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SCHOLARLY ARTICLE

Anne Brontë's Agnes Grey and Helen Huntingdon: Exploring Women's Struggles for Economic Emancipation during the Victorian Era

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Abstract

A closer reading of Anne Brontë's two novels *Agnes Grey* (1847) and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) reveals a clearly feminist sub-text, which displays a variety of Brontë's concerns about how the home becomes a site of imprisonment for both her heroines, Agnes and Helen, rather than the safe, nurturing space upheld by Victorian society. This paper examines how Anne Brontë, writing in the nineteenth-century Victorian era, challenges the doctrine of the 'separate spheres' prevalent at that time, the period's most ingenious mechanism for restraining insurgent women, by depicting the struggle by the passionate, intellectual, and strong-minded heroines of her two novels, Agnes Grey and Helen Huntingdon, to achieve economic autonomy and thereby script their own identities. This paper takes into account British feminist and historian Alice Clark's investigation into the impact of industrialization on women's work in reducing the choice of independent occupations for women and explores how both Agnes and Helen, confined at home, take the crucial decision to step out into the public arena, to earn a living for themselves and for their family, and as a result, they lead a happier, fulfilling life.

Keywords: Victorian, women, profession, governess, artist, emancipation, empowerment.

Introduction

The Victorian age was an incomparable age of transformation for England. The newly empowered middle class with its particular values, behaviour standards and unique culture had the responsibility to provide work with a new meaning and solid relevance. During the Victorian age, Samuel Smiles (1812-1904), a British writer and thinker, highlighted the importance of work by urging the middle-class man to help himself, to face a new way of thinking and behaving in order to self-improve and also to apply this attitude towards work as a path to success. According to Smiles, a society composed of individuals who are more capable would consequently become a more capable society. This new self-awareness and understanding of the Victorian middle-class man's role in society also brought the creation of separate spheres of action or distinct social spheres where men and women had very different roles. The public sphere where men allegedly moved freely, detached from frivolous distractions, was considered potentially corrupt since it was oriented towards the accumulation of wealth and considered mechanical because it was industrialized and cold. All this while, women were kept confined to the house, preserved in "their own ethereal domestic sphere" (Lima 242). Such a division was fundamental to Victorian ideology as seen in the wisdom of the old King in Tennyson's "The Princess", published in 1847:

> …but this is fixt
> As are the roots of earth and base of all;
> Man for the field and woman for the hearth:
> Man for the sword and for the needle she:
> Man with the head and woman with the heart:
> Man to command and woman to obey;
> All else confusion.
>
> (Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "The Princess," 435-441)

Upon the women's shoulders rested the heavy responsibility of creating an ideal place of blissful peace and happiness — the home. Women were generally and ideally seen as morally superior, saintly angels, pure and kind while men were generally seen as more aggressive, morally inferior, hardy, and corrupted by the public arenas of life. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in discussing the angel figure in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* express that she possessed the "eternal feminine" virtues of "modesty, gracefulness, purity, delicacy, civility, compliancy, chastity and politeness; the angel character was selfless, modest, dispassionate, and submissive" (Mehla 11). From here, the symbolic figure of 'the Angel of the House' inspired by Coventry Patmore's poem "The Angel in the House", published in 1854, was born. Because of the 'separate spheres' ideology, women were "destined to the private, domestic sphere where they were to preside over the 'home and family' with a 'mission' to provide a sanctified haven from the rough-and-tumble world of business and politics, and raise up another generation of young men and women with this ideology internalized and ingrained within their being, unquestioningly" (Bridgers 5). According to Perkins, "Men's idea was of a decoratively idle, sexually passive woman, pure of heart, religious and self-sacrificing…an ivy-like wife who was also a doting and self-abnegating mother, clinging to her husband on whom she was totally dependent" (Bridgers 12). Unsurprisingly, under these circumstances, middle-class women who wished to work outside their homes and earn their own incomes would generally be regarded with suspicion. Victorian society disapproved of this attitude, which was seen as disruptive and unnatural, a threat to the traditional family model in which the patriarchal ideas were deep-rooted.

