive desire to save one's own reputation while sacrificing another's appears particularly vengeful and un-Christian, especially for a Victorian woman expected to be self-sacrificing at all times. Langland claims:

Brontë insistently deploys such oppositions as love/hate, redemption/punishment, saint/sinner, angel/devil, female/male to set up the conditions for transgression. At this point the text works to privilege and to legitimate one binary term over another. But, inevitably, due to the operation of the symbolic code, the text also becomes the site for exposure, multivalence, and reversibility. The pivotal event is Helen's return to nurse her injured husband. Does she return to redeem or to punish? Does she go out of love or out of hatred? Is she a ministering angel or a vengeful devil? Is she a holy saint or a common sinner? ("The Voicing" 41)

Helen challenges the neat and tidy conventions, particularly because she is such a nuanced conflation of the Victorian dichotomies. Her moralizing and motherly aspects place her in the angelic and saintly realm of domesticity and Victorian womanhood, while her strength, independence, and her simultaneously rational and impassioned articulations position her in a decidedly other sphere.

Her “otherness” makes Helen an enigma, a curiosity, and her volatile rejection of domestic containment while still maintaining the moral hallmarks of domesticity—dedicated motherhood and selfless service to her ill, bedridden estranged husband—also reflect the sublimity discussed earlier in Chapter Two. But the power of a female protagonist like Helen Huntingdon in Victorian fiction also reveals the complicated relationship between power and oppression in the lives of Victorian women, as Nina Auerbach explains:

Legally and socially women composed an oppressed class, but whether she was locked in the home, exiled to the colonies, or haunting the banks of the Thames, woman’s very aura of exclusion gave her imaginative centrality in a culture increasingly alienated from itself. Powerful images of oppression became images of barely suppressed power, all the more grandly haunting because unlike the hungry workers, woman ruled both the Palace and the home while hovering simultaneously in the darkness without. Assuming the power of the ruler as well as the menace of the oppressed, woman was at the center of her age’s myth at the same time as she was excluded from its institutions. (188-9)

Thus the importance and centrality of the Victorian heroine in the British nineteenth-century novel reflects the conflicting views of womanhood and the treatment of women in Victorian society and their strange positioning as simultaneously empowered and disempowered.

Nancy Armstrong argues that the centrality of the Victorian heroine represents a breakdown of the traditional aristocratic British class system and allows for the emergence of the new middle-class. The Victorian novel displays how as women become the arbiters of moral authority, the power shifts from the public to the private sphere and women began to wield greater control over their lives. Armstrong explains that the writing of the Brontë sisters specifically ushers in a new emphasis on female subjectivity and the stark opposition of individual desire and social conventions:

Austen's heroines marry as soon as their desire has been correctly aimed and accurately communicated. But the Brontës broke up this congruity of personal and social experience by endowing their heroines with desire for the one object they could not possess, namely, Heathcliff and Rochester as first encountered in the novels. These males are historically obsolete. [...] But when one discovers what one wants in the Brontës' novels, the story has just gotten under way. Their heroines typically desire the one man whom society forbids them to marry, giving rise to the notion that social conventions are, in an essential way, opposed to desire. (Armstrong 192)

Though Armstrong analyzes only Charlotte and Emily Brontë's work, focusing on *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* to support her claims, one can see the same process at work in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Helen desires Arthur first, believing that she can reform him, but only through experience does she realize the damaging and detrimental effects her relationship with him has on her life. But unlike her sister Charlotte's plot where Rochester gradually evolves into a suitable counterpart for her heroine, Anne Brontë completely replaces the unsuitable and unreformed Arthur with a new suitor, Gilbert Markham.

