

ANNE BRONTË'S HELEN AND HER ATYPICAL INSUBORINATION:
"A WILL OF HER OWN"

JUAN DE DIOS TORRALBO CABALLERO

University of Cordoba

Abstract: *This article examines the protagonist of The Tenant of Wildfell Hall (Helen Huntingdon/Graham) as an anomaly in the novelistic tradition. Helen Huntingdon is a character who decides for herself, without heeding the advice of her aunt and uncle (exercising "a will of her own", "I take the liberty of judging for myself"). Helen Graham, in this manner, challenges society, the Victorian novel, and also the sentimental novel that preceded it. She suffers domestic violence at the hands of her husband and, in an extraordinary act of rebellion, courage and determination, abandons him, taking her son away with her. The author's depiction of Helen's spouse, the alcoholic and abusive Arthur Huntingdon, also constitutes a divergence from the status quo of the era, as affairs of this kind were not normally portrayed in novels about the affluent Victorian society.*

Keywords: *Victorian novel, domestic violence, alcoholism, Anne Brontë, The Tenant.*

It's well you couldn't keep your own secret –ha, ha! It's well these women must be blabbing –if they haven't a friend to talk to, they must whisper their secrets to the fishes, or write them on the sand or something; and it's well too I wasn't over full to-night, now I think of it, or I might have snoozed away and never dreamt of looking what my sweet lady was about –or I might have lacked the sense or the power to carry my point like a man, as I have done. (Brontë 2008:311)

1. Introduction

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, published in 1848, is a peculiar and dissonant novel, as it departs from the English literary tradition, principally because Helen Huntingdon is not a conventional protagonist. The work's author, Anne Brontë, crafts a main character who decides her future on her own, disregarding her family's counsel. In this way Brontë's writing contravenes the idealised society of her time, as she renders an unhappy marriage and a courageous protagonist, one who dares to leave her husband after his repeated abuse and humiliation of her, perpetrated both privately and publicly.

As a character, Helen Huntingdon, who later adopts the alias Helen Graham, is also a creation running counter to the sentimental novel, the romance, and the customs of the well-to-do Victorian society, whose morality and concern with appearances led people to quarantine the issues of abuse and alcoholism to the strictly private and family sphere. Helen rebels "against traditional ethics and the law itself by separating herself and her son from her dissolute husband" (Drewery 2013:339). Jennifer K. Phillips (2001:141) addressed the concept of New Women in her doctoral thesis on *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

Jessica Cox (2013:33) states that Anne Brontë's novel "appears closer to the New Woman fiction of the nineteenth century [...] than to the sensation fiction of the 1860s", and then points out that this New Woman "became a social and literary phenomenon at the end of the Victorian age, and carried the feminist movement forward into the twentieth century". According to Beatriz

Villacañas (1993:196), this novel is a “really revolutionary step for a woman of her time and situation”.

The realistic subject matter taken up by Anne Brontë was novel in her time, to such an extent that her own sister Charlotte (2009:304) deemed *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* “an unfortunate piece of work” and stated that “The choice of subject in that work is a mistake”. In the 20th century, however, the work attracted renewed interest, revisited by scholars like Samantha Ellis (2017) whose biography of Anne Brontë praises and more equitably assesses Anne Brontë’s literary legacy. Another indication of the continuing impact of the novel is Sam Baker’s borrowing from it for his novel *The Woman Who Ran*, published in early 2016.

2. Some Letters and the Pages of a Diary

Anne Brontë structures her novel in 15 letters that Gilbert Markham sends to his brother-in-law, Halford; hundreds of diary pages by Helen Huntingdon/Graham, which Markham reveals to Halford; and, finally, again, nine letters sent by Markham. In this way, the work features the two narrative voices of Gilbert and Helen.

In addition to this narrative complexity, Anne Brontë’s novel includes a component of chronological complication: the work begins in the autumn of 1827, and ends on June 10, 1847 but does not follow a linear path, as before the end of the first part (I-XIX), specifically in Chapter XVI, the time period narrated reverts to June 1st, 1821.