However, there were also women who remained single by choosing to live with a brother or a cousin. To those who had no relatives who could take them in, to live alone often meant great financial difficulty and to be shunned by society. Completely alone and on the

verge of despair and without the means to work, many were forced into prostitution. Consequently, an imperative need to acquire the means to earn one's livelihood arose. Frances Power Cobbe, (1822-1904), an Irish writer and a social reformer, declared:

> The old assumption that marriage was the sole destiny of woman, and that, it was the business of her husband to afford her support, is brought up short by the statement that one woman in four is certain not to marry, and that three millions of women earn their own living at this moment in England. (Lima 244)

Therefore, the work 'matter' seems to appear as the natural result of these vital needs to survive and to emancipate oneself; namely, the need felt by the Victorian middle-class woman to validate herself as an individual thus conferring worth to her existence. It is perhaps conceivable that the middle-class woman understood at some point how much "she needed to fend for herself, how precarious her social, legal and financial condition truly was, and how the long-standing patriarchy enslaved her through the requirement to follow the rules of the establishment" (Lima 244). Many women longed both to be and to do more than what the very limiting, constrictive societal expectations allowed. Women writers certainly reacted to and often countered the traditional expectations and notions. According to Elaine Showalter, the "battle to stay alive, to fight for one's emotional independence against the smothering embrace of the Angel, is fought repeatedly in women's literature" (Bridgers 14-15). The novel became the natural form for "portraying women's struggles for self-realization" in a society full of constraints imposed on her.

Anne Brontë's aim is to teach and instruct, and the moral she means to impart is that women have choices to make regardless of how limited they might appear. Richard Chase in his article "The Brontës: A Centennial Observance" believes that Anne Brontë's novels embody a sort of female quest for meaning. Lima observes, "Anne Brontë contributes, though in a measured way, to the outline of gender notions and feminism in the nineteenth century by

presenting the reader with women who pursue their individuality and independence" (244). Brontë's literary creations are sharp and arresting, and the female protagonists in her two novels *Agnes Grey* (1847) and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) are active in a way most Victorian heroines are not. Brontë protested against the degradation of a wife's financial servitude to her husband and through her two novels, she went on to demonstrate how work, a vital element towards the survival of the individual, proved crucial for the empowerment of the Victorian middle-class woman. Her highly independent and revolutionary heroines actively pursue their respective professions, and contribute much to create an environment which helps to understand a woman's need and right for freedom. Brontë refuses to glorify the male figure and instead chooses to empower Agnes Grey and Helen Huntingdon by giving them "a voice of their own and allowing them to tell their stories in the first person" (Lima 246). This paper explores how in a society where an independent woman was rather atypical, both Agnes and Helen are self-sufficient women who, after several stages of transformation and growth, are able to discard patriarchal approval, and script their own identities by actively pursuing work as a path towards emancipation.

Methodology:

In her seminal text *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* (1919), British feminist and historian Alice Clark (1874-1934) charts the impact of industrialization on the position of women as workers and as family members. Alice Clark's portrayal of seventeenth-century working women covers all the major fields of women's work activity - agriculture, textiles, crafts and trades, 'business' and the professions. She points out that productive work for women was the rule in this era. Women in fact produced the bulk of the country's food supply, since they worked not only as agricultural labourers, but as managers of agricultural enterprises. Clark maintained that the pre-industrial, pre-capitalist economy was based on 'domestic

industry' whereby goods were produced solely for home consumption, co-existing with 'family industry' in which the entire household unit shared the income obtained from the sale or exchange of its collective resources. The state of affairs obtaining in agriculture extended to all forms of work. The textile trade depended on the work of women; women owned and ran most of the 'beer-houses' in the country; they were admitted to the craft guilds (forerunners of the trade unions) on an equal basis with men; they worked as pawnbrokers and managers of insurance offices and counted medicine and midwifery among their traditional skills. Wives were also, in Clark's view, virtual partners to their husbands in crafts and trades as various as brewing, printing, silk making and tanning. A corollary of this situation was that women did not then possess the status of economic dependents. Alice Clark observes, "In the seventeenth century the idea is seldom encountered that a man supports his wife; husband and wife were then mutually dependent and together supported their children" (12). The woman in the family generally supported herself and her children through her own work. With industrialization all this changed. The change-over to factory production caused the family to lose its traditional productive function, and it set in motion a chain of events which produced the modern division of labour by sex: woman-housewife and man-provider. There grew a separation of public and domestic spheres which reflected and reproduced deeper divisions between women and men. The two spheres were separate and interdependent but the relationship between them was unequal: women's areas of influence and responsibility were subordinate to and controlled by men's. Thus, women were no longer respected as equal contributors to the family economy with the rise of an ideology which sanctioned women's domesticity. The Mines Act of 1842, the first act of protective labour legislation for women, marked the official beginning of an era in which women were increasingly excluded from the world of work and relegated to the sphere of home. The heritage Clark sought to reclaim was the values and conditions of life which nineteenth-century capitalist ideology had destroyed by its relegation of bourgeois women to

