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**TAMING OF THE RAKE: FROM A MAN ABOUT TOWN  
TO A MAN AT HOME IN *THE TENANT OF WILDFELL  
HALL* BY ANNE BRONTË**

**Abstract:** In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* Anne Brontë considers one of the most burning questions of the Victorian period, i.e. the problem of male domestic violence. The novel contributed to the public debate on the defects of the legal system which discriminated against women and made them totally dependent on their fathers and husbands. However, the writer's diagnosis of the social issue does not focus on the formal aspects only, as she believed that political action should be accompanied by a far-reaching reconceptualisation of nineteenth-century models of femininity and masculinity. Brontë suggests that legal reform is not enough to eliminate such pathologies as marital abuse. She tries to dismantle stereotypes not only about female weakness and submissiveness, but also about male dominance and authority to demonstrate that men should be sentient and responsible participants in home life. The successful spiritual metamorphosis of four male characters: Lord Lowborough, Ralph Hattersley, young Arthur Huntingdon and Gilbert Markham is subject to scrutiny in the present paper in order to evidence that moral training embracing domestication of men was one of the keys to family bliss.

**Key words:** masculinity, home violence, Victorian, novel, reform

In *Character*, one of his most influential books, Samuel Smiles (1889:44) aptly encapsulates the essence of Victorian ideals of masculinity by stating that *[h]ome makes the man*. Anne Brontë seems to advocate a similar idea of domestic-oriented masculinity in her novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), which depicts the process of moral redemption of four male characters: Lord Lowborough, Ralph Hattersley, young Arthur Huntingdon and Gilbert Markham. Thus the motif of internal metamorphosis of men who learn to respect female guidance, appreciate family bliss and adhere to the gentlemanly code of conduct becomes one of the

dominant themes of the text. As indicated by Lisa Surridge (2005:73), the novel constitutes an illustrative example of the shift from the image of a dissolute, self-indulgent man, disseminated among aristocracy under Regency and George IV, to the picture of a self-disciplined, prudent Victorian middle-class man. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, heralded by Elizabeth Leaver (2007:227) as *the most controversial and provocative of the seven Brontë novels*, demonstrates that the fight against home violence and spousal maltreatment, commenced in the Victorian period, should begin with reorientation of thinking about manliness and gender relations, as human mentality tends to be more resistant to changes than the judicial system.

Anne Brontë's postulate that it is possible to alter defective constructions of masculinity concurs with modern gender theories. In her groundbreaking work, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) Judith Butler (1990:33) declares that gender is *a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end*, acknowledging the fluent, transient nature of the category. One of the major channels through which deconstruction of given gender models becomes feasible is discourse. According to Michael Foucault (1976:100-101), *it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together [...] Discourse transmits and produces power: it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it*. Discourses circulating in society may exert a disciplining and prescriptive impact, therefore the literary, social, religious, legal, etc. discourses operating in the public space are capable of inculcating the recipients with new standards of conduct and give an incentive to internal transformation. The Victorian novel was deeply involved in negotiating the meaning of various social and moral issues, including the notion of masculinity, and actively responded to, or stimulated other discourses, paving the way for successful changes. The book scrutinised in the present paper is a good example of such a text, which entered into a polemic on the pitfalls of the Victorian system of separate spheres, double moral standard and legal biases.

Transformation of the law heading towards egalitarian society began in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. A number of consecutive parliamentary acts improved the legal position, or rather legal nonexistence, of Victorian women previously determined by the common-law rule of coverture, according to which, married women (called *femmes covert*, i.e. "covered women") had no individual political representation, and were obliged to abide by their husbands' decisions (Phegley 2012:17). In light of the doctrine, wives were deprived of legal identity, which rendered them invisible in the public sphere. Actually, women were little more than private properties of their husbands, whose will could be imposed on their spouses by legal means. One of the first bills that undermined the privileged status of men was the 1839 Custody of Infants Act, which granted women the right to claim custody of children under the age of seven, provided they were not found guilty of adultery (Phegley 2012:19). The next pioneering piece of legislation was the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act passed in 1857, enabling women to apply for separation or divorce in

a civil divorce court. The opening of the London Divorce Court in 1858 publicised the range and scale of family tragedies that had been taking place in the seclusion of domestic environment. Although the act provided women with legal instruments to obtain liberation from spousal oppression and raised public awareness of marital pathologies, it was still disadvantageous for wives, who were obliged to evidence not only their spouses' adultery (as men were required), but also either brutality, incest, bigamy or desertion (Phegley 2012:20). The problem of women's financial independence was finally solved in 1882, when the Married Women's Property Act secured their exclusive ownership of the money and possessions they acquired before and during marriage (Phegley 2012:26). When Anne Brontë was writing her novel most of the aforementioned acts were not introduced yet, that is why she tried to shed some light on the personal and political ramifications of female disenfranchisement. However, like many other writers, thinkers and moralists of the day she was convinced that legal transformation would be fruitless unless complemented with a substantial change of social attitudes to the traditional gender roles. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* seems to reflect the novelist's idea that it was necessary for men to reform, particularly by incorporating feminine virtues (Joshi 2009:915).

