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Student's Name: Noelia García Solá

Tutor's Name: Gemma López Sánchez

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Abstract : This research will investigate how three novels written by the Brontë Sisters, *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), helped empower women at the time they were published and debates whether they continue to do so today. By shedding light on the obstacles they had to overcome daily due to the power of the patriarchy, the novels also offer an accurate representation of the anxieties and desires of 19th century women via the female characters portrayed. This work offers an analysis of each novel in which themes like female independence, disobedience, desire, friendship, anxiety, motherhood and creativity are related to the female characters in order to discover how they challenged the established order. To develop such analysis, this investigation will be quoting multiple scholars who have written about this topic in a similar light, but the pillar secondary source will be Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's (1979) *The Madwoman in the Attic*.

Keywords: Brontë Sisters, *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, female anxiety, female desire

Resum: Aquesta recerca estudia la manera en que tres novel·les escrites per les germanes Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Wuthering Heights* (1847) i *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), contribueixen a l'empoderament femení de la seva època i debat si continuen generant aquest efecte a dia d'avui. Centrant-se en les dificultats que tingueren habitualment a causa del patriarcat, aquestes novel·les proporcionen una representació acurada de les angoixes i dels anhels de la dona del segle XIX a través dels personatges de dones representats. Tanmateix, aquesta investigació ofereix una anàlisi de cadascuna de les novel·les en el qual factors com independència femenina, desobediència, desig, amistat, angoixa, maternitat i creativitat són relacionats amb les protagonistes per tal de descobrir com s'enfronten a l'ordre establert. Per enriquir aquesta anàlisi, aquesta investigació citarà diferents acadèmics que han escrit sobre aquest tòpic de manera similar, però el pilar fonamental serà l'obra de la Sandra Gilbert i la Susan Gubar (1979) *The Madwoman in the Attic*.

Paraules clau: Germanes Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, ansietat femenina, desig femení

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Introduction

19th century English novels portray lots of female characters that served as role models for the young ladies reading them. Such female characters went from upper nobility ladies to economic struggling women, but independently of their class, nobility title or lack of it and economic power, what the majority of these 19th century female characters share is that they all served as an inspiration to the reader to submit under the patriarchal rule and discourses that ruled women both inside and outside fiction. Moreover, 19th century novels did not only offer portraits of women in fiction that served as models of conduct for their non-fictional sisters, but also attempted to restrict the power of writing to only the male sex, for as Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (2020) point out in their essay, “the woman writer substitutes what we have called an “anxiety of authorship,” an anxiety built from complex and often only barely conscious fears of that authority which seems to the female artist to be by definition inappropriate to her sex” (p. 51). Therefore, it could be said that not only did male authors depict the ideal of womanhood themselves, but also attempted to prohibit their female counterparts of writing and creating a definition of themselves. Nevertheless, the issue of the woman writer did not end when women started writing, but as Gilbert and Gubar point out in their essay:

“In comparison to the “male” tradition of strong, father-son combat, however, this female anxiety of authorship is profoundly debilitating. Handed down not from one woman to another but from the stern literary “fathers” of patriarchy to all their “inferiorized” female descendants, it is in many ways the germ of a dis-ease or, at any rate, a disaffection, a disturbance, a distrust, that spreads like a stain throughout the style and structure of much literature by women, especially — as we shall see in this study — throughout literature by women before the twentieth century. For if contemporary women do now attempt the pen with energy and authority, they are able to do so only because their eighteenth-and nineteenth-century foremothers struggled in isolation that felt like illness, alienation that felt like madness, obscurity that felt like paralysis to overcome the anxiety of authorship that was endemic to their literary subculture” (p. 51).

Therefore it could be argued that the lack of feminine writing tradition meant an added challenge for the women writers of the 19th century, who were judged not only due to their women nature but also criticized in their quality as authors. Nevertheless, and as will be demonstrated in the following research, some of them dared to write and used their voices in order to create marvelous fiction, but also to denounce the injustices that tradition perpetuated.

This paper will be dealing with three novels by three Victorian sisters: *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) by Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë respectively. In order to deal with these three novels through a feminist perspective, it is important to define and clarify a relevant notion that will be discussed throughout this compilation of essays: the patriarchy. According to the Cambridge Dictionary it is defined as: “a society in which the oldest male is the leader of the family, or a society controlled by men in which they use their power to their own advantage.” Therefore, following this description it could be said that patriarchy has ruled the world and it still continues to do so today, because even if nowadays one could think that women and men have the same opportunities, can access to the same amount of economic power and freedom, issues like the glass ceiling, gender violence and patriarchal discourses are still very present today and, in practice, this is translated into the resolution that women, still to this day, are not granted the same freedom as men.

Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that this research will not deal with the contemporary consideration of patriarchy and how this affects women, but with the Victorian era’s patriarchal order and how back in the day this oppressive social mechanism constrained women, and how the Brontë Sisters’ novels defied this preestablished thinking. In order to illustrate better how the patriarchy worked in the Victorian era, it is important to quote Elizabeth Langland’s (1987) essay “Patriarchal Ideology and Marginal Motherhood in Victorian Novels by Women”:

“After approximately 1840, Victorians were engaged in a significant debate over the roles, rights and responsibilities of women. Informing and fueling these debates were assumptions about women’s particular “nature” and its differences from a man’s. [...] The Victorians’ thoughts on the subject led to articulations of differences between masculine and feminine nature, most memorably, perhaps, in

Sarah Lewis' *Woman's Mission* (1839), Coventry Patmore's *The Angel in the House* (1854-62), and John Ruskin's "Of Queen's Gardens" (1865), works extolling woman's special role as the moral regenerator of mankind. [...] The variety and persistence of myths on a similar theme quickly reveal the Victorian preoccupation with and investment in woman's special nature, a nature characterized by nurture, compassion, and a humanized community. This preoccupation developed into an ideology that legitimized unequal power relations into the economic and political sphere even as it glorified women's role in the domestic "moral" sphere. It is easy to see, therefore, how the myth of women's salvatory and redemptive potential victimized women." (p. 382-382).