Josephine McDonagh (2008:xxxiv) discusses the stylistic aspects of the novel, echoing those who point to the writer’s lack of maturity: “her failure to have found – unlike her sisters – an authentic voice”. She also, however, poses another hypothesis, with which the author of this work concurs: “But that could equally look on this sense of distance or reserve that it constantly produces in relation to its narrative voice as part of a larger set of problems that the novel interrogates”.

Also, some letters of Gilbert Markham’s and some pages from Helen Huntingdon/Graham’s diary defy the conventions of the Victorian-era novel in their content, as they depart from the idyllic motifs found in other works (for example, Thomas Hardy’s *Far from the Madding Crowd*, with its rural idyll between Bathsheba Everdene and Gabriel Oak; or the romance between Rochester and Jane Eyre, in sister Charlotte Brontë’s novel of the same name). This work contains a series of missives written by a young man who is in love, but unrequited throughout the novel, precisely because Helen has a past that haunts her and impedes her from forging a new life.

The diary describes the mistreatment that the protagonist suffers at the hands of her husband, the Victorian libertine Arthur Huntingdon, a lover of revelry in London and of a degenerate lifestyle, in which he also indulges at his own home in Grassdale. In Chapter XXXIII, Helen discovers her husband with his lover, Lady Lowborough, in the garden of their house. Mortified and unable to sleep, she rises and sets about writing: “I found my bed so intolerable that, before two o’clock, I rose, and, lighting my candle by the rushlight that was still burning, I got my desk and sat down in my dressing-gown to recount the events of the past evening. (Brontë 2008:261-262). Outwardly, however, the protagonist maintains an eloquent silence, as she asks her maid Rachel not to tell the rest of the servants.

In the new life that the protagonist undertakes, along with her son Arthur, she must also employ concealment to keep from being found by her husband in her new location at Wildfell Hall. The young Gilbert Markham, in love with her, must endure her apparent disdain and odd behaviour, as she struggles, inside, with the effects of the mistreatment she has suffered. After fleeing her husband, a new love ultimately flourishes between the “widow” Helen and her neighbour.

3. Helen Seizes the Reins of Her Life: “I take the liberty of judging for myself”

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall is a novel that foregoes the prototypes and archetypes of the Victorian novel, as seen in Helen’s rejection of her suitors in Chapter XVI, the first section of the diary, when the young woman is just 18 years old. Helen herself confirms that “I commenced my career – or my first campaign” (Brontë 2008:113) in London. She rejects a certain Mr Wilmot as too old, snubs the insipid Mr Boarham, and does not care for another gentleman, who is deemed “an empty headed coxcomb” (Brontë 2008:114).

This is a novel of self-affirmation and determination, as it is the protagonist herself who insists on deciding in relation to her marriage, brushing aside the opinions of her aunt and uncle. She puts it like this: “I take the liberty of judging for myself” (Brontë 2008:120). Indeed, Helen determines her actions, through freely decided acts, in this challenging conduct piece of literature, particularly “the principle of wifely submission” (McDonagh 2008:xxviii). In Chapter XXXIII, when she loses a game of chess against Walter Hargrave, the subsequent dialogue metaphorically conveys Helen’s courage; when he says “Beaten-beaten!” (Brontë 2008:255), she answers “No, never, Mr. Hargrave” (Brontë 2008:256). That said, it should be noted that at the end of Chapter XLI, when Helen talks with Esther, the former advises her to “have patience” and “do nothing rashly”, also instructing her to “Keep both heart and hand in your own possession” (Brontë 2008:318), this suggesting that she regrets her decisions, even if they were taken freely.

When Helen marries Arthur Huntingdon (Chapters XXII and XXIII), the novel is one about falling in love. Thereafter, however, she suffers her husband’s abuse and contempt. When he is away in London again for a second time, in the thirtieth chapter, Helen Huntingdon reflects on the decisions she has taken of her own volition, without adhering to others’ opinions or external constraints: “But I remembered that I had brought all these afflictions, in manner wilfully, upon my self; and I determined to bear them without a murmur” (Brontë 2008:208). When she must endure the suffering born of her husband’s debauchery and dissipation, she finds consolation in her newborn son, and in Art and Literature: “I had my books and pencils” (Brontë 2008:208).

