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## Educational Patterns in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

Vilja Johnson

Since the time of its publication, the final marriage at the conclusion of Anne Brontë's novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* has sparked debate among scholars. The novel ends as Gilbert Markham briefly mentions the marriage in a letter to his brother-in-law, claiming to live a happy existence with his wife. However, because Helen herself does not speak in this conclusion, she can provide readers with no concrete evidence as to her level of satisfaction with her second husband. The interpretation of Helen's second choice in a spouse creates much of the contention and confusion regarding this union, which, in turn, alters the ultimate effect of the entire novel. If Anne Brontë intends Gilbert to learn and develop throughout the novel, then he makes a suitable husband for Helen, giving her a second chance for marital bliss. If, however, he acts merely as a controlling, violent man of passion, then the novel's ending takes on an ominous tone, suggesting that Helen has repeated the mistakes of her youth and reentered the confines of a matrimonial prison. Although many critics view Gilbert Markham as a negative character, Brontë's writing does not fully support this gloomy, ironic conclusion. Throughout the novel, Gilbert follows a pattern of progression similar to the one set by Helen's son Arthur, leaving the mistakes of his youth and growing into a proper gentleman and suitable husband.

Among modern critics, the vast majority of scholarship on the novel takes a feminist approach, reading the character of Gilbert Markham as domineering, immature, violent, and ultimately unworthy of Helen's

affections. One major argument for this interpretation focuses upon the various parallels between the behavior of Arthur and that of Gilbert, especially in Gilbert's brutally violent attack upon Frederick Lawrence. Nicole A. Diederich summarizes this argument, stating that, "Gilbert's violent behavior thus problematizes the new domestic sphere established at the end of the novel, reminding the reader of the violence at Grassdale Manor" (37). Because Gilbert demonstrates a potential for violence beyond anything Arthur demonstrates within Helen's narrative, he casts doubt upon his ability to truly act as a proper husband for Helen. Tess O'Toole builds upon this argument, claiming that the disparity between Gilbert and Helen's brother, Frederick, serves to highlight his many inadequacies. After mentioning his violent attack and his propensity for gossip, among other shortcomings, she concludes that, "The opportunity for revision and recuperation lies not in the undeniably disappointing Gilbert, so curiously less mature than his bride, but in the brother" (O'Toole 723). For O'Toole, Gilbert, when contrasted with the virtuous Frederick, fails to bring any redemption to Helen's tale, simply dragging her down in a second marriage of inequality.

Aside from Gilbert's personal defects, critics also view his role within the novel's narrative structure as a discouraging indication of problems facing the new marriage. Helen works so hard to escape her domineering husband, only to place her voice within the confines of Gilbert's narrative. Kate Flint claims that the framework of Gilbert's letter "uncomfortably points to the way in which men continue to frame woman's existence" (180). According to this argument, Helen can never have a voice or true independence of her own because her voice does not exist outside of masculine domination. Gilbert traps her entire narrative within his own, never allowing her to speak on her own terms. This framework appears especially disconcerting at the close of the novel, where, as Jill Matus explains, the social order "is still patriarchal and threatening to female voice; Helen seems silenced and distanced from the reader in Gilbert's closing retrospective" (119). Regardless of Helen's social standing or personal wealth, the ending of the novel apparently threatens her independence. As Gilbert silences her with his words, he suggests a usurpation of her authority and exerts himself as the patriarchal head of their union. From this perspective, Helen's marriage to Gilbert undoes the benefits of her escape to Wildfell Hall, tying her back into the confines of a male-dominated society.

Although these critics raise valid arguments and concerns about the nature of Gilbert Markham and his marriage to Helen, the optimistic tone at the end of the novel fails to support such ironic,

depressing interpretations. Brontë gives no hints of dominance or inequality within the actual language of the conclusion, suggesting that she views the marriage as one of redemption. Some scholarship supports this perspective, defending Gilbert's character and praising the subsequent marriage. However, even these scholars fail to create any fully convincing argument in Gilbert's favor, focusing upon him mainly in the context of religious qualities, despite the fact that he, personally, never gives any implication of deeply religious feeling. When Lee A. Talley defends Gilbert, she claims that, "If we were to read this learning process Evangelically, Helen would be converting Gilbert to her way of reading the world for meaning" (134). Talley's defense of Gilbert argues that he does learn and grow from his mistakes, but he does so as a type of convert to Helen's religious worldview. Similarly, Marianne Thormählen places Gilbert's virtues within a Biblical context, stating, "If ever a woman needed a good steward, it is Helen Huntingdon, and she is granted one in the man whose renunciation of his youthful aspirations is couched in terms borrowed from the parable of the talents" (167). Both Thormählen and Talley look to religion as a means of determining Gilbert's value as a husband. Despite Helen's deeply religious nature, the text fails to support any real indication of Gilbert's spiritual inclinations, making both religious readings of Gilbert's character somewhat inadequate and incomplete.