Gilbert Markham as Radical Hero

Gilbert Markham also breaks from the traditional Victorian hero and seems at first glance a peculiar match for Helen. Many critics and readers have critiqued Anne Brontë's depiction of Gilbert, their opinions ranging from disappointment to rage. Arlene Jackson views Gilbert's character as "shallow, petulant, certainly not worthy of Helen Huntingdon's love and a puzzling choice as her marriage partner" (200). Tess O'Toole terms him "an oddly unsuitable partner for Helen" (716), while Elizabeth Signorrotti describes Gilbert as "sadistically predatory" in his "desire to conquer and control Helen" (22). Though petulance and shallowness do seem to typify Gilbert as a young man and make him seem unsatisfactory as a suitor, being "sadistically predatory" seems a bit extreme for the bumbling albeit easily-angered and offended young Gilbert. Jill Matus states, "Apart from the whipping of Lawrence, Markham's passionate outbursts are, for the most part, occasions for a genial mockery of arrogant immaturity or romantic lovesickness" (107). Gilbert's ridiculous behavior springs from his immature self-centeredness and his obsession with Helen rather than from a deeply ingrained depravity of character.

Though the appallingly violent attack of Lawrence and his voyeuristic spying from the bushes seem to place him in exactly the same league as Arthur Huntingdon, several aspects of Gilbert's character differentiate him from Helen's first husband. First, Gilbert does not find amusement or comedy in violence towards others. Unlike Huntingdon who views domestic violence as a form of entertainment, Gilbert's violent episodes, though inexcusable, result directly from his intense jealousy of Lawrence. But Gilbert seems especially compatible with Helen and starkly juxtaposed to Arthur in

specific but deeply intertwined ways: he displays a dedication to dwelling, sharing her intimate connection with nature and her interest in both art and reading.

The beginning of the novel contains several domestic scenes where Mrs. Markham dotes upon her beloved sons and sets her daughter Rose to work making fresh tea for her dear Gilbert. These scenes in the kitchen are sites of discussion and gossip within the novel—Mrs. Markham mentions Helen’s arrival at Wildfell Hall here for instance. Gilbert’s views on domestic life also emerge here. He tells his mother: “‘[...] when I marry, I shall expect to find more pleasure in making my wife happy and comfortable, than in being made so by her: I would rather give than receive’” (54). In the setting in which Gilbert makes this claim, his statement seems quite ironic, for he is being waited upon by his mother and sister, the former affectionately and the latter begrudgingly.

Yet in some ways his statement seems genuine, for some scenes in the novel portray Gilbert as a true caregiver. As a gentleman farmer, his occupation requires him to care for living things—animals, plants, and land. Chapter I of the novel begins with Gilbert’s ruminations on his vocation, a vocation that he had attempted to avoid, “for ambition urged [him] to higher aims” (9). He consoles himself by noting,

‘an honest and industrious farmer is one of the most useful members of society; and if I devote my talents to the cultivation of my farm, and the improvement of agriculture in general, I shall thereby benefit, not only my own immediate connections and dependents, but in some degree, mankind at large:—hence I shall not have lived in vain.’ (9)

Though he may have been reluctant to become a farmer, he views his role as an important one. But his status as a farmer very much involved with the work of the farm places him in an ambiguous position in the class structure. He lacks the amount of leisure time that

the aristocrat such as Arthur possesses, for he is often hard at work on the land. Yet he also owns land and has farmhands and servants under his authority:

It was a splendid morning about the close of June. Most of the hay was cut, but the last week had been very unfavourable; and now that the fine weather was come at last, being determined to make the most of it, I had gathered all hands together into the hayfield, and was working away myself, in the midst of them, in my shirt sleeves, with a light, shady straw hat on my head, catching up armfuls of moist, reeking grass, and shaking it out to the four winds of Heaven, at the head of a goodly file of servants and hirelings—intending so to labour, from morning to night [...] (66)

Gilbert works in the fields, “with as much zeal and assiduity as I could look for from any of them, as well to prosper the work by own exertion as to animate the works by my example” (66). Unlike Arthur who lacks a vocation and spends his time indulging in leisurely pursuits and harassing the household servants, Gilbert consciously works the land side-by-side with the laborers.

Even though he laments the lower status of his position, Gilbert enjoys his work—he seems to appreciate his labor, reveling in the smell of the hay and the splendoredness of the late June morning. Gilbert takes pleasure in working the land and living in relationship with it, contrasting with Arthur who visits his country estate as a tourist, bored and restless. Helen conveys her displeasure over Arthur’s laziness in her journal: “I wish he had something to do, some useful trade, or profession, or employment—anything to occupy his head or his hands for a few hours a day, and give him something besides his own pleasure to think about. If he would play the country gentleman, and attend to the farm [...]” (214). Gilbert thoroughly enjoys his occupation as “country gentleman” and his close proximity with the land. When he is out in nature, working in the fields or caring for the animals on his farm, Gilbert feels intense pleasure.

