



# Beyond the Ideal: Anne Brontë's Realistic Feminism

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**Abstract**— This article offers a fresh perspective on Anne Brontë's feminist stance in her novels *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and *Agnes Grey*. While previous scholars have criticized Brontë's portrayal of her female protagonists in a manner that contradicts her feminist message, this article argues that Brontë's nuanced portrayal of the complexities of female subjectivity within the social, cultural, and historical constraints of her time is essential to her feminist stance. Anne Brontë empowers her female characters with realistic feminine tools to cope with the patriarchal suppression they face and calls for a rethinking of the miserable situation of women in the Victorian patriarchal society. The article argues that Brontë's aim is not to call for an impossible revolution through an ideal feminine figure but rather to promote action based on the reality of the situation. This article's originality lies in its fresh and sophisticated interpretation of Brontë's feminist stance that avoids reducing her characters to mere symbols of resistance and acknowledges the complexities of female subjectivity in a patriarchal society.

**Keywords**— Anne Brontë, Victorian feminism, *Agnes Grey*, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

## I. INTRODUCTION

As a female writer in the patriarchal milieu of nineteenth-century England, Anne Brontë was acutely aware of the restrictions imposed on women's lives by the dominant societal ideology. In her literary works, Brontë eloquently articulated her feminist vision, which challenged the patriarchal norms and aimed to establish a more equitable society. Unlike some of her contemporaries, however, Brontë's critique of patriarchal doctrine is characterized by a subtle, pragmatic approach that reflects her commitment to the practicalities of social change. Her literary style is distinguished by a realistic orientation that emphasizes the complex, multifaceted nature of gender relations. By adopting a more tempered stance that aims to create a bond of mutual benefit between the genders, Brontë's feminist vision is a testament to her sophisticated understanding of the complexities of social change, and her dedication to transforming oppressive societal structures through dialogue and cooperation.

Brontë's feminist vision is brought to life through the characters she creates, who serve as embodiments of the societal constraints placed on women in the patriarchal society of nineteenth-century England. Her female protagonists, Helen in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and

Agnes in *Agnes Grey*, are compelling examples of women who are able to forge a path for themselves, despite the restrictions imposed upon them. By refusing to be confined to the narrow role of domesticity, they assert their independence and create a new sense of self that challenges traditional gender roles. Brontë's skillful depiction of these characters and their interactions with men and the wider public sphere offers a poignant critique of the gendered norms that were deeply entrenched in her society. Through her detailed portrayals of female characters, Brontë showcases her feminist vision, which seeks to dismantle the structures of oppression and create a more equitable society.

Anne Brontë employs her literary prowess to deliver a forceful critique of the patriarchal structures that pervaded nineteenth-century England. Through her depiction of male characters, Brontë highlights the tyranny and violence often associated with the masculine mindset. For instance, in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Arthur is a cruel husband who deprives Helen of her possessions, talents, and ultimately her identity as a woman. His callous treatment of Helen and indifference to her feelings paint him as an abuser, making him an embodiment of Brontë's condemnation of patriarchal norms. Similarly, Gilbert

shares Arthur's possessiveness, violence, and patriarchal thinking. In *Agnes Grey*, Mr. Bloomfield contributes to the protagonist's struggles through his brutality and lack of understanding. Brontë's depiction of these male characters provides a powerful critique of the patriarchal principles that limit women's freedom and opportunities. As Carol Senf (1990) argues, through the interactions between these male and female characters, Brontë exposes how the "nineteenth-century notions of marriage consigned women to silence" (p. 450).

Although Anne Brontë's literary works are undoubtedly marked by her feminist overtone, it is also clear that her texts do not contain the strong agenda and the feminist politics found in other revolutionary feminist texts of her time. Rather than advocating for a complete overthrow of the patriarchal system, Brontë's approach emphasizes compromise and mutual benefit between the sexes. As noted by Carnell (1998), "Brontë ultimately sought to achieve wholeness and integration between the sexes through an eighteenth-century ideal of the public good in which most women might participate indirectly as instructors and nurturers of their husbands and sons" (p. 20). This unique approach of Anne Brontë has caused her to receive less attention as a feminist writer compared to her sisters and has led some critics to levy criticism against her works on various grounds.