The belief in the uplifting effect of men's domestication and the trust in female guidance may be noticed in a number of Victorian texts. Coventry Patmore, who coined the term "The Angel in the House" (1854), was one of the first to celebrate feminine purity. In his highly popular poems he advises men to undertake moral self-improvement in order to deserve their wives' devotion and affection (1905:38):

*On wings of love uplifted free,  
And by her gentleness made great,  
I'll teach how noble man should be  
To match with such a lovely mate;*

Similarly, the prominent Victorian sage, John Ruskin, supported spiritual subjection of husbands to the ennobling, spiritual power of their wives. He seems to have promoted the chivalric code of conduct (1900:82) in which *the first and necessary impulse of every truly taught and knightly heart is this of blind service to its lady [...]*. Furthermore, he clearly emphasised the significance of men's involvement in domestic affairs (1900:98):

*Generally we are under an impression that a man's duties are public, and a woman's private. But this is not altogether so. A man has a personal work or duty, relating to his own home, and a public work or duty, which is the expansion of the other, relating to the state.*

John Stuart Mill (1870:175) was another influential man of letters who advocated equitable share of domestic commitments for both genders: *The association of men*

*with women in daily life is much closer and more complete than it ever was before. Men's life is more domestic.* The ardent feminist and social reformer regarded men's domestication as one of the means to combat family violence. Samuel Smiles (1889:325-326), likewise, tried to encourage contemporary men to develop feminine qualities and open their hearts to female influence:

*And while woman is the natural cherisher of infancy, and the instructor of childhood, she is also the guide and counsellor of youth, and the confidant and companion of manhood [...] In short, the influence of woman more or less affects, for good or for evil, the entire destinies of man.*

Anne Brontë also contributed to the debate on men's role in the domestic milieu, calling for reorientation of masculine ideals to facilitate women's emancipation and eradicate abusive behavioural patterns. Her didactic stance is presented in the preface to the second edition (2008:4), where she addresses both male and female readers: *I know that such characters do exist, and if I have warned one rush youth from following in their steps, or prevented one thoughtless girl from falling into the very natural error of my heroine, the book has not been written in vain.* By sketching the portraits of four reformed men who find personal fulfilment and gain respect after they abandon profligate, selfish, corruptive habits, and learn to appreciate feminine and gentlemanly virtues, Brontë evinces the potential success of a new, nonviolent, Christian model of manliness that was steadily gaining ground in the Victorian period.

The contemporary ideal of masculinity which incorporated those attributes best was that of gentlemanly masculinity. According to Philip Mason (1993:161), *[b]eing a gentleman had then, by the second half of the 19th century, become almost a religion.* The notion had a universal appeal, since it embraced virtues that the upper class respected and middle-class celebrated. The elitist quality of the term gentleman, granted exclusively to men of sterling character and impeccable manners, motivated men to construct their masculine identities in accordance with a proper ethical code, which upgraded modesty, benevolence and self-control in masculine demeanour. The seminal definition of the notion formulated by Cardinal Newman in 1852 in *The Idea of a University* (1999:189-190) aptly illustrates the main premises of the ideal:

*It is almost a definition of a gentleman to say he is one who never inflicts pain [...] The true gentleman in like manner carefully avoids whatever may cause a jar or a jolt in the minds of those with whom he is cast [...] his great concern being to make every one at their ease and at home. He has his eyes on all his company; he is tender towards the bashful, gentle towards the distant, and merciful towards the absurd [...] He has too much good sense to be affronted at insults, he is too well employed to remember injuries, and too indolent to bear malice. He is patient,*

*forbearing, and resigned, on philosophical principles; he submits to pain, because it is inevitable, to bereavement, because it is irreparable, and to death, because it is his destiny [...]*

The omnipresent focus on Christian values, which stigmatise violence, egoism and recklessness, made this model fit for both public and private use. A man capable of internalising such features was most likely to be an understanding, empathic and respectful husband, who would appreciate marital bliss and never think of resorting to harmful, offensive practices. Many Victorian sages, social activists and novelists engaged in the campaign of discrediting the Georgian model of extravagant, authoritative masculinity and promoting the gentlemanly, domesticated manhood to reinforce the effects of changes in matrimonial law.