He describes another morning: “[...] the young primroses were peeping from among their moist dark foliage, and the lark above was singing of summer, and hope, and love, and every heavenly thing—I was out on the hill-side, enjoying these delights, and looking after the well-being of my young lambs and their mothers” (55). Gilbert’s care for the “lambs and their mothers” lies starkly opposed to throwing objects at the poor spaniel or laughing at your buddy beating up his wife as Arthur does. Gilbert’s love for his dog Sancho and their constant companionship also suggests a deeper respect of other beings (despite his voiced dislike of cats and his penchant for shooting crows and hawks, menacing creatures in the eyes of a farmer). In fact, Gilbert explains that his “first pretext for invading the sanctum,” of Helen and little Arthur’s home at Wildfell Hall, “was to bring Arthur a little waddling puppy of which Sancho was the father, and which delighted the child beyond expression, and, consequently, could not fail to please his mamma” (68). Though Gilbert displays blatant calculation in his decision to wheedle into Helen’s life by giving her son a cute puppy, the care that he shows little Arthur contrasts with the young boy’s biological father, who seems to lack genuine love for his son. Gilbert, in his interactions with Helen and little Arthur, as well as with the land and animals of his farm, embodies an aspect of Heidegger’s definition of dwelling: “to cherish and protect, to preserve and care for, specifically to till the soil, to cultivate the vine” (145).

The phrase Gilbert uses when he presents little Arthur with the puppy, that he “invades the sanctum” of the home Helen has made at Wildfell Hall, seems intrusive, and his behavior at other points in the novel—spying on Helen, beating Lawrence—are violent and lacking in the ethic of dwelling as well. But in attempting to enter into a

relationship with Helen, Gilbert must intrude on the isolation that Helen attempts in her desire to keep her identity secret. Gilbert slowly begins to break down the barriers Helen's erected, as he explains his attempts to convince Helen to give him chance:

My second [pretext] was to bring [little Arthur] a book, which, knowing his mother's particularity, I had carefully selected, and which I submitted for her approbation before presenting to him. Then I brought her some plants for her garden, in my sister's name—having previously persuaded Rose to send them. Each of these times I inquired after the picture she was painting from the sketch taken on the cliff, and was admitted into the studio, and asked my opinion or advice respecting the progress. (68)

Gilbert comes bearing gifts, but they are carefully selected gifts—books for her son, plants for her garden, and inquiries about Helen's passion, her painting. He considers what she values and attempts to cultivate a relationship of reciprocity and shared interests. He states: “we talked about painting, poetry, and music, theology, geology, and philosophy: once or twice I lent her a book, and once she lent me one in return: I met her in walks as often as I could; I came to her house as often as I dared” (68). Gilbert's education and enjoyment of novels prevent him from being reduced to the stereotype of “dumb farmer,” and makes him a desirable suitor in Helen's eyes. They discuss fields of study that they find interesting and important, and Gilbert enjoys Helen's company and hearing her opinions.

But Gilbert's interest in reading also sets him in marked contrast to Arthur. Garrett Stewart, in an insightful and thorough analysis of how the structure of *The Tenant* focuses on texts and the acquisition and sharing of texts, notes, “The symptom of this [Arthur's] restiveness and ‘ennui’ is yet again an indifference to books, an imperviousness to their lure. Living only for the moment, Huntingdon can abide only quotidian print” (Stewart 92). While Arthur can barely read a newspaper and is intensely

annoyed by his wife reading in his presence because it reflects a lack of her complete and focused attention solely on him, Gilbert enjoys reading and discusses novels with Helen.

Gilbert also admires Helen's view of the world as an artist and the way she causes him to see the world in a new way. He describes one of these moments:

“ ‘How beautiful those little clusters of foliage look, where the sun comes through behind them!’ said she [...]