Therefore, even though nowadays women still are under the pressure of a system which oppresses them, things were much worse for the Victorian ones, which were denied the opportunities their male counterparts were granted not only in practice but also in theory, by law. Women were not only perceived as unable to perform the tasks attributed to the other sex, but were also reduced into multiple stereotypes in order to fit in what the canonical patriarchal discourses allowed them to become. Following Langland's claim, women could be described as beings who were supposed to be "characterized by nurture, compassion, and a humanized community" (p. 382). Therefore, following these dictations, Victorian women were raised with the idea of staying in the house and bearing children as the outmost of their life duties (in other words, and as Langland also quotes, "Coventry Patmore's *The Angel[s] in the House*" (p. 382)).

Therefore, it is important to bring into the spotlight how revolutionary it was for Victorian women, not only to seek a writing career, but to denounce gender injustices through this writing and to do so in a manner so different to what was expected from a woman. That is why the Brontës' novels are still important today. I would be very glad to write about the Brontë's biography, but for the sake of the length of this research, I will only be quoting about the impact of their fiction. Juliet Barker (2013) offers an excellent summary of this in her perfectly documented biography on the sisters:

"The Brontë novels have held such an honored place in the corpus of English literature for so long that is difficult today to conceive the shock and moral outrage that greeted their first publication. *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights* and *The*

Tenant of Wildfell Hall, in particular, flouted almost every convention. It was not simply the unprecedented passion with which they were written that dismayed the critics: the stories and characters, too, displayed all those qualities which polite Victorians most feared — a disregard for social niceties, an obsession (as it was seen then) with violence, cruelty and vice, and a complete lack of that satisfying morality which doled out rewards to the innocent and good and punished those who had done wrong” (p. 103 & 104).

As it can be observed from Barker’s analysis, these three novels challenged the patriarchal codes of conduct and are therefore crucial in the analysis on Victorian women regarding what this essay will be studying.

After having introduced the importance of the novels by the Brontë’s in the light of female experience, it is time to state the aim of this paper. This research aims to analyse the ways in which these three novels (*Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*) helped empower women and break up with the established patriarchal thinking, and up to what extent they continue to do so today. The investigation will be focusing deeply in Victorian female anxiety and desire, and how these two polarizing experiences are portrayed in the Brontë novels. In order to do so, the theoretical framework this investigation will be using will be Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), whose theorization is not only impeccable but also highly relevant on this field. Nevertheless, even though *The Madwoman in the Attic* will serve as a pillar for this research, this investigation will also be paying close attention to several scholars who have studied these novels in a similar light.

Jane Eyre

Educating for Independence

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) could be considered to be an anthem to female independence and one of the firsts novels (if not the first one) that questioned the ways in which the patriarchy oppressed women who were "poor, obscure, plain and little" (*JE*, p. 235) in society, like Jane herself. In fact, the main character choice is not a random one, because the novel states since the very beginning how the female protagonist is not granted with the typical features that helped women insert and adapt to the 19th century society: she has no money, she is not beautiful, and has no title. In other words, Jane is devoid of the treats that could help a woman survive in society and that were given by heredity and inheritance, and therefore has to fight her way with the tools that are available for her, which are her voice and her character.

When it was first published, *Jane Eyre* was not well-received by the Victorian public. As Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (2020) claim in their essay, "it seems not to have been primarily the coarseness and sexuality of *Jane Eyre* which shocked Victorian reviewers (though they disliked those elements in the book), but, as we have seen, its "anti-Christian" refusal to accept the forms, customs, and standards of society — in short, its rebellious feminism." (p. 338). The fact that the novel was rejected by a vast majority of the public who, as Gilbert and Gubar claim were shocked by its "rebellious feminism" (p. 338) already gives us a clue of why this novel was so important in challenging the patriarchal discourses established in the Victorian society, and maybe it was rejected because the windows of thought that this novel opened were very dangerous, as they could shatter the foundations of patriarchal thinking. To finish with this revision of the novel as a threat to the Victorian patriarchal rule, it could be said that "what horrified the Victorians was Jane's anger" (Gilbert and Gubar, p. 338).

From the very beginning of the novel, Jane is forced to fight oppression and patriarchal violence. When she is living at Mrs. Reed's she does not only face solitude and marginalisation, but also a continuum of violence and cruelty, especially from her aunt and cousin. One of the punishments that Mrs. Reed practices on her niece is to lock her up in the

Red Room, which is full of metaphorical meaning. As Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar claim,

“her experience in the red-room, probably the most metaphorically vibrant of all her early experiences, forces her deeply into herself. For the red-room, stately, chilly, swathed in rich crimson with a great white bed and an easy chair “like a pale throne” looming out of the scarlet darkness, *perfectly represents her vision of the society in which she is trapped, an uneasy elfin dependent*. [...] It is, in other words, a kind of patriarchal death chamber” (p. 340, ital. mine).

Therefore, from the very beginning of the novel it is stated how Jane rebels and tries to fight patriarchal discourses. As Gilbert and Gubar write above, the Red Room would have served to Jane as a kind of test of what patriarchal society would try and do with her: silence her voice and exert fear upon her. The Red Room could also be working as a mimic strategy of the encapsulation anxiety that women in the Victorian society experienced, as their place was ultimately inside the house. As Gilbert and Gubar put it, being in the Red Room is “to be imprisoned literally as well as figuratively” (p. 340).

