

Extended Essay

English B HL

The social, legal and economic challenges that women face in a patriarchal society

How are social, legal and economic challenges that women face in a patriarchal society and era defined in the novel “*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*” by Anne Brontë?

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Introduction:

In the Victorian Era the hatred that women faced, heavily depended on the beliefs that women were lesser than men. The society where men have an unfair advantage is shown in the book "The Tenant of Wildfell Hall" by Anne Brontë, highlighting the protagonist and her husband's abusive relationship and many other women in the book who are discriminated against. Through Helen Graham's experiences, how marriage, property laws, and social expectations limit female autonomy are investigated. Helen's fights with her husband reveals the legal power given to men in marriage, whilst her lack of financial independence illustrates the economic fragility imposed upon women because of these destructive beliefs. This extended essay investigates the question "How are social, legal and economic challenges that women face in a patriarchal society and era defined in the novel "The Tenant of Wildfell Hall" by Anne Brontë?" by using the 19th century as a setting for an environment of hierarchy and restraint where custom, reputation, and authority controlled day-to-day activities and individual freedom was restricted, particularly for women, analysing how the protagonist Helen Graham's resistance both exposes and shapes the boundaries of her society. Anne Brontë mentions in her preface that "if I have prevented one thoughtless girl from falling into the very natural error of my heroine, the book has not been written in vain." (Brontë, 1996, p. 4) pointing out that she wants to show women the flaws in the system and enlighten them on this process. In the Tenant of Wildfell Hall, Anne Brontë shows the dehumanization of women in the nineteenth century through the influence of misogyny on both men and women, the compulsory economic dependency on men, and women having significantly fewer rights and privileges by using dialogues between characters, inner monologues of Helen and detailed descriptions of the era itself to present an environment which oppressed women by default.

The Influence of Misogyny on Both Men and Women

Brontë portrays misogyny as a socially reinforced mentality, not just an individual problem by showing Helen's and many other women's experiences with their abusive husbands and the unfair rights that were granted to them by this system. The novel is written in two parts with split narratives where the first part is narrated by Gilbert. This allows the reader to see things from a man's perspective, beginning the story from how a man experiences the male dominant society and the rights and privileges that are presented to him. The second part is consisted of Helen's diary which has a deeply personal tone. The documentation of her experiences and her abuse challenges Victorian era stereotypes and acts as a guide for women to separate affection and control in a relationship. The tone shift between the two parts shows each character's personality where Gilbert has a romantic and relaxed tone while Helen is more reserved, serious and affected by the criticism directed at her. Through this tone shift, Brontë critiques male romantic idealization of women.

The misogyny of men is heavily represented through Helen's abusive husband Arthur. Arthur Huntingdon's treatment of Helen demonstrates his notion that emotional control and moral seriousness are flaws in women, not virtues. He rejects Helen's worries and purposefully undercuts her authority as a wife and mother, implying that he sees her as an object of control rather than an equal partner. Brontë suggests that such attitudes are learned rather than natural, as Arthur's behaviour reflects the upbringing he got.

The affects of influence in the household is an example of how Arthur teaches his son to have the same views as he does by force. The novel's illustration displays how men are groomed to maintain current power structures while women are positioned as targets of male dominance through this dynamic. By depicting the father's direct instruction and the son's reactions, Brontë

highlights this effect and draws attention to the social and personal repercussions of internalized misogyny. This challenges the systems that teach and normalize patriarchal beliefs by illustrating the subtle ways that maintain gender inequality and highlight the difficulties that women like Helen endure. “My son, whom his father and his father's friends delighted to encourage in all the embryo vices a little child can show, and to instruct in all the evil habits he could acquire—in a word to make a man of him.”(Brontë, 1996, p. 350) Arthur’s effect on their son is an example of the scope of male dominance in marriage and family life. Helen's husband’s ownership of legal responsibility over their child's upbringing, allows him to intentionally undercut Helen's moral teaching. His actions show a conviction that restraint and sensitivity are flaws, which he promotes in order to assert authority. Brontë depicts a power imbalance that harms both Helen and the child, implying that patriarchal control in the home reinforces destructive values. The novel's portrayal challenges the premise that paternal power is inevitably just or useful.