And they did look beautiful, where at intervals the level rays of the sun penetrating the thickness of trees and shrubs on the opposite side of the path before us, relieved their dusky verdure by displaying patches of semitransparent leaves of resplendent golden green. (79)

Gilbert's ability to appreciate Helen's view of the world gestures to the caring-type relationship that Karen Warren describes. He recognizes the otherness in her and wants to preserve that uniqueness. He also genuinely admires her talent as an artist. Gilbert discusses the completed painting of the view of the sea from the cliffs:

The picture was strikingly beautiful: it was the very scene itself, transferred if by magic to the canvass; but I expressed my approbation in guarded terms, and few words, for fear of displeasing her. She however, attentively watched my looks, and her artist's pride was gratified, no doubt, to read my heart-felt admiration in my eyes. (69)

Though Gilbert's view of her painting in this scene may be deeply influenced by the mutual attraction of a couple falling in love, even Gilbert's first view of Helen's artwork, a painting of Wildfell Hall, seems particularly generous. He describes the scene, “a view of Wildfell Hall, as seen at early morning from the field below, rising in dark relief against a sky of clear silvery blue, with a few red streaks on the horizon, faithfully drawn and coloured, and very elegantly and artistically handled” (42). He admires her art and seems to know enough about art in order to have some knowledge of works that are “artistically handled.” In contrast to Gilbert, Arthur, even early in his relationship with

Helen, tells her to, ““Never mind the picture,”” when she begins “to comment on the beauties and peculiarities” of a Van Dyke painting they are viewing and in which she shows interest (138). Arthur never shows any interest in her art except for the sketched portraits of himself that reveal her desire for him (147). Gilbert’s interest in her creative expressions comprises another aspect of his personality that makes them compatible, and that makes him exceptional as a nineteenth-century male protagonist.

Martin Heidegger suggests in his essay “The Origin of the Work of Art” that art provides direct insight into our sense of being, how we dwell. He refers to Van Gogh’s painting of a peasant woman’s shoes, and explains that the shoes in the painting reveal aspects of the woman’s being that she “knows [...] without noticing or reflecting” (33). The quotidian and mundane are brought into a completely other sphere—the shoes enter an entirely new dimension. Art thus “breaks open an open place, in whose openness everything is other than usual” (70). Paintings and other works of art provide access to another perspective, a new space, where we can understand the world in a new way. Gilbert recognizes this in his relationship with Helen.

But Heidegger’s essay also emphasizes the intricate relationship between art and work, and Gilbert and Helen’s relationship suggests the same. Gilbert thrives as a farmer just as Helen does as a painter, and both of them dwell more fully as they engage in their occupations. Their ability to build and cultivate simultaneously brings together Heidegger’s two aspects of dwelling. The novel showcases the beauty of a reciprocal relationship that involves intellectual stimulation and shared values—Helen and Gilbert both *dwell*. As Heidegger states, “Van Gogh’s painting is the disclosure of what the equipment, the pair of peasant shoes, *is* in truth. This entity emerges into the

unconcealedness of its being” (35). The work of art comes “to stand in the light of its being” (35). The novel places the couple on display with all their flaws and idiosyncrasies, and just as the peasant shoes are not beautiful, yet the painting (and the novel) “produces the beautiful” (35).

The Radical Narrative Structure of *The Tenant*

The narrative structure of the novel, many critics argue, is awkward and clumsy. Yet the complicated, multi-genre compilation—a myriad of letters, a journal, even a song—attests to the importance of fulfilling and mutually supporting relationships. Helen’s embedded journal forms the center, framed by Gilbert’s letters to his friend Halford. The majority of criticism written on *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* focuses on the unique narrative structure of the novel. The novel begins with Gilbert writing a letter to his brother-in-law, Halford, a close friend who “like[s] a long story” and, Gilbert writes, is “as great a stickler for particularities and circumstantial details as my grandmother” (8). In the letters, Gilbert describes his younger self, and the series of events that bring Helen Huntingdon into his life. Gilbert includes Helen’s journal in his offerings to Halford, so Halford can read the journal in a similar manner to the way Gilbert did—within the organic chronology of the story.