Accordingly, the research problem that this article endeavors to address pertains to the underappreciation of Anne Brontë as a feminist writer in contrast to her sisters, and the criticisms that have been levied against her works on various grounds. The article aims to examine Anne Brontë's nuanced feminist vision and its manifestation in her literary works, particularly in her depictions of female protagonists. Through this analysis, the article seeks to illuminate how Brontë's approach to feminism is characterized by a measured emphasis on compromise and mutual benefit between the sexes, rather than advocating for the complete overthrow of the patriarchal system, which is a feature of other revolutionary feminist texts of her time. As such, the article aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of Anne Brontë's feminist vision, elucidating the ways in which her literary works challenge patriarchal norms, and establish her rightful place in the feminist literary canon. By achieving these objectives, this article seeks to contribute significantly to the scholarly conversation on Anne Brontë's feminist legacy, providing valuable insights into the intricacies of social change and gender relations in nineteenth-century England.

## II. DISCUSSION

### 2.1. Anne Brontë's Feminist Stand

Anne Brontë's literary works have been subject to criticism for their perceived lack of complexity in comparison to those of her sisters. Scholars Nash and Suess (2001) note that this aspect of Brontë's writing resulted in her works being overshadowed until more recently (p. ix). Additionally, Brontë has been criticized for her "extravagant over-coloring" of certain parts of her novels, which were themselves "carefully copied from life" (Brontë, 1998b, p. 15). However, in response to this criticism, Brontë staunchly defended her position, asserting that the so-called "distasteful" subjects in her works were drawn from reality and served to accurately represent the state of affairs within society. As Brontë explained, she preferred to depict her characters "as they really are than as they would wish to appear" (Brontë, 1998b, p. 15). Ultimately, Brontë's dedication to a realistic portrayal of her characters and the world in which they lived allowed her to offer a complex critique of societal structures, highlighting the often-harsh realities faced by women in nineteenth-century England.

The differing approach to feminism between Anne and her sisters may account for the comparative lack of attention paid to her works. While Charlotte and Emily boldly challenged patriarchal dominance in society and the literary field, Anne favored a more understated approach. In contrast to her sisters' novels, Anne's works do not prominently feature the political and social issues found in Charlotte's *Jane Eyre* and Emily's *Wuthering Heights*. Furthermore, Anne's novels lack the intricately woven psychological dramas that make her sisters' works so compelling. Charlotte and Emily address topics such as the plight of women writers, women's madness, and women's sexuality head-on, while Anne's writing is more reserved in its treatment of such subjects. Additionally, Charlotte and Emily expertly craft psychologically rich and complex heroines, a quality that is less prominent in Anne's literature.

It is evident that Anne Brontë's approach to feminism diverges from that of her sisters. Brontë's portrayal of female empowerment is limited to the talents and skills her heroines possess, rather than a broader political agenda or rebellion against the patriarchal system. Brontë's implicit message suggests that women can attain self-actualization by embracing their feminine attributes, rather than seeking revolutionary change. However, despite these tools of empowerment, Anne Brontë's heroines are unable to effectively challenge patriarchal oppression. Helen, for instance, takes a bold step by leaving her husband to pursue her artistic ambitions, and Agnes strives to support herself through her own labor.

Yet, ultimately, both heroines succumb to the dominant patriarchal institution of marriage.

The ultimate fate of her heroines culminating in marriage is a notable feature of Brontë's novels, which raises important questions about the extent of her feminist beliefs. While this trope is not unique to Brontë, it sheds light on the status of Anne as a feminist writer. The marriages that conclude each novel reinforce the fundamental principles of a male-dominated society, apparently contradicting Brontë's condemnation of male hegemony. Paradoxically, her critique of patriarchy can be seen as a validation of it. This trend in Brontë's writing may highlight the ways in which gendered socialization permeated her works and the limits of her feminist vision. Ultimately, the platform intended to voice women's concerns surrenders to entrenched notions of male authority.

Within this context, Brontë's writing may be perceived as serving a paradoxical purpose of simultaneously denouncing and promoting patriarchal ideology. Her novels provide a platform for her to vehemently criticize the oppressive nature of male hegemony, while also ultimately conforming to it by concluding each novel with the marriage of the female characters. Thus, Brontë's heroines enter into the very institution that inhibits women's emancipation, highlighting the tension between her critique of patriarchal society and her own adherence to it. This contradiction illustrates the complexities of Brontë's position as a woman writer, which was both empowering in allowing her to voice her rejection of male hegemony and challenging in terms of the deeply embedded nature of patriarchal ideology within her own psyche.