Nevertheless, Jane is not intimidated by such hateful discourse, but in contrast, she feels a driving emotion which was not very common for ladies to manifest, and which can be reflected in Gilbert and Gubar’s claim that argues that “what horrified the Victorians was Jane’s anger” (p. 338). Instead of feeling a paralyzing fear which could be a useful way to tame and control women who were seen as a menace to the established order, Jane Eyre felt an indignation that allowed her to denounce what she did not believe just. In other words, it allowed her to fight back. When Jane is confronted by the servants after she has hit her master John Reed in self-defense, Jane cries: “Master! How is he my master? Am I a servant?” (*JE*, p. 10). Through this utterance, Jane is rejecting the discourse that her environment is trying to exert upon her: she refuses to feel a “servant”, and claims that her abuser is not her master. Therefore, although since the very beginning of the novel she is cursed with abuse, Jane is not silenced and makes it clear that she will challenge the rules that her environment has long since accepted, and will continue to do so all throughout the novel.

At Lowood school, Jane is aware of how this institution tries to tame and domesticate young girls, and after rejecting Mr. Brocklehurst offer of staying at Lowood as a teacher, she looks for jobs as a governess. When she gets a job as a governess at Thornfield Hall, a whole

new dimension opens: Jane Eyre is not only a rebellious young girl who does not stay silent when encountering injustices, but also an educated woman who gets a job in order to gain a living. The fact that the novel's main character is self-sufficient and does not need a patriarch to pay for her expenses is key: *Jane Eyre* was establishing an example of conduct and opening a window for young Victorian women to wonder what independence would look like.

Jane arrives at Thornfield, in which women live but are also trapped. Bertha Mason was married to Mr. Rochester and has spent years locked in the attic. Aside from the obvious, which would be the fact that Bertha's liberties have been nullified and she has been physically locked in the attic, forced to live without dignity, denied the right to decide about anything and treated like a beast, this paper will be exploring the reasons why Bertha Mason is portrayed as a madwoman and how this is related to Jane. Gilbert and Gubar claim in her essay that "Thornfield's attic soon becomes a complex focal point where Jane's own rationality (what she has learned from Miss Temple) and her irrationality (her "hunger, rebellion and rage") intersect". (p. 348) Therefore, Bertha, as Gilbert and Gubar claim, stands for "Jane's truest and darkest double" (p. 360)

The novel is then using Bertha Mason's character in order to illustrate female Victorian anxieties taken to the limit and creating therefore a woman who is not a woman anymore, forced to live between four walls without being able to communicate her needs, nor fight for another life, nor exercise her intellect and who has lost her identity, her independence, her status, her manners, her voice and even her will to live. What were the reasons for Bertha's madness? What is clear is that she is the reincarnation and the example of the patriarchal discourses imposed on women. Therefore, Bertha's character is one unable to fight the patriarchy due to the damage it has done to her both physically and psychologically. For this reason, it is key to analyse such character in relation to the one who does challenge actively the patriarchal expectations. Gilbert and Gubar write:

"But on a figurative and psychological level it seems suspiciously clear that the specter of Bertha is still another — indeed more threatening — avatar of Jane. What Bertha now *does*, for instance, is what Jane wants to do. Disliking the "vapoury veil" of Jane Rochester, Jane Eyre secretly wants to tear the garments up. Bertha does it for her. Fearing her inexorable "bridal day," Jane would like to

put it off. Bertha does that for her too. Resenting the new mastery Rochester, whom she sees as “*dread* but adored,” (ital. ours), she wishes to be his equal in size and strength, so that she can battle him in the contest of their marriage. Bertha, “a big woman, in stature almost equalling her husband,” has the necessary “virile force” (chap. 26). Bertha, in other words, is Jane’s truest and darkest double: she is the angry aspect of the orphan child, the ferocious secret self Jane has been trying to repress ever since her days at Gateshead.” (p. 359-360)

Therefore, if Bertha is, according to Gilbert and Gubar theory, “Jane’s [...] double” (p. 360), then they could be related also in terms of the doubles of this investigation: anxiety and desire. Then, Jane could be considered to be the desires of Victorian women, someone who did not only not conform to the patriarchal dictates in her upbringing and education, but who also was able to escape from them. Jane could make her own living and earn her own money, she was able to get an education that was useful to her and to get away of Thornfield Hall when the conditions in which she had to stay there were not suitable for her. And moreover, she was rewarded with money and what she wanted in the first place: Mr. Rochester. Nevertheless, Bertha Mason is not able to do so due to several factors that influenced her status and place in society. Whereas Jane Eyre is a white woman, Bertha Mason is creole, and therefore she is not treated in the same terms as her white counterpart. Moreover, she also is doted with “virile force” (*JE*, p. 272) another hint that she is not built as the prototypical weak Victorian woman and therefore, a hint of her fight against such dictations not only verbally but also with physical resistance. Nevertheless, as Gilbert (1998) writes in her essay “Jane Eyre and the Secrets of Furious Lovemaking”,

“even while Bertha enacts Jane’s rebellious rage at servitude, she may also be said to dramatize the sexual “hunger” that all the women in this novel either repress (in the hope of spiritual reward) or pervert (for financial gain) — sexual hunger that (as Showalter also noted in the seventies) some Victorian physicians thought could drive a woman to madness” (p. 360)

Therefore, Bertha’s sexuality or “sexual “hunger”” (Gilbert, p. 360) could be one of the reasons why she is punished and catalogued as a madwoman. In fact, later on in her essay, Gilbert points out more specifically at this relationship between Bertha’s passion and sexuality and her later treatment. Gilbert claims:

“Unlike any of the Englishwomen we encounter in *Jane Eyre*, however, Bertha is the product of a symbolic as well as literal tropic in which desire flourishes, or so Rochester claims. After marriage, he tells Jane, “her vices sprang up so fast and rank... and what giant propensities [she had]!” (333-4). Although his language is guarded (he is after all talking to a supposedly pure English virgin), Victorian readers would certainly have been able to decode what Rochester is saying when he describes such “giant propensities” as causing his wife to be “at once intemperate and unchaste,” noting that her nature was “gross, impure, depraved,” and adding that “her excesses had prematurely developed the germs of insanity” (334). Even if she is not, in his phrase, “a professed harlot” (335), Rochester is explaining to Jane that Bertha’s virtually nymphomaniac abandonment to excesses of desire — to the heat of lust — has “sullied [his] name” and “outraged [his] honor,” while driving *her* to madness (336)” (p. 360).

Following this analysis, then, the reason why Bertha is locked up in the attic is that she did not act accordingly to the submission attributed to her sex, as she was active instead of passive in the sexual field, and instead of being quiet and silent about her desires she felt free to pronounce them openly. She was a double victim of patriarchy: she was not aware of the dangers of not behaving accordingly to what Victorian women should in terms of passion and lust, and for this reason she was also punished, as if she could not be considered to be a woman and was then treated like a beast. Nevertheless, when Jane is aware of Bertha’s situation and life conditions, she does not denounce it as a crime against a woman, but rather she is simply horrified at Rochester’s lie: maybe due to her proper education as an Englishwoman she was aware of the perils of behaving with such lust-driven passion and dared not (or simply could not) argue against such imprisonment, so integrated they were in her thinking. Therefore, the novel could be offering a window of thought for women to interpret what had happened to a woman who acted in such liberal way, but at the same time the novel does not position itself in the discussion of whether such imprisonment was just or unjust. Gilbert and Gubar also point out to this in their essay:

“the relationship between Jane and Bertha is a monitory one: while acting out Jane’s secret fantasies, Bertha does (to say the least) provide the governess with

an example of how not to act, teaching her a lesson more salutary than any Miss Temple ever taught” (p. 361)

The novel also places artistry as one of the main desires that the main character experiences. Even though Victorian women painted usually, Jane’s ability to create art is emphasized in the novel. As Maria Ioannou (2018) points out in her essay: “the portrait forms a declaration that the esoteric elements of a woman’s art are essential elements of her identity. The signature, which is the finishing touch to the portrait, is the start of the chain of events that grant Jane independence and wealth.” (p. 325). Therefore, following Ioannou’s claim, Jane’s art and her assertion of identity will enable her to get access to her inheritance. It could be argued, then, that the novel poses an example of ambition and seeking of such desires, also in the art field.

Jane Eyre also challenges notions of female inequality when it comes to education. To analyse this, it is important to bare in mind Margaret Mills (2018) claim in her article “Female Education as a Theme in the Novels of Charlotte Brontë”:

“The truth of the matter was that men not only had more education than women but that their education was different. Many areas of knowledge were simply inaccessible to the Victorian woman, and this automatically created (and maintained) an imbalance of power which men were able to exploit. Most Victorian women risked male disapproval if they evinced an interest an interest in ‘masculine’ subjects” (p. 75).

Then, education was a tricky theme for Victorian women, because as Mills has pointed out, they not only did not have access at the same level that men which created inequality but also they could be considered “unfeminine” when demonstrating their education. *Jane Eyre* challenges this notion and places education as one of the most important desires that the main character craves to acquire: since the very beginning of the novel Jane seeks to educate herself, and it is precisely this education that allows her to decide and improve her situation. Her education enables her to leave Lowood School and apply as a governess at Thornfield, and also her education allows her to leave Thornfield and become a school teacher when living with the Rivers.

Lastly, the novel offers multiple instances in which it is demonstrated that Jane and Rochester’s relationship is not a prototypical one, as Gilbert and Gubar claim they could be considered to be “spiritual equals” (p. 352), nevertheless, this essay is going to be focusing on their relationship by the end of the novel. Approaching the end of the novel, Jane comes

back to Rochester to discover that he has lost almost all patriarchal force: Thornfield has been burned, he has lost his patrimony and his physical capacities have been greatly reduced. Nevertheless, such lessening to his power opens a possibility, as Gilbert and Gubar claim:

“Apparently mutilated, he is paradoxically stronger than he was when he ruled Thornfield, for now, like Jane, he draws his powers from within himself, rather than from inequality, disguise, deception. [...] And now, being equals, he and Jane can afford to depend upon each other with no fear of one exploiting the other” (p. 369).

Therefore, it could be said that only when he does not make use of his patriarchal capabilities he is able to gain Jane’s affection. This is greatly revolutionary, because, even though the pair end up together, they do so in equality terms, and then, Jane is able to be part of the relationship without betraying the principles that she had defended throughout the whole novel.

Wuthering Heights

Fighting for Freedom

Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) is now considered to be a classic, but due to concepts that the novel narrates and how they are portrayed, it was received as a very inappropriate novel by its contemporaries. To illustrate its receiving, we could use Beverley Southgate's (2019) claim about the novel:

“The novel is every bit as explosive as this dysfunctional household in which the characters break themselves and each other apart. Destructiveness defines its sense of the psychological landscape. Charlotte Brontë was willing to say so; although only *after* Emily had died: ‘over much of “Wuthering Heights” there broods a “horror of great darkness”’, she said.” (p. 364).

