

**Extended Essay English B Category III**

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*To what extent that was a feminist testament for Anne Bronte to have published her novel “The Tenant of the Wildfell Hall” in 1848 considering the economic and social structure of the Victorian Era?*

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## **ABSTRACT**

Women's Rights has been a very debatable subject in our world and sometimes writers may be subjective upon the subject and defend or be against it. In this essay, my aim is to discuss to what extent that was a feminist testament for Anne Bronte to have published her novel "The Tenant of the Wildfell Hall" in 1848. The novel took a lot of reaction when it was published because of its content. In order to point out if it was a feminist testament for Bronte to have written the book, I first analyzed her way of stating that the novel is a critic of the women's rights in those times. Then I analyzed the most commonly handled notions in the novel and I studied on in which ways the notions revealed Bronte's perspective. I also made use of sources about the Victorian Era in order to have a better understanding of the circumstances in the novel. As a result, I found out that, considering the times' legal structure and accepted moral values, it was absolutely a feminist testament for Bronte to reveal the inequality of the social structure in a such critical way.

## **Introduction**

'The Tenant of the Wildfell Hall' written by Anne Bronte was published the last week of June 1848 and it was completely sold out by the first week of August. Although it reached a big success in the sales, the criticisms for the novel were also as many. The content of the novel was quite feminist as it revealed the nature of sexual disintegration and the consequences of women's rights in Victorian era with the most realistic attitude. The reason why the novel was disapproved that much and bitterly criticized was not only because it was realistic but was also critical of the aforementioned issues.

## **Why the book was a criticism**

The novel, in a few words, is about the difficulties that a woman suffers in existing as a single human-being by herself. The basic themes of the novel are moral corruption, women's position in society, marriage and education. As in all theocratic and patriarchal societies, those subjects are the taboos that are inconvenient to be discussed and of course to be criticized. For those reasons, the novel is a clear rebellion and criticism of Victorian Era laws and morals.

Bronte's most remarkable way of discussing those issues by revealing her point of view, which results as a criticism of the system, gives very distinctive characteristics to the characters in the novel. The characterization is made so obviously that it is possible to say that the novel is shaped around the conflict of the protagonist and the antagonist who are then understood to be representations of the struggle of women rights and undulled moral principles against rotten moral values and sexual discrimination.

Helen Graham, the protagonist of the novel, is the bridge of Bronte to reveal her thoughts about how the scruples of the society are and how the demeanor of each individual, both man and woman, and their moral principles should be. Helen, when analyzed only by her actions, is dissimilar to the common image of women and she is against the moral and legal obligations of the Victorian Era. As the plot proceeds, she marries not a man for his fortune, though she could, but a man who she falls in love with, she opposes her husband, runs away from him to live alone with her son and educate him due to her rights, makes a living from her own talent and does not refrain from being antithetic or raising her son different than the others. All these aspects are regarded to be the definition of a 'fallen and disapproved woman' in the Victorian Era yet Helen is an idealized character in every manner; outer appearance, morality, education, intelligence, giftedness, elegance, loyalty, genuineness, modesty, honesty, patience, faithfulness and compassion.

The function of Helen Graham as the representation of morality is also supported by the usage of different perspectives in the novel. The novel consists of two different points of views. One is the first person view of Gilbert Markham, the other protagonist in the novel and the other is the first person view of Helen Graham herself. Analysis of Helen Graham together with her social environment by two perspectives is very important because this multiple optique technique offers both an outer and introspective observation of Helen Graham; her feelings, thoughts, impressions on other people, behaviour, scruples are all providing an objective understanding of her condition and her actions not to mention the fact that it also favors the understanding of the definition of the idealized moral principles of Bronte and her argumentations in criticizing the present moralities and legal structure.

The antagonist of the novel, Arthur Huntington, on the other hand, impersonates the moral corruption and sexual discrimination in the social structure. As Helen's husband who eventually causes her to runaway with their son, he has a key role for being the reason of Helen's rebellion and therefore the focus visualization of the criticized immorality and sexism. His characteristics and lifestyle apart from his attitude Helen's husband is also significant in order to indicate Bronte's definition of immorality. Being left a fortune from his father and grandfathers, Huntington has no desire of earning his life and leaving a greater fortune for his kin. He lacks the cultural interests like reading books and has no cultural ability in any kind of art. He is selfish enough to make a friend drunk just to make fun of him, childish enough to be jealous even of his own son and profligate enough to present his wife to others' interest. As his role as the husband, having married a woman who apparently deserves more than him, he literally makes life unbearable for Helen. He finds her scrupulousness boring and blames her for being dissatisfied with his life. He is always overwhelmed by alcohol and his sottish friends. Considering his debauchery to be harmless or a right when it seems harmful, he annihilates his own family life. Not only does she cheat on Helen but also does it in front of her very eyes with one of his best friends' wife. To put it briefly, Huntington is definitely the main presenter of moral corruption and the unfair attitude towards women in the novel.