Brontë highlights how patriarchal attitudes are reproduced by women, especially the elder generation. Characters like Gilbert's mother unquestionably embrace traditional gender norms, preferring obedience and decorum over freedom. Similarly, the gentle attitude toward Arthur Huntingdon demonstrates a willingness to overlook male wrongdoing while holding women to higher moral standards. Helen, on the other hand, defies these norms by publicly criticizing behavior she finds demeaning. Brontë argues that women's oppression stems from both male authority and social norms that inhibit female unity. They follow a system that is dominated by men, demean other women, and humiliate themselves in an effort to win over men. As a reflection of the expectations of patriarchal society, it is clear that some female characters in the book, such as Gilbert's mother and other older women, embrace the notion that a wife's job is to follow and satisfy her husband. Helen, on the other hand, defies these expectations, but Brontë also illustrates how deeply embedded these ideas are by showing women who degrade or criticize others in order to win over men. This internalized misogyny illustrates the manner in which women might uphold the same constrictive beliefs that restrict their individuality and the social pressure placed on them to conform from an early age. By depicting these relationships, Brontë draws attention to both the subtle ways that women can uphold patriarchal norms and the outward causes of male authority. The book also highlights that these internalized beliefs reinforce the larger social limitations on women's agency and help abusive and controlling relationships endure. Although not all wives experience physical abuse, even seemingly happy marriages give the husband complete control and advantages. Arthur is an example of Brontë's criticism of patriarchal standards because of his harsh treatment of Helen and lack of concern for her feelings. “He playfully abuses me... tells me I can have no conception of the multitudinous engagements that keep him away...” (Brontë, 1996, p. 220) with this quote Brontë's portrayal of Helen's marriage highlights the emotional impact of controlling and dismissive behavior. Helen's husband regularly undermines her authority and dismisses her moral concerns, leaving her with little power in her own home. Marriage, rather than providing security, becomes a framework that restricts Helen's individuality and self-expression. Brontë critiques male authority's control over women's life by portraying Helen's quiet as compelled rather than voluntary.

The Compulsory Economic Dependency on Men

One of the many reasons of Helen being trapped in a violent marriage is her lack of economic independence which is talked about through her and Arthur's dialogues about her hoping to become an artist. The complete control over Helen's property and earning potential, makes her reliant on a man's approval for her everyday life and the future of her kid. Brontë highlights economic vulnerability through Helen's effort to leave and support herself, demonstrating how legal and societal standards limit women's autonomy. By depicting Helen's limited options, the story criticizes how marriage served as both a social and economic prison for women in the Victorian era. "The keys of your cabinet, desk, drawers, and whatever else you possess.... Now then, sneered he, we must have a confiscation of property." (Brontë, 1996, p. 365)

Problems of property and economic dependency are discussed in the book with Helen getting all of her property taken away from her. "You'll find nothing gone but your money, and the jewels and a few little trifles I thought it advisable to take into my own possession... I've left you a few sovereigns in your purse, which I expect to last you through the month-at all events, when you want more, you will be so good as to give me an account of how that's spent." (Brontë, 1996, p. 366) it is seen in this quote that the economic dependence of women on men is not just a social norm but a situation upheld by law, tradition and restricted opportunities for employment and ownership. This reliance influences almost every facet of women's lives.

Helen's lack of authority over her belongings and her kid in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* highlights the severe limitations pushed on women in her society. Her choice to leave Arthur and live on her own, shows how much women had to put up with to live as an independent individual. Helen's experiences are used to express a woman's ability to function in a male dominated society, demonstrating how social, legal, and financial obstacles makes independence challenging. By describing these difficulties, Helen's ability to get over the norms of society's rules that belittle women.

Brontë's work highlights the limitations on women's autonomy due to legal and societal obligations. By depicting Helen's bravery in the face of these restraints, the novel illustrates the conflict between human autonomy and the patriarchal structures that bound women in the Victorian era. This systematic deprivation linked financial instability to physical control and maternal vulnerability, ensuring that women's dependence was total and unavoidable. Helen Graham firmly stands for equal chances for men and women in society and strongly discourages domestic servitude in the novel. She says that "I would take my precious charge at early dawn... I would support myself and him by the labour of my hands." (Brontë, 1996, p.337) showing the struggles women have to face in order to be independent.

Women Having Significantly Fewer Rights and Privileges Than Men

The little influence women have over their own lives since men are in positions of authority over property, children, and family decisions due to legal and social institutions are reflected in the novel with various examples of women having to fight for their rights and be seen less by their husbands. Because Arthur Huntingdon has the financial and legal authority to control Helen's everyday life and limit her freedom of choice, Helen is directly affected by these limitations. The novel illustrates the personal effects of patriarchal domination while criticizing the structural injustices that restrict women's rights and privileges by defining Helen's struggles. Cultural narratives that portray women

as fundamentally inferior, emotionally unstable or morally unfit for duties outside home are used to justify injustice by keeping them out of the political, economic and educational spheres. Together these restrictions lead to a systematic disempowerment and dehumanization in addition to inequality. Women lacked the rights necessary to challenge or overcome their lower status, while males were able to establish laws that upheld their dominance. This larger tendency is best illustrated by the Victorian era when male privilege was strictly enforced by social and legal conventions.