Feminist critics often critique the “good old boys” feel of this—Gilbert passes Helen’s private journal around to his buddies for their perusal. Although Helen gives her diary to Gilbert voluntarily, many critics debate whether she gave Gilbert permission to share it with Halford. Tess O’Toole states, “It strikes the reader as curious at best that Gilbert would transcribe for another man the contents of his wife’s intimate diary, and

disturbing at worst that Helen's hellish experience is used for a homosocial end" (719). Although Halford is a family-member and close friend, Gilbert's divulging of Helen's story strikes the reader as at least strange if not offensive.

Some scholars attempt to explain this transaction as attesting to the educational power of Helen's story. They maintain that Gilbert matures via his reading of Helen's journal, and that Halford may potentially gain an education via the journal as well. Edith A. Kostka argues that the narrative shows "the simple act of reading has within its nature the means to change youthful indifference into responsible, aware adulthood" and that Gilbert develops as an individual "because he has undertaken the reading act" (41, 47). Lee A. Talley claims that Helen's embedded first-person narrative "allows the heroine to present Gilbert with a written text—a secular testament to her virtue. Like scripture, Helen's diary functions as a textual document to which Gilbert can refer to learn and propagate truth" (136). But Elizabeth Langland views the diary in a different manner, for in allowing Gilbert to read her private thoughts about her life at Grassdale, Helen "exchanges her story for the right to fulfill her polymorphous desire: to restore her reputation, to punish with impunity her first husband, and to marry a man who consents to be the object of her beneficence and affection" ("The Voicing" 36). The journal, in my opinion, functions in these ways simultaneously—as a means of education for the men, a testament to Helen's virtue, and also a means of revenge for Helen as she details Arthur's horrific character. But ultimately both Gilbert's and Helen's narratives inform one another, displaying the reflexive relationship they share and how that relationship affects both of them as individuals.

But does Gilbert obtain an education through the journal? N. M. Jacobs explains that his “voice is that of a mature man only half-aware of the extent to which his younger self was ridiculous” (208), and this particularly astute observation suggests the extent of Gilbert’s learning. Though several critics claim that Helen’s journal educates Gilbert and causes him to mature, the text shows no actual proof of that from Gilbert’s commentary to Halford. Gilbert offers no confessions in his letters to Halford of the lessons he has learned via his reading of Helen’s narrative of her experience, and as Jacobs suggests, we get the idea that Gilbert still does not fully realize how foolish his behavior as a young man appears. Yet perhaps this blatant honesty just reflects Gilbert’s desire, which parallels Anne Brontë’s, to maintain a sincere commitment to truth-telling. Gilbert states in the prefatory letter to Halford that he will provide “a sketch—no not a sketch,—a full and faithful account of certain circumstances connected with the most important event of my life” (8). He fully and faithfully reveals his youthful, passionate self, before he had “acquired half the rule over my own spirit, that I now possess” (9).

Regardless of his claims to maturity, the text does not explicitly share the ways that Gilbert has changed as a result of reading his wife’s journal. Halford’s response to the story is unknown as well (nor does the reader ever know if he even receives the letters at all). As Tess O’Toole states in response to critics that do believe Gilbert received an education from reading Helen’s journal: “[...] in so doing, they risk reinscribing the domestic ideology that it is a part of the novel’s accomplishment to problematize. Moreover, each has at some point to ignore, minimize, or recast elements in Gilbert’s narrative that qualify a positive account of Helen’s second marriage” (717-718). But

assuming that Helen's journal changes the lives of two male readers places her in the role of educator, not the extreme female-savior role that the novel explicitly critiques.

However the ambiguity of whether Helen's journal becomes a didactic tool that transforms the lives of Gilbert Markham and Jack Halford could allude to the parallel modesty and humility that Brontë shows in her preface: "Let it not be imagined, however, that I consider myself competent to reform the errors and abuses of society but only that I would fain contribute my humble quota towards so good an aim" (3). Brontë emphasizes in her preface that she feels a responsibility to express (her view of) the truth, and that she knows that she will only reach "those who are able to receive it" (3). Not every reader will accept the truth of her words. The ambiguity of whether the two men learn anything from Helen's narrative plays on this—have they heard and absorbed the message? We as readers remain unsure. But we do know that they love narratives, and judging from the narrative that Gilbert decides to share with Halford, they enjoy narratives that evaluate the complexities of human relationships and the social veneers that humans often hide behind as they attempt to live their lives. The narrative, for Brontë, becomes a space of expression and a *potential* space for education as well. The consequences of the reader's engagement with the text remain unknown but staggering in their potential.