Lisa Surridge (2005:9) notes that *Victorian novels [...]* take as a central theme the disciplining of spousal violence, both contemplating the public, legal means and creating one of the primary private means by which this was to occur. Apart from highlighting the need for political steps, Anne Brontë also takes into consideration the personal facets. She aptly highlights the benefits that not only Victorian wives, but also whole society could derive from the moral training of breadwinners. One of the numerous examples of male redemption in the novel is Lord Lowborough. Initially, he is a member of a gentlemen's club in London, a popular form of homosocial entertainment during the Georgian era. The club gained notoriety due to the wild *orgies* (Brontë 2008:163) that its members repeatedly organised. At first glance, Lowborough is the embodiment of a vain, debauched, wanton aristocrat, wasting money and time on gambling, alcohol and drugs. Together with his friends, Huntingdon, Grimsby, Hattersley and Hargrave, he leads an idle, unrestrained life, paying no regard to moral, religious and social principles. He quickly loses his fortune, ruins his reputation and jeopardises his health. However, when he hits rock bottom, he unexpectedly experiences a moment of self-reflection: *'It's only this, gentlemen, – that I think we'd better go no further. We'd better stop while we can.'* [...] *'And if you choose to visit the bottomless pit, I won't go with you – we must part company, for I swear I'll not move another step towards it!'* (Brontë 2008:161). Unfortunately, he is a man of weak will and soon gets tempted by his companions into reverting to his old, disastrous habits. The struggle with his demons lasts for a few more months, until he finds strong motivation to terminate his addictions for good: *'[...] But now I see what it is that keeps me back, and what's wanted to save me; [...]* *'What is it, Lowborough?'* [...] *'A wife,' he answered;* (Brontë 2008:165). The *ruined and wretched* man (Brontë 2008:166), as he calls himself, hopes to find a guardian angel to help him amend his conduct and start a completely new chapter in life. The nobleman expresses a conviction that feminine tenderness, patience and benevolence will heal his wounds, elevate his soul and prove peaceful, domestic felicity superior to bodily pleasures. Yet Lord Lowborough's path to respectability and moral regeneration turns out to be even bumpier than he expected, because

his first wife, Annabella Wilmot, is a sweet and charming creature, but only on the surface. To his great dismay, the object of his admiration does not deserve the affection, being a materialistic and deceitful woman, who does not hesitate to develop a romantic relationship with one of her husband's married friends, Arthur Huntingdon. Instead of supporting her spouse in the pursuit of self-improvement, she puts a strain on his newly gained composure with her impertinent language and disrespectful attitude. However, the character does not disgrace himself again and holds to his resolution. The writer rewards his perseverance with a second, happier and more harmonious marriage, to a woman endowed with *genuine good sense, unswerving integrity, active piety, warmhearted benevolence*, whom he views as *a world too good for him* (Brontë 2008:389), and makes *one of the happiest and fondest wives in England* in return for her goodness (Brontë 2008:390). It is highly probable that Lord Lowborough would never succeed in refining his comportment but for his own determination, and yet the quest for a protective wife seems to be the main engine of his moral conversion.

Another member of the infamous club, Ralph Hattersley, likewise undergoes a moment of illumination as for the dangerous repercussions of his dissipated lifestyle and self-centred deportment. Nonetheless, in contrast to Lord Lowborough's desire for feminine counsel, Hattersley wishes to marry a submissive, meek and unprotesting woman, who would never attempt to change his way of life. Milicent Hargrave, his friend's sister, seems to be a perfect match. She humbly bears his insults, never complains about his vulgar behaviour, accepts his savage pastimes and refrains from revealing how miserable and depressed her husband's abuse and neglect make her. On the example of their relationship, Anne Brontë demonstrates that women's passivity actually may implicitly contribute to men's degeneration. Since Milicent does not externalise her real state of mind, her spouse falsely supposes that she is indifferent to his extravagancies. Only after another person, Helen Huntingdon, opens his eyes to the truth, can he comprehend the absurdity of this assumption. He discovers that it is convenient not to notice his spouse's suffering, as otherwise he would be forced to face the heinousness of his deeds. Helen decides to interfere into their relations, as she believes in Ralph's reparation and intends to rescue their marriage (Brontë 2008:245):

*'[...] And I can tell you, Mr. Hattersley, that Milicent loves you more than you deserve, and that you have it in your power to make her very happy, instead of which you are her evil genius, and, I will venture to say, there is not a single day passes in which you do not inflict upon her some pang that you might spare her if you would'*

The heroine argues that it is the husband that holds the key to their happiness. His wife is as amiable, generous and understanding as he has always wanted her to be; now it is his turn to become a suitable partner for such a woman. Mrs.

