

Discuss the representation of the search for 'identity' in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall can be read as an exploration of female identity and the process through which it was constructed and perceived by Victorian society. Helen Graham, the protagonist, although initially appearing to be at the centre of the narrative, reveals herself to be marginalised and objectified by others. Helen is the tenant of Wildfell Hall: a woman whose three surnames vividly illustrate her numerous identities. The novel, set in Regency times, is the story of Helen's marriage and then escape from Arthur Huntingdon, her attempt to live independently and finally her marriage to Gilbert Markham who re-tells the whole story over twenty years later in a letter to his brother in law. Throughout the novel we witness Helen's attempts to find an identity for herself; attempts which are often thwarted by others – usually men although sometimes women, themselves caught and confined by patriarchal society. Brontë explores the identity of the protagonist through the narrative voice itself, buildings and location, access to language and art and the symbolism of shadows, mirrors, clothes and food.

In the novel the role of narrator illustrates the construction of identity: by the very act of writing an identity is created and shaped. The narrative voice of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is complex, as it appears to be the voices of two people: Helen Graham, the tenant, and Gilbert Markham, the young farmer who falls in love with her. However, it cannot escape any reader's notice that Helen's narrative is trapped by the two parts of Gilbert's and in fact her diary only appears in the novel (which takes the form of a letter from Gilbert to Halford, his brother in law) because he has chosen to send it: he has appropriated Helen's story for his own uses. Betty Jay writes that he 'appears to be in possession of his wife's diary, which he not only transcribes but

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall

also edits.¹ We are therefore aware that although we might be objective readers, we are never completely sure how much of Helen's identity we are being shown and how much Gilbert has filtered out, particularly as he alerts Halford and the reader to the fact that he has removed some of the text because he believes it is only of 'temporal interest to the writer, or such as would serve to encumber the story rather than elucidate it.'² Helen can only ever be, therefore, the person her husband allows her to be: she can not express herself in the way she originally intended to and her private thoughts and feelings are exposed to public scrutiny without her consent.

Helen moves to a foreign place in an attempt to assert her own identity and frequently suffer the efforts by others to ascribe an identity to her because they 'fail' to explain their presence sufficiently for the rigorous demands of a rigid society. The most basic form of identity is a name and in the novel this appears symbolic: at the opening of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* we do not know Helen's surname which increases the impression of her being rootless and without ancestry or inheritance. Helen's assumed surname, Graham, is equally telling: she takes on a man's first name as her surname whilst making an attempt at independence as if to prove she can take on the male role of making money and supporting her family. The name is doubly symbolic because it was her mother's maiden name and she feels she has some claim to it: it is like the throwing off of the patriarchal order under which she has suffered for so long, whilst, ironically, also disguising herself in it. Whilst married to the drunken Arthur her name is Huntingdon, which can be viewed as an aberration of the words 'hunting down' which is exactly what happens to her: she is hunted down by both her husband, who wants possession of his son, and then by the villagers who want to hunt down her 'real' identity.

¹ Betty Jay, *Anne Brontë*, (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2000), p.39.

² Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, (London: Penguin, 1848), p.109.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall

Helen is always defined by her surroundings and her identity seems to be an integral part of her surroundings. The book refers to the place of abode in the title and this seems to stand for both a physical place and metaphorically for her place in society which is always precarious and insecure: Helen is only the 'tenant' of Wildfell Hall; she does not have a sense of ownership or belonging to her surroundings. When Gilbert's sister, Rose, announces to Gilbert and his mother that a single woman has taken Wildfell Hall, his mother cries out "Good gracious, my dear! The place is in ruins!"³ The reader is left wondering whether she is referring to the state of the buildings or the reputation the new tenant will bring to it, being a single woman with a child; thus Helen's identity is already being decided before she has even met any of the people in the neighbourhood. This also highlights the fact that it is not just the men in the novel who construct the identity of Helen, it is other women who already live in the places and seem to accept their own constrained lives in a way which Helen is not prepared to do.

Helen does not take the acceptable role or 'path' ascribed to her, either in her literal journey or in her metaphorical journey to be herself. In *Women's Madness* Jane Ussher writes that women were given a clear message to 'follow the path nature has provided and you will be happy. Attempt to follow the masculine path and all manner of illness could befall.'⁴ This is literally played out by Helen who takes an unconventional journey when she flees her marital home early in the morning under a new name. As she looks back at the house she refers to it as 'dark and still'⁵ and a 'prison' from which she has escaped. There is literally and metaphorically a new day dawning for Helen as the sun rises and she articulates her sense of freedom in the contrast between the dark prison she has left behind and the 'liberty and hope'⁶

³ *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, p.19.

⁴ Jane Ussher, *Women's Madness: Misogyny or Mental Illness?*, (Harlow: Prentice Hall), p.89

⁵ *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, p.299.

⁶ *ibid*, p.300.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall

before her. However the suspicion she will encounter in her new home is signalled in the foreboding description of Wildfell Hall, in which the furniture is 'grim', the windows 'narrow' and the outlook 'bleak'. The description would equally well suit Helen's own attempts to make a new life for herself: she is confronted by the grim and suspicious countenances of her neighbours whose narrow minds fail to consider Helen's past suffering and thus make the outlook for her life bleak: if she can not settle there or keep her past a secret she may well have to return to her husband and the misery of her marriage.