Although Arthur is clearly a disapprovable character with all his personal traits like 'cheating', and the many others which he can not absolutely be considered within his flaws as the women's rights were not recognized in the Victorian Era, which gave men a very large range of rights like overpowering women. Many things including cheating on females were considered to be normal . Therefore, one of the most important assignments of Arthur Huntington in the novel is to be the reflecter of the liberation of women by then. It is important to have a general idea of women's rights

in 19th century as it is crucial to understand Bronte's argumentations in criticizing the social structure of the time and also to grasp to what extent a feminist testament could have written a novel about an idealized yet independant woman should be.

### **Woman in Victorian Era**

Woman in 19th century can be named with four words: lady of the house. The woman of the Victorian Era can not be defined without the presence of men because she is either a mother, a sister or a wife. An independant existence of woman is barely possible. Even the garment of women prove this motionless situation of women; corsets, high heeled shoes, long heavy skirts; they are all designed for a house life. In the novel, the place of women in the society is analysed under three titles; marriage, bussiness life and education. These are the themes of the novel by being the most precise targets of Bronte's arrows of criticism.

### **The Critisized Issues**

#### **Marriage**

The institution of marriage is an oftenly addressed issue in the novel. It is the theme that mostly widely focuses on sexual discrimination. The plot is shaped around many traditional and very few idealized marriages. Almost all the marriages in the novel are under the umbrella of traditional marriage as they are all formed mainly for the well being of men. The other marriages which are exceptional are marriages of love and mutual respect.

The traditional marriages in the novel reflect the understanding of marriage and sexual discrimination of those times very well. The Victorian Era has a very theocratic structure so marriage is more than just being a necessity for a healthy communal structure but it is also the nucleus of the government. This assigns marriage the obligation to be proper for social expectations and values. Those values however always result in the well being of men and in restriction of the woman as is exemplified in the novel.

Analysing the marriage of Helen Graham and Arthur Huntington, the kind of marriage most deliberately presented for the reader's information, it is possible to see that marriage is an institution formed in favor of man. The lives of both the sides, Helen and Arthur, give very useful ideas about the duties of men and women in a marriage. The most explicit proof of the man's domination in marriage is the continuous repetition of wifedom as 'duty for the husband' throughout the novel. A husband is responsible for bringing home the bacon. His only responsibility is to provide for his family. Besides being the financier, he is also the only one responsible for 'how to spend the income'. A woman's duty, on the other hand, is to raise her children, maintain the order and peace in the house, amuse her husband and supply all his needs and to be a proper hostess for her guests. Briefly, marriage is an assemblance between the woman, to labour and serve and the man, to provide the nobility of the breed.

The marriage of Helen Graham and Arthur Huntington starts with mutual love and respect however

in time, because of Mr. Huntington's self indulgence and desire for a more exciting life, it gradually becomes more and more unstable. At the beginning, the only problem of the marriage appears to be the cliff between the intellectuality levels of Helen and Arthur. As the novel continues, Arthur's spendthriftness and debauchedness become more tangible, serving Bronte's purpose of revealing the real nature of marriages full frontally. Arthur's visits to London are the beginning point of the partition of the marriage. Although they seem to be normal at the beginning, in time it is understood that he has no business purposes in London as he claims. On the contrary, his real purpose of London journeys turns out to be an escape from the responsibilities of a family life. He does nothing but stay away from his family, drinking, enjoying the day and unrestrainedly spending money. What is important to state here is that, Helen being aware of all these and left alone with her son, never holds it against Arthur till her break point. She takes care of both herself and her son and never complains or lets anyone condemn Arthur's long term departures. Helen and Arthur's approach to their son and his education is also a powerful indicator of genders' situations in marriage. Helen, for all aforementioned reasons, for she escapes in behalf of little Arthur above all and for she settles for an abstracted life in the Wildfell Hall so that she could raise little Arthur healthily and has clearly dedicated her life to her child. Mr. Huntington shows quite contrary behaviour. His jealousy of Helen from his own little son and his ignorance of the child prove how little of a paternity responsibility he has. He never holds his son or takes care of him as a reaction to Helen's lack of attention in himself. He states that he doesn't like the child because Helen, having been a mother recently takes care of her child and can not show attention to Arthur as much as she used to do. He also has no concern of creating a healthy environment for his son's development and he finds nothing wrong in teaching curses and misdeed to his son; in fact he has no relationship with little Arthur except the times that he makes him an entertainment tool for his company. He even describes those activities and such a life style as 'manly accomplishments'. It is evident that the

society does not believe that the father should have a role in children's education and schooling as they do not reprove or find Huntington's regardless behaviour strange. It is tremendously inconsistent with the laws considering that women had no right of custody in the Victorian Era. This contradiction between the social and the judiciary situation of women, which is strongly highlighted in the novel, proves that Bronte's argumentations about sexual discrimination are not unfounded and therefore may draw reaction.