However, upon analyzing Brontë's feminist stance, Carnell (1998) suggests that her novels present a "nostalgic vision of domestic harmony" (p. 23). In other words, Brontë seems to propose the idea that women's emancipation does not necessarily require the elimination of men or traditional gender roles, but rather the establishment of a society where men and women coexist and respect each other's rights and freedoms. Brontë argues that patriarchy is not an inherent characteristic of men, but rather a social construct that has been imposed upon them. By promoting a marriage based on mutual respect, Brontë suggests that such relationships do not have to be oppressive to women. This view suggests a subtle and complex understanding of gender relations that is not reducible to simple binaries or essentialist categories.

In considering Brontë's contribution to feminist discourse, it is important to acknowledge that although she may be subject to certain criticisms, she cannot be faulted

for her efforts to address the plight of women within a society dominated by patriarchal norms. Her novels continue to serve the purpose of exposing and challenging the male domination of women in Victorian society, and her realistic portrayal of characters and situations – even if confronting for some critics – embodies a true feminist spirit. Brontë's realist style was particularly well-suited to highlighting the oppression of women, as the absence of such a style in female literature only served to reinforce patriarchal domination. In comparison with other female writers of her time, Brontë's perspective on patriarchy was more grounded in reality and avoided the complex portrayal of characters and events that may alienate readers. This may explain why Marion Shaw (1994) describes Brontë as a "Quiet Feminist."

In the face of the daunting obstacles inhibiting women's self-realization within patriarchal societies, Brontë stands out as a prominent and realistic feminist. She undertakes her feminist mission with an understanding of the impossibility of completely eradicating the oppressive circumstances that surround women. As Brontë herself declared, "Let it not be imagined, however, that I consider myself competent to reform the errors and abuses of society, but only that I would fain contribute my humble quota towards so good an aim" (Brontë, 1998b, p. 15). It is this recognition of the harsh realities of her time that distinguishes Brontë's works. Her realism demonstrates a firmer commitment to women's issues than the approaches of some feminists who strive to create highly idealized characters that take revolutionary actions, which are not only impossible in Victorian society but also in the most developed and liberal societies of the twenty-first century.

## 2.2. Anne Brontë's Women Characters

Brontë's feminist message is communicated through her portrayal of female protagonists, who attempt to break free from gender constructs but ultimately succumb to patriarchal norms dictating that marriage is the ultimate goal for women. Although these characters ultimately conform to societal expectations of women, they serve as a testament to Brontë's deliberate representation of women who resist the repressive patriarchal ideology of nineteenth-century England. In essence, Brontë's female characters represent a subversion of societal expectations, as they challenge patriarchal norms, albeit within the constraints of the society in which they exist. It is noteworthy that Brontë's own gender is a crucial factor in the representation of these characters. Additionally, Brontë's characters are not just products of her imagination, but rather an extension of her own life experiences.

Brontë's tumultuous childhood, marked by financial insecurity and the loss of her mother at a young

age, had a profound impact on her writing career (Shaw 1994). For her, writing became not only a form of escape from psychological trauma but also a means of expressing her rejection of the limitations placed on women in her time. Through her female protagonists, Brontë presents empowered women who are capable of combating the oppressive circumstances in which they find themselves. Brontë's personal experiences with the limited options available to women in Victorian England informed her writing and contributed to her feminist message. Her works were a reflection of the societal restrictions she and other women faced, and the empowerment of her female characters served as a critique of the patriarchal system of the time.

### 2.2.1. Agnes Grey

Brontë's method of empowering her female protagonists involves endowing them with a profession or skill that serves to authenticate their personalities and allows them to navigate the oppressive patriarchal atmosphere. In *Agnes Grey*, Brontë's skillful portrayal of the eponymous character illustrates this method. Agnes is a bold and determined woman who believes strongly in her individuality, demonstrated by her decision to leave home and seek employment as a governess. By taking on this employment to help her financially struggling family, Agnes defies patriarchal notions that women are incapable of fending for themselves and making significant contributions to the financial needs of their dependents. Through Agnes, Brontë conveys the message that women possess agency and can take control of their own lives.