Wuthering Heights narrates the story of a woman who does not conform to the norms that the patriarchal society imposed on her, and when she does, ceases to be happy and manifests an emotional and physical decline. The novel is full of characters that illustrate the polarizing forces of the patriarchal society and thinking: women could be either good ladies or fallen women, and *Wuthering Heights* explores the transition phenomena of women who dare to change from one thing to the other. This essay will be exploring the ways in which *Wuthering Heights*'s female characters challenged the expectations that were imposed upon them and how they manifested their desires and anxieties, and at the same time, how this was punished.

If we analyse the novel chronologically, the first event that is narrated is the journey that Mr. Earnshaw takes. He asks his children what they would like to receive after he comes back, and their answers are very interesting to analyse in the light of feminine desire. As Gilbert and Gubar (2020) point out in their essay:

“[Hindley] asks for a fiddle, betraying both a secret, soft-hearted desire for culture and an almost decadent lack of virile purpose. Stranger still is Catherine's wish for a whip. “She could ride any horse in the stable,” says Nelly, but in the fairy-tale context of this narrative that realistic explanation hardly seems to

suffice, for, symbolically, the small Catherine's longing for a whip seems like a powerless younger daughter's yearning for power" (p. 264)

Therefore, since the very beginning of the novel the female main character states her desire for power, as Gilbert and Gubar write above. The fact that Cathy asks for an instrument that serves to dominate and to assert power among other people is born from the knowledge and awareness that, because of her being a woman, she could not have access to authority and could only exert it by means of an instrument, whereas her brother, for instance, does not desire a whip because he is aware that, as the male heir of the family, the power will be given to him naturally. Cathy's awareness of the impossibility she had to be granted power due to her gender was both an anxiety and a desire, something which many Victorian women could have felt related to.

Wuthering Heights presented a main female character who defied all the Victorian expectations imposed on women. When women were supposed to be elegant, silent, well-mannered creatures, Cathy Earnshaw acted wild and had no manners, as she was someone who instead of reading novels in the drawing room or play the piano, run by the moors with the company of her male counterpart, Heathcliff. Therefore, the novel offered an example of a young girl whose freedom depended on the fact that she did not conform to the social norms adjudicated to her gender, but instead, explored the activities that society did not accept for women. Gilbert and Gubar claim:

"Catherine and Heathcliff have been driven in the direction of Thrushcross Grange by their own desire to escape not only the pietistic tortures Joseph inflicts but also, more urgently, just that sexual awareness irritatingly imposed by Hindley's romantic paradise. Neither sexuality nor its consequences can be evaded, however, and the farther the children run the closer they come to the very fate they secretly wish to avoid" (p. 271)

Therefore, even though young Cathy wishes to escape the patriarchal social norms that are trying to constrict them, she ultimately ends meeting these constrictions at Thrushcross Grange. When she is bitten by the dog at Thrushcross Grange, she is forced to stay there in order to recover. Gilbert and Gubar's analysis of the wounding is very interesting to bare in mind: "Obviously such bleeding has sexual connotations, especially when it occurs in a pubescent girl. Crippling injuries to the feet are equally resonant, moreover, almost always

signifying symbolic castration, as in the stories of Oedipus, Achilles and the Fisher King” (p. 272). Therefore, following Gilbert and Gubar’s claim, the wild girl who in her safe, wild space was free of social discourses, is wounded with the patriarchal social norms that before were, if not absent, not so much rooted in her. Moreover, Gilbert and Gubar also defend that she is “castrated” (p. 272) when the dog bites her ankle, which in fact makes perfect sense as Cathy’s wild freedom would be indebted with the Victorian social norms that reign the Grange. Following the idea of castration, Gilbert and Gubar claim:

“And certainly the hypothesis that Catherine Earnshaw has become in some sense a “social castrate,” that she has been “lamed for life,” is borne out by her treatment at Thrushcross Grange — and by the treatment of her alter ego, Heathcliff. For, assuming that she is a “young lady,” the entire Linton household cossets the wounded (but still healthy) girl as if she were truly an invalid. Indeed, feeding her their alien rich food — negus and cakes from their own table — washing her feet, combing her hair, dressing her in “enormous slippers,” and wheeling her about like a doll, they seem to be enacting some sinister ritual of initiation, the sort of ritual that has traditionally weakened mythic heroines like Persephone to Snow White.” (p. 273)

Therefore, as Gilbert and Gubar have claimed, her physical state recovers thanks to the aid and care of the Lintons, but at the same time by treating her like an “invalid” (p. 273) they seem to inflict upon her “the very fate [she] secretly wish to avoid” (p. 271). She starts her metamorphosis from a wild, free and happy creature who was driven by passion and lust into a young, well-mannered lady. Therefore, a conclusion could be drawn from this: Victorian females experienced passion and desire just as Cathy did, and even though she was able at first to express such passion and to manifest her desires at Wuthering Heights, where social norms and constraints seem to be on a second level, when she were introduced to the patriarchal education, and, following Gilbert and Gubar claim of “social castrate” (p. 273), her wild, passionate side was indeed converted in order to become a socially accepted woman.