In addition to the criticism of the custody laws, there is also the issue of adultery which is handled scrutinizingly in the novel. Most of the male characters in the novel, including Mr. Huntington, commit adultery and though it is not quite approved, it is not dispraised either. In fact, Helen's objection to Mr. Huntington after she discovers the adultery is found to be a lot stranger by the community. *'...he still maintained that she had done wrong to leave her husband; it was violation of her sacred duties as a wife and a tempting of the Providence by laying herself upon to temptation; and nothing short of bodily ill-usage (and that of no trifling nature) could excuse such a step'(Bronte, 518).* Loyalty is one of the primary conditions of marriage however it is obvious that the consequences of marriage are valid only for women in social and even judiciary life. In the Victorian Era, men only had to prove that their wife committed adultery in order to get divorced but women had to prove incest, bigamy, cruelty or desertion together with adultery in order to get divorced from their husbands. *'Furthermore, rights to the woman personally - that is, access to her body - were his. Not only was this assured by law, but the woman herself agreed to it verbally as ell: written into the marriage ceremony was a vow to obey her husband, which every woman had to swear before God as well as earthly witnesses.'*(Wojtczak) This double standard is discussed in the novel by Helen's reaction to the relationship of Arthur and Lady Lowborough and Arthur's reaction to the relationship of Helen and Mr. Hargrave. Helen, having discovered the adultery, makes up her

mind to bear the situation not to shatter his son's life and it is until she understands that Arthur will continue being a bad influence on their child that she decides to escape. On the other hand, Arthur, having realized Mr. Hargrave's feelings towards Helen, assaults Helen emotionally as if she had been to be blamed. His reactions become so uncivilized that he even says that anyone who is interested in Helen could have her so he considers Helen a property. For all those reasons, Helen and Arthur's marriage emerges as the primary indicator of sexual discrimination.

The secondary characters' marriages are also necessary to mention because they reveal the nature of traditional marriages. Traditional marriages and traditional kind of husband and wife relationships are many in the whole of the novel. The male characters in the novel, except Mr. Markham, Mr. Hargrave and Mr. Lowborough, are all married to or in search for wives to condone all their faults and without raising an opinion. The best example for the secondary character marriages would be the marriage of Milicent and Mr. Hattersly. Milicent, not being deeply willing to marry Mr. Hattersly feels ashamed of even having confessed her reluctance to Helen in a letter while Mr. Hattersly tells Mr. Huntigton that he wants a passive wife so that he could live his life in pleasure as she stands there for him to provide his well being. All through the novel, it is not possible to see a marriage in which the woman has an active role in providing the income or showing an independent existence like traveling separately from the family or even going out alone. Therefore, the biggest function of the secondary character marriages, besides their contribution to the understanding of traditional kind of marriages, happen to be explanatory of the position of men and women in social and bussiness lives which is another criticized issue.

While the traditional marriages expose the general situation of the society, the idealized marriages serve Bronte's purpose of criticism by creating a polarity and revealing her understanding of a

healthy marriage. The idealized marriages can be seen as the marriages of Helen Graham and Gilbert Markham, Milicent Hargrave and Ralph Hattersly's later on and Frederick Lawrence and Esther Hargrave. Helen's second marriage which is with Mr. Markham is the one that is most clearly presented to support a criticism not only because the relationship is really based on love and respect but also because both Helen and Mr. Markham are slightly rebellious to the corrupted society values and they are the most ethical characters in the novel. Their relationship occurs in a such way that it also shows how badly affective can the moral patterns on people be, by teaching them that there can not be any other truths but the ones that are determined by the society and that being agreeable to the social pattern of marriage is a condition to be respected. Both Helen and Mr. Markham are different from the society with their perspectives and priorities however even they can not escape from the lectures of the society and once this brings their relationship to a breakpoint.

### **Business and social life**

As Bronte has a purpose of criticizing the attitude and social approach to women, criticisms of women's position in business and social life are indispensable to the novel. The criticisms are put forward by the images of the daily lives of men and women and Helen's providing for herself and her son by selling her paintings. While the side characters create a general image of the situation of women in business and social life, Helen's providing for herself happens to be another direct criticism by showing an independant woman can live and be successful by her own talents and capacity.