But Gilbert's role as the disseminator of Helen's story places him in an interesting position. His project of telling Helen's story makes him a intermediary between the community and Helen. He shows her struggles and shares her difficulties in order to explain the challenges and confines that Helen has faced and sought to overcome. Gilbert allows us to see the exceptional qualities that Helen possesses, bringing her heroism to light. In sharing Helen's story, Gilbert engages in a reciprocal relationship

with his friend Halford, and this relationship allows for the possibilities of other relationships and other narratives. Gilbert gives the story of Helen, the other, both building and preserving that story. The narrative remains connected in a very integral way to Heideggerian dwelling.

Karen Warren analyzes the potential of first-person narratives from an ecofeminist perspective in her essay “The Power and the Promise of Ecological Feminism.” In this essay, Warren includes a narrative account of an experience she had rock climbing. She describes rappelling down the side of a cliff to just above the surface of Lake Superior:

I could see no one—not my belayer, not the other climbers, not one. I unhooked slowly from the rappel rope and took a deep cleansing breath. I looked all around me—really looked—and listened. I heard a cacophony of voices—birds, trickles of water on the rock before me, waves lapping against the rocks below. I closed my eyes and began to feel the rock with my hands—the cracks and crannies, the raised lichen and mosses, the almost imperceptible nubs that might provide a resting place for my fingers and toes when I began to climb. At that moment, I was bathed in serenity. I began to talk to the rock in an almost inaudible, child-like way, as if the rock were my friend. I felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude for what it offered me—a chance to know myself and the rock differently, to appreciate unforeseen miracles like the tiny flowers growing in the even tinier cracks in the rocks surface, and to come to know a sense of *being in relationship* with the natural environment. It felt as if the rock and I were silent conversational partners in a longstanding friendship. I realized then that I had come to care about this cliff which was so different from me, so unmovable and invincible, independent and seemingly indifferent to my presence. I wanted to be with the rock as I climbed. Gone was the determination to conquer the rock, to forcefully impose my will on it; I wanted simply to work respectfully with the rock as I climbed. And as I climbed, that is what I felt. I felt myself caring for this rock and feeling thankful that climbing provided the opportunity for me to know it and myself in this new way. (134-5)

Warren cites several reasons why a first-person narrative such as her own is important to feminism and environmental ethics. First-person narrative, Warren states, “takes

relationships themselves seriously” and “stands in contrast to a strictly reductionist modality that takes relationships seriously only or primarily because of the nature of the *relators* or parties to those relationships” (135). Reminiscent of the horizontal sublime and the loving eye discussed in Chapter Two, Warren stresses how focusing on relationships, rather than the power or control wielded by the individual parties within relationships, becomes most important in navigating away from traditional (dominating and controlling) modes of existence into a more conscientious and caring way of life.

Helen’s first-person journal displays this move from domination and control in relationships toward an emphasis on reciprocity and ultimately, learning to dwell. But first-person narratives risk solipsistic self-absorption, where the author dichotomizes the world via subject and object positionalities. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, however, displays the complexity of human relationships and the coercive forces often involved in our interactions with other humans, animals, and the land. In framing Helen’s narrative with Gilbert’s, the novel suggests the incredible importance of how personal narratives, when shared, inform and challenge each other and ultimately become a means of cultivating and developing caring relationships. N. M. Jacobs explains:

But the Brontës’ framing narratives [in *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*] are more like competing works of art, or outer rooms in a gallery, or even the picture painted over a devalued older canvas. We cannot see or experience the buried reality of the “framed” story without first experiencing the “framing” narrative. There is no other way in. (206-7)

Only via Gilbert’s narrative can we reach Helen’s story, and only through his eyes can we access her experiences. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* attests to Helen’s, and, I would

suggest, Anne Brontë's, desire to share her experiences and allows to reader to learn about her experiences and her ways of dwelling.