Gilbert Markham, despite his imperfections and his inability to fit entirely into the mold of forced religious fervor, still has the ability to bring hope into Helen's second marriage. Throughout the novel, he develops into a decent man suitable for Helen's husband. Lisa SurrIDGE describes the way in which Gilbert grows throughout the novel, explaining, "Gilbert's progression towards Victorian manhood is achieved through an agonizing process of self-knowledge, contrition, and self-restraint" (82). SurrIDGE makes a distinction between the violent ideals of manhood endorsed during the Regency and the restraint of the Victorian gentleman, claiming that Gilbert matches each ideal at different stages in his development, eventually ending with the respectable domestic figure of the Victorian man.

This argument helps to explain how Gilbert, though possessing troublesome characteristics at the opening of the novel, can resolve the troubling aspects of his character by its close. However, SurrIDGE fails to fully explain how or why Gilbert makes this change. Without an explanation of Gilbert's motivation, it is difficult to measure the sincerity or permanency of his transformation. Rather than changing of his own accord, Gilbert, like Arthur, must rely upon Helen to help him make

the shift into a Victorian gentleman. Using her personal narrative as an educational tool, Helen shapes Gilbert from the selfish, indulged boy of his introduction into a man who, though imperfect, still proves himself a worthy suitor. Because it is Helen herself who performs the education of Gilbert, she can form him into the type of husband which will bring her the greatest happiness. It is she who determines what she wants Gilbert to become, and she educates him accordingly.

The way in which Helen educates Gilbert as her suitor parallels the way in which she educates her son, Arthur. Morally deteriorating due to an overly indulgent upbringing, both Gilbert and Arthur originally follow a steady decline, eventually inciting Helen to begin an education of excess to the point of revulsion. Eventually, this education reforms both Arthur and Gilbert, transforming them into true Victorian gentlemen and allowing them to escape Huntingdon's ribald notion of masculinity. In this role as a true gentleman, Gilbert earns reliability as both the closing narrator of the novel and the happy husband of the former Helen Huntingdon.

The first phase of both Arthur and Gilbert's upbringing begins with a period of destructive overindulgence. For young Arthur, this overindulgence comes from his father, who attempts to ruin him simply in order to wound his mother. In her painful narrative, Helen laments Arthur's precarious moral environment, describing how "My greatest source of uneasiness, in this time of trial, was 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' was one of their staple amusements" (Brontë 350). Huntingdon, with his base band of associates, delights in feeding the evil, selfish tendencies of Arthur's childish mind, building him into a young model of brutish manhood. He tutors Arthur to become his protégé in every way, encouraging disrespect, indolence, profanity, and even a love of alcohol. As he gains more and more indulgence from his father, Arthur moves further and further from the moral safety of his mother's teachings, alienating himself from her daily.

Gilbert follows a similar pattern in his upbringing, as the constant praise of his social circle stunts his moral maturity. In his narrative, Gilbert readily admits this early pampering, conceding that, "Perhaps, too, I was a little bit spoiled by my mother and sister, and some other ladies of my acquaintance" (Brontë 36). As the outright darling of his limited social circle, Gilbert gains continual praise and admiration, leading to an inflated sense of his own self-worth. This confidence allows Gilbert to act as he pleases with a deep pride that prevents him from seeing the

error of his ways. His misdemeanors include petty gossip, disregard for his mother's opinion, and an unchecked tendency for impulsive behavior. Throughout his narrative, Gilbert offers no apology for such behaviors, relying upon his mother's incessant assurance that he has the capability to do anything he pleases.