It is, then, a novel of abuse and violence, both psychological and physical [referring to “his errors” (Brontë 2008:222) and “my husband’s faults” (Brontë 2008:210)] perpetrated against the protagonist, and even against her son Arthur, by Arthur Huntingdon. It is also a novel about addiction, as Huntingdon is an alcoholic whom Helen even tries to cure, through patience and care. The protagonist describes her husband’s behaviour as “degradation [...] his failings, and transgressions”, as well as “vice” and “sins” (Brontë 2008:222).

It is, too, a novel of rebellion and courage, when Helen Huntingdon decides to leave her husband, taking her son Arthur with her. In this pivotal plot development Anne Brontë’s work addresses what were considered pressing issues at the time: the custody of children, about which a law was passed in 1839 (Bill for Infant Custody), and also divorce, the subject of legislation in 1857 (Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act, not yet passed). Other Victorian novels contain some of this kind of female boldness and determination, but in a more veiled way. When Helen Huntingdon resolves to flee (Chapter XXXIX is entitled “A Scheme of Escape”), she states that “I would support myself and him [her son] by the labour of my hands” (Brontë 2008:298), and concentrates on improving her technique as a painter: “I immediately resumed my task, and worked hard all day” (Brontë 2008:307).

It is also a novel of liberation: on October 24, 1827 Helen Huntingdon writes: “Thank Heaven, I am free and safe at last!” (Brontë 2008:329). She has previously stated that, once she manages to escape from Grassdale, “I shall consider myself safe” (Brontë 2008:302).

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall constitutes a proto-feminist work in the defence of women, written before social movements on behalf of women’s suffrage had begun. In this sense it is a forerunner of the struggles for women’s rights that emerged in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

It is, as well, a novel about love, in that it depicts an impossible love in Victorian society: that of a married woman (mistreated and separated) for a young man, Gilbert Markham, who opts to ignore the slander, criticism and suspicion vexing his beloved, following the dictates of his heart and trusting in her goodness.

4. Episodes of Domestic Violence

The twenty-fourth chapter, entitled “The First Quarrel”, relates an initial episode of domestic violence, one that psychologically traumatises the protagonist. On April 4, 1822, Mr Huntingdon tells his wife about his love affair with Lady F- (Brontë 2008:176-177). She reacts by seeking refuge in the library to cry. Her husband then decides to depart for London, which only aggravates Helen’s suffering. The reasons he gives for this trip, undertaken alone, is that he could not be happy there and that his wife did not love him (Brontë 2008:182) in response to his wife’s inquiries.

The twenty-sixth chapter, which narrates the arrival of a group of guests to Grassdale, describes how Lady Lowborough flirts with Mr Huntingdon, to which he responds favourably (Brontë 2008:193), hurting his wife and inciting her jealousy. Helen expresses her emotions after her husband effusively praises the guest’s piano playing and singing:

But I confess I do feel jealous at times – most painfully, bitterly so – when she sings and plays to him, and he hangs over the instrument and dwells upon her voice with no affected interest; for then, I know he is really delighted, and I have no power to awaken similar fervour. I can amuse and please him with my simple songs, but not delight him thus. (Brontë 2008:194)

It is noteworthy how the protagonist, realistic and departing from the tradition of the sentimental novel, does not sing sophisticated songs, like the guest’s, but rather simple ones. This detail accords with the tone of realism characterising the pages of Anne Brontë’s novels.

A similar contrast had arisen a year earlier at the house of Helen’s aunt and uncle when the two women (Helen and Annabella), both single at the time, met at a party. In that case Helen had sung “a little Scotch song” (Brontë 2008:139) that her aunt had requested; but her suitor Huntingdon had ecstatically asked Annabella for another tune. The first episode took place on September 22, 1821; the second, on September 23, 1822. In this way Anne Brontë reveals Mr. Huntingdon’s tendency, when either single or married, to flirt with other women, and to succumb (at his wife’s expense) to Annabella’s flirting.

