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"The Misfortunes of Motherhood: How Anne Bronte Exposes 19th Century Legal and Social Injustices to Mothers Through <i>The Tenant of Wildfell Hall</i> "

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“THE MISFORTUNES OF MOTHERHOOD: HOW ANNE BRONTE EXPOSES 19TH
CENTURY LEGAL AND SOCIAL INJUSTICES TO MOTHERS THROUGH *THE TENANT
OF WILDFELL HALL*”

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Dedicated to Anne Bronte, who through her words and characters inspired this project and opened my heart mind to the world of the Victorians.

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Abstract

Focusing on the misfortunes of mothers in the 19th century, this thesis will expose the legal and social limitations unfairly put on women through the lens of Anne Bronte's novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Laws concerning marriage in Victorian England were partisan to men, and gave women few rights concerning their own wealth, property, and even children, as evident in court cases from the period. If women could manipulate legal restraints, societal expectations would provide little relief. Arguing against common interpretation that *Tenant* is a feminist text about Helen Huntingdon's role as an independent woman, this presentation will show that the novel focuses on what Helen is unable to do as a mother rather than what she is able to do as a woman.

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Introduction

Anne Bronte, the youngest of the literary family, writes perhaps the most forward thinking and complex work of literature within the family's collection. Few artifacts have survived of Anne's short life, and because of a series of unfortunate circumstances, she has been overlooked and overshadowed by her older siblings, Charlotte and Emily, from the time of their first joint publication. Anne's first published work was a collection of poetry written by all three sisters under pseudonyms, Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell; although the collection was barely noticed, the few critics who did publish on the topic would begin a trend that would follow the Brontes' work for decades--a comparison of their writings. Since the first publication, Anne's writings have struggled to be recognized as individual pieces rather than a *weaker* part of the Bronte collection. Although Emily's poetry is often accepted as superior, and Charlotte's *Jane Eyre* is the preferred Bronte novel, Anne's second novel, *Tenant of Wildfell Hall* should be reexamined as a work of its own; written not for entertainment, but to expose the truth, set against the backdrop of an oppressive legal system and society that left women, especially mothers, without the ability to live a life outside of the one expected of them.

What is often forgotten about Anne's *Tenant* is the early criticism, as she died so soon after its publication; her death and the revelation of their identities overshadow the novel. Upon publication in 1848, Anne's novel was said by an unsigned review in *Athenaeum* to be "the most interesting novel which we have read for a month" and although some thought the content to be harsh, the genius of the writing was not to be ignored (Allott 251). Other reviews¹ compared the novel to *Jane Eyre* stating, "their associations are alike; their heroines...their heroes...we have...entertained a suspicion that all the books...might have issued from the same source"

¹ See *The Brontes: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 254-274

(Allott 254). These early comparisons show that *Tenant* was viewed originally as having merit, but the mystery of the Brontes' or Bells' identities and sex overshadowed the readers' focus on the content of the novel. Emily and Anne were both dead within the year, without the public knowing who they were, leaving Charlotte to reveal their identities. She did this in 1850 with a new edition of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* by adding a biographical notice. In this notice, she reveals not just the identities of the sisters, but also her own criticisms of their work. Being the last of the Brontes, she was able to publish two more novels in her lifetime, and also to influence the public's opinions of the Bronte collection.

Charlotte Bronte's opinion of her sisters' writings was and sometimes still is believed to be the superior theory. Upon her sisters' death, she writes concerning *Tenant* that "the choice of subject was an entire mistake," going on to tell of Anne's good intentions in her writing, believing it to be her "duty" (The Victorian Web). Although Anne writes of her "duty" to speak the truth, what this "truth" is becomes debatable. With Charlotte's published statement, her two other novels, and eventually her death, Anne's *Tenant* was pushed aside as a weaker piece compared to the genius works of the then known and loved Charlotte Bronte. After the death of Charlotte, Elizabeth Gaskell wrote the first biography of the Bronte family, *The Life of Charlotte Bronte*, and although the accuracy of some of the information has since been questioned, the book solidified Charlotte's place in literary history, placing her at the head of her literary family. By the end of the 19th century, Anne was nothing more than the sister of Charlotte Bronte. In the preface to the Haworth edition of the Brontes' work published in 1899 Mary Ward writes, "It is not as the writer of *Wildfell Hall*, but as the sister of Charlotte and Emily Bronte, that Anne Bronte escapes oblivion" (Allott 460). This belief would continue throughout most of the 20th century, with Margaret Lane calling Anne "the Bronte without genius" in her 1953 biography,

The Bronte Story (117). Only more recently have scholars re-examined Anne's work and found a strong sense of free thought in her female characters and a revelation of an oppressive society in which the Brontes lived. Anne's second novel reveals a strong woman whose role as a mother in Victorian England is embedded in the legal and social restraints of the period. In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Anne creates a mother who is left without legal or social choices concerning her child or herself, revealing the injustices put on women and mothers in the 19th century.

Although more recent scholars have begun to see *Tenant* through previously ignored interpretations, some still miss the truth she wished to expose. They still argue that Anne's life, specifically her brother Branwell's battle with alcohol abuse, influenced her writing, and that *Tenant* is a novel revealing the dangers of this disease². Although alcohol use is a theme in the story, it is not mentioned enough to be the primary focus; moreover, so little is known of Anne's life or her personal thought about her brother, that this argument seems little more than speculation. Over the last several decades, other developing ideas concerning Anne's *Tenant* revolve around the argument that it is an early feminist text of a strong and independent woman who defies her husband and society to live on her own. If Anne's only purpose was to show the strength of her female character by having her leave Arthur, Helen's second marriage within the same society weakens that defiance. In addition to ignoring the second marriage, many critics fail to recognize the aspect of motherhood in the story, though it is arguably the most prevalent theme, being the reason Helen leaves, and perhaps the reason she remarries.

Although much recent scholarship discussing *Tenant* centers on social and gender studies, critics have not stopped considering how Anne's life influenced the text³. Like most writers, Anne's life is most likely influential in her work as she writes about governesses and

² See Chapter 2.

³ See Chapter 2.

women living in the 19th century. However, because of Anne's early death, much of the information about her life comes second hand from her older sister, Charlotte or is lost altogether. With the lack of information about Anne's life, it is difficult to draw conclusions about how it influences her work, although some scholars have attempted to take what facts are available and parallel them to her writings.

Just as earlier scholars compared Anne to Emily and Charlotte, contemporary critics have done the same, ignoring Anne's individuality. Christine Colon, a scholar of 19th century English literature, writes about *Tenant* as a rejection of Charlotte's love story, *Jane Eyre*. In her 2008 article, "Beginning Where Charlotte Left Off," Colon writes about how Anne's view of love is not escaping the outside world for a world of isolation with a lover. This article explores the differing views of love that Charlotte and Anne have, showing the differences between the sisters. Comparing the two novels, Colon makes the argument that they are different types of females, but both have a "romantic conclusion" leaving little room for *Tenant* to be about anything that does not compare to *Jane Eyre* (20). Because of the significance of Charlotte's opinions of her sisters, many critics continue to discuss the lasting impact of their relationships. Believing the Brontes should be examined together, Susan Bauman, Bronte researcher at the University of Regina, has published many articles about the Brontes, most including all three sisters. She writes in "Her Sisters' Keeper: Charlotte Bronte's Defense of Emily and Anne," that Charlotte promotes the poetry of Emily and Anne to "rescue them from the notoriety surrounding the novels" (23). However, Charlotte's interference can be viewed as damaging to the reader's ability to see the other sisters' work without influence.

Recognizing some of the parallels of Anne's life and her novels, two critics disagree with the idea that the Brontes should be examined together, and have chosen to allow Anne to be

examined outside of the confines of the Bronte literary family. Victorian scholar Nora Gilbert, explores governesses in the 19th century and what influenced their writing, specifically writing about how Anne's life experiences working with children influenced her novels. Like Gilbert, Catherine Han discusses Anne's experiences in life, but further examines why Anne has been marginalized compared to the other two Bronte sisters, while also acknowledging that she has re-emerged in recent years as a feminist figure. Like most scholars writing about *Tenant*, Marion Shaw, at the 1994 Scarborough Conference, and in a recently published article, agrees that Anne's experience with her brother influences her reasoning to write the novel. Although Branwell was a known alcoholic, there is no evidence that proves this to be the primary purpose for Anne's novel. The issue surrounding the scholarship concerning Anne's life as it relates to her work is that there is little known about her life, but because of Charlotte's early explanation, scholars have continued to try to see her novels through the lens of her speculative life.

Although many still examine *Tenant* in relation to the other Bronte novels or as it relates to Branwell, some scholars have, in the last century, begun to examine the novel as an individual text rather than a lesser part of the Bronte collection. 20th century critics have found the capability to explore Anne's novel and find merit in her ability to create an early feminist undertone through a strong rebellious female character. The later part of the 20th century shows a slight shift as scholars still make the argument that *Tenant* does not equal *Jane Eyre* or even *Wuthering Heights*, but acknowledge it deserves to be recognized. A professor at St. Joseph's University, Arlene M. Jackson, writes in a 1982 article, "Anne demonstrates through her writing that she has a conscious, perceptive control of her fictional materials. This control gives Anne Bronte a claim to artistic merit in her own right" (198). Jackson further argues that the story exposes Victorian injustices and does what other novels of the time do not, since it "answers a

question that other novels of her time do not ask: what happens to a marriage and to the innocent partner when...the role of husband is tied to the freedom to do as one wants, and...the role of wife is linked to providing service and pleasure...including daily praise and ego-boosting and, quite simply, constant attention” (203). Jackson’s article recognizes *Tenant* as an important feminist text, revealing 19th century gender roles, and exposing the truth of what it was like for married women, but fails to acknowledge how the second marriage falls in accordance with this idea.