Although Gilbert's immaturity does not match the dangers of young Arthur's education, the duration of his unchecked behavior leads to a much more drastic and horrific climax as he physically attacks Helen's brother Frederick. He describes how, "Impelled by some fiend at my elbow, I had seized my whip by the small end, and ... brought the other down upon his head. It was not without a feeling of savage satisfaction" (Brontë 116). Just as Arthur demonstrates an inherent ability to follow in the footsteps of his father, Gilbert too, mimics Huntingdon in this description. He not only acts with savagery, but he takes pleasure in this behavior, just as Huntingdon revels in his own evil exploits. The pampering of Gilbert's upbringing leads him to this horrific point, consistently encouraging him to act with impulsive selfishness, regardless of the consequences.

While frightening and disturbing, the attack on Frederick Lawrence cannot serve as the final statement upon Gilbert's character, as critics such as Diederich suggest, for it occurs before Helen's narrative makes its mark upon her future husband. If readers of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* would not dismiss Arthur Huntingdon, Jr. as a lost and fallen man due to the mistakes of his early childhood, they cannot fairly judge Gilbert Markham definitively before the beginning of his own education with Helen.

In her education of both Arthur and Gilbert, Helen uses a similar method of excess in order to create revulsion for offensive behaviors. With her young son, Helen teaches this lesson physically, attempting to make her son ill at the thought of the alcohol, which has ruined his father and threatens to destroy him as well. She describes her method, explaining that she gives him as much alcohol as he desires, but "into every glass I surreptitiously introduced a small quantity of tartar-*emetic*—just enough to produce inevitable nausea and depression without positive sickness ... till his reluctance was strengthened to complete abhorrence" (Brontë 370). Helen knows that any attempts to restrain her son's appetites will only increase his lust for alcohol and his disregard of her opinions, and so she must use another means of teaching him abstinence. She allows him to indulge in alcohol to his heart's content, even forcing it upon him at times, but changes the content just enough to make him despise it. Through the use of tartar-*emetic*, Helen transforms her son's desire into

disgust, making him permanently ill at the very thought of alcohol. By this means, Arthur learns to hate his vice of choice without having his mother explicitly indoctrinate him.

Similarly, Helen subtly gives Gilbert an overdose of his own distasteful behavior in the narrative of her first husband, causing him to reject his previous tendency for violent selfishness. By giving Gilbert her personal diary, she allows him to read a firsthand account detailing the lasting effects of indulgence. Arthur Huntingdon has the same charm and popularity, which Gilbert professes to possess. He takes a history of indulgence to the extreme, demonstrating the sickening immorality of an unchecked life. Huntingdon, like his son, responds negatively to any remonstrance from his wife, simply pursuing his desired course with increased recklessness and disdain for his bride. In reading the narrative, Gilbert reads an overwhelming account of Huntingdon's alcoholism, adultery, and emotional abuse, gaining a complete and total disgust for his immorality and disrespect. As Gilbert describes his immediate reaction to the narrative, he explains how he "felt a kind of selfish gratification in watching her husband's gradual decline in her good graces and seeing how completely he extinguished all her affection at last" (Brontë 397). Rather than admiring Huntingdon's brand of manliness, Gilbert learns to disdain it, recognizing the way in which it destroys Helen's affections. Like little Arthur, he then begins to completely abhor such behavior, as he focuses only on "my sympathy for her and my fury against him" (Brontë 397). The diary, like Arthur's tartar-*emetic*, builds Gilbert's complete and total loathing for the vicious egotism contained within its pages. Helen does not have to sermonize her second choice in partner, as her first husband provides sufficient motivation for change. Through the extreme example of Arthur Huntingdon, Helen teaches Gilbert very plainly that selfish, rash behaviors lead only to moral ruin rather than the noble love he desires.

Through this educational method of excess rather than forceful reproach, Helen manages to remove the Huntingdon-like tendencies from both her son and her future husband. Exulting over her success with little Arthur, she rejoices, "I had exerted all my powers to eradicate the weeds that had been fostered in his infant mind, and sow again the good seed they had rendered unproductive . . . Thank heaven, it is not a barren or a stony soil; if weeds spring fast there, so do better plants" (Brontë 369). In her son, she sees the effects of her education as he turns away from base behaviors and demonstrates the ability to cultivate positive qualities in the soil of his young mind. Gilbert, too, demonstrates the capacity for a rapid change, as he describes the immediate fruits of his education: "Soon,

however, this chaos of thoughts and passions cleared away, giving place to ... shame and deep remorse for my own conduct" (Brontë 398). Upon reading the diary, Gilbert almost immediately recognizes its implications for himself and, weeding out his old pride, admits the error of his conduct towards Helen. This rapid humility sparks a progression within Gilbert towards the type of man Helen Huntingdon can eventually marry.