In the nineteenth chapter Helen is so jealous that she abandons the party and retires to the library, while in the new chapter she writes in her diary that others view her as “a neglected wife” (Brontë 2008:194). Despite being able to take revenge on her husband by responding to Mr Hargrave’s advances, Helen prefers not to torment him, resisting the temptation to do so: “This is unjust; and I am sometimes tempted to tease him accordingly, but I will not yield to the temptation [...]” (Brontë 2008:195). These incidents of psychological torture are of paramount importance to the protagonist, as the only description found in her diary of that day is precisely her account of this episode; this organisation of the content could be either a complete account of what she wrote that day, or a selection made by the diary’s recipient (Gilbert Markham) who – lest we forget – is the one who arranges and communicates the diary’s contents to his brother-in-law Halford (Gilbert Markham writes the letters comprising the first 15 chapters).

In the same chapter in which the protagonist records in her diary that she has given birth (XXVIII), the reader is witness to the father’s mistreatment of and contempt for Helen, and little Arthur, fifteen days after his birth, despite his mother’s devotion to him, as he spits at her: “Helen, I shall positively hate that little wretch, if you worship it so madly! You are absolutely infatuated about it!” He dismisses it as an “ugly creature”, “a little worthless idiot” and demands Helen’s full attention : “As long as you have that ugly little creature to dote upon, you care not a farthing what

becomes of me” (Brontë 2008:204). Arthur refuses to kiss the child, so his mother “gave my little one a shower of gentle kisses to make up for its other parent’s refusal” (Brontë 2008:205). He goes on to disparage his son with other pejorative and derogatory terms: “senseless, thankless, oyster”, “little devil” and “a little selfish, senseless, sensualist” (Brontë 2008:205).

A year later (Chapter XXIX), in December 1822, the narrator discloses that her husband has returned to London in the spring, refusing to take her and her son with him, and spending some four months there: “It was early in March that he went, and he did not return till July” (Brontë 2008:207). Later, when Arthur leaves to hunt in Scotland, the protagonist alludes, in contrast to said destination, to “the corruptions and temptations of London” (Brontë 2008:225).

In this chapter there are two conversations about Huntingdon’s dissipated life in London, both involving his neighbour Mr Hargrave. The first takes place when he epitomises an entry of Helen’s diary (in December of 1822). Hargrave relates that he has just returned from the city, where he saw Huntingdon (Brontë 2008:210), taking exception to his thoughtlessness and degeneracy, with complaints like: “but I cannot suppress my indignation when I behold such infatuated blindness and perversion of taste”, “[...] the indulgences to virtue and domestic orderly habits that he despises” (Brontë 2008:210), “[...] to think that your husband is the most enviable man in the world” (Brontë 2008:211), and even bemoaning his conduct: “Oh, Huntingdon; you know not what you slight!” (Brontë 2008:213). The neighbour (for whom the chapter is entitled) cites the reasons for Huntingdon’s downfall, among which is his conspicuous alcoholism: “Where I have but sipped and tasted, he drains the cup to the dregs” (Brontë 2008:210) and the abandonment of even his newborn son: “And this too, he has forsaken! [...] that is such a *sweet* child” (Brontë 2008:211). The second conversation occurs when the narrator/protagonist reflects on another day in early July, by the woods next to the park, where her neighbour Walter Hargrave arrives. She reveals her loneliness and abandonment when he asks “You have not heard from Huntingdon lately?” and she responds “Not this week”, followed by a reflection: “Not these three weeks, I might have said” (Brontë 2008:213).

Anne Brontë deals with the moulds and concepts of “manliness and womanliness” (Shaw 2013:330), as her husband exceeds the limits incumbent upon a gentleman, as traced by John Ruskin (2004:206) among other writers, and because she will not be constrained by the corset of being a domestic and submissive woman, though she does stoically endure her husband’s abuse for several years.