Contemporary scholars not only recognize the importance of the text as revealing, but argue that Anne was intentional when writing the novel to expose the injustices of the period. In a 2018 book about British women authors, Kristin Le Veness writes a chapter discussing Anne’s role as a subversive, although a quiet one, as her female characters are rebellious but moral. Agreeing with Le Veness concerning Anne’s intentions, Marion Shaw’s recently published article, “Anne Bronte: A Quiet Feminist” examines the author’s motives and inspiration behind the novel, specifically defining gender roles and how Anne’s life affected her work. Revising a paper given at the 1994 Scarborough Conference, Shaw argues that the complex ideas of “manliness and womanliness” understood and mistaken in the characters are Anne’s most “heartfelt” views (126). Le Veness and Shaw both acknowledge that Anne’s creation of Helen as a rebellious woman is strategic and intentional. However, they keep their focus on Helen as a character rather than what on Anne is doing with the character. While pointing out Helen’s strengths, they fail to acknowledge her weakness as a mother.

The argument that *Tenant* is a feminist text revealing a strong rebellious woman has been a main focus for several decades with little variation, but few scholars go beyond the death of Helen’s husband to examine her second marriage. AJ Drewery, in the 2013 article, “*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall: A Woman’s Place*,” writes a strong argument about how Helen’s intelligence

and self-will allows her to defy her husband and leave with her son. Drewery acknowledges that after leaving, Helen discovers that a single mother is vulnerable to the society of the period, and argues only after her husband's death can she be free. The issue with Drewery's assertion is that after acknowledging that Helen has to conform to Victorian society, she ignores the second marriage that takes place within the same society. If Helen is only strong for leaving Arthur, her second marriage is an acceptance of life within the confines that she once rejected. Further, Drewery neglects to discuss how Helen's role as a mother affects her decisions, both to leave her first husband and marry a second time.

Scholars who go beyond discussing the defiance of Helen and explore the legal and social aspects of her marriage still only examine her relationship with Arthur and ignore the second marriage to Gilbert. In "Why Anne Bronte Wrote as She Did," Elizabeth Leaver explores the lives of mid-19th-century women and their plight in marriage and other social arrangements. She writes about women's experiences and the seriousness of matrimony in the novel, as it would have been read in 1848. Although marriage is a central theme in the novel, many critics have questioned Helen's decision to marry Arthur while ignoring her marriage to Gilbert. However, Nicole Diederich and Aysegul Kuglin explore both marriages, comparing the two men Helen marries, arguing that they both have many of the same character flaws such as violent tempers and controlling tendencies. Diederich, in "The Art of Comparison: Remarriage in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*," goes into more detailed specifics than Kuglin, arguing that Helen is entering a second marriage that will be much like the first--one that will take away her freedom as an artist and confine her to wife and mother. Both articles challenge readers to think of the novel as it relates to Helen's choice to marry both men, but they neglect to discuss in detail

her role as mother and how that influences her decision to remarry, rather than it being a naive choice or one for love.

Although most scholars acknowledge Helen's choices, they do not recognize the full depth of her character or the connection between the choices she makes. For Helen, the difficult choices she makes throughout the novel are for the well-being of her son, not for personal gain or to be independent of her husband. This is not to say that she is not strong or that she does not desire independence, but that being a mother restricts her from being able to pursue this completely, so it is not the driving force behind her actions. Creating Helen in this way, Anne Bronte is not showing the ability of a strong woman to make her own way, but the inability of a mother to have that choice. Understanding the complexity of Helen's choices in the novel, readers must recognize the consistent motivation behind them, and Anne's brilliant connotation within them. To do this, one must recognize the expectancy of 19th-century husbands, wives, mothers, and marriages without the prejudices of 21st-century ideas.

Understanding the social and legal systems of nineteenth-century England puts the aspect of motherhood into perspective; however, critics often overlook this theme. Although not a Bronte scholar, Neil Cocks recognizes this gap in the scholarship and attempts to address Helen's role as mother in his article, "The Child and the Letter: Anne Bronte's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*." Cocks attempts to "return the child to Bronte's text as a disruptive, rather than containing force" (1). In doing so, he challenges readers to understand not just the existence of the child in the story, but the importance of his presence as it influences the plot. Like Cocks, Le Veness examines the theme of motherhood, but focuses on the mother rather than the child, exploring the expectations of Victorian mothers. In "Lessons From *Tenant of Wildfell Hall*: Recasting the Mother," Le Veness considers the idea of motherhood as well as how it relates to

feminism in the text. This article examines many of the often overlooked themes in the novel, such as societal shortcomings and expectations of mothers, but concludes with the assumption that Helen's second marriage is a happy one.

Understanding the complexity of the scholarship surrounding Anne's *Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, from its publication through to the present, readers can accept the years of neglect and misunderstandings. However, seeing the evolution of appreciation for the novel shows that perhaps a combination of views reveals the meaning behind Anne's text. *Tenant* produces a strong female character whose inability to break from traditional societal expectations reveals the oppression of 19th-century British society, specifically in relation to mothers. Without legal and social freedoms, Helen Huntingdon, as a mother, is left with few choices concerning her own life as well as her son's.

Chapter 1- Legal and Social Injustices

Understanding the legal system in England during the 19th century is imperative to fully understanding Helen's situation in the novel. The law in 19th Century England was constantly evolving, specifically with issues of marriage, divorce, and child custody. Since *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* was published in 1848, but set in the 1820s, it is essential to look at the changing laws throughout the 19th century and how those laws were interpreted to give context to Helen's legal boundaries in terms of marriage and motherhood as well as Anne's understanding of those choices. Women in the 19th century were expected to marry and have children, with few other responsibilities outside of social obligations. Until the late 19th century and the passing of the Married Property Act, women, once married, had few legal rights to their own wealth or possessions, including their children. The laws in England were predicated on the concept that husbands were responsible for the public sphere and wives were responsible for the private. The beginning of the novel shows Helen's acceptance of her duties as a wife, but becoming a mother changes her. Helen makes a series of choices in the novel, first in accordance to English law and societal practices, but after the birth of her child, her acceptance of her role as wife and mother changes; she realizes because she is a mother, she is unable to be an independent woman or resist the institution of marriage.

Halsbury's Laws of England is the only comprehensive narrative statement of the law of England and Wales, containing law derived from multiple sources. According to Halsbury, marriage in the 19th-century was a legal contract "between one man and one woman for life where the domicile is that of the husband, and the wife cannot acquire a domicile separate from that of her husband" (Halsbury, vol. 6, p. 263). Upon marriage, women were to take care of the home; for upper class women, this would include being in charge of the household staff, helping

prepare social parties, and hosting these parties. The daily duties would leave little time for oneself outside of obligations as a wife. Keeping women within the private sphere left women with no control concerning affairs outside of the household, including legal transactions. Because a married man and woman were viewed as one entity with the husband being in control of the marriage, women had little rights within the law.

In addition to losing control and ownership of wealth and possessions, divorce laws were different for men than women in Victorian England. 19th-century English law states that a woman could “probably” be granted a divorce if she has been “deserted by her husband, or whose husband has so conducted himself towards her that she is justified in living apart from him,” but of course, the final decision would be left up to a judge (Halsbury, vol. 6 p. 263). For men, divorce could be granted for less offences, such as the accusation of adultery, and women could be left with nothing as the English law would “not restrain a husband from removing his property out of the jurisdiction, for the purpose of defeating a wife’s right to alimony, before the order of alimony is made” (Halsbury, vol. 6 p. 266). As the husband would have already gained legal access to his wife’s wealth and possessions brought into the marriage, this would have included what was hers before marriage. In certain instances contracts could be made before marriage and a woman’s wealth or property could remain legally hers, but there is no proof of this taking place in the novel, and Arthur confirms that what is Helen’s belongs to him (Halsbury, vol. 6 p. 277). Legally, women like Helen would have no say in how their money would be spent or how their possessions would be used, but her husband could do as he pleased without consequence.

Just as women had little to no power over their wealth, property, and possessions, once children were born, the legal power over them would also go to the husband. Halsbury’s *Book of*

Laws states, “the authority of parents over children is...governed by the law of the country” just as “the authority of a husband over his wife,” giving husbands clear dominance within his household (Halsbury, vol. 6 p. 280). In regard to custody, the law states, “A father has a natural jurisdiction over, and a right to the custody of his child during infancy, except that in the case of a daughter the right determines on her marriage under age. The right to custody may be enforced by writ of habeas corpus or by petition, and is absolute even as against the mother” (Halsbury, vol. 17 p. 105). This absolute power could only be overruled by the court in the case of “actual cruelty of the father either to his wife or child” (Halsbury, vol. 17 p. 106). Even in cases of wrongdoing by the father, cruelty that was not physical would be hard to prove, allowing fathers to abuse their families without consequence. Women, specifically mothers, did not have many options outside of enduring the difficulties or running away as a divorce could threaten a mother’s rights to her children. Often, even if a father was the one to lose custody, the mother would also lose her rights.⁴

The courts often sided with the husband in cases of divorce and child custody, as revealed in a case presided by Dr. Lushington, a judge and member of Parliament, in 1844 concerning a separation.⁵ The wife of an abusive husband moved out of the home, and Dr. Lushington was to decide if “the acts done by Lord D. rendered future cohabitation unsafe” (394). If the judge found that it was not unsafe, he could order cohabitation. The recorded decision of Dr. Lushington is that he believes “the countess to blame for absenting herself so long from her husband’s roof---for not conforming more to his tastes and habits, which, strange and eccentric as they were, it was still her duty to have conformed to the utmost” (394). This court decision

⁴ See *Chetwynd v Chetwynd* (1865) and *Crouch v Waller* (1859)

⁵ See *Dysart v Dysart* (1844)

reveals the unfair treatment of women within the court system, and the lack of ability to make a claim against her husband or to even have her defense considered.

Perhaps the most influential case concerning divorce and child custody in the 19th century is that of Caroline Norton, a lady who was in an abusive relationship and had an affair with the prime minister. In 1839 Caroline left her husband, but was unable to obtain a divorce. After taking her earnings and their children away from her because the law permitted him to do so, her husband sued Lord Melbourne, then Prime Minister, for adultery, or “Criminal Conversation,” with Caroline. Although Norton lost the case, Lord Melbourne and Caroline’s reputations were ruined, leading the British government to reevaluate laws concerning marriage, divorce, and child custody. Caroline was never granted a divorce, and only upon her husband’s death in 1875 was she able to remarry. After the trial, Norton would not allow Caroline to see their children, one of them dying from a riding accident without being allowed to see his mother. He later let Caroline have visitation with the remaining children, but the visitations were never unsupervised.⁶

The changing legal world concerning marriage, divorce, and child custody during the 19th century was heavily influenced by Caroline Norton’s case. Caroline campaigned to expose the injustices of the legal system, even writing a letter to Queen Victoria (“Caroline Norton (1808-1877)”). As a result, Parliament passed the Custody of Infants Act 1839, Matrimonial Causes Act 1857, and the Married Women’s Property Act 1870. Although this did not provide complete equality with their husbands, it was a major shift legally for women.

Understanding how the law was set up in favor of men makes Helen’s choices understandable. In the novel, once Helen comes to the realization that her marriage is over, she

⁶ See Norton’s *Caroline Norton’s Defense*

asks Arthur if she can leave with the child and the wealth she brought into the marriage, arguing “he will be safe from your contaminating influence,” a request which Arthur refuses (166). She then pleads to leave with her son and no money, but he responds, “No, nor yourself without the child” because he does not want to be “the talk of the country” proving his reputation is what drives him (166). Because Arthur is not physically abusive to her or the child, she has no legal grounds for divorce. She knows her only option to give her son a life outside of the influence of his father is to run away. She does this, not realizing the societal expectations on mothers would be more constraining than the laws of marriage.

During the 19th century men, women, mothers, fathers, and children were expected to act according to their gender and family roles, and deviation from this expectation had consequences. The legal system being set up strongly in favor of men reflected the social standing of the period. Men were given rights, both as husbands and fathers and women were often denied the same consideration. If a woman could find a way to make the legal system work in her favor, she would be met with societal expectations that were often more demanding to traditional views. The legal system had limitations, but societal expectations demanded adherence to them. For women without children, defying tradition would only affect themselves, but a mother had to consider the ramifications her children would have to face for her actions.

Women had instruction manuals on how to live, but mothers did not have the same resources. 19th century marriage manuals were so numerous that some of the books contain notices from authors defending themselves against plagiarism; however, manuals on motherhood were not so abundant. Manuals, books, and magazines, written by men and women, were to help women be good wives. Child raising in Victorian England was not the center of a mother’s life, even middle and lower class mothers spent significantly less time with their children than in later

centuries. For upper class families, children were placed in the care of a nurse, later a governess and often were sent away to school at an early age, leaving parents little time to spend with them. Middle and lower classes were more involved during the first years of a child's life, but these children too were sent away for school, to be influenced heavily by others outside the household. Because of the social expectations put on parents at the time, a single mother caring for a male son without other influences could be more controversial than trying to appear before a judge to fight for custody.

Because of societal expectations on child raising, Helen has a difficult time being accepted into society as a single mother. After leaving her husband and trying to convince Linden-Car that she is a widow, she tries to begin a new life for herself and her son, but after discussing with neighbors her ideas about raising little Arthur, she is met with harsh criticism. She soon realizes that she is unable to live the life she expected because the society to which she has escaped has their own ideas of motherhood. She is encouraged to find help outside of herself for the raising of her son, and she soon realizes that although she escaped the legal ramifications of leaving her husband, if her son was to be accepted in 19th century England, she would have to allow other influences and educators, such as nurses and governesses.

For women like Helen, raising a son without a male influence would be unacceptable within Victorian society. Being a part of the upper class, little Arthur would have been taught formally by a governess, but influenced by his father in the ways of men, as shown in the novel. Although mothers played an essential role in the home, providing the "general cheerfulness of the household," outside of the daily social and domestic duties, they would have little to do with other aspects of their children's lives, such as education (Ellis 44). Parents becoming too involved in their children's lives was viewed as "overindulgence," and as an 1880's edition of

Cassell's Household Guide explains, "Overindulgence is the stumbling block of life" (140). For Victorian parents, this would mean having an opinion about how to raise your child outside of the social norm would be too appealing to the child, and could cause him or her to be unable to make good choices in the future. Helen is informed by Mrs. Markham of her tendency to dote over Little Arthur shortly after meeting the Linden-Car community, and is warned of the consequences of her actions. When Helen does not allow Arthur to be left without her, Mrs. Markham warns, "You should try to suppress such foolish fondness, as well to save your son from ruin as yourself from ridicule" (28). With this warning, Mrs. Markham reveals to Helen the confines of the society of which she now finds herself and her son to be a part.

Being aware of society's expectations both legally and socially, Helen has to decide what to do for herself and her son's future. Boys and girls were put on separate paths early in life to become proper members of Victorian society. Although education was evolving during the period, gender still affected the paths chosen: boys' schooling was considered more important, and they were taught academic and functional skills while girls were taught sewing, needlework, drawing, and music (The Victorian School). These decisions made early in the life of boys and girls would influence the ways in which relationships within the home would develop. It was believed that women would only need to be educated with "accomplishments" like singing, dancing, playing the piano, etc.--basically anything that would earn them a husband (Hughes). With this thought, women would only be useful in and around the household, making marriage and childbearing the focus for young women. The two genders would inhabit what Victorians thought of as the "separate spheres" with the woman inhabiting the private sphere at home and the man inhabiting the public sphere taking care of anything outside of the domestic (Hughes).

This ideology was formed based on what were believed to be the natural characteristics of men and women.

Once a woman mastered these accomplishments, attending social gatherings to find a husband would be the next step in her life. After marriage and children, taking care of the household, entertaining guests, and creating a cheerful home would become the focus of a woman's life. If women stepped outside of this "natural" order for "unnatural" intellectual pursuits, they were viewed as unfeminine, and once women were allowed into university, many parents feared their daughters to be "unmarriageable" (Hughes). Like intellectual suppression, women were also expected to have little to no sexual appetite, with the desire to marry to be for the benefit of having children. The Victorians believed in a double standard of sexuality where "acts and desires considered perfectly normal in men were seen as deviant in women" (Steinbach 196). Many red light districts offered women for sex, making it easy and acceptable for young men to find pleasure outside of their marriage. Even the legal system allowed men to commit adultery without consequence, while women were not allowed the same consideration.⁷ Helen aligns herself to these Victorian ideals throughout her young life, through a difficult marriage, and the birth of her son; however, once she understands that it is this society that has produced the abusive husband to whom she is married, she fears that her son will inevitably become the same.

Unlike the strict expectations put on young girls and women in the 19th century, boys and men did not have the same experiences. Boys were expected to grow intellectually as well as learn the responsibilities of the public sphere, such as work, business, and economics. Just as women were taught that being quiet and submissive was the expected way for their sex, men

⁷ See earlier in Chapter 2; Halsbury's Book of Laws.

were taught that to usurp authority and please oneself was theirs. An example of this is the advertisements of night clubs where men were encouraged to pay for drinks and prostitutes and published guides on how to approach these women. In 1840, *The New Swell's Night Guide* provided advice to men on how to find and acquire actresses and prostitutes, giving detailed information on multiple places of business that provide these pleasures. These expectations of men were often reflected in their marriages and relationships as they believed their happiness superseded that of their wives, and because women were taught this to be true, it would be easier to conform to the ways of their husbands.

The Victorian ideals and social expectations are evident in *Tenant*, specifically with Helen's marriage and remarriage. Arthur embodies the dominant male of the 19th century whose only pursuit is self pleasure. His actions throughout the novel, however appalling, are those of a man conformed to the ways of his society, and until the birth of her child, Helen is obliged to do the same. She understands that she will be expected to live only for her husband's happiness, and even after his abuse and affair, she is determined to stay with him. Helen decides to leave only when she realizes that her son will be raised to act like his father. Her first choice to leave her husband comes after she realizes she is unable to keep Arthur from influencing their son. Because she is most likely unable to legally divorce her husband or gain custody of her child, she is left with the option of running and taking her child with her. Planning to raise her son on her own, she is met by a society with expectations more confining than her marriage, forcing her to make a second choice to remarry within that society so her son will not be rejected.

Chapter 2- Helen's First Marriage

Helen's choice to marry Arthur and her mindset leading to that choice is significant when trying to understand the choices she later makes to leave him and then to marry again. After having several boring and unattractive suitors thrust upon her by her aunt, Helen meets Arthur Huntingdon, "a very lively and entertaining companion" (73). After a few encounters, Helen decides to marry Arthur because he is more exciting than her other options, and they seem to have a mutual appreciation for art. Before he proposes, in discussion with her aunt, Helen reveals that she plans to "save him" from whatever vices and inappropriate friendships he may have, and she "would willingly risk [her] happiness for the chance of securing his" (82). Before she knew if he would ask, Helen was prepared to be unhappy if it meant keeping him happy, making it difficult to believe this to be the reason she leaves him later.

After coming to the conclusion that she would be satisfied as long as Arthur was happy, Helen is put to the test before their marriage, as she has the opportunity to see his weaknesses before his proposal. Arthur decides to look through Helen's paintings without her permission; when he finds a portrait of himself, he laughs at her, knowing of her embarrassment, showing his insensitivity to her feelings. Afterwards, he purposefully goes to Annabella Wilmont, with whom he later has an affair, and spends an entire evening in her company, while Helen watches (85). After trying to win back Helen's affections, he proposes and she says yes, knowing what it would be like to be married to him, and being warned by her aunt not to accept. His actions before their marriage parallel what would happen constantly within the marriage, so Helen likely expected him to continue living the same life he did before she said yes. Like most women in the 19th century, Helen was aware that life with Arthur would be less perfect for her than him, but was willing to live her life making him happy as that would be what she was expected to do.

Helen's choice to marry Arthur, knowing of his attraction to Annabella and his obvious disrespect for her and her artwork, shows that her unhappiness was somewhat expected in the marriage. His happiness and contentment would always be put above hers, something she and he both recognized as "marriage." Having this understanding before she accepts his proposal and then marrying him, it is unlikely that her mindset would have changed within a few years of marriage solely based on her happiness or desire for independence. If her purpose for leaving Arthur was to be independent, she could have remained single and continued creating artwork. However, she was happy to marry and live life as a typical 19th-century wife living in England--making her husband happy.

Helen is content with her choice of marriage, even after admitting that Arthur "is not what [she] thought him at first," writing in her diary that she does not regret marrying him (111). After many arguments and disappointments, Arthur being selfish and blaming their quarrels on her, Helen still loves him and is devoted to her role as his wife, stating, "I do love him still; and I do not and will not regret that I have linked my fate with his" (114). However, less than a month later, four months after their marriage, she writes for the first time of regret after an argument, but it only takes her a few days to forgive him and go to London with him, trusting they may "be happy yet" (119). This quarreling and making up continues to be the backdrop of the first months of their marriage, showing that Helen is content to live this way.

During this early stage of Helen and Arthur's marriage, Helen's friend Milicent decides to marry one of Arthur's friends, Ralph Hattersley, a character much like Arthur. Like Helen, Milicent is aware of Ralph's faults, but "finds no difficulty in loving him as a wife should do" showing that Helen's situation was not uncommon for women in the 19th century and wifely duty comes before personal happiness (125). Comparing Milicent and Ralph's relationship to

Arthur and Helen's, they seem to reflect the way marriage worked for Victorian England--wives submitted to their husbands and gave up their own happiness, even when the relationships were abusive and hurtful. Understanding this, Arthur's harmful actions would have perhaps been expected by Helen; this expectation might help to explain her commitment to continue trying to mend the relationship.

Arthur continues to be difficult for Helen to love, going so far as to accuse her of breaking her vows for questioning his actions, pointing out that she is to "honour and obey" to which she responds, "Will you go on till I hate you, and then accuse me of breaking my vows?" (129). This exchange embodies more than the struggle within their marriage, but the struggle for wives in the 19th century who had little choice but to "obey" their husbands, while the vows of the husband were not viewed the same. Anne brings to light the larger issues for wives of the period through Arthur and Helen's marriage. Helen's choice to stay and try to make their marriage work proves her acclimation to the expectancy of wives, as she shows no signs of leaving.

The shift in Helen's thought comes after she becomes a mother a year after their marriage. After the birth of her son, Helen's mindset begins to transform from her duties as a wife to her natural affection as a mother and her duty to her son. When Arthur becomes annoyed at the child, Helen begins to understand that she would do anything to protect her son. As the first year passes, she struggles with the realization that to protect her child, she must teach him against his father's example (133). This revelation is the first time Helen's plans or actions begin to defy societal expectations. Until the birth of Arthur, Helen shows no signs of opposing the structure in which she was raised and married in to. Because of this, it is reasonable to conclude

that the child is the reason for her change of heart. Throughout the rest of what we know of her life, the choices she makes are shown continuously in relation to what is best for her son.

Helen's relationship with her husband continues much as it did before the birth of their son, even seeming to get better until his affair with Annabella is uncovered. After this discovery, Helen decides she is unable to be a wife to Arthur. Her first response is to ask Arthur if she can take her money and child and leave, which he denies. She then asks if he will let her leave with just the child, but because of his pride he refuses. So the only way Helen can keep her son is to remain in her marriage, but she makes the bold statement to Arthur that she is nothing more to him than his "child's mother and [his] housekeeper" (166). Readers can see the importance of this moment as the turning point for Helen. In an introduction to the novel in the early 20th century, May Sinclair stated that "the slamming of [Helen's] bedroom door against her husband reverberated throughout Victorian England" (Sinclair). Although she does take a fearless stand against her husband and societal expectations of the time, she remains in the marriage and in the home because she will not leave her son to be raised by his father. Helen verbally admits her reason for staying with Arthur, telling him, "I would leave you tomorrow...and never again come under this roof, but for my child" (165). Her statement removes any doubt of her intentions, proving her role as a mother outweighs her personal desires and motives.

Helen's child becomes her focus; she is devoted to making sure he is taught to be the boy and man she believes is best. Her fear is that he will be influenced by his father and learn to love him more than her. For a time this seems to be true as Arthur teaches their son to disrespect his mother and do whatever pleases himself no matter whom it offends. As made evident through the male characters, for boys in Victorian England, this would have been how they were raised--to be a man focused solely on himself. Helen struggles with this until Arthur leaves for long

periods, which gives her the opportunity to bond with her son and teach him against his father's influence--such as teaching him to hate the taste of alcohol. However, each time Arthur returns home, the struggle begins again. For Helen, she is resolved to protect her son, but this gradually becomes impossible as Arthur is determined to make life difficult for her, and impossible for her to form a lasting relationship with her son. Although Arthur's actions are relentless, they are perhaps not abnormal for husbands and fathers in Victorian England.

When Arthur comes home from London talking of hiring a governess to care for Arthur, Helen understands that he will eventually take all of her influence away. She attempts to protest the idea of a governess, but Arthur cuts her short saying "he had engaged a governess already" (207). Understanding that she had no option concerning the new governess, Helen refuses to argue with her husband, but "thought of [her] asylum in --shire" showing that her mind was made to leave with her son (208). While writing her family, she reveals again that it is "in duty to my son" that she leaves Arthur. After writing letters to her friends and family, she leaves only with her son and lady's maid, Rachel.

Helen's choice to leave is undeniably for her son as she writes this as the reason in her diary. For critics who argue that Helen is making choices to be independent and defy her husband, they should acknowledge that her actions and statement proves it is solely what she believes to be best for her son. Without the motivation of her son, Helen was content to live her life as a wife to Arthur, even at the expense of her own happiness. Having a child changed Helen's outlook and motivation in life, and realizing she was losing her influence over him, she was forced to make a difficult decision. For Helen, divorce was impossible as she did not have legal rights to do so without proving two offences against Arthur, and a court case would be too risky. However, it would become impossible for Helen to stay with her husband as he continued

to drink and become unstable, influencing their young son. Mothers in this situation had little choice for themselves or their children as fathers had all legal rights over their children. Helen's choice to leave is complex as she is going where she has no legal rights and lives completely dependent on her art and her ability to keep her identity a secret. Because her husband has the power to make legal decisions for their family, Helen leaving is risky for herself and her son. If he finds her, he has the legal right and ability to bring her back and deny her the right to see her son. As proven by the previously mentioned case, a judge could order cohabitation.⁸

If Helen later regrets her decision to leave, Arthur gives her an option to change her mind, offering to let her live alone "unmolested...[with a] reasonable allowance" with the promise to "deliver up his son" (214). This is not an option for Helen; as a mother, she will protect her son at all costs as she constantly writes about her desire to shield him. Her declining this offer further proves her reasoning for leaving to be her son. After her choice to leave, this is where her voice ends at the end of her diary. Other than a few letters, the reader is shut off to Helen's voice for the rest of the novel. Throughout her diary entries, readers are able to recognize her transformation from a wife abiding by social norms to a mother who takes it upon herself to protect herself and her son from Arthur. Helen consistently discusses her fear that her son will grow up in a society that will teach him to be like his selfish father. Because of her inability to divorce, the only option to save her son is to leave with him and attempt to live life as a "widow" to protect her son. However, she and little Arthur will not be able to escape societal expectations in their new found home.

Finally being free of Arthur and having an unsupervised relationship with her son does not come without consequence. The town to which they move proves to be more confining than

⁸ See *Dysart v Dysart* (1844)

the place she escaped. The novel is not clear as to how Helen expects to be received in her new town, but it is made clear she hopes for peace and privacy. Her community and neighbors will not allow her to have this as they are too concerned with her ideas of mothering her young son. As in her previous home with Arthur, Helen's ability to raise her son is questioned. She is almost immediately advised by Gilbert's mother to talk to Mr. Millward, the vicar, so he can "tell you what you ought to do" (13). Again, she is told that a man knows more about being a mother than she does.

Regardless of what Helen expected her new found life to be, she quickly understands that her new community is critical of her raising Arthur without a man. During the first visit, she realizes that her son will be judged for not having a man in his life. She is told by Mrs. Markham to "save your son from ruin and yourself from ridicule" after learning of her plans to teach her son in her own way (10). Mrs. Markham continues her warnings later in the conversation telling Helen, "you would not judge of a boy by yourself...let me warn you...against the error...of taking that boy's education upon yourself" (13). The recommendation given by Gilbert's mother is impossible for Helen as she is still legally married, but after the death of her husband, is conceivably the reason for her choice to marry a second time. After seemingly escaping her controlling first marriage, she realizes she is unable to escape societal expectations for Victorian mothers.

Chapter 3- Social Expectations

When Helen's son is born, her ideas about society change, and she is no longer content to be the submissive wife she planned to be when she married Arthur. The fear of her son growing up to be like his father motivates Helen to leave so she can control how he will be raised and who his influences will be. She soon learns that even though she can escape Arthur, she cannot escape the society of which he is a result, and its influence over her son. Helen's choice to leave is perhaps her easiest as she has hope in a different future, but she comes to soon understand her plight as a mother in the 19th century. Although Victorian England was evolving with the Industrial Revolution and even the rise of legal liberties for women and mothers, change would not come fast enough for women in situations like Helen Huntingdon, and Victorian ideals proved to be more constraining for mothers than other women in the era.

Mothers in the 19th century had few legal options concerning their children. As we have seen, women were only allowed to divorce on grounds of adultery paired with another fault such as domestic violence, and even this would not guarantee divorce or child custody. Often women had a difficult time gaining access to their children, even when a divorce was granted (Wood). Unfortunately for Helen, the only way she would be able to leave her abusive relationship while also having custody of her son is if her husband agrees. Without the child, Helen would have been able to leave and remain financially stable through painting, but her son would have been an outcast as the son of a woman who ran away and abandoned her husband. These legal and social constraints leave Helen with little choice but to lie and say she is a widow, hoping the community will accept this without questions. What Helen is met with once she escapes her marriage is a societal expectation from which she is unable to run.

Helen's attempt to educate her son in the way she feels best is met with constant judgment. When she arrives in the small community where Wildfell Hall is located, the people become curious about her origins and what has brought her to Linden-Car. Helen, although apprehensive, does attempt to fit in with the community, perhaps to try and convince them that her life is normal so they will not inquire too much about her past. However, even before they learn of her secret, they begin questioning her ideas about being a mother. Victorian upper class mothers like Helen would have had little to do with their child's wellbeing other than providing a means to hire a nurse and governess. A nursery maid would be responsible for the general care of the child. The child would be expected to stay within the boundaries of his or her nursery until the expected time of visitation with parents, "a ritual that might occupy only an hour or two a day" according to Claudia Nelson's study of Victorian family ties (51). Likewise, children did not eat with the family, but would eat in the nursery earlier in the day while parents ate later in the evenings (Flanders). These separate places parallels the distance between children and their parents among the upper class in Victorian families, a norm that Helen refused within her relationship with little Arthur. She rejected the idea of a governess teaching Arthur, planning instead to teach him herself, and spent time trying to combat the teachings of his father. Although typical mothers within the upper class rarely saw their children or interacted with them concerning daily activities, Helen refused to fit the mold of a Victorian from the time of her son's birth, arguably to save him from becoming like his father.

Although upper class children had little contact with their parents on a daily basis, parenting as an idea was viewed in strict terms in Victorian thought. Nelson argues that the amount of discussion surrounding the ideals of motherhood and fatherhood led to the "degree of anxiety with which parenting was invested in Victorian England" (71). Victorian society had

strong opinions about how children should be raised, making it difficult for parents who did not fit the mold. For some middle class and working class parents, these ideals would be more relatable in their parenting abilities, and a boy raised by a single mother would not have given the child the best opportunities. Victorian society “did not have the same expectations for sons as for daughters” making Helen’s situation more difficult as the community tries to control her parenting of a son, believing her unable to do so without male influence (Nelson 72). Boys were taught to be self serving, to be able to take over the wealth and family name in the future in the same way girls would be expected to marry well and produce children. Therefore, the son who “demanded time...for self-cultivation was demonstrating his obedience to Victorian family values” (Nelson 87). For Helen, she would have to combat these ideals--not just her husbands, but the community’s expectations as well.

Helen’s intentions to be closely involved in little Arthur’s life are evident from the time she becomes a mother. She spends ample amounts of time with him when her husband is away in London, mostly trying to combat his father’s influence. They have a nurse, but Helen remains a strong presence in little Arthur’s life, and is determined not to allow outside influences to weaken her own. When Arthur plans to bring a governess into their child’s life, Helen decides her lack of control over the raising of their son is reason enough to leave with him. She plans to be the primary influence in his life, but soon realizes that this will be impossible within Victorian society.

From the time Helen and little Arthur begin to reach out to the people in their new found community, her parenting skills are questioned by those who feel the responsibility to voice their opinions. Within the first ten pages of the novel, Gilbert writes about how the vicar believes “his opinions [are] always right, and whoever differ[s] from them must be either...ignorant or

willfully blind” making it clear that the opinions and advice of some in the community would be impossible to ignore (5). Gilbert also makes clear that society expects Helen, a “widow,” to remarry; upon his mother’s first visit to see Helen, Mrs. Markham comments, “though you are alone now, you will not be always...you have been married and...will be again” and when Helen denies that she will, Mrs. Markham tells her she “knew better” (4). This early interaction sets the tone for Helen’s new life and the opinions about her parenting and future plans of marriage.

Beyond the unwanted advice, Helen’s plans of being the primary influence in her son’s life become impossible, and Helen is unable to keep her son away from the prying eyes of the community. When first asked to join the Millwards and Markhams for a visit, Helen refuses because she does not want to leave Arthur, and states she will not go without him; this begins the opinionated comments about her parenting. Mrs. Markham responds to her refusal to leave little Arthur saying, “I call that doting...you should try to suppress such foolish fondness, as well to save your son from ruin as yourself from ridicule” making it clear that it was not acceptable for a mother to nurture her son in the way Helen does (10). Without knowing Helen or her background, Mrs. Markham is confident enough in her opinion of how Helen should mother her own child that she does not hesitate stating her points of view, perhaps because it is the collective opinion of society at the time. Helen wants to live a quiet life with her son, raising him under her authority, without the influence of others, but the hasty remarks of Mrs. Markham prove this will be difficult.

Helen knows she is in a complicated situation as she is unable to marry because she is still legally married to Arthur. Understanding this, she must prove that being alone is what is best for her and her son although this goes against the societal expectations of the time. Helen surrenders to their invitation and goes the Markhams for a visit, only to be met with further

criticism of her parenting. Helen gradually is exposed to the fact that her husband's ideas about raising their son are shared by many within Victorian society while hers are despised. One of Arthur's concepts of raising his son to be a man was to allow him to drink alcohol, even though Helen despised this and worked to make sure he would also despise it. However, during their first visit to the Markhams, Gilbert's sister Rose offered wine to little Arthur only to have him shrink away because of his mother's successful plan to make him hate it. Upon explaining this to the Markham family, "everyone laughed" showing how abnormal her ideas are (12). Mrs. Markham continues her critique of Helen saying, "I really gave you credit for having more sense.- The poor child will be the veriest milksop that ever was sopped! Only think what a man you will make of him if you persist in--" where she is cut off by Helen persisting that she "think it a very excellent plan" (12). Mrs. Markham and Helen's strong differing opinions show how unique Helen's views are and how strongly the society in which she now lives opposes them. Additionally, these early conversations Helen has with members of the Markham family suggest her husband's expectations as to how they should raise little Arthur are accepted within Victorian society.

The conversation surrounding little Arthur's refusal of wine leads to further argument between Helen and Mrs. Markham where Mrs. Markham accuses Helen of being unable to raise a son on her own. She warns, "you would not judge of a boy by yourself...let me warn you...against the error...of taking that boy's education upon yourself...and if you persist...you will bitterly repent it when the mischief is done" (13). She continues to warn against treating him "like a girl" and then advises that the vicar, Mr. Millward will "tell you what you ought to do" insisting that a man knows more about mothering her son than she does (13). Understanding her plight as a single mother unable to remarry, Helen tries to remove herself from the community

that judges her, but is unable to do so without arousing suspicion. Refusing to indulge the Millwards and Markhams with her past, Helen opens herself up to be criticized. Almost immediately after arriving at Wildfell Hall, her story of being a widow is questioned. Helen finds herself in an impossible situation where she is unable to tell the truth, making the circumstances difficult in which to raise her son.

In the absence of Helen and little Arthur, Mrs. Markham asks Mr. Millward his thoughts on how Helen is raising her son, to which the vicar agrees with her that “not only is it making a fool of the boy, but it is despising the gifts of Providence, and teaching him to trample them under his feet” (18). The vicar making the argument that Helen is going against God in her ideas of raising her son proves to what extent her choices would affect her son’s life within Victorian society. Without the approval of community leaders such as Mr. Millward, he would be rejected by society and unable to be successful. Helen is left with no choice but to try to protect her son to the best of her ability without outside help.

Helen's move to protect her son and the social pressures on her as a mother trying to raise a son are the context through which Gilbert's actions in the novel should be read. From the time of their meeting, Gilbert refuses to leave Helen alone, using her son as a reason for continuously stopping by Wildfell Hall. Helen, beginning to understand that in Victorian society her son needs a male influence, gradually welcomes his friendship. Gilbert uses the societal expectation to his advantage frequenting Wildfell Hall to get to know Helen while using little Arthur, acknowledging their relationship as one “he would not otherwise have known” (23). Even though Gilbert and Arthur’s relationship can be a positive thing, it becomes obvious that Gilbert is not pursuing the relationship for Arthur’s sake, but for his own, leaving Helen little choice but to allow it. Through this friendship, readers can see the oppressive situation Helen is put in as a

mother; if her son is to be accepted, she has little choice but to allow him to have male influence. However, Helen knows because she is still legally married, she is unable to bring a permanent male figure in little Arthur's life. Gilbert is fascinated by Helen and continues to visit her, using little Arthur as an excuse, and even though she does not turn him away, she gives no indication that his presence is desired for anything more than a friend for her son.

Gilbert uses Arthur to get to Helen, usually meeting him outside Wildfell Hall first with his mother "always follow[ing]" showing that little Arthur begins to enjoy his new "friend" (23). Setting the child up for potential heartbreak, Gilbert selfishly uses Helen's inability to be the sole influence in her son's life to spend time with her, without good intentions. Like his relationship with Eliza Milward, Gilbert's motives for wanting to be with Helen are not serious, but for his own amusement. He writes, "I shall not fall seriously in love with the young widow...but if I find a little pleasure in her society I may surely be allowed to seek it," proving his intentions are not serious, making it likely that little Arthur will be negatively affected by his selfishness(24). When Helen is "too busy" to visit, Gilbert plays games and talks to Arthur until she makes herself available, sometimes using his dog, Sancho, as the child enjoys playing with him (24-28). Helen, knowing she is not a widow, constantly tries to distance herself from Gilbert's affections, but he refuses to allow her to turn him away as he continues to come up with ways in which he can gain Arthur's interest, making it difficult for a mother to refuse.

As Gilbert tries to divert his attention from Arthur to Helen, she makes it clear that she has no intention of pursuing anything more than a friendship, even bringing Arthur to Gilbert's attention, reminding him of why she approves of his company. When Helen agrees to go with the Markhams and Millwards to spend some time outdoors, she leaves Arthur with the group and goes away to paint. When the child becomes occupied, Gilbert slips away from him to go see

Helen, making it clear that he has no interest in spending time with Arthur outside of the presence of his mother. However, Helen quickly reminds him of why she allows his company asking, “what was Arthur doing when you came away?” to which Gilbert answers then spends much of the conversation discussing her parenting choices of leaving Arthur with Eliza rather than himself (33). It becomes clear that Arthur, like his mother and most of society, is critical of Helen’s choices as a mother, and is not shy in making his thoughts known.

Over time, Gilbert becomes more persistent as Helen becomes more distant, but being a male in the 19th century, he is not deterred from what he wants, regardless of her wishes. He admits in his letter that each time he “touched upon the sentimental or the complimentary” she would respond “more cold and distant” and sometimes “entirely inaccessible” (35). He constantly met Helen’s resistance with resilience, however unwanted. He first tries to buy her a book, admitting it to be his “first experiment” in trying to win her approval, showing that his intentions are for her alone, not to enrich Arthur’s life with a male companion as he previously and later again attempts to profess. His letter proves his intentions with Arthur as he writes that after Helen has denied him access to her life so many times, he will “first establish [his] position as a friend...the patron and playfellow of her son” (35). The admission to such plotting proves that he is willing to use little Arthur for his own gain as he was present when his mother and the vicar challenged Helen’s parenting ability as a woman; Gilbert knows Helen will do anything for her son so he uses her vulnerability as a single mother of a boy.

The reader can see that Gilbert’s attempts at using Arthur are calculated as his first “pretext for invading the sanctum” is to bring the child a dog (35). Arthur has enjoyed playing with Gilbert’s dog, Sancho, from the beginning of their acquaintance. On the surface, this gesture appears to be thoughtful, but because of Helen’s lack of independence as a mother to a son, it

puts her in a difficult situation. Gilbert then brings Arthur a book, noting his mother's "particularity," making it obvious that his charitable actions are not for the amusement of the boy, but rather a manipulation of Helen's injustice (35). Still needing an "apology for invading the hermitage," Gilbert brings Arthur a collar for his dog so that he can bring Helen a book he purchased for her, admitting what he does for Arthur is with a "selfish motive" (35-36). After many attempts at making his presence desirable at Wildfell Hall, Gilbert attempts to give Helen a gift in addition to Arthur, but is met with rejection. Within the conversation that follows, Helen states, "I am obliged to you already for your kindness to my son," proving that Gilbert's attempt to use Helen's difficult situation as a single mother for his own gain has worked (36). Helen believes she now owes Gilbert for what has appeared to be kindness, but is motivated by his selfish pride. For a mother like Helen, she has little control over how society will accept her son, so the "kindness" of a male friend is the only choice the judgemental community has left her. The plight for Helen is that she lives indebted to a man for his selfish manipulation she has attempted to reject.

Chapter 4- Helen's Choice to Remarry

Gilbert's selfishness at placing himself in Helen's life becomes more difficult for Helen to ignore once her husband is dead. When she finds herself unmarried, she is faced with a decision as she begins to realize that her son needs a man in his life to be accepted within Victorian society. After going home to care for her sick and dying husband, Helen finds herself free of the abusive and oppressive marriage when he dies from excessive alcoholism. However, Helen is already aware that she is unable to remain single with a son, and for his sake, she must remarry. Because Gilbert believed Helen to be a widow from the beginning of their relationship, he has already placed himself in a position to step into that role.

Scholars have often examined Helen's bold move to take her son and leave her husband, and some have discussed gender roles and how Helen defies her wifely duties; however, what is often glossed over or ignored is Helen's remarriage into the same society as her unsuccessful first marriage. Helen's second marriage brings into question the argument of her independence as her second husband is just as connected to the society she despises as her first. This is not to say that Helen is not a strong woman who resists the 19th-century institution of womanhood, but that after becoming a mother, her difficult decisions are made for the advancement of her son rather than her desire to resist her husband or reject society. This reasoning parallels all of Helen's choices in the novel, including her remarriage to Gilbert. As a mother, she is left without a choice of independence.

Making the hard choice to leave her husband, wealth, and safety, then making the bold choice to reject Linden-Car's expectations of her parenting, Helen's choice to remarry seems out of character. However, understanding how becoming a mother changes her priorities, it is evident that she makes these choices for her son. She believes that leaving Arthur is her only

option for taking her son away from his father's influence, and while living at Wildfell Hall, she believes her ideas of raising her son are best, rejecting the prompting of the community to line up with 19th-century opinions. After being legally free from her marriage, she understands the difficult decision she must make--whether to marry again and give her son a future or to remain his sole influence and maintain her own freedom. As the earlier difficult decisions prove, her son's well being is Helen's priority so to marry again would be in little Arthur's best interest. At the time of her husband's death, Helen has been home for some time without corresponding with Gilbert, and she only mentions him to Lawrence when prompted. Arthur's death is convenient for Gilbert as he has become the male figure in little Arthur's life that Helen needs for the rumors about them to stop. In Linden-Car, Helen has learned that living alone with her son as a "widow" will not be acceptable as Mrs. Markham has made clear that a "proper person...would not be living there by herself" (49). Other rumors of Helen's child being Mr. Lawrence's illegitimate son, as well as rising curiosity about Helen's past take away little Arthur's chances of a normal life. If Linden-Car representing the average community within Victorian England, it is conceivable that no matter where Helen moves, it will be impossible for her to live alone with her son without putting his future in jeopardy.

As with every decision Helen has made since the birth of her son, she chooses to marry Gilbert not because of love, but because it is the only option for her son to be accepted in Victorian society. Gilbert has set himself up as the answer to Helen's problem, but understanding her lack of choice, his intentions are less admirable. Gilbert has played on Helen's weakness from the beginning of their friendship; during their first meetings, he uses little Arthur as an excuse to see her, making it difficult for Helen to refuse his presence, as his motives appear genuine. Now that she is actually a widow, remarriage is expected so her son will have a male

influence in his life. Recognizing Helen's inability to live alone with her son makes her choice to marry Gilbert forced, and his persistence in her life something she has little power over. Her correspondence with her brother shows no intention that she is interested in pursuing a relationship with Gilbert or that she is interested in his life, and for a time after Arthur's death, she avoids Gilbert, settling affairs with her widowed aunt.

During the time of Helen's absence, Gilbert explains his feelings and reveals his selfish motives. After learning of Arthur's death, his "joy and hope" are evident, without much concern for Helen's feelings, immediately wondering how he can get Helen's brother, Lawrence, to work "in [his] behalf" (247). Gilbert's hasty response proves his selfishness and lack of concern about Helen's feelings and possible pain at the death of her husband. He writes that he must sit through "dreadful vigils" while his own happiness overshadows any sympathy felt for her (247). Gilbert now knows he has no legal restrictions preventing his marriage to Helen, and that societal expectations are in his favor, but her delay in contacting him or attempting to see him proves her lack of feelings. Gilbert acknowledges this when writing about his plan to gain her attention, recognizing that if he waits on her to notice him, "of course she would not"--thus confirming that he does not believe she has mutual feelings for him (248). This confirmation does not stop Gilbert from pursuing her, showing he is not concerned with her feelings, but his own selfish desires.

Waiting ten weeks, claiming to have "courage," Gilbert tries to read through Helen's writings, but she never gives him what his pride wants, perhaps the reason for his infatuation. After admitting to being too prideful to ask about Helen's feelings, Gilbert is told that she is planning to remarry, and this threat is what sends him on a wild chase to "save her," showing he believes he is her answer, even if she does not agree (254). His outrage at the thought of her

marrying someone else shows his jealousy and his lack of concern with her wishes, and his attempt to “save her” shows his belief that she needs saving. This proves that Gilbert recognizes her weakness as a single mother in 19th-century England, making his attempts to marry her suspect. Upon his arrival to Helen’s home, Grassdale Manor, Gilbert acknowledges the “undeniable difference between Helen’s rank” and his own, giving him another advantage in marrying her (259). For a short moment, Gilbert loses his confidence and decides to leave without talking to Helen, but is quickly reminded of her weakness when little Arthur approaches, excited to see him. Helen’s recognition statement sums up her relationship with Gilbert as she remarks to her aunt, “here’s Mr. Markham, Arthur’s friend” (261). Until the time of her agreement to marry him, Helen shows no interest in Gilbert beyond a friend to her son, and marrying him guarantees this relationship.

In marrying Gilbert, Helen leaves her short-lived freedom for her son to have a future within Victorian society. Unfortunately, but perhaps purposely, Helen does not get a voice in the novel concerning her relationship with Gilbert so his story of how she feels about him is what is told. Any affection expressed by Helen to Gilbert is told directly by him; none of her letters or diary entries reflect feelings for him, although she does agree to marry him. There is little indication that this arrangement will be much better than her last one. Although Gilbert appears to be an improvement to Arthur, he is the one writing the letter, so an undeniable bias is present in the story. Examining both Arthur and Gilbert’s actions in the novel, many of their characteristics parallel, with Gilbert sometimes appearing less amiable than Arthur, showing that Helen’s future with Gilbert is likely to be much like her past.

Arthur and Gilbert show many of the same characteristics throughout the novel, but critics often overlook this. One of the few scholars who address this, Nicole Diederich, in her

article, “The Art of Comparison,” briefly mentions some of the similarities, recognizing that Helen’s remarriage is much like her first, focusing on her inability to be an artist and a wife in either marriage. Diederich asserts that Helen’s choice to remarry is “seemingly for love,” making the comparison something of which Helen is unaware (33). Yet the similarities are pronounced, and Helen’s actions seem to suggest that her agreement to marry Gilbert is not out of love, but rather a desire to give her son a better life.

If Helen is a strong woman seeking independence from her abusive husband and the life of oppression many women suffered in the 19th century, her remarriage does not match her pursuit. In several instances of the novel Gilbert and Arthur’s actions are comparable. The last line of Helen’s diary gives readers the only description of Gilbert through her own voice, “The fine gentleman and beau of the parish and its vicinity (in his own estimation, at least) is a young...” (214). Her words are cut off because she rips out the following pages before giving it to Gilbert, but this single, unfinished sentence provides substantial evidence about Helen’s thoughts, Gilbert’s character, and his similarity to Arthur. The parenthetical statement shows that Helen is aware that Gilbert’s thoughts do not reflect how she thinks of him, bringing his reliability as a narrator into question, specifically when discussing Helen’s feelings. Furthermore, Helen’s first impression of Gilbert mirrors her first impression of Arthur--she initially sees them both as gentlemen. In Helen’s diary, she writes of the night she met Arthur, “A gentleman stood by...amused...and went to the lady of the house...for the purpose of asking an introduction to me...she introduced him as Mr. Huntingdon” (72-73). Both Gilbert and Arthur appear to be gentlemen upon their introduction, but as the novel continues, both are revealed to have more complex personalities and characteristics. The difference in the young Helen meeting Arthur and the slightly older Helen meeting Gilbert is that she has become a mother. Because she is not a

mother when she meets Arthur, she is focused on making him happy, whatever the outcome be for herself, but when meeting Gilbert, her focus in life has become her son. Although she describes Gilbert in the same way as Arthur, she seems to be less naive when meeting him, recognizing his “own estimation” of himself to be just that (372).

The similarity of their initial encounters shows that from the beginning of Helen’s relationship with Gilbert, he shows resemblance to her first husband. During the early stages of Helen and Arthur’s courtship, one of the subjects of interest was art, first of others’ work, then Helen’s, as he “paid more attention to [her] drawings than to [Annabella’s] music” (85). The harsh side of Arthur is revealed in this scene when he looks at the back of the drawings without asking and notices the sketch Helen has drawn of him. Recognizing her humiliation, he refuses to give it back to her responding, “No--by George, I’ll keep it...with a delighted chuckle” (85). Taking the rest of her drawings and looking diligently over them, both front and back, without her approval shows his lack of concern for her feelings. This is not the only time Arthur brazenly looks through her private artwork, but again when he comes uninvited into her library. Without asking, he picks up her portfolio, ignoring her protests, and begins to look through it, taking another with a sketch of his face and putting it in his pocket. She pleads with him crying, “It is mine, and you have no right to take it. Give it me directly,” to which he responds with laughter (88). These encounters show Helen’s struggle to follow her feelings for Arthur as he mocks her, and reveal her lack of control over his wishes, her property, and their son.

Like Arthur, Gilbert looks through Helen’s artwork without permission or regard to her privacy, and like Arthur, he finds a painting of the face she admired for so long--that of Arthur Huntingdon. Being in her studio in Wildfell Hall, Gilbert questions her artwork and “was sensible of having committed an act of impertinence in so doing, for [Helen] coloured and

hesitated,” becoming aware that she is not comfortable discussing her choices concerning her art (21). He also notes, “I see your heart is in your work” recognizing that her art is personal to her (20). However, like Arthur, Gilbert is more interested in resolving his own curiosity than respecting her wishes, and when she leaves the room, he “amused [himself] with looking at the pictures” (22). After looking through the visible portraits, he moves some around finding one “with its face to the wall” undoubtedly because Helen wished for no one to see it, but like Arthur, he finds the portrait of Arthur’s face (22). When he asks Helen about the portrait, she is adamant that his curiosity will not be gratified, to which he responds by “sulkily” giving her the portrait, being silent and “carelessly” turning to look out the window, then tells his sister they must leave without another word to Helen (22). Gilbert’s response to Helen’s wishes shows he has little respect for her and believes his wants are superior to hers, much like Arthur’s views.

In addition to their actions concerning Helen’s art, Gilbert and Arthur’s priorities and points of view are comparable, specifically when analyzing their selfish pride and concept of Helen. Few would argue that Arthur’s actions prove his selfishness and pride, but Gilbert’s motives are not as explicitly pronounced. Yet a close analysis of his actions shows him to be prideful, selfish, and easily compared to Arthur, only more violent. Arthur shows his pride in the presence of his friends when he attempts to prove his superiority over Helen, specifically concerning little Arthur. Believing it his responsibility to “make a man of him,” by teaching him to “tipple wine like papa, to swear like Mr. Hattersley, and to have his own way like a man, and [send] mamma to the devil when she [tries] to prevent him” is doubtlessly because it is expected by the society of which he is apart (189). Later when Helen asks to leave with her money and the child, he tells her she must leave the boy. As losing his son would be humiliating and not having

a boy to raise and teach to replace him would give him less to brag about to his friends, Helen's request is denied.

Similarly, Gilbert acts out of selfish pride in several instances within the novel. Perhaps the most shocking moment in the story is when he feels threatened by Lawrence's relationship with Helen and violently attacks him. Although this attack is horrifying and is a product of Gilbert's temper, perhaps more concerning is his response to the assault. After striking Lawrence with his whip, almost to the point of killing him, Gilbert responds, "It was not without a feeling of savage satisfaction that I beheld the instant, deadly pallor that overspread his face" (61). His action and immediate response are the evidence of his quick temper, but after realizing the extent of his blow, Gilbert begins to blame Lawrence, arguing that "it served him right" and his actions "were too unpardonable" (61-62). This blaming of the victim confirms his actions are a result of his wounded pride, which is further confirmed when he returns to help, not because of "generous impulse" but the "voice of conscience," knowing he should do his "duty" to save him so Lawrence would not be able to claim he "attempted to murder him" (62-63). Being more concerned with how he would be perceived by the community rather than humiliated that he assaulted a man almost to the point of death is arguably more appalling than any action attempted by Arthur in the novel, and is undeniably more violent. The attack proves Gilbert's angry temperament, but the reaction reveals his true character--that of pride and self-preservation at the expense of whomever is a threat.

Gilbert's and Arthur's actions reflect their similar mindsets, particularly as it applies to Helen. The beginning of Helen's diary reveals her ideas of marriage before she weds Arthur--to love and care for him without regard to her own happiness. For Victorian society, this would have been her "duty" as a wife, and any pursuit or interest in anything outside of her wifely

duties would be unacceptable. The common Victorian model of a perfect woman became known as “The Angel in the House,” an ideal that inspired the poem by Coventry Patmore a few years after *Tenant* was published. Although the poem was not published until 1854, it is conceivable that the idea of this untouchable woman would have been familiar when Anne wrote *Tenant*. This ideal is both Arthur’s and Gilbert’s vision of Helen--made clear by the text--making it feasible that her second marriage will come with the same expectations as her first. When Helen marries Arthur, her passion for art is put on hold as her duties as a wife take precedence and leave little room for personal enjoyment, probably because it is her husband’s expectation. The idea of a perfect wife gave women little opportunity to act outside of societal expectations, something Helen is willing to accept, until she becomes a mother. After the birth of little Arthur, Helen begins to realize the society of which she and her husband are a part is not the way she wants to raise her son. Arthur’s idea of Helen is unmistakable as he calls her an angel seven times in the novel, making it clear that his expectation for her is unrealistic and idealized. This is made clearer when she does not conform to how he thinks a wife--and specifically a mother should be.

“The Angel in the House” was expected to be a perfect wife and mother, powerless and submissive to her husband. Victorian society had deeply carved out expectations for men and women, making it difficult to fall outside of those lines. Because the separate spheres were believed to be created from the natural characteristics of men and women, to step outside of these roles would be to act unnaturally. For Helen to not want to stay with her husband, or to consider raising her son on her own would be a rejection of her “natural” obligations as a wife and mother. She understands this when the community in Linden-Car begins to question her

story and advise her against doting on her son. She then realizes for the sake of her son she is unable to escape the institution of marriage.

Arthur's expectations for Helen are made evident throughout their marriage as she plays the housewife, or the "angel" who was there to be seen, submissive, and obedient. Although this is rarely disputed, what readers fail to recognize is the evidence that Gilbert has the same expectations of Helen, making it plausible that her second marriage will be much like her first. Like Arthur, Gilbert sees Helen as angelic, from his first impression of her "angelic smile" to calling her "[his] darling angel" once he knows they will be married, showing his idealistic view of her will go with them into marriage (37, 267). Gilbert's flaws are not missed in the beginning of the novel, but it appears as if he changes; however, what changes is his circumstances, not his character. Once he learns the truth about Lawrence, he is more concerned with his pride than his wrongdoing. Gilbert does not have a point in the novel where he recognizes his faults and makes a decision to change. Rather, his circumstances with Helen change, and only then does he appear to become more content.

Through the study of Gilbert's and Arthur's characters, one can assert that Helen's second marriage will likely be like her first. Gilbert's violent temper and pride, as well as his idealistic views of Helen, prove that he is not unlike Arthur; in some instances he even shows less self control than Arthur, showing that both men are a product of the same societal expectations. Helen does not unknowingly choose this second marriage, but because she is a mother, she is left without a choice if her son is to have a future within this society. Victorian England demanded mothers to conform to the ideals of raising children, forcing Helen to accept a man who will offer her son a father, while simultaneously taking her independence. Her choice,

therefore, proves not her quest for independence, but rather her inability to make any other decision.

Conclusion

The initial response to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* was to argue that it was written by the author of *Jane Eyre*, but the critics quickly recognized the harshness of Anne's language, setting it apart from her sister's novel. Before the second edition of *Tenant*, Anne responded to this criticism with her purpose for writing the story. In her only public statement concerning any of her writing, Anne states, "My object in writing the following pages was not simply to amuse the Reader; neither was it to gratify my own taste...I wished to tell the truth, for truth always conveys its own moral to those who are able to receive it" (Author's Preface to the Second Edition). With this statement, Anne makes it clear her intentions are not to entertain the reader, but rather to reveal the "truth" she felt important to expose. Because the main character is a mother who is confined to legal and social structures from which she is unable to escape, it becomes feasible that this is the "truth" Anne wishes to tell.

The truth for 19th-century women was that they had little control over their own lives. In a male-dominated world, legal and social constraints on women were overpowering. Although this is rarely disputed, there is a subset of women whose plight is sometimes overlooked. Mothers in Victorian England faced struggles beyond themselves as they had little to no control over the well-being of their children, further restricting their power. Women might have been able to resist societal expectations, but mothers would have to risk the future of their children to do so. This lack of female control is evident in *Tenant* through the narration of Gilbert, as he controls Helen's story. Even when quoting Helen's diary, Gilbert takes her voice away, admitting to leaving out passages "here and there" (70). The advantage of her story being told in her own words is taken from her and the reader as Anne shows the dominance of Gilbert over Helen. Altering Helen's voice forces the reader to go beyond the storyline to find the truth about

Victorian England from the author. Although Gilbert controls Helen's narrative, Anne exposes the truth of Victorian society by revealing male authority through the narration. By taking Helen's voice away in places and altering it in others, Anne not only gives the power of narration to Gilbert, but also reveals to the reader the man he really is--one who reflects the world in which he lives.

Anne could have written Helen as a strong character whose voice dominates the storyline to reveal women's independence. However, her purpose in telling the "truth" would not allow her to create such a character. Therefore, Anne shows not what Helen is capable of as a woman (as Charlotte Bronte does with Jane Eyre), but rather what she is incapable of as a mother, as she believed this to be a greater truth to be exposed. Charlotte Bronte creates a strong female character through Jane Eyre, giving her fortune on her own merit, allowing her to choose love and marriage for gratification and not out of necessity. For Jane, the marriage to Rochester is a choice as there is no evidence of needing him for anything other than love and companionship. When Jane needs Rochester for wealth and social gain, she rejects him and leaves, only returning to care for him when she is financially able to sustain herself.

Like Jane, Helen is financially stable, although she obtained her wealth by birth. Helen does not need to marry for financial stability and as long as she never marries or stays married to her first husband is socially stable. However, what makes Helen different is that after her first marriage, she becomes a mother and thus becomes powerless to choose her own future or her son's. Without becoming a mother, Helen could have remained single, or married and divorced with only herself to suffer the consequences; once she has a son, her choices will affect his future and she is forced to conform to societal expectations of the period. Once she rejects her first husband, her financial and social stability is taken from her, and she is left with few legal rights.

Having no legal control over her son, she is forced to run away with him to maintain any oversight of his upbringing. After the death of her husband, she is legally and financially in control again, leaving some readers to believe this to be too convenient for the plotline. However, it serves only to show that even with these freedoms, Helen remains socially constrained as a mother. Unlike Jane, Helen does not have the ability to *choose* marriage as she is unable to be an acceptable mother without it. For her son's future, she is forced to marry a man whose expectation of her is the same as her first husband's, showing her future life will be much like her past. Through Helen's choices, Anne reveals what life for mothers was like in the 19th century, not allowing her to have independence like Jane and exposing a truth that Charlotte was unwilling to make her subject.

Like Charlotte, Emily also writes an entertaining novel in *Wuthering Heights*, a gothic story focused mainly on the idea of obsessive love. Although three of her characters become mothers, two die after giving birth and the other's motherhood story is not told. The children in the novel are raised by their fathers and a nanny or house maid, and although the focus is on the relationship between Cathy and Heathcliff, seeing how the children were raised shows some of the expectations of the period. Heathcliff as a child was adopted and because he was not raised by his mother and father, he becomes unruly and focused on revenge for his upbringing. Heathcliff's revenge on Linton becomes the drive in his life and readers believe this to be because of not having the right influences in his life during his early years. As Emily focuses on the obsessive relationship between Heathcliff and Cathy, the storyline of the children gets lost. Perhaps Emily does this to avoid the difficult subject of motherhood during the 19th century. Anne does what Emily and Charlotte will not by addressing these issues, not for entertainment purposes, but to expose the truth of motherhood in the period.

Since the first publication of the “Bell brothers’” writings, critics have compared their poetry, novels, and the authors themselves, but usually without a fair assessment of Anne or her writings. Because there is little known of Anne’s life, she is often described as the angelic and quiet sibling, but the harsh language in both her poetry and novels makes it conceivable that these conclusions are based on the unknown rather than the known. Critics have compared the Brontes’ stories, language, and responses, but ignore the context of the publications. With Anne living less than a year after the first edition of *Tenant*, she was unable to promote her novel in the same way Charlotte was able to promote *Jane Eyre*. Further, Charlotte’s critical remarks about *Tenant* seemed to steer readers and critics in one direction concerning the novel, without careful analysis of the text. Understanding this while also considering Anne’s remarks about the novel, one must reconsider its meaning and purpose.

For Anne, the importance of writing *Tenant* was not to gratify herself or the reader, but to expose a “truth” of Victorian society. Although not a mother herself, Anne shows the injustices put on mothers both legally and socially in the period, forcing readers to hear the “harshness” associated with the truth. Because the Brontes were closely tied to each other and their writings, it is fair to compare and contrast their works, but only if done so without prejudice. Anne is indeed set apart from her more famous literary sisters, not just in her burial spot, but in her writing as well, but not for reasons most argue. If Anne’s *Tenant* is a novel of entertainment, put up against *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, it falls short, and if it is a novel revealing the strength of an independent woman, it again does not make its mark as Helen conforms to a second marriage. However, if the purpose of *Tenant* is to tell the truth, Anne does what Charlotte and Emily dare not in exposing the legal and social constraints put on mothers in Victorian England.

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