the private and ornamental sphere. Clark believed that every woman must strike a proper balance between productive and reproductive labour, and advocated that women needed to fulfil both their productive and reproductive powers in order to live happy, full lives. Clark's perspective was feminist and personal, owing more to her own working experience and political environment than to existing discourses in social and economic history (Chaytor and Lewis 28). Taking into account Clark's analysis of the impact of industrialization on women's work in reducing the choice of independent occupations for women, this paper explores how Anne Brontë, in both her novels, depicts resolute and determined heroines who, despite the limitations imposed on them by being relegated to the domestic sphere, are not deterred by the circumstances and actively pursue professions which help them to script their own identities.

Section I: Agnes Grey, the Governess Who Endured

Anne Brontë's first novel *Agnes Grey* (1847) tells a story of female development — the story of a young Victorian woman, the daughter of a clergyman who, like Anne Brontë herself, is driven by a desire to work and decides to become a governess. The novel is an unusual exploration of the position of women in nineteenth-century English society — a novel in which Brontë pleaded for self-fulfilment for women and equality of the sexes. In *Agnes Grey*, the eponymous protagonist of the novel introduces herself as the youngest daughter of Richard Grey, a respected country parson. After her father invests all his money in a risky mercantile venture which fails, and her family becomes impoverished after this disastrous financial speculation, Agnes Grey determines to find work as a governess to contribute to their meagre income and assert her independence. However, as the younger sibling, her family sees only the child in her and not the woman. Brontë, in consonance with Clark, also portrays how women were expected to remain confined to the domestic sphere because of limited occupational choices and depicts how Agnes's desire to work as a governess amuses her parents, and her

mother and sister do not believe that she is capable of looking after herself, let alone children: "you would not even know what clothes to put on" (Brontë 10). Agnes has always been treated as the baby: "father, mother, and sister, all combined to spoil me — not by foolish indulgence to render me fractious and ungovernable, but by ceaseless kindness to make me too helpless and dependent, too unfit for buffeting with the cares and turmoils of life" (Brontë 4). The world, or sphere, that Agnes seeks to enter, has now been exclusively reserved by the society for men as Clark portrays in her analysis. Agnes's step to resist being kept as "the child, and the pet of the family", and to leave her family at the tender age of nineteen in order to become a governess, to attain social and economic independence, may be considered as a bold step as it was quite uncommon for the Victorian era woman.

Unlike the usual governess, who is alone and forced to seek employment, Agnes actually wants to try her powers in the world and assert her independence (Matus 96). She asserts:

> How delightful it would be to be a governess! To go out into the world; to enter upon a new life; to act for myself; to exercise my unused faculties; to try my unknown powers; to earn my own maintenance, and something to comfort and help my father, mother, and sister, besides exonerating them from the provision of my food and clothing; to show papa what his little Agnes could do; to convince mamma and Mary that I was not quite the helpless, thoughtless being they supposed. And then, how charming to be intrusted with the care and education of children! (Brontë 11)

As for her pupils, Agnes intends to "train the tender plants, and watch their buds unfolding day by day" (Brontë 11). To help the family finances, Agnes thus goes out as a governess to two wealthy families, first the Bloomfields of Wellwood House, a prosperous family whose money was earned in trade, and then to the Murrays of Horton Lodge, "thorough-bred gentry" (Brontë

55). In both these posts as governess, Agnes makes only slight gains with her recalcitrant students, but she continually takes home the lessons to herself, learning from the experience, and emerging more fully and forcibly as a self-determining individual. According to Elizabeth Langland, "Although Anne Brontë seems to have been largely oblivious of any feminist or ideological agenda, her commitment to women's activity and influence in the world and her suspicion of men as providers led her to promulgate a feminist thesis: that women must look to their self-provision" (98).