CONCLUSION

The establishing of truth in the work is the bringing forth of a being such as never was before and will never come to be again. The bringing forth places this being in the Open in such a way that what is to be brought forth first clears the openness of the Open into which it comes forth. Where this bringing forth expressly brings the openness of beings, or truth, that which is brought forth is a work. Creation is such a bringing forth.

—Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art”

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall exhibits the “bringing forth” of creation that Heidegger speaks of in a variety of different ways. Helen’s role as a professional artist emphasizes the role she plays as a creative being, and reflects Anne Brontë’s own position as the author. The pride that Gilbert takes in cultivation and the joy he seems to receive from his work also reflects this “bringing forth.” The unique narrative structure of the novel and the idiosyncrasies of the characters in the novel, which both seemed radical in the nineteenth-century and still do, to some extent, even today, also suggest “a bringing forth of a being such as never was before and will never come to be again.” Even the setting where Helen becomes most fully engaged in her work as an artist seems particularly unique, since the liminality and sublimity of Wildfell Hall and the landscape surrounding the ruined mansion display the tension between the natural and the cultivated. Wildfell Hall provides a space, or to use the Heideggerean term (perhaps at the risk of being reductive), a clearing, for Helen to pursue and create her art. So why, at the conclusion of the novel, do Helen and Gilbert leave Wildfell, choosing to live instead at Staningley? Why do Helen and Gilbert choose to leave this dwelling space?

Helen's appropriation of the rejected and ruined space of Wildfell Hall as a temporary site of respite from her tyrannical husband occurs precisely because her brother Frederick prepares their abandoned childhood home for her arrival. So the return to the home in some ways represents a return to her roots. Though she fails to remember the house itself, her devoted servant Rachel reminisces about carrying Helen as a baby up "the terribly steep and stony lane" to Wildfell Hall (374). But this return to her natal home seems an ambivalent one—although Helen cannot remember the house itself, she does recall, in a conversation with Arthur, that when her mother died her father gave her up to her aunt and uncle while he raised her brother Frederick. She does not feel that he cares enough about her to object to her marriage, and she suggests that he has abandoned her completely to the care of her aunt and uncle (164). His failure to object to her marriage leads to her devastating union with Arthur, and makes her father partly culpable for the misery that she undergoes. Gilbert also mentions in passing that Frederick's father (Helen's father as well, but unknown to the reader at that point in the text), "was generally believed [to have] shortened his days by intemperance" (38). The absence of her alcoholic father in the novel and the silence surrounding Helen's early childhood haunts the novel and, I would suggest, Wildfell Hall. Even when Helen returns to Wildfell Hall, she never mentions any memories of the place or any sense of familiarity with it. Anne K. Mellor claims that for some Romantic women writers, "sublime landscapes are home scenery, the location of blissful childhood memories. Confronting magnificent mountains and lakes, their characters experience heightened sensibility, not of anxiety, but of love, reverence, and mutual relationship" (97). But although Helen finds freedom and liberation in the landscape surrounding Wildfell Hall, she does not

express a sense of feeling at home there, and, instead, the home seems silently linked to patriarchal abandonment.

Perhaps the haunting abandonment that Helen felt is one reason that she cannot dwell permanently at Wildfell Hall. This abandonment reveals the hollowness of the patriarchal promise to provide protection and domestic tranquility, a hollow promise that Helen experiences first hand in her marriage to Arthur. Wildfell Hall, with its melancholy and affective characteristics, emphasizes this, its crumbling ruins reflecting Helen's past. Helen admits to Gilbert that at times when "the bleak wind moan[s] around me and howl[s] through the ruinous old chambers, no books or occupations can repress the dismal thoughts and apprehensions that come crossing in" (51). She quickly assures him that "it is folly to give way to such weakness [...] Indeed I cannot be too thankful for such an asylum, while it is left to me," and Gilbert explains that she speaks these words "in an under tone, as if spoken rather to herself than to me" (51). Her desire to be tough and resilient in resisting the melancholy aspects of the old gothic home, just as the hardy yet stunted plants surrounding the home resist the harsh elements, certainly influences how Helen speaks of her environment. We witness how her dwelling becomes a conflicted site even in her own mind.