In the thirtieth chapter, when Huntingdon returns after the aforementioned four-month stay in London, he gets into an argument with the butler, Benson, whom Helen defends. Her husband flies into a rage, and even threatens his wife, promising that he is going to drink six bottles of wine to ease his anger: “If you bother me with another word, I’ll ring the bell and order six bottles of wine. And, by Heaven, I’ll drink them dry before I stir from this place!” (Brontë 2008:216). He then asks for and downs a glass of wine to calm his nerves, and confirms his intemperate life in the metropolis through this hyperbole: “I’ve lived more in these four months, Helen, than you have in the whole course of your existence, or will to the end of your days, if they numbered a hundred years” (Brontë 2008:218). This conversation contains notable insults hurled by Arthur at Helen, such as “you she tiger” (Brontë 2008:217) – when he asks for the glass of wine – and “my pretty tyrant” (Brontë 2008:218) when he chastises her for threatening to lose all affection for him.

Helen stands in contrast to Hattersley’s wife, who, in London with her husband and with Arthur Huntingdon, appears to abide all her husband’s antics, putting up with his drunkenness, and never complaining about the late hours at which he comes home. Helen explains, however, that Mrs Hattersley sends her letters expressing her bitterness and indicting Huntingdon as a bad influence on her husband.

Helen reflects on her objectification (or reification) and alludes to her husband’s cruelty: “but when I alone was their object, as was frequently the case, I endured it with calm forbearance, except at times when my temper, worn out by repeated annoyances [...] and exposed me to the

imputations of fierceness, cruelty, and impatience” (Brontë 2008:220). The protagonist confesses that her love has waned, and that she must also take care of her sick child.

The night Helen witnesses her husband’s infidelity in the bushes of their home (with Lady Lowborough, Chapter XXXIII) another episode of violence and psychological damage ensues. The humiliated wife waits for him when the guests go to bed, and states categorically that “I would leave you to-morrow!” (Brontë 2008:260) to which he replies that he won’t let her, merely because he does not want to be “the talk of the country, for your fastidious caprices” (Brontë 2008:260). Given her ostensible inability to leave, Helen responds: “Then I must stay here, to be hated and despised. – But henceforth, we are husband and wife only in the name” (Brontë 2008:260). The penultimate chapter of the second volume (XXXVI) confirms Huntingdon’s continuing mistreatment of and disdain towards his wife; for example, when he receives a letter from his beloved Lady Lowborough, and contemptuously throws it on a table, barking two commands at her: “Read that, and take a lesson by it!” (Brontë 2008:275)

Once Helen has made her decision to flee (chapter XXXIX), there is a scene in which her friend Hargrave informs her of the scorn with which her husband speaks of her when amongst other men. Mr Hattersley offers him this metaphorical counsel: “To turn over a new leaf, you double-dyed scoundrel [...], and beg your wife’s pardon, and be a good boy for the future” (Brontë 2008:301). Mr Huntingdon’s response is as follows:

‘My wife, what wife? I have no wife?’ replied Huntingdon, looking innocently up from his glass – ‘or if I have, look you gentlemen, I value her so highly that any one among you, that can fancy her, may have her and welcome –you may, by Jove and my blessing into the bargain’. (Brontë 2008:301)

Helen’s reaction (to Hargrave, who is telling her this) conveys, on the one hand, her decision and, on the other, her dried-up heart, in light of the metaphor she uses: “‘I say’, I replied, calmly, ‘that what he prizes so lightly, will not be long in his possession [...] my heart is too thoroughly dried to be broken in a hurry.’” (Brontë 2008:301)

In this chapter there is another case of masculine violence, which Anne Brontë strives to express via two superlatives. The insults Huntingdon levels at his wife are deduced precisely because they are not openly stated in the text, but rather implied through an artifice employed by the writer to stress the gravity of the slander. Arthur Huntingdon sees his wife alone with Hargrave and: “poured forth a volley of the vilest and grossest abuse it was possible for the imagination to conceive or the tongue to utter. I did not attempt to interrupt him” (Brontë 2008:304). Ironically, she has just firmly rejected Hargrave’s declaration of love. The narrator then confirms that he continued “muttering some more abusive language” (Brontë 2008:305). Helen, reeling, turns to Hargrave to show him that she has not been unfaithful. At this juncture the novel conveys the protagonist’s determination to clear her unjustly tarnished name, even while still in her own home, as Helen begins to react to the defamation and slander to which she is subjected.