To youthful Agnes, the opportunity to work and earn an income that will enable her to prove herself valid seems to enclose a world of possibilities and as she embarks on the quest for a profession, she equally seeks her voice as an individual, to confirm that "little Agnes" (Brontë 11) is more capable than the world believes. Moreover, for Agnes, labour is represented as "a duty towards her family and herself" (Lima 246). Regarding the working conditions of the unmarried girls and women who go out into the world and earn a living, Agnes constantly battles to eradicate dishonesty and misbehaviour and to raise the standards, salaries, and treatment of female employees. As Agnes starts earning, she soon starts developing an identity of her own: "I flattered myself I was benefitting my parents and sister by my continuance here; for, small as the salary was, I still was earning something, and, with strict economy, I could easily manage to have something to spare for them, if they would favour me by taking it" (Brontë 33). From what she earns at Horton Lodge, Agnes claims that "the comfort of my father, and the future support of my mother had a large share in my calculations, and fifty pounds appeared to me no ordinary sum. … what a valuable addition to our stock!" (Brontë 56). Because the governess was aligned to both the middle-class mother and the working-class woman, Poovey maintains that "the very figure who theoretically should have defended the naturalness of separate spheres threatened to collapse the difference between them" (Howgate 222). Agnes serves in two posts as a governess, the first of which challenges her physically, the

other spiritually. In both posts, huge demands are made on her energies, yet she is given little authority to fulfil those demands. Her success is measured by her imaginative and flexible adjustment to the limitations imposed on her (Langland 100). Agnes maintains self-control in times of difficulty and in Frawley's words, she remains "confident that she will be able to alter the children's personalities and reform their characters" (Kaushik 157). With "unshaken firmness, devoted diligence, unwearied perseverance, unceasing care" (Brontë 49), Agnes carries on the duties of a governess in educating her charges at both Wellwood House and Horton Lodge. Commitment and intransigence, rectitude and rigidity, are weapons that help Agnes cope with her feelings of alienation and solitude in her profession as a governess (Knapp 71-72). She always has the choice of returning to her home; thus, she assesses her situation on "the basis of the autonomy she has achieved rather than on the difficulties she encounters" (Langland 105).

Agnes's experience as a governess brings her a certain financial relief that enables her to become useful to her family by proving herself, such as she wishes to be able to contribute to common economy. After her father's death, Agnes chooses to depart from her second post to open a school with her mother. It is here that true emancipation accomplished through work comes for Agnes Grey when she decides, together with her mother, to work for herself as a teacher in a private school. "Seasoned by adversity, and tutored by experience" (Brontë 50), the personal and professional experience gained as a governess comes to signify one of the essential traits empowering Agnes to deal with the responsibilities of school management. Although the school is a small boarding school, she becomes quite proud of their endeavour: "We had only three boarders and half-a-dozen day-pupils to commence with; but by due care and diligence we hoped ere long to increase the number of both" (Brontë 164). Mrs. Grey refuses her elder daughter Mary's help, who requests her to come and live with her and her husband Mr. Richardson, "the vicar of a neighbouring parish". Instead, she sets about seeing

how she and Agnes can "gather honey" for themselves. Her metaphor suggests the "sweetness of productive employment and self-sufficiency, as well as the indefatigable activity of the honey-bee" (Matus 111). The opening of the school concludes Agnes's journey in her achievement of individual autonomy and social authority. Elizabeth Langland observes, "Through teaching, Agnes has plumbed her own strengths and honed her own understanding. She has completed her own education" (106). Agnes appears as a strong-willed, independent woman who stands up for her own convictions and beliefs and in doing so, she "simultaneously reacts to the gendered expectations that are influenced by the 'separate spheres' ideology" (Bridgers 47).

It is only at this point of physical health, mental equanimity, and the personal fulfilment of financial and emotional independence that Mr. Edward Weston, a clergyman whom Agnes loves, arrives to propose. The marriage simply stands as a coda to Agnes's journey toward autonomy. Although the novel ends with Agnes marrying Mr. Weston, Agnes opts to experience her deep affection in a more controlled way, trying perhaps to shape their match within her moral patterns of conduct, acting as a life companion and not just a conventional wife (Lima 248). Anne Brontë stipulates that a good marriage must be the union of moral equals and must provide the woman with reasonably meaningful work. Agnes marries only after the readers have been made to feel she has the option of self-support and of a nurturing female community — unusual options to find represented in a novel set in Victorian England. The novel ends with Agnes's statement that she has become the loving mother to three children, and thus one can say that Brontë chooses to end her novel in keeping with Clark's view that a woman needs to exercise both her productive and reproductive powers in order to lead a happy, full life. Timothy Whittome observes, "The fate of Agnes is important because she comes to assume the mantle of the two roles dearest to Anne Brontë's heart - namely those of patient teacher, and loving mother" (40). According to Susan Meyer, "The end of the novel holds up … the middle-class