There have been many theories about Cathy and Heathcliff’s relationship. This essay in particular agrees with Gilbert and Gubar’s claim about the purpose of such union, that consists on the fact that “Heathcliff’s presence gives the girl a fullness of being that goes

beyond power in household politics, because as Catherine's whip he is (and she herself recognizes this) an alternative self or double for her, a complementary addition to her being who fleshes out all her lacks the way a bandage might staunch a wound." (p. 265) Then, thanks to her relationship with Heathcliff, Cathy would be able to get access to the power she desires through the use of the male body that enables such possibility. Therefore, even though it is Cathy who has the ambition and desire to get access to that power, her gender and the patriarchy do not allow her to make use of it. Therefore, her relationship with Heathcliff is not only an affectional one, but also allows her to access power that was not originally granted to her due to her role in society. The novel, then, is creating a character that fights for the resolution of her ambitions and desires, and at the same time, is portraying a social order that made it impossible to access that power while being a female, and the consequences this could have on female subjects. Ultimately, Gilbert and Gubar's claim about Heathcliff being "an alternative self" for Cathy (p. 265) can also be related to the famous claim that the girl confesses to the maid: "Nelly, I *am* Heathcliff — He's always, always in my mind — not as a pleasure, any more than I am always a pleasure to myself —but, as my own being" (*WH*, p. 484).

It could be argued, then, that *Wuthering Heights* offers a compilation of ways in which women are oppressed through the patriarchal system. Cathy is aware, or is made aware, of such gender differences. A good example of this is to be found in Gilbert and Gubar's theory about women's physical conditions:

"Frances peevishness, however, is not just a sign that her ladylike ways are inimical to the prelapsarian world of Catherine's childhood; it is also a sign that, as the twelve-year-old girl must perceive it, to be a lady is to be deceased. [...] As a metaphor, Frances's tuberculosis means that she is in an advanced state of just that *social* "consumption" which will eventually kill Catherine, too, so that the thin and silly bride functions for the younger girl as a sort of premonition or ghost of what she herself will become". (p. 268-269)

This leads to the conclusion that the novel does not only portray women incapable of accessing positions of power, but also states that women, especially those who are classified as ladies and therefore constrained by gender and class discourses, fall into this "*social* "consumption"" (Gilbert & Gubar, p. 269) due to a society that marks and limits what they

can and cannot desire, and how they can and cannot behave. Therefore this could be translated into a “premonition” (Gilbert and Gubar, p. 269) for Cathy, whose ambitions have no place under the patriarchal rules and who is made aware of the impossibility of living according to her desires from a very young age.

Another interesting female character to analyse in the light of female desire is Cathy’s sister-in-law, Isabella Linton. In her case the transition phenomena takes place in a manner opposite to Cathy’s; she goes from being a well-mannered lady into a fallen woman. As Gilbert and Gubar claim:

“Falling from Thrushcross Grange to Wuthering Heights, from “heaven” to “hell,” in exactly the opposite direction from Catherine, Isabella patently chooses her own fate, refusing to listen to Catherine’s warnings against Heathcliff and carefully evading her brother’s vigilance. But then Isabella has from the first functioned as Catherine’s opposite, a model of the stereotypical young lady patriarchal education is designed to produce. (p. 287)

Isabella is then driven by lust when she decides to elope with Heathcliff and does not care about losing her status and economic power for this reason. Nevertheless, and as it is to be expected from the Victorian laws, Isabella was heavily punished for this, because such elopement led to her ceasing to be part of the Linton’s family and at the same time made her be a victim of Heathcliff’s abuse. Therefore, the fact that both sisters-in-law destinies turn out to be miserable seem to be symbolic, and could be summarized into what Gilbert and Gubar claim: “Since even the most cultivated women are powerless, women are evidently at the mercy of all men, Lockwoods and Heathcliff alike” (p. 289)

Therefore, Isabella Linton defiance of patriarchal rules had its consequences on her losing her status and family. Her brother, after discovering of her elopement, says “she had a right to go if she pleased — Trouble me no more about her — Hereafter she is only my sister in name; not because I disown her, but because she has disowned me” (*WH*, p. 523). Nevertheless, she did not submit to the violence that her husband imposed on her and she decided to leave him and escape. Moreover, she decided to name her son Linton, which could be translated into an act of rebellion, as she was aware of Heathcliff’s hate for such name, and at the same time she wanted to state her identity on her creature, making sure that the boy still carried some of her essence in his name.

It is also interesting to take into account the character of Nelly, who as the servant of the family clearly exemplifies the conditions that women from lower classes had to endure. Nevertheless, another approach to this character is possible, as Bette London shows. London (1988) assures that:

“It is because Nelly does dream that she, like Lockwood, wants to stop her ears to Cathy’s lament. And it is because Nelly does love that she wants to cut Cathy’s confession short. Like Heathcliff, who walks out in the middle, Nelly wants to silence Cathy’s narrative, a love story that parallels too closely a story she has been forced to suppress” (p. 43).

Therefore, following what London writes above, it could be said that, even though the narrative does not focus on Nelly Dean’s desire, this female character also has love ambitions and oppressed emotions. Nevertheless, and contrary to the other higher class characters in the novel, she does not feel free to liberate such desire, but on the other hand, she does what is humanly possible in order to forget them, as Victorian patriarchal education dictated. As London also puts perfectly, “the argument I offer about Nelly Dean’s narrative uncovers a classic female story of the repressed [...] It is a narrative that cannot be voiced, or even acknowledged, by virtue of constraints of gender and class” (p. 49).

Finally, it is important to analyse the figure of Catherine Linton in the light of the other female characters. Gilbert and Gubar analyse this character in the following manner:

“Because she is a dutiful daughter, moreover, Catherine II is a cook, nurse, teacher, and housekeeper. In other words, where her mother was a heedless wild child, Catherine II promises to become an ideal Victorian woman, all of whose virtues are in some sense associated with daughterhood, wifhood, motherhood. [...] Thus it is she who finally restores order to both the Heights and the Grange by marrying Hareton Earnshaw, whom she has, significantly, prepared for his new mastery by teaching him to read.” (p. 299 - 300).