The selected journal entries that the narrator compiles (Helen gave the diary to Gilbert, who, in turn, shared it with his brother-in-law Halford) are from dates whose significance are pertinent to the contents of the work: December 25, 1822 (XXVIII), December 25, 1823 (XXIX), December 26 (XXX), December 20, 1824 (a chapter eloquently entitled “Dual Solitude”; XXXVI), December 20, 1825 (XXXVII), a day when she even writes “I am weary of this life”. (Brontë 2008:276) Falling on Christmas or near this religious celebration, these dates, firstly, allude to the wedding anniversary of Helen and Arthur; and, secondly, they convey to the reader the religious protagonist’s pain and distress, as this is a time of year when, for both religious and family reasons, they ought to be enjoying and celebrating their wedding anniversaries and Christmas (we should not forget Helen’s piety), as well as conjugal and family love. These stark scenes clash with the idyllic romances typical of the Victorian novel (for example, in the aforementioned *Far from the Madding Crowd*) and the earlier romantic novel, such as the case of Jane Austen’s work (for example, *Sense and Sensibility*).

5. An Alcoholic Husband

The biographical inspiration for Brontë's alcoholic characters is an aspect addressed by such critics as Robert Inglesfield (1998:ix), who, in his classic introduction to the *The Tenant* asserts: "no doubt that in writing *Agnes Grey* Anne Brontë drew directly on her own experiences". Indeed, the works of Anne Brontë feature certain parallels with her life. The premature death of the writer's mother meant that the future novelist was raised by her father's sister. In the novel this is mirrored in the protagonist's orphan status, as her father neglects her, and it is her aunt and uncle who raise her. References to nature as rugged yet unspoiled, in contrast to the conception of the metropolis as a hurried and corrupt place, reflect the author's conception of her native Yorkshire and its dissimilarity to the capital. The same dynamic occurs with Arthur Huntingdon, whose real-life inspiration may have been her brother Branwell (McDonagh 2008:xviii).

It has already been mentioned how wine and alcohol are portrayed in several episodes throughout the novel. In one case, Helen's friend and neighbour Mr Hargrave describes to her, in hyperbolic terms, how her husband drank in London: "he drains the cup to the dregs" (Brontë 2008:210). His own wife confirms that "he prefers the society of his friends to that of his wife, and the dissipations of the town to the quiet of country life" (Brontë 2008:213).

The protagonist then records in her diary how wine, during times of depression and weakness, became her husband's crutch: "his medicine and support, his comforter, his recreation, and his friend, – and thereby sunk deeper and deeper" (Brontë 2008:220). In response, Helen remains ever vigilant and firm in order to free him "from the absolute bondage to that detestable propensity", its pernicious effects being underscored by means of these parallel morphological and syntactic structures: "so insidious in its advances, so inexorable in its tyranny" (Brontë 2008:221).

Thanks to Helen's efforts, her husband drinks less – though only for a while. This work of re-education and reintegration is metaphorically called "the frail bulwark" (Brontë 2008:221) in reference to the effort Helen made. However, in the fall of 1824 (Chapter XXXI) the party thrown at home shows that Mr Huntingdon has relapsed, metaphorically expressed as follows "We are shaken down again to about our usual position" (Brontë 2008:228), with the subsequent confirmation that "These two detestable men Grimsby and Hattersley have destroyed all my labour against his love of wine." (Brontë 2008:229)

6. The Novel's Reception

Anne Brontë's novel, the story of the abusive and manipulative Huntingdon, may be interpreted as a realistic counterpoint to the romance found in sister Emily's *Wuthering Heights*, with Heathcliff, the Byronic hero. The novel sold very well, better than Emily's work, in fact (Ellis 2018:257). Anne's first novel, *Agnes Grey*, was published together with Emily's sole work, and almost at the same time as Charlotte's *Jane Eyre*. Her two sibling rivals prevailed in terms of immediate fame. Nevertheless, this was a society that also demonstrated interest in the unique aspects of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

Some critics and readers concluded that the novel could not have been written by a man, as they found it hard to believe that a male writer would have depicted such an abusive and alcoholic male character. On the contrary, *Sharpe's London Magazine* stated that "none but a man could have known so intimately each vile, dark fold of the civilised brute's corrupted nature; none but a man could make so daring an exhibition", more specifically asserting that "no man would have made his sex appear at once coarse, brutal, and contemptibly weak, at once disgusting and ridiculous" (quoted in Ellis 2018:270).