domestic sanctity of the marriage between Agnes and Mr. Weston, one in which a mother educates the children herself, and in which the family is able to subsist happily on their modest income" (12).

Section II: Helen Huntingdon, the Artist Who Rebelled

Anne Brontë's second and last novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) has often been read as "the portrayal of a wilful female subject whose struggle to claim her identity overturns the Victorian stereotype of women" (Lin 131). *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) is much longer than its predecessor, and more complex in structure, scope, and the number of characters it contains. Christine Alexander and Margaret Smith observe in *The Oxford Companion to the Brontës*: "Conceived under a powerful sense of duty, [*The Tenant*] is an unsentimental depiction of individual excess and its contagion for family, friends, and society, and a plea for the independence of women and equal education for the sexes" (Leaver 228). The novel opens with a letter from the prosperous farmer Gilbert Markham to his friend Halford, his brother-in-law as the readers learn at the novel's close; Markham's letter invites Halford (and the reader) to witness past events. Gilbert's letter records a narrative which begins twenty years earlier, in the autumn of 1827, with the arrival of a new tenant at Wildfell Hall. Gilbert's brother, Fergus, remarks that he hopes she is a "witch". His joking conjecture anticipates the communal suspicion and predisposition to gossip about the "mysterious lady". After an initial controversy, Markham is deeply intrigued by Helen Graham, the beautiful and secretive woman who has moved into nearby Wildfell Hall with her young son. It is only when Helen allows Gilbert to read her diary that the truth is revealed and the shocking details of the disastrous marriage she has left behind emerge. Elizabeth June Woolaston observes, "Helen uses her journal as a refuge from an unhappy marriage and as a confessional, a safety-valve for her burgeoning frustration, fear and despair" (55).

From Helen's diary one learns that Helen assumes her "mother's maiden name" of 'Graham' and the new identity of a widow, and is living in secrecy at Wildfell Hall to protect herself and her son from the persecutions of her dissolute husband, Arthur Huntingdon. The diary chronicles how she makes the terrible mistake of marrying Huntingdon, her gradual disillusionment with him, and the increasing suffering and humiliation which at last determine her to escape. In conformity with the separation of spheres that was brought about as a result of industrialization as put forward by Clark in her analysis, we observe how the diary chronicles Helen staying home while Huntingdon goes to town, "his affairs there demanded his attendance" (Brontë 244). However, Huntingdon's "business" from which, exhausted, he seeks respite at home is debauchery, not honest toil. He is brutal and selfish in his ways, unsympathetic towards Helen's grief on the loss of her father, callous toward his new-born son, hateful to the servants, an adulterer and an alcoholic. Helen is a "household deity" who must never leave her home, and a sex object: "I could do with less caressing and more rationality: I should like to be less of a pet and more of a friend" (Brontë 202). According to Naomi M. Jacobs, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* "depicts an unpleasant and often violent domestic reality completely at odds with the Victorian ideal of the home as a refuge from the harshly competitive outside world" (205). Helen's economic dependence on her husband becomes an acute problem when she finds she can no longer co-habit with Arthur in a decadent household of heavy drinking, reckless gambling, sexual promiscuity, and corruption of the child (Bellamy 255).

Brontë describes Helen's grim situation and her escape from a ferocious, hectic husband to settle with her son in the family property, Wildfell Hall, with the help of her brother, Frederick Lawrence, and her servant, Rachel, with whom Helen has a lifelong friendship. Elizabeth Langland observes, "In brief, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* rewrites the story of the Fallen Woman as a story of female excellence. In so doing, it takes on a radical feminist

dimension" (119). Having used her imagination and her indomitable will to plan her escape from her brutal husband, Helen sets about to create a life for herself and her young son in the haven of her birthplace, Wildfell Hall, where she will support them both "by the labour of [her] hands" (Brontë 352) — through the fruits of her labour as a professional artist. Helen observes that, "The palette and the easel, my darling playmates once, must be my sober toil-fellows now" (Brontë 352).