Huntingdon's intervention is not in vain, as Ralph reforms his demeanour and comes to perform his role of paterfamilias in a responsible and appreciative way. Josephine McDonagh (2008:xxviii) goes so far as to say that he turns into *the most loving, devoted, and respectable of husbands*. Furthermore, once he lets himself taste the serene atmosphere of the domestic temple, he understands what a blessing happy family is in a man's life (Brontë 2008:390):

*Avoiding the temptations of the town, he continued to pass his life in the country immersed in the usual pursuits of a hearty, active country gentleman; his occupations being those of farming, and breeding horses and cattle, diversified with a little hunting and shooting, and enlivened by the occasional companionship of his friends (better friends than those of his youth), and the society of his happy little wife (now cheerful and confiding as heart could wish) and his fine family of stalwart sons and blooming daughters.*

The Hattersleys subplot demonstrates the author's faith in men's self-development. No matter how vile a man's actions are, how reckless his habits, there is always a chance for atonement and spiritual rebirth. In addition, she pays attention to the common good that male redemption can foster. A morally reformed man does not only save his soul, but also strengthens his wife's purity and beneficence, as well as produces another generation of thoughtful, honest and upright citizens.

Deep concerns about her child's future welfare motivate Helen Huntingdon to introduce reformatory measures into her own son's upbringing. Young Arthur becomes rude and insubordinate under his father's corrupting influence. Mr. Huntingdon tries to mould his son's character according to his own principles of pleasure seeking, self-indulgence and dissipation, finding absolute delight in spoiling his wife's efforts to raise the boy in a responsible and virtuous way. Helen bitterly notes in her diary that her husband (Brontë 2008:277): *[does] his utmost to subvert [her] labours and transform [her] innocent, affectionate, tractable darling into a selfish, disobedient, and mischievous boy; thereby preparing the soil for those vices he has so successfully cultivated in his own perverted nature.* The mother's heart bleeds when she sees how easily the child picks up bad habits and crude language in male homosocial company (Brontë 2008:296): *So the little fellow came down every evening, in spite of his cross mamma, and learnt to tipple wine like papa, to swear like Mr. Hattersley, and to have his own way like a man, and sent mamma to the devil when she tried to prevent him.* Helen realises that her husband is resistant to positive guidance and impervious to reason, but she cannot give up on her beloved child. As an affectionate and solicitous mother she considers it crucial to prevent the boy from contaminating his soul by reckless and licentious acts. The heroine plays the role of guardian angel to her son, securing not only his health, reputation and manly honour but also his salvation. She is ready to sacrifice

her life for little Arthur's physical and spiritual wellbeing. In her opinion, the only way to protect her son from moral downfall is to separate him from the source of evil, i.e. his father. Fortunately, the child's wickedness turns out to be a temporary effect of Huntingdon's vile teachings, and he soon opens his heart to the mother's gentle care and ennobling instruction. Her patience, benevolence and wisdom soon bear fruit and soften the son's coarse deportment. *His apprehensions are more quick, his heart more overflowing with affection than ever his father's could have been; and it is no hopeless task to bend him to obedience and win him to love and know his own true friend, as long as there is no one to counteract my efforts* (Brontë 2008:313). The maternal supervision and guidance that Arthur receives help him to construct his manliness around feminine virtues, which ultimately consolidates his gentlemanly demeanour. Young Huntingdon never develops his father's weaknesses and becomes a respectable man and affectionate husband (Brontë 2008:414): *That pretty child is now a fine young man: he has realized his mother's brightest expectations, and is at present residing in Grassdale Manor with his young wife, the merry little Helen Hattersley, of yore.* The process of his maturation and successful internal metamorphosis provide evidence for feminine influence in a man's life. Moreover, the novelist indicates that male conduct is shaped in childhood. A child's innate goodness and innocence may be either spoiled by careless and irresponsible parenting or enhanced by proper moral education and sensible support. In addition, Brontë demonstrates that no punitive measures or legal actions will be needed to discipline men if they learn generosity, courtesy and self-control by having a paternal role model to follow and affectionate mother to nurture the emotional side of their nature.