Gilbert's description of the overgrown garden also reflects Helen's conflicted past, for he mentions how the "hardy" plants are now overgrown, having escaped "the gardener's torturing shears" (19). The land has escaped the torturous cultivation of the past, imposed upon it by the "civilizing" forces of humans. Even cultivation, which throughout most of the novel is lauded as an activity of care and nurturing preservation, a reciprocal act that respects the land and animals, can become a dominating force where

even growing plants are pruned and cut in order to fit prescribed, aesthetically pleasing shapes. Helen's own inability to dwell parallels this as well; she is pruned and shaped by her society, confined by their sense of what being a woman entails. Conditioned by her society for many years to be a docile object of display, Helen's rebellion against these notions of propriety shows her desire to be free and independent. But even in rebelling against these notions, Helen finds herself under greater scrutiny than before.

The novel suggests, then, that dwelling, especially for an independent, self-sufficient woman, remains a tenuous and precarious existence for a woman in Victorian society. Despite the freedom that she experiences, Helen ultimately returns to "proper," "civilized" society—she moves from the barren landscape of Wildfell Hall to the fine estate of Staningley. When Gilbert travels to reach Helen, he overhears two other men in the stagecoach speaking of the land that she has inherited: "'Fine land this,' said one of them, pointing with his umbrella to the wide fields on the right, conspicuous for their compact hedgerows, deep, well-cut ditches, and fine timber-trees, growing sometimes on the borders, sometimes in the midst of the enclosure;—very fine land, if you saw it in the summer or spring'" (455). Once again, Gilbert evaluates the landscape, and the landscape of Staningley stands in stark opposition to Wildfell, where only stunted trees and shrubs can grow and the rough and stony fields are only suitable for grazing sheep (19). As the men in the carriage accompanying Gilbert note, Helen now holds the status of a wealthy heiress, a status that reinstates her within society. No longer a humble tenant, Helen resumes a privileged position within the class of the landed gentry. But even the men note that the status and power that her uncle has bestowed upon her is "strange" (456). Very few women in the nineteenth-century could wield such power as

Helen—owning two estates (Staningley and Grassdale), she can “marry none but a nobleman” if she desires (456).

Just as Rochester must appeal to Jane Eyre in humility, so must Gilbert do the same when he approaches Helen. And in the same manner, both couples leave the conflicted, gothic estates for brighter, more socially acceptable abodes. In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, the reader never knows how Helen and Gilbert live at Staningley and what attempts they may make to create a dwelling place there. No mention is made of Helen’s art, and Gilbert, in bequeathing the Markham farm to Fergus, may have given up farming as well. The novel’s abrupt end fails to address the particularities of their life at Staningley, other than Gilbert’s statement, the penultimate sentence of his letter to Halford (and of the novel): “As for myself, I need not tell you how happily my Helen and I have lived and loved together, and how blessed we still are in each other’s society, and in the promising young scions that are growing up about us” (471).

This vague conclusion makes the novel’s statement regarding dwelling ambiguous. How important is dwelling then, ultimately? The novel’s statement on the importance of living in an attitude of care and nurturance seems quite explicit. Developing relationships that cultivate care and nurturing attitudes, rather than ones based on domination, self-serving manipulation, or control, forms a central theme throughout the novel. Rosemary Radford Ruether’s words in her seminal text *New Woman and New Earth* echo the message of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and explain the significance of this radical transformation:

Women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination. [...] The concept of domination of nature has been based from the first on social domination

between master and servant groups, starting with the basic relationship between men and women. An ecological revolution must overthrow all the social structures of domination. This means transforming that world-view which underlies domination and replacing it with an alternative value system. (204)

Though written forty-three years ago, these words still convey the importance of transforming an ideology of domination. In a similar manner, Anne Brontë radically confronted Victorian ideology with *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, and this novel continues to confront the dominating ideology that still clings to Western society in the twenty-first century. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* creates a clearing, to use Heidegger's term once again, that allows us to re-evaluate how we treat our fellow human-beings, the land in which we dwell, and the animals and plants in which we come in contact.

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