In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, liberation gains another meaning altogether. While Agnes Grey only feels freed through her profession by the end of the narrative, Helen Huntingdon has an immediate use of painting because she understands the power her landscapes truly hold; they are a means of providing for herself and a road towards freedom. To Helen, her work always appears "imbued with a double value: on the one hand it is a recreational activity relieving and assisting her to feel whole, an emotional refuge that disciplines her, and on the other, it is a source of income essential for her liberation" (Lima 248). It is significant that even at her marital home Grassdale, Helen had transformed the library into her own studio, the location in which she produced the landscape paintings she had hoped would provide her with the money to escape Grassdale's tortures, and which Huntingdon had later carted off for a conflagration. She had created her workspace, the place in which she generated rebellious female art, within a library that was filled with books written by men. Deborah Denenholz Morse observes, "Moreover, all these books are owned, as the library itself of course is owned — as she herself by law is owned — by Huntingdon. Her defence of her person with a tool of her art symbolizes the strength and power of female art, and its ability to reconstruct civilization out of the coarsest brutalities" (108).

At Wildfell Hall, Helen's brother Frederick offers to provide for her, but Helen values her independence now: "I shall have so much more pleasure ... when I know that I am paying my way honestly, and that what little I possess is legitimately all my own" (Brontë 393). "The

power of earning," J. S. Mill asserted in 1869, "is essential to the dignity of a woman" (Drewery 258). Within the space of the abandoned mansion of Wildfell Hall, Helen creates an art studio, transforming the musty interior of the house into a place of artistic creation. When Gilbert visits Helen at Wildfell Hall, he is taken aback by the experience of being "ushered into a room where the first object that met the eye was a painter's easel, with a table beside it covered with rolls of canvas, bottles of oil and varnish, palette, brushes, paints, etc." (Brontë 46). During this visit, Helen continues to work at her painting while conversing with Gilbert, and this makes him observe that her "heart is in [her] work" (Brontë 46) while the centrality of her studio and her easel in this scene suggest that her work is her passion, the heart of her existence. Gilbert is impressed with Helen's devotion to her work, as well as with the quality of her painting, especially when he learns that all her work is sold in London, for she "cannot afford to paint for [her] own amusement" (Brontë 47). For Helen, art, once seen in terms of social accomplishment, is now a socially acceptable means of survival. According to Stevie Davies, "Anne Brontë's portrait of the artist as a fee-earning young woman trebly trespasses on the domain of the masculine: female artists dabbled in water-colours or sketched decoratively in pencil or pen and ink; 'ladies' did not engage in trade; and, besides, the tools of her trade in this case count as stolen. The artist's materials noted by Markham on entry are formally the property of her husband — a point Anne Brontë concisely makes in Chapter Forty when Huntingdon burns her materials" (11-12).

Brontë reimagines the story of the female artist — the woman constructed by her society as 'unnatural', a woman who creates rather than procreates — in part by making her a mother (Morse 108). When Helen is driven from her husband's home at Grassdale Manor by his philandering and drunkenness, it is her responsibility to her child that motivates her decision to escape from Huntingdon's tyranny: "I could endure it for myself, but for my son it must be borne no longer" (Brontë 352). At Wildfell Hall near Linden-Car, Helen's jaunts with her son

across the moors show her desire to escape the confinements of the domestic sphere. Sometimes Helen just wanders with her son, and at other times Gilbert finds her "with a sketch-book in her hand, absorbed in the exercise of her favourite art" (Brontë 53). Both little Arthur and his mother seem to thrive in their new life at Wildfell Hall, and Helen, whether she is engrossed in art or meandering over the moors with her son, enjoys the freedom to roam around the abandoned old mansion at will. This freedom allows her to freely nurture her son, create her art, and cultivate a life of her own. At Wildfell Hall, Helen can openly and actively pursue her art, and she tells Gilbert that, "few people gain their livelihood with so much pleasure in their toil as I do" (Brontë 86). Her paintings reflect her maturing consciousness as they move from the beatific vision of Nature and human nature embodied in her early, conventionalized allegorical painting and decorative miniatures to increasingly realistic portraiture, and finally to representational landscapes that strive for the authenticity of verisimilitude until, as Margaret Berg states, "Helen, like Anne, is committed to a more literal and objective recording of external reality" (Morse 109).