Both Arthur and Gilbert progress towards decent, respectable manhood after the removal of their moral stumbling blocks. This ideal of manhood contrasts sharply with the ideals of Huntingdon and his cohorts, who glorify brutish, insensitive masculinity. Lisa Surridge explains this contrast as "England's maturation from regency excess to Victorian domesticity" (81). According to Surridge, English society as a whole made a shift from violent, unrestrained power to a more genteel model in men. In *Mansex Fine*, David Alderson further expands upon the contrast between the two periods of conflicting masculine ideals, explaining that Victorian "'Manliness' is ... associated with virtuous restraint, specifically with those checks which proceed from internal, yet cultivated, prejudices. It is this sensibility which forms an opposition with the uncivilized masculinity of the revolutionaries" (18). While the men of the Regency reveled in "uncivilized masculinity," the new Victorian gentlemen shifted away from excess and violence towards self-restraint and virtue. Huntingdon revels in his ability to match the old Regency ideals, as he and his friends "gave a loose to all their madness, folly, and brutality, and made the house night after night one scene of uproar, and confusion" (Brontë 348–9). According to their paradigm, these men assert their masculinity through riotous brutality, each attempting to outdo the others in excess. In contrast, Gilbert and Arthur progress towards modernity in their actions, demonstrating Victorian ideals in their later actions within the novel.

In order to make this shift, Brontë distances the two males from the masculine ideals of the Regency period, ascribing to them previously feminine traits. When Gilbert sees Arthur after several years of separation, he describes him as a "tall, slim young gentleman with his mother's image visibly stamped on his fair, intelligent features" (Brontë 477). This description, especially the words "slim" and "fair," arouses a distinctly feminine image which contrasts with Huntingdon's dark, imposing power. Helen has managed to remove Huntingdon's forceful impression permanently from his son, placing her own intelligent, female stamp upon his features. For Gilbert, the distancing from typical masculinity comes not in his physical appearance, but in his role as suitor. He goes to find Helen at her new home, but in the end, she is the one who must



extend the proposal of marriage. She takes control of their courtship as she offers him a symbol of her heart with the question, "Will you have it?" (Brontë 483). By relinquishing his role as the dominant, controlling male, Gilbert moves away from Huntingdon's domineering practices, creating a new type of suitor.

As they move further and further from the masculine stereotypes of the Regency male, they begin to embody the characteristics of a true Victorian gentleman. In 1852, John Henry Newman, the rector of a Catholic university, published a series of essays entitled *The Idea of a University*, in which he outlines the various qualities present within such gentlemen. At one point, he states that self-respect "teaches men to suppress their feelings, and to control their tempers, and to mitigate both the severity and the tone of their judgments" (Newman 143). Prior to reading the diary, Gilbert lacks this quality, repeatedly demonstrating a severe lack of self-restraint in both judgment and action. Upon hearing Frederick and Helen together, he immediately jumps to the conclusion that they must be having an affair and sticks to this conclusion stubbornly. In his anger, he beats Frederick and refuses to speak to Helen. When he finally does see her, he chooses to listen to her explanation with the prideful attitude of "I can crush the bold spirit" (Brontë 126). Instead of keeping the severity of his judgments in check, as Newman suggests, he instead determines immediately to crush Helen into submission as the result of his own false conclusions.

This attitude contrasts distinctly with his behavior at the end of the novel, where he exemplifies the idea of self-restraint. When Helen has to propose marriage, it is not because Gilbert lacks the manly power to assert himself, but rather because he has learned to control his emotions and weigh his position with caution. He loves Helen and hopes for success, but dares not proceed in the uncertainty of his situation. After Helen offers him the rose as a symbol of her heart, he explains, "I trembled to clasp her in my arms, but dared not believe in so much joy, and yet restrained myself to say, 'But if you *should* repent!'" (Brontë 484). With this statement, Gilbert demonstrates his progression since the beginning of the novel. He has good reason to assume that Helen sincerely wishes to marry him, and yet he checks his feelings in order to remove any doubt before taking action, displaying his ability to match Newman's guidelines.