The book emphasizes the behavioural patterns that boys and girls are forced to follow in order to create men and women who are morally, mentally and intellectually quite different from one another. Arthur narrates "You are breaking your marriage vows yourself," said he, indignantly rising and pacing to and fro. "You promised to honour and obey me, and now you attempt to hector over me, and threaten and accuse me and call me worse than a highwayman. If it were not for your situation Helen, I would not submit to it so tamely. I won't be dictated to by a woman, though she be my wife." (Brontë, 1996, p. 235) showing his power over Helen in their marriage. The novel also mentions that even men like Gilbert who are seen as less evil, are still affected by society's norms as he mentions in the novel "I cannot say that I like her much. She is interesting in her appearance, but by no means amiable, twisting everything into conformity with her own preconceived opinions – too hard, too sharp, too bitter for my taste." (Brontë, 1996, p. 43) emphasizing that the norms of a patriarchal society are engraved in men and women. Social and legal constraints placed on women serve to praise male dominance, because power is concentrated in the hands of males, Helen's incapacity to manage her property or make autonomous decisions about her child illustrates how women are unable to question the systems that limit them. The novel emphasizes the conflict between individual autonomy and structural oppression through Helen's careful preparation and acts of rebellion. Additionally, Brontë challenges the ways in which cultural notions of "proper" feminine behaviour push women to accept reliance as the norm, exposing the ways in which these notions uphold a hierarchy that blocks female autonomy. By describing these difficulties in great detail, the book highlights how resilient women must be in order to Victorian culture was characterized by male-dominated structures and patriarchal rules. The inequality can be seen in Arthur's quote "The cases are different," he replied. "It is a woman's nature to be constant – to love one and one only, blindly, tenderly, and for ever." (Brontë, 1996, p. 236) as it shows the effects of a society that denies women their rights and gives all power to men. Brontë demonstrates how social, legal, and economic systems actively upheld the limitations imposed on women. Helen's difficulties demonstrate how these systems worked together to restrict her freedom: she is unable to obtain financial resources, manage her property, or make decisions about her child on her own without breaking the law. Brontë illustrates how patriarchal power functions to uphold male dominance by emphasizing the challenges Helen encounters, such as Arthur's legal control and the societal expectations that need her submission. Through this portrayal, Brontë challenges the ways of how male authority is upheld and highlights how strong women must be to survive in a world that is set up to put them in boxes.

Conclusion

In Victorian England, women's lives were restricted by moral constraints and economic dependence, their destinies held by their fathers and, after marriage, by their husbands. In this era, where male dominance over women was considered natural, legally granted to men, and gender

identities were defined by men, misogyny was common. The humiliation inflicted by both men and women lowered women's social status. Confined to the duties of pleasing their husbands, closely supervising their children's education, and managing household chores, women were denied the right to act independently or to dedicate time to their interests. Men's jealousy or infidelity was considered normal while women were expected to be faithful and attend to their husbands.

The novel's female protagonist, Helen, is presented as a woman who has experienced all the aforementioned hardships and suffered psychological abuse from her husband. Her alcoholic, frivolous, and immoral husband, Arthur, does everything in his power to break Helen's strong character, which she maintains through her religious beliefs, and her fearless stance in expressing her opinions. He even uses his own son in this endeavour. Insults, humiliation, and infidelity become increasingly frequent daily behaviours for Arthur, inflicting immense psychological torment and manipulation on Helen. Helen constantly contemplates leaving her home and husband, a concept deemed unacceptable by society and her husband, while simultaneously harbouring hope that her husband will change. Despite Helen's good intentions, there is no positive change in her husband, and her attempts to escape are always unsuccessful because all legal, economic, and social advantages are always on his side. Helen is also worried about her son because Arthur is setting a bad example for them, hurting Helen's feelings, and legally has the right to separate the child from his mother.

Helen, who describes herself as a slave, a prisoner in her marriage, is desperate and determined to rescue her son from his father. She eventually manages to escape to the countryside with her son and his nanny. However, in this new life, she is forced to lie about being a widow to lessen societal pressure. She breaks free from the roles assigned to women, being a skilled housewife, a docile neighbour, and tries to cope with economic hardship by selling her paintings. In her new environment, she is seen as a sharp-tongued, harsh-tempered, pedantic woman who is on the wrong path. Conversely, Helen, a gentle, forgiving, and devout person, becomes a victim of prejudice and misogyny.

The novel begins with Helen's life in Wildfell Hall, where she fled. This part is narrated by Gilbert, whom she would later come to love. Anne Brontë chooses to describe the gossip surrounding Helen and the prejudices of both her male and female neighbours from a male perspective. Gilbert here represents the patriarchal societal viewpoint. The author recounts Helen's experiences during her marriage through her diaries. Helen describes, without reservation, how her beautiful dreams about her marriage and husband have been replaced by a life filled with pain and hatred, and how she manages to stand strong with her unwavering faith, as if she were talking to herself. From her writings, we also learn of her criticisms of the rules that restrict women but not apply to men, the patriarchal view of society and inequalities in all areas.

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6. Some parts have been helped by AI (ChatGPT)