Through Agnes's experience with the Bloomfield family at Wellwood house, Brontë depicts the misery of a woman suffering within a drastically materialistic and patriarchal society. Agnes endures a lot under the dominance of Mr. Bloomfield, Mrs. Bloomfield, and their children. Despite this, Agnes refuses to accept the humiliating situation and never succumbs to the role society has assigned to her. She does not lose her wits on finding that she has been dismissed and ultimately searches for another opportunity. What is worth mentioning is the fact that Agnes is aware of the way society regards her as she says "(t)hough a woman in my own estimation, I was still a child in theirs." (Brontë, 1998a, p. 19). However, she never succumbs to this role and proclaims "If ever I felt it degrading to submit so quietly, or intolerable to toil so constantly, I would turn towards my home, and say within myself-they may crush, but they shall not subdue me! (Brontë, 1998a, p. 40).

Agnes Grey's character is an embodiment of Anne Brontë's attempt to challenge the prescribed image of a woman in the 19th century and the limitations imposed on them in the public sphere. Her determination to support her

family and her engagement in earning wages deviate from the norm and establish her as a woman who is far from being typical. As such, Agnes evinces as a symbol of Brontë's representation of a woman character that defies socially-constructed norms and creates her own image of the woman, one that does not necessarily conform to the socially-accepted parameters.

Brontë's literary world is not limited to her protagonists, but rather extends to her minor female characters who share her motive for women's emancipation. Agnes's sister, for example, is a talented artist who supports herself by selling her drawings. Brontë's portrayal of female artistry is noteworthy as it not only empowers women with a profitable skill but also carries many political implications that strengthen her feminist message. This is particularly evident in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, where the protagonist, Helen Graham, is an artist who defies social norms and expectations through her work.

### 2.2.2. Helen Graham

In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Brontë delves more deeply into the figure of the female artist and uses art as a tool to launch a sharp critique of patriarchal principles. Through Helen's character, Brontë highlights the ways in which marriage is often used as a means of limiting women's opportunities for self-fulfillment and self-definition. Helen's artistry is not just a skill, but a crucial aspect of her identity and a means of achieving self-realization. However, the societal expectation that women should prioritize marriage and family above all else presents a significant obstacle to her artistic journey.

Following her marriage, Helen's identity as a wife eclipses her identity as an artist, causing her to be denied the opportunity to express her talents. Her artistic self is suppressed as she assumes the role of a wife, a clear example of the constraints of patriarchal marriage. As Siv Jansson (1998) remarks, "Brontë's account of (Helen's) marriage to Arthur is one of the most savage indictments of both the legal and economic constraints which supported Victorian marriage, and the mythical ideology which deceives Helen into it" (p. 36). Through her portrayal of Helen's struggles as a woman artist, Brontë denounces the patriarchal principles inherent in a marriage that restrict women's ability to attain true freedom and express their identity. As a married woman, Helen is stripped of the rights she previously had with regard to her artwork. The laws of the time empower Arthur to claim ownership of Helen's paintings. In this manner, Helen's artistry serves as a tool for Brontë to expose marriage as a force that stifles artistic talent, denies women ownership of their work, and deprives them of a source of income.

Helen's fierce rejection of her oppressive marriage is a testament to her unyielding spirit. As she proclaims, "he may drink himself dead, but it is NOT my fault!" (Brontë, 1998b, p. 255), she asserts her autonomy and refuses to be held responsible for her husband's self-destructive behavior. This statement is linked to her artistry, both of which are a rejection of the confining and oppressive domestic sphere that threatens to suffocate her as a woman artist. When she realizes that her words alone cannot secure her emancipation, she decides to take control of her life by masquerading as a widow. By doing so, Helen is able to escape her husband's domination and preserve her identity, property, and talent. Commenting on Helen's ability to conceal her identity, Alisa Clapp (1996) observes that "Helen is learning the sexual power play inherent in women's art, of when to hide and when to publicize art" (p. 119).

Undoubtedly, Helen's artistry and paintings serve as a means to facilitate Brontë's poignant attack against the male-dominated world. Beyond serving as a form of expression of her inner self, Helen's artistry exposes how patriarchy intrinsically annihilates women's artistic talent. Hence, it can be said that Brontë, with her narrative finesse, advances her feminist theme through the medium of Helen's paintings. Helen's artwork and her struggle to establish her artistic identity enable Brontë to create *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* as a work that uncovers the atrocities of the patriarchal ideology and reprimands the limitations it imposes on women's artistic opportunities.