In the same description of the true gentlemen, John Henry Newman also asserts "it is almost a definition of a gentleman to say he is one who never inflicts pain" (143). Both Gilbert and Arthur demonstrate this trait, as they humbly attempt to rectify the pain they cause. In

the ending of the novel, when Gilbert visits Helen, he notes Arthur's behavior towards his aunt, remarking that, "when he saw that his pertness was seriously displeasing to his aunt, he went and silently put his arm round her neck, kissed her check, and silently withdrew" (Brontë 478). Rather than ignoring and mocking reproach as he does under his father's influence, Arthur has learned to recognize and regret the pain he causes with impertinence. Upon recognizing the displeasure he inflicts upon his aunt, he makes an immediate and silently humble gesture to remedy her pain. In a similar show of sensitive humility, Gilbert immediately approaches Helen upon finishing her narrative with the apologetic statement of, "I've read it through ... and I want to know if you'll forgive me—if you *can* forgive me?" (Brontë 399). Upon the realization of his grave mistake, Gilbert immediately desires to apologize for his brutish behavior. Demonstrating the extent of this desire, Gilbert then proceeds to make an awkward apology to Frederick, attempting to make amends despite the difficulty of confessing his error. Through these apologies, both Arthur and Gilbert exhibit a sincere change of heart and a desire to rectify any harm they cause through insensitivity.

According to scholar Robin Gilmour, "Manliness' is a key Victorian concept ... and it connotes a new openness and directness, a new sincerity, in social relations" (18). By allowing Helen to maintain control over her own life even after the bond of marriage gives him legal power over her, Gilbert Markham demonstrates this openness and sincerity in his relationships. He offers her this power during the proposal, declaring that "we will live either here or elsewhere as you and she may determine, and you shall see her as often as you like" (Brontë 487). Through this declaration, Gilbert gives Helen freedom within their marriage, allowing her and her aunt, two women, to dictate his future circumstances. By marrying him, she will give him access to her superior wealth, and yet Gilbert still chooses to treat Helen with respect and deference, living in the manner which will bring her the most personal comfort and satisfaction. That Gilbert feels absolute sincerity in making his offer to live in the place of her choosing becomes apparent in his closing explanation, where he describes the distance from his own home and family and the care they offer Helen's aged aunt until the time of her death.

Through her unique method of education, Helen Huntingdon not only saves her son, but also molds her second husband into a suitable, albeit human, gentleman and spouse. In his final statements, Gilbert expresses complete satisfaction in his marriage of equality, telling his brother-in-law that "I need not tell you how happily my Helen and I

have lived and loved together, and how blessed we still are in each other's society" (Brontë 488). After years of marriage, Gilbert still maintains a deep love and respect for Helen completely absent in Huntingdon's speech after only a few years of matrimony, suggesting that Gilbert's education has proved lasting and effective. Through this education, Helen maintains control over her interactions with Gilbert, shaping him into a loving, respectful husband completely different from her first husband, who blatantly mocks and ignores Helen's attempts to influence his behavior for good. Those critics who see Gilbert's framing narrative as a confining structure upon Helen's voice distrust this closing depiction of matrimonial bliss claiming that Gilbert simply gives his own satisfied view of an oppressive marriage. However, Gilbert's educational experience serves to dispute this concern. Throughout his entire narrative, he never once attempts to hide his own mistakes from the reader, giving a full account of his selfishness and brutality before Helen's lesson molds him. As part of his new role as a Victorian gentleman, he must speak with complete sincerity and honesty, unlike Huntingdon, who constantly justifies or conceals his vile behavior. Rather than stealing Helen's voice, Gilbert demonstrates his complete submission to his wife, for it is she who gives him the opportunity to have a voice in the first place. Helen's story exists independent of Gilbert, but until she gives him her narrative, he has no tale of his own.

In giving her words to Gilbert, Helen not only allows him to speak, but also allows the reader to trust the final relationship in a way they cannot through her words alone. Throughout her diary, Helen demonstrates a severe lack of judgment in love, even giving Huntingdon renewed faith and an outpouring of love immediately before her discovery of his infidelity. In order to trust the bliss of her second marriage, the reader must see it through the eyes of a reliable narrator, one whom Helen has personally shaped to properly tell her story.

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