Therefore it can be argued that Catherine II, due to her spending all her life being educated by the patriarchal laws has interiorized such discourse. Also, following Gilbert and Gubar’s claim, it is she who “restores [patriarchal] order” (p. 300) and who brings education to Wuthering Heights. Thus, Catherine II could be working as another example that the novel

poses in terms of how patriarchal discourses affected women and specifically female ambitions and desires, because in her particular case, Catherine II figure revolves around the concepts of “daughterhood, wifehood, motherhood” (Gilbert and Gubar, p. 299), which are indeed the main goals a Victorian woman could be expected to perform.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall

Escaping from Abuse

Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) is not as famous as the other novels by the Brontë Sisters. This is not a coincidence: the themes that it tackles were silenced at the time and the author felt the need to write a preface in which she claimed: "I may have gone too far" (*Preface, TWH*, p. 4). Therefore, even before starting the first page the reader is aware that what they are going to read is not something that society accepted at the time. Anne Brontë herself wrote in the preface to the second edition that she "wished to tell the truth, for truth always conveys its own moral to those who are able to receive it" (*Preface, TWH*, p. 3). Therefore, even before discovering the character of Helen Huntingdon, the reader has already found a woman who, like her fictional creation, fights over what has been established in order to do what she believes is best. Brontë continued to write in her preface: "I may have gone too far, in which case I shall be careful not to trouble myself or my readers in the same way again; but when we have to do with vice and vicious characters, I maintain it is better to depict them as they really are than as they would wish to appear" (*Preface, TWH*, p. 4). Therefore, Anne Brontë wrote a very powerful statement in her preface to the second edition, which could be summarized into the notion that the aim of her novel was to denounce an issue instead of writing for the sake of it and to receive praise from it. And indeed, she was very successful in doing so. Not only was the younger of the Brontë Sisters stating her intention with the novel, but also this preface was used to denounce another issue that also concerned her. When addressing the issue of her real identity, Brontë writes:

"As little, I should think, can it matter whether the writer so designated is a man, or a woman as one or two of my critics profess to have discovered. I take the imputation in good part, as a compliment to the just delineation of my female characters; and though I am bound to attribute much of the severity of my censors to this suspicion, I make no effort to refute it, because, in my own mind, I am satisfied that if a book is a good one, it is so whatever the sex of the author may be. All novels are or should be written for both men and women to read, and I am at a loss to conceive how a man should permit himself to write anything that

would be really disgraceful to a woman, or why a woman should be censured for writing anything that would be proper and becoming for a man.” (*Preface, TWH*, p. 4-5)

It is clear, then, that the reader is made aware not only of the nature of the novel, but also of the author, who was brave enough not only to write a novel that challenged the patriarchal laws of the time, but also to respond to her critics and denounce the fact that society made the distinction between men and women writers.

As aforementioned, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* portrayed a reality that society did not accept. Continuing with the issue of the receiving of the novel in its time, Ian Ward (2007) claims:

“Little wonder that so many reviewers were quite so troubled by Anne Brontë’s novel. It displayed, in harrowing detail, the reality of marriage for many Victorian women — and not just any women, but middle-class bourgeois women, the kind of women who could, indeed, be expected to read a Brontë novel. In short, it resonated.” (p. 151)

Therefore, as Ian Ward writes above, Anne Brontë’s novel challenged the patriarchal discourses of the Victorian era and, moreover, by narrating the situation of a middle class woman and how she decided to denounce her unjust situation, she could be used as a model for other women and therefore, as her, rebel against the discourses that tried to silence and oppress them. Therefore, reviewers were “troubled” (Ward, p. 151) by this, as maybe the novel was perceived as a threat to the patriarchal Victorian society and an impulse for women to claim more freedom.

The preface to the novel already gives the reader a hint that what they are going to read is not something banal, but on the contrary, the reader is made aware from the beginning of the controversial nature of what is written inside these pages. As this research aims to study the novel through a feminist perspective, this essay will develop around the female characters and therefore will start with an analysis of Helen’s narration, which can be found later on in the novel.

To start talking about Helen, it must be said that she belongs to a wealthy and accommodated family and, therefore, can enjoy the freedom of not having to marry for money or work in order to sustain herself. Therefore, when the time comes for her to think

about marriage and her aunt proposes man she does not like, she rebels and instead marries Arthur Huntingdon even though her aunt advises her not to. The reason for Helen to marry Arthur could be then passion, and even lust, because, even though she is christian and leads her way of living according to the word of God, she is also passionate and decides to marry the man that she likes best. Nevertheless, she is not granted her aunt's support in such marriage, which can be explained by Reilly Fitzpatrick (2020) approach:

“The many women in Wildfell Hall who experience marital frustration, discontentment, and abuse systematically fail to express the emotions inspired by this treatment. This lack of expression emerges due to a social expectation — both implied and explicit — that women be obedient, submissive, accommodating wives.” (p. 206-207)

Helen is denied the support of her aunt at first, who is afraid of her niece's determination due to Arthur's image, but who do not resist her niece's decision as she would be breaking her role as an “obedient, submissive, accommodating [wife]” (Fitzpatrick, p. 207), as Helen is granted the support of her uncle who looks at the marriage from an economic perspective. From this it could be deduced that, even though her aunt, a woman, tried to warn her about the perils of marrying Arthur, Helen did not listen to her advice and instead followed the patriarch's acceptance.