This interpretive approach to Helen's artistic skills not only aids in comprehending Brontë's feminist message in the novel but also underscores the significance of art and artwork within Brontë's oeuvre. For Brontë, women's artistic talent is not merely a pastime or leisure activity, but rather a means of both self-discovery and political expression. From a thematic perspective, art serves as a tool for women to establish their identities and achieve liberation. On a technical level, it can be utilized to critique the hegemonic patriarchal system that confines women to domesticity. Ultimately, this interpretation illuminates the intricate ways in which Brontë constructs her female characters as complex individuals who are capable of expressing their agency through various means, including artistic expression.

### 2.2.3. The Protagonists' Marriage

By endowing her female protagonists with artistic talents and skills, Brontë conveys her feminist ideology, showcasing the potential for women to attain self-fulfillment within a patriarchal society through their own femininity. The figure of the "female artist" is imbued with a powerful feminist message, as Brontë suggests that a woman can establish herself by embracing her femininity

rather than rejecting it to assimilate into a male-dominated world. In this sense, Brontë subverts the patriarchal notion that a woman's worth is solely derived from her relation to a man, and instead celebrates women's inherent abilities and creative potentials as an avenue towards self-realization.

However, the endings of both *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and *Agnes Grey* prompt significant inquiries into Brontë's feminist principles and her portrayal of female protagonists. The marriages of the heroines at the end of the novels appear to compromise Brontë's critique of the patriarchal institution of marriage and its adverse effects on women's emancipation. Agnes's marriage, for instance, could be perceived as a regression after her valiant efforts to establish a unique, independent life. Similarly, Helen's marriage to Gilbert may be seen as a failure of her attempts at self-liberation, as it marks her return to the very domestic sphere from which she had been endeavoring to liberate herself. This notion of women's ultimate submission to men is a hallmark of most women's writing in the Victorian era. Therefore, Brontë, like some of her contemporaries, appears to be complicit in the same doctrine that she seeks to undermine. Although Brontë portrays highly independent and well-developed female characters, she ultimately delivers them to the institution that tradition has deemed essential for their gender.

Despite the apparent contradictions between the endings of Brontë's novels and her feminist message, they are crucial to her intricate portrayal of the complexities of female subjectivity within the social, cultural, and historical constraints of her time. Brontë's realistic trend and her desire to reflect reality as it is may account for this feature. She is cognizant of the various dimensions surrounding women in society and recognizes the necessity of marriage for women to be accepted within the public sphere. Therefore, the portrayal of marriage in each novel seems more of an obligation that each woman must perform as prescribed by patriarchal society. In this sense, Brontë does not establish her female protagonists as ideal and unattainable models for women to follow. Rather, she constructs them as voices that challenge the status quo of women and call for questioning the societal norms and conventions that restrict women's choices and possibilities.

### III. CONCLUSION

Through her nuanced portrayal of female characters, Anne Brontë reinforces her feminist beliefs by equipping them with realistic and practical tools to confront the oppression of a patriarchal society. Unlike some other revolutionary feminist texts of her time, Brontë's approach emphasizes compromise and mutual

benefit between the sexes, rather than advocating for a complete overthrow of the patriarchal system. Her heroines serve as a voice that promotes action based on the reality of the situation, rather than an unattainable ideal. As Brontë herself stated, her primary goal was to convey the truth through her work and to avoid indulging in "soft nonsense" (Brontë, 1998b, p.15). By presenting a sophisticated vision of feminism that encourages critical thinking and reflection on the miserable circumstances of women in Victorian society, Brontë invites readers to join her in the pursuit of truth and social change. Through her works, Brontë not only challenges patriarchal norms but also establishes herself as a feminist writer in her own right, deserving of recognition alongside her more celebrated sisters.

In addition to establishing her place in the feminist literary canon, Brontë's works provide insights into the complexities of social change and gender relations in nineteenth-century England. By highlighting the realities of women's lives and the limitations of their agency, Brontë invites readers to recognize the need for incremental change that is grounded in the practical realities of women's experiences. Moreover, her emphasis on the importance of individual agency and responsibility in the pursuit of social justice underscores the ongoing relevance of her feminist vision today. As we continue to grapple with issues of gender inequality and patriarchal oppression in contemporary society, Brontë's sophisticated and pragmatic approach offers valuable lessons on the role of literature in shaping and reflecting our understanding of social change.

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