According to Winifred Gérin (1975:261), some experts criticised the "scandalous insistence on presenting scenes which public decency usually forbids". Also noteworthy is the

reflection written by her sister Charlotte Brontë (2009:304-305) in her well-known “Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell”, as it refers to the thematic anomaly of the work, calling the choice of subject an error:

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, by Acton Bell, likewise received an unfavourable reception. At this I can not wonder. The choice of subject was an entire mistake. Nothing less congruous with the writer’s nature could be conceived. The motives which dictated this choice were pure, but, I think, slightly morbid. She had in the course of her life, been called on to contemplate, near at hand and for a long time, the terrible effects of talents misused and faculties abused; hers was naturally a sensitive, reserved and dejected nature; what she saw sank very deeply into her mind; it did her harm. She brooded over it till she believed it.

From these words it cannot be inferred that Charlotte failed to advance the cause of women, or that she was not concerned about the same issues, though she may have addressed them in a more subtle and tangential way. The end of the twelfth chapter of *Jane Eyre* contains an example of this defence of women:

Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex. (Brontë 2008:109)

I conclude with the initial reflection in *Agnes Grey* (Brontë 2010:1), in which the author clarifies the content of the literary work and the esteem that the novel may acquire over time, once readers have time to assess it:

All true histories contain instruction; though, in some, the treasure may be hard to find, and when found, so trivial in quantity that the dry, shrivelled kernel scarcely compensates for the trouble of cracking the nut. Whether this be the case with my history or not, I am hardly competent to judge; I sometimes think it might prove useful to some, and entertaining to others, but the world may judge for itself; shielded by my own obscurity, and by the lapse of years, and a few fictitious names, I do not fear to venture, and will candidly lay before the public what I would not disclose to the most intimate friend.

The quote refers to the classic dual aspiration to instruct and entertain at the same time, noting that sometimes it is necessary to delve deep into the content (hence the metaphor of cracking the nut) to apprehend the intended edifying message. The novelist also enhances the verisimilitude and realism of her narrative by using the noun phrase “true histories”.

7. Conclusions

Domestic violence in the middle and upper classes is one of the most salient themes of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. While Victorian society was accustomed to literature featuring scenes of violence amidst the lower classes, it was not used to seeing depictions of it in the upper echelons. Thus, Anne Brontë placed in the public spotlight a set of matrimonial and domestic issues that, as a general rule, were confined to the private sphere of the family.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall contains a literary representation of the problem of domestic violence and abuse in the Victorian era. Writing about domestic violence in 1848 was groundbreaking, this having been considered a reason for the work and its author having been largely overlooked and spurned during their time. Emily’s only novel and Anne’s second starkly describe the brutal violence of society, while Charlotte tiptoes around this aspect, either omitting it from her novels, or indirectly referring to it, in accord with her conception of what her readers would tolerate, as they were not accustomed to a novel containing such manifest violence.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall constitutes an anomaly precisely due to the crudeness and realism with which it depicts fictional elements. Helen Huntingdon stands out for her justified insubordination. The novel is ground-breaking by portraying the courage and independence of its female protagonist, who, humiliated, resolves to flee from her abusive husband, taking her son with her. Family circumstances spur Helen to make a living on her own, painting and selling her works in order to raise her son while forgoing her husband's financial support. For all these reasons, Helen is a synecdoche for determination and courage in her time, taking these decisions even though the marriage legislation of the time, in cases of separation, favoured the husband to the detriment of the wife.

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Notes on the author

Juan de Dios TORRALBO CABALLERO has been an Associate Professor at the University of Cordoba since 2012. He holds a PhD in English Studies from the University of Cordoba, and a PhD in Spanish Literature from the Complutense University of Madrid. His research interests lie in 17th-century English poetry, the advent of the English novel, and the reception of English literature in Spain.