Later on in the novel, after Helen experiences her marital nightmare of abuse, she discovers that her friend Milicent is going through the same fate. A moment in the novel comes when they decide that they cannot continue to keep on being silent, and they share their misery. As Fitzpatrick claims “The success of these advocative gestures increases in proportion to the women's vulnerability: as they become more open about their individual marital pain — more willing to share it with each other — they become better advocates for each other and for the rising generation of women.” (p. 207)

Although this support between women is very interesting in the light of how it served to diminish their suffering and share their pain, the most important success it had was that of saving other women from making the same steps. As Fitzpatrick writes: “When Milicent and Helen see Esther Hargrave on the same trajectory, they refuse to stay silent or impersonal like Helen's aunt and other women did when they faced their own critical decisions. They instead resolve to use their experiences to save Esther from a similar marital fate.” (p. 211) This is

especially interesting because it shows how, through rebellion of the established patriarchal norms of conduct for women, the two women were capable to “save Esther from a similar marital fate” (Fitzpatrick, p. 211) that they were doomed to due to this “cycle of silence” (Fitzpatrick, 208). This, therefore, could be establishing an example for the target readers of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, and through fiction, Anne Brontë could be advocating what Drew Lamonica Arms (2019) claims: “If, in reading her novel, only one person has been saved from some disastrous life choice, the writing, she declares, was worth any amount of scorn” (p. 36).

Another key aspect to bare in mind when analysing the novel’s depiction of female resistance has to do with the multiple times in which Helen has to face marital abuse. Regarding this topic, Ian Ward claims:

“The fragmentation of the Huntingdon marriage is rapid. The mental and emotional abuse escalates, and soon Helen finds herself trapped in a kind of Gothic horror, a fate that would certainly have been familiar, and not a little thrilling, to many in her creator’s audience. [...] Moral lassitude is pervasive at Grassdale, sexual impropriety forever smirking in the shadows. In time, Helen will be propositioned by Hargrave, one of Arthur’s drinking companions, who takes his host at his word when, in a fit of pique, he offers his wife to any who would care to “have her,” a gesture that adds petty pimping to the litany of domestic abuses that beset the Huntingdons (340, 342-43).” (p. 156)

From this it can be extracted that Helen was not only abused by her husband, but Arthur Huntingdon literally offered her body to his colleagues. This could be translated into one of the peaks of abuse in the novel, as Helen’s body is being traded without her even knowing, which results in a complete lack of agency. Therefore, it is easily seen how Helen Huntingdon was subject to all type of patriarchal constraints, not only when bearing the “mental and emotional abuse” (Ward, p. 156), but also when having to endure the degrading treatment that her husband applies on her.

Nevertheless, Helen finally resolves that her situation is no longer endurable and she decides to disobey all patriarchal chains that forced her to stay with her husband, and decides to leave abuse behind and start again on her own. This is, for sure, the boldest decision she

could make, for by doing so she is rejecting all feminine roles imposed on her. As Sara Martín Alegre (2018) points out in her article,

“Disobeying all legal and social regulations, Helen decides to abandon Arthur, mainly to protect her five-year-old son from his despicable, alcoholic father. [...] This new life, though clandestine and threatened by Huntingdon’s legally sanctioned prerogative to take wife and son back if found, is usually celebrated as proof of Helen’s feminine (perhaps even feminist) agency, as is her judicious management of her second love story with Gilbert” (p. 1)

Therefore, following Sara Martín Alegre’s thinking, by leaving, Helen is making use of her own “feminine [...] agency” (p. 1) and therefore challenging the patriarchy and the established roles of conduct for women, resisting what canons dictated that she should do, which would be to stay home with her husband and endure the abuse she was suffering.

Another very interesting topic to bare in mind when analysing *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is the issue of motherhood. For Helen, motherhood is the most important duty of her life and therefore the way she interacts with her son and the role she plays as a mother is a key aspect to take into consideration when reading the novel in the light of feminine will. Helen is able to make use of her own voice and her own ideals when it comes to raising and educating her son, no matter how many other voices she has to defy: “I will lead him by the hand, Mr Markham, till he has strength to go alone; and I will clear as many stones from his path as I can, and teach him to avoid the *rest*” (*TWH*, p. 25). Therefore, the matter of motherhood is important to consider not only in the light of the desire the main character feels towards this experience but also as a means through which she can manifest her will and challenge the patriarchal education and expectations related to this issue.

Marianne Thormählen (2019) offers a very interesting approach to the issue of motherhood in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* which is relevant to this analysis:

“The education of children is an explicit theme in *The Tenant*, though, and the reader first comes to know the mysterious ‘Mrs Graham’ as a fiercely protective and devoted mother. [...] Whatever physical pain [Arthur] might have been able to inflict on her would hurt her far less than his deliberate attempts to destroy the

child who matters more to her than anything else — he knows that all right” (p.

16)

Then, according to Thormählen’s approach, Huntingdon would be using their mutual son in order to find a means through which to punish his wife, and therefore, he would be making use of his patriarchal force in order to both corrupting his son and Helen’s wish of, as Thormählen also points out, “educating her son ‘for Heaven’.” (p. 16), something that Helen ends up rejecting and overcoming, challenging all established norms.

Finally, it is interesting to change scope and analyse another female character who had not the same “happy ending” as Helen Huntingdon’s. Lady Lowborough is a very interesting character to analyse, because due to her unloyal conduct, it could be said that she is “punished” by the narrative, which gives an account on her life by the end of the novel: “Lady Lowborough eloped with another gallant to the continent, where, having lived awhile in reckless gaiety and dissipation, they quarrelled and parted. She went dashing on for a season, but years came and money went: she sunk, at length, in difficulty and debt, disgrace and misery; and died at last, as I have heard, in penury, neglect, and utter wretchedness.” (*TWH*, p. 357). This could be directly related to Sara Martin Alegre’s claim:

“[The adulteress] must be expelled from