Helen's second husband, Gilbert Markham, turns out to be a more attentive, reliable partner and sentient parent, however only after he manages to restrain his fiery temper and acquires a well-balanced demeanour. Gilbert differs from the three aforementioned characters, because he neither indulges in outrageous amusements, nor tarnishes his honour by ignoble actions. Nevertheless, he still lacks patience, moderation and self-discipline indispensable in the mid-nineteenth-century gentlemanly code of conduct. He is a hot-blooded youth who tends to jump to conclusions and mistreat people urged by his rash judgements. When he sees Helen, whom he secretly loves, embracing their mutual friend, Mr. Lawrence, he instantly suspects them of having a love affair. Wounded pride and jealousy drive him mad and next day he whips the supposed rival and throws him off his horse causing severe head injury; on top of that, he abandons the bleeding and dizzy victim like a ruthless rascal. Lisa Surridge (2005:82) suggests that Gilbert's assault on Frederick Lawrence is the most violent scene in the novel; it reveals Gilbert's capacity for horrifying cruelty, horrifying because committed without the dehumanising impact of alcohol. However, such passionate, pathological reactions are not his only sin. Markham's initial conduct in inter-gender relations is also rather questionable. He frivolously treats his advances to Eliza Millward, as he first

singles her out from local girls and then after meeting Helen, shuns her company abruptly, paying no regard to her feelings. The manner in which he tries to court Helen is also anything but gentlemanly. He burdens her with frequent visits to her lodgings, spies on her and demands recognition of his desire despite her reticence and insistence on loneliness. Only after reading Mrs. Huntingdon's diary, depicting the details of her disastrous marriage and subsequent escape, does he discover his mistakes and learn his lesson. The hero has to undergo internal metamorphosis in order to purge his character of dangerous impulses and selfish inclinations. He apologises to Mr. Lawrence and promises to withdraw from Helen's life (Brontë 2008:348): *'Yes, yes I remember it all: nobody can blame me more than I blame myself in my own heart – at any rate, nobody can regret more sincerely than I do the result of my brutality as you rightly term it'*. The ability to manifest repentance and self-reproach give hope for his future self-improvement. Nonetheless, before he gets worthy of marrying Mrs. Huntingdon, Markham has to suffer the loss of his beloved, who returns to her terminally ill husband to nurse him on his deathbed. The suspense, insecurity and waiting for another chance to meet her are a painful ordeal for the man. He describes the period of apprehension in the following words (Brontë 2008:388): *[...] my chagrin, my expectations and disappointments, my fluctuations of dull despondence and flickering hope, my varying resolutions, now to drop it, and now to persevere – now to make a bold push, and now to let things pass and patiently abide my time [...]*. His hesitations and dilemmas signal the internal conflict between the old self and the new self that he must handle. The process of self-training is wearing and arduous, but Markham benefits from the decision to restrain his violent temperament and soon transforms into a mature, principled and forbearing gentleman. When their paths cross again, *we see a man entirely without arrogance, entirely supplicant*, as Elizabeth Langland (1989:136) observes; even Helen's demanding and fastidious aunt recognises his merits and blesses her niece's second marriage in good conscience (Brontë 2008:416): *'[...] if she must marry again, I know of no one, now living and of a suitable age, to whom I would more willingly resign her than yourself, or who would be more likely to appreciate her worth and make her truly happy, as far as I can tell.'* Such a recommendation serves as the best certificate of Gilbert's improved manners, reformed character and undeniable moral credibility. He becomes an adherent of Victorian virtues and embodiment of the mid-nineteenth-century ideal of domesticated gentlemanly manliness.

To conclude, Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* addresses a few burning questions of the mid-Victorian period: the shameful problem of marital maltreatment, the need for legal reforms in family law and the danger of maintaining stereotypical representations of gender roles. Marion Shaw (2013:332) argues that the novelist expresses feminist views on inter-gender relations based on social and moral egalitarianism in terms of responsibilities and rights, underpinned by the Christian belief in the equality of souls before God. To dismantle the double moral standard

is to make an important step towards curing many social ills. Hence, the book traces the emergence of the domesticated model of masculinity based on feminine and gentlemanly principles, as one of the crucial factors in changing social attitude to domestic abuse. On the example of four male characters who score a triumph over their moral frailty and break themselves of deviant habits the writer proves the possibility of eroding the deep-rooted misconceptions about male prodigality and dominance and female docility. As Lisa Surridge (2005:74) suggests, *Brontë foregrounds the 'silent revolution' in masculine domestic behaviour*, a revolution that has been carried out by subsequent generations, and whose consequences still pervade the contemporary conceptualisations of heterosocial relations. John Tosh (1999:197) truly hits the nail on the head when he indicates the close link between the Victorian and current trends towards domesticating men: *The Victorians established the 'common sense' of the proposition that, to be fully human and fully masculine, men must be active and sentient participants in domestic life. One hundred years on, we still contend with the practical and emotional implications of that belief.*

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