As Helen starts earning, she undergoes a change of identity and a process of emotional maturity. Helen Huntingdon creates a social upheaval at Linden-Car because she embodies feminine capability and independence, implicitly rejecting many of the small community's long-cherished shibboleths, which conveniently help preserve the patriarchal status quo. She is morally earnest rather than coquettish, asserting her right to escape the bonds of an insufferable marriage and to earn a living. Anne Brontë juxtaposes Helen to a series of less acceptable female role-models to emphasize Helen's suitability: Eliza Millward, Jane Wilson, Annabella Lowborough and Milicent Hattersley (Woolaston 83). Stevie Davies observes:

> Wildfell Hall is a feminist manifesto of revolutionary power and intelligence. Helen 'Graham' or 'Huntingdon' or 'Lawrence' stands as an image of unaccommodated woman, in a landscape of biblical texts as well as moorlands

> and pasture, in which we plainly see that the daughter of woman has nowhere to lay her head. Paradoxically, her destabilizing inheritance is contradicted by her exceptional strength and stability as a person, with a core of impregnable self-esteem, far more steadfast in herself than the volatile male narrator, plodding through his acres, through whose eyes we first approach and experience her. The dispossessed Helen is transgressive: a challenge both to the narrator and the narrator's community. She lives alone. She earns her own living; keeps her own counsel and tells the definitive version of her own story. (11)

According to Rachel K. Carnell, "Helen represents a woman who, within the confines of her inner narrative, refuses the gender role dictated to her by her culture, insists on her status as a professional painter, pursues an affective and humanistic bond between herself and her loyal servant Rachel, and challenges the economic subordination of wives" (23). After witnessing her husband's dissolution, Helen sets out to eradicate any such tendencies in her son when she starts living at Wildfell Hall. Helen methodically creates a negative association with wine, making her son "swallow a little wine or weak spirits-and-water, by way of medicine when he [is] sick" (Brontë 31), so much so that young Arthur winces even at its mention. For this, she is rebuked by the neighbouring ladies, "The poor child will be the veriest milksop that ever was sopped! Only think what a man you will make of him …" (Brontë 31). She is further criticised because "you will treat him like a girl – you'll spoil his spirit, and make a mere Miss Nancy of him" (Brontë 33). When the ladies discern that Helen plans to teach her son by herself, she is urged against the "fatal error ... of taking that boy's education upon yourself" (Brontë 32). And Helen responds with spirit, "I am to send him to school, I suppose, to learn to despise his mother's authority and affection!" (Brontë 32). Helen's rationality and her ability to present her opinion logically challenge the 'angel in the house' ideology, while her ability to forcefully

and passionately express her opinion challenges the Victorian model of womanhood as well; the combination creates a sublime heroine (Lupold 4).

In her impassioned and articulate speeches against drinking, against boarding-school education, and against the irrational differences in the education of girls and boys, Helen Huntingdon enacts the sort of "talking on a large scale" that Victorian conduct books such as Sarah Ellis's *The Wives of England* would prohibit (Carnell 10). Helen's voice is rational, confident, and self-sufficient at this point in the narrative — and by the norms of the day, her discourse would certainly be deemed masculine (Carnell 10). When Arthur Huntingdon is taken ill after he injures himself by falling from a horse, Helen chooses to return to Arthur but now she operates from a position of relative power. While unselfishly tending to him, Helen even exploits her position to have Huntingdon sign a witnessed legal document to put their son "entirely under my care and protection, and to let me take him away whenever and wherever I please" (Brontë 426). The incident shows that Helen has moved a long way from her early zeal in saving her husband from his self-indulgence; she opts now instead to secure her maternal relationship and her son (Matus 109). Her letters to her brother reflect her control and authority over the dying Arthur, and they suggest her newly acquired confidence and improved self-esteem.