Helen is often caught by the gaze of others, particularly the male gaze, which as Luce Irigaray has stated reflects back a negative image of man: his Other and this makes it very difficult if not impossible, for a woman to assert her own sense of self. Irigaray claims that women are outside of male representation: they are negative and absence, a force that can not be defined.⁷ This happens to Helen Graham when Gilbert Markham first sees her: 'Just then, she happened to raise her eyes, and they met mine; I did not choose to withdraw my gaze.'⁸ He is in control here, he feels no shame in staring at this unknown person, except a feeling of moral impropriety in not attending to his prayers in church. He further objectifies Helen by referring to her as a 'strange lady' and 'the object of general attraction'. Helen has no opportunity to redress or renounce this objectification either at the time of events (she is scolded by the vicar for staying away from church) or at the time of the narrative because Gilbert writes to Halford whilst the rest of the family are out on a visit.

⁷ For a summary of Irigaray's theory of women as men's Other see: Toril Moi, *Sexual Textual Politics*, (London: Methuen, 1985)

⁸ *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, p.22.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall

In her essay 'Difference of View' Mary Jacobus, in considering Virginia Woolf's writing, explores 'the extent to which patriarchal representation [...] silences women.'⁹ Although Helen appears to be present in most of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* she never has the opportunity to voice her own opinions: she is re-presented by Gilbert and is thus always silenced. He even comments that when she returned to nurse the dying Arthur and sent letters to her brother, Frederick Lawrence, which he allows Gilbert to see, he looks at them with a 'longing gaze'¹⁰ and 'devoured these precious letters with my eyes.'¹¹ Even when Helen is able to express herself freely Gilbert destroys her sense of self by his greed for her and then re-presents some of her work by writing out, from memory, 'the most important passages'.¹² In this way then Gilbert takes part of Helen's identity and makes it his own and re-defines her by editing the letters and thus silences part of her account by his implied judgement of it as 'unimportant'. She has no identity except through Gilbert.

Helen suffers a similar fate at the hands of Arthur when he discovers her diary and reads about her plan to escape. He takes possession of her keys and destroys all her painting materials by burning them and Helen comments, 'I saw them all consumed'¹³: the eating metaphor bearing striking similarities to Gilbert's confession of 'devouring' her letters. Arthur torments Helen further by holding up the candle to her face 'and peered into my eyes with looks and laughter too insulting to be borne.'¹⁴ He looks carefully at her to try to ascertain the depth of her anger; the extent to which he has destroyed her feelings of worth; but she remains silent.

⁹ Mary Jacobus, 'Difference of View' in *The Feminist Reader*, eds Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore, 2nd edn, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), p.68.

¹⁰ *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, p.334.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p.340.

¹² *Ibid*, p.340.

¹³ *Ibid*, p.281.

¹⁴ *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, p.281.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall

Helen Graham is overtly encouraged to play roles throughout the novel: to take on an identity that she does not feel comfortable with. In Gilbert's descriptions of Helen's attire it appears that Helen is passive and a willing subject of his metaphorical undressing of her. He describes how 'Her appearance, manners, and dress [...] were all set before me.'¹⁵ When Helen describes her disguise on leaving Wildfell Hall, she claims that she 'intend[s] to be taken for a widow', suggesting that she will be passively waiting for others to make assumptions about her.

In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* Helen is an artist but she restricts herself to painting landscapes: apparently neutral and merely pleasing spectacles. She does, however, disguise her signature on her artwork whilst she is in hiding from Arthur; another example of one of her multiple identities. She suffers through making aborted attempts to sketch Huntingdon's profile when she is first acquainted with him. She displays her artwork for the scrutiny of the gathered guests but Arthur carefully turns each picture over to study the marks on the back and although Helen thinks she has obliterated all traces, is forced to concede that 'the pencil frequently leaves an impression upon card-board, that no amount of rubbing can efface.'¹⁶ Again it is like the 'dominating phallic shadow' that Jacobus refers to: Helen is unable to escape from Huntingdon's presence, however shadowy.

Helen is sometimes described as occupying a shadow, being a woman on the margins, unable to maintain the centre of attention or the narrative. She is the subject of mistaken identity, an event which takes place at night, in the 'shadowy walk' in the grounds of Grassdale. For Helen though it serves as the death of her marriage and the destruction of her identity as Arthur Huntingdon's wife, she tells him

¹⁵ *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, p.21.

¹⁶ *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, p.129.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall

“I am your child’s mother, and your housekeeper, nothing more.”¹⁷ Here Helen labels herself: she fulfils roles and has multiple identities which she can not escape; as she says herself, she is ‘nothing more’. She is defined through her role in society.

At the end of the novel the reader sees that, having struggled for an identity throughout the novel, Helen is completely silenced by Gilbert Markham when he retells the story of his marriage to Helen. Throughout the novel Helen has been viewed as an object; often as one which only has value in its worth to those who objectify her. When Helen is about to be married to Gilbert she is referred to merely in terms of money. Her aunt apparently tells Gilbert he is going to ‘rob’ her of her niece but she hopes the union will ‘prosper’ and she knows Gilbert will appreciate Helen’s ‘worth’. Gilbert reports his own mother’s gratification at his ‘good fortune’. Helen does not appear to have an identity at all, merely value to Gilbert. Furthermore, at the close of his letter Gilbert reports to Halford that, ‘it is time to bring my narrative to a close.’¹⁸ He does not acknowledge Helen’s part in the story at all: it has become one in which he stands in the centre and she remains on the margins; silent and within his shadow.

The novel offers a representation of fractured female identity: it shows how the female identity can be subsumed by patriarchal male society. Helen offers the reader insight into the way in which women were assessed and valued by their position in Victorian society and how they were alienated if they attempted to alter their status or expressed the ability or desire to lead an independent life. The protagonist reflects the appropriation of language and art by the patriarchal order and this is illustrated in the novel by symbols of language, art and the male gaze. Helen ultimately fails to express her own identity and is silenced first by Arthur Huntingdon,

¹⁷ *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, p.238.

¹⁸ *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, p.377.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall

then by a hostile society and finally, and permanently, by her second husband, Gilbert Markham.

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