All through the novel, tea parties and picnics are the only settings where the analysis of the social

structure is made because these are the only places where men and women can spend time together. In those settings, the affect of the occupations of men and women on their understandings becomes quite explicit. The daily life of a woman consists of taking care of children, playing the piano, reading, sewing and visiting relatives and friends whereas the men are occupied with their jobs and have a wide umbrella of choices of places to go including pubs and even abroad. These borders of social environment are the reasons for men's and women's difference of intellectuality and therefore perception. Women are raised to become wives and mothers and their lives only consist of the necessities of these two adhesive responsibilities '*...in all household matters, we have only two things to consider, first, what's proper to be done, and secondly, what's the most agreeable to the gentlemen of the house- anything will do for the ladies'*(Bronte, 57). Their minds are limited by the fences of their houses and this can be observed in their conversations. Helen's boredom because of the lame chats of women is a repeatedly mentioned situation in the novel. Women, having no interest and information about the world and intellectuality, accordingly have no controversial issues to talk about. The only thing that they are capable of doing is gossiping and daily talks. On the contrary, men have a much wider social environment and that, by all means, reflects to their awareness and contributes to their authority in the house. Taking into consideration that men were the only controllers of the total income of the house including the property of women brought into marriage, even in a situation of divorce and also keeping in mind that married women had no rights to sign a contract without the husband's legal approval, it is not surprising that women were not a part of the business life. "*Once married all of the woman's property, earnings, and money were given over to her spouse.*( Mitchell, *Marriage and Divorce*, )". The proportions of working women which were %3 for white women and %25 for black women prove women's ineffectiveness in business life. For those reasons Helen to be earning herself and her son's keep by selling her paintings after they start living in Wildfell Hall is a clear criticism of the lack of value given to

women in business and social life. The reaction of Arthur when he finds out that Helen will run away and earn money by her paintings is also worth mentioning. Arthur's reaction which is burning Helen's all paintings and tools of painting shows that Bronte thinks that women's professional success is a danger for men as it would reduce their social authority by weakening their importance in the financial status of the family and the society.

### **Education**

Education, being the last main area of criticism of Bronte, is strongly related with men and women's position in marriage, business and social life. As education is directly related with knowledge and capabilities, it plays a big role in determining the social status of men and women. All through the novel, women are considered subordinate to men as taking only piano classes and it is understood that men have a higher level of education because their jobs which are mostly about their landed properties require mathematical calculations and marketing information. Hence, Bronte inevitably touches upon the issue of education as well. Her method of revealing how much education has a role on sexual discrimination and criticism of the issue is creating a dialog between Helen Graham and Mrs. Markham. In the conversation that takes place when Mrs. Markham and her son visits Helen Graham to welcome her, the necessities of raising a child are discussed. However Helen and Mr. Markham can not agree on a point because Helen's understanding of how to bring up a girl and a boy is much more equalitarian than the general acceptance of the society. Helen's suprisingly strict opposition, although it is the first time she meets Markham family, to the idea that girls should be raised more delicately is a result of Bronte's effort of commentating her contradistinction to education is onset of sexual discrimination. The following lines of Helen towards Mr. Markham as a result of her misunderstanding of his intention proves that education is

included in Bronte's targets of criticism. *'-to teach her how to sin is at once to make her a sinner, and the greater her knowledge, the wider her liberty, the deeper will be her depravity, -whereas, in the nobler sex, there is a natural tendency to goodness, guarded by a superior fortitude, which the more it is exercised by trials and dangers, is only further developed-'*(Bronte, 31)

## **CONCLUSION**

Every novel is born into its time's social conditions and it is involuntarily evaluated due to the time's moral values. Therefore, it isn't surprising that 'The Tenant of Wildfell Hall', being published in the Victorian Era, drew a lot of reaction. Some found the main character Helen Graham deprived of womanly accomplishments, some said the approach towards women in the novel is not realistic and some warned female readers not to read the novel. Considering that Helen's struggle of survival was named as 'not being woman enough' and that women were deliberately wanted to be kept simple minded in the social life as especially women were warned not to read the novel, besides acknowledging that every negative situation that Helen lives through has a legal provision meaning the novel is based on realities, it is proved that the content of the novel was found prejudicial by the society. It is because the novel emphasized a problematic lack of women rights and equality. Hence, to have written this book had become a clear feminist testament for Anne Bronte. She, as a reply to the critics, had explained her purpose of writing the novel briefly as showing the ugly truth. Fifty years after that, though the book hadn't been republished after her death, May Sinclair, a popular British writer of the 19th century said that the slamming of Helen's bedroom door against her husband reverberated throughout the Victorian England and in 1878, women were granted the right to get divorced and have custody of their children in case of cruelty. The progressively equalitarian

perspective of the novel had turned into a shape of a feminist testament under the circumstances it was published but in time, just like Helen's delayed and deserved happiness, Anne Bronte got its best appreciation which was the acceptance of the ugly truth unveiled.

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