Helen and Gilbert's growing romantic attachment comes in part through their time together with little Arthur. Gilbert expresses a natural rapport with Helen's son: "I decidedly liked to talk to her little companion, whom [. . .] I found to be a very amiable, intelligent, and entertaining little fellow; and we soon became excellent friends" (Brontë 51). It is this that makes Gilbert appealing to Helen — "his paternal affection for her son" (Pike 120). On the other hand, Gilbert Markham is enchanted by Helen's "eloquence, and depth of thought and feeling" in conversation. Initially captivated by her beauty, especially on the rare occasions when it is enlivened by laughter, he comes to admire her intelligence, her strength of character

and her gifts. At the novel's conclusion, the readers learn that Helen and Gilbert have been happily married for twenty years. According to Samantha Ellis, Helen "is finally living a more creative life, and as she gains confidence, she starts to let more people into her life, even a new husband. By the end of the novel, she is still painting her own canvas; it is just that now she is using all the colours on her palette" (201). It is evident that the rematch between Helen and Gilbert promises to be "a more egalitarian one than Helen's previous marital debacle" (Woolaston 4-5). Helen and Gilbert start living at Staningley Hall, the estate that Helen inherits from her uncle after his death, and in keeping with Clark's analysis that a woman must fulfil both her productive and reproductive powers in order to live a happy, full life, we observe Helen at Staningley Hall joyfully nurturing little Arthur until he grows up to marry Helen Hattersley, daughter of Milicent, Helen's friend, and the reformed wild ruffian Ralph Hattersley. This second-generation Arthur-Helen union re-enacts the first marriage, symbolically redeeming it, and carrying with it the promise of future generations whose upbringing will enable them to avoid the struggles of their parents.

Conclusion:

Thus, Anne Brontë's fiction depicts work as something rather essential or vital and in both novels, the reader can observe how labour is considered: as a woman's liberation device. In both Anne Brontë's novels, it is possible to observe how the need to acquire some type of professional training, some experience gained through repeated effort becomes necessary. Only through experience can occur an evolution and both Agnes Grey and Helen Huntingdon are able to become truly proficient in their respective areas of activity. Simultaneously, in both literary works the reader perceives that, although described in two very distinctive situations, the concern to prevail as an emancipated woman, a status earned through work, is always present. This paper has explored how Anne Brontë, in accordance with Alice Clark's theory,

portrays her heroines as leading an emotionally fulfilling life because they have the option of self-support even after their marriage to kindred souls and after experiencing the blissful joys of motherhood. Sónia Aires Lima observes, "These middle-class Victorian women [Agnes and Helen], so close and yet so distant from us, had what society considered an appalling wish to be emancipated, created from despair, necessity or from the audacity to desire more than they were allowed to have. They were themselves pioneers who marked the need to fight for women's political and legal rights" (250). Lima further observes, "In Anne Brontë's literary work, we find proof that, if the writer had not passed away so young, her literature could have done much more by drawing society's attention to the women's cause" (250). It is perhaps the "religious cast to Anne Brontë's purpose in her novels which has disguised just how feminist her heroines and her narratives are" (Shaw 134).

Since the nineteenth century, women of all social classes have travelled a long road. In the beginning of the twentieth century, Wanda E. Neff indicated that a woman capable of supporting herself through work was already part of the industrial and social structure and was no longer viewed as the tragic pitiable figure from previous decades (Lima 250). Among the "Professional Class" in the 1891 census, almost ten thousand women worked for the national government and another five thousand as local officials. There were one-hundred-and-sixty-six women law clerks; one-hundred-and-one doctors, two veterinarians, more than fifty thousand sick nurses and midwives; and almost one-lakh-and-forty-five-thousand women teachers, professors, or lecturers. Altogether more than four lakh women were in the professional class, in addition to the explosion of women's work as typists, telephone operators, telegraphers, and commercial clerks. Thus, work as a symbol of individual worth and social validation seems to have signified one of the main ways towards emancipation of the middle-class woman. Marianne Thormählen observes, "Anne Brontë's novels deserve to be known, read and loved for the courage with which their protagonists face the fact that each individual

has to conquer the hardships of life on the basis of his or her own resources. Only God can lend assistance in that struggle: no human agent can save another from existential misery, and we sink or swim alone" (338). In the 'Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell', Charlotte Brontë said of her sister Emily that "her nature stood alone" (62). However, the person who really stood alone in the Brontë family was its taciturn youngest member who was 'obliged to fend for herself as none of her siblings did, finding her way as an independent adult in an outside world that showed her little kindness, and whose last words to her sister were "Take courage, Charlotte, take courage"' (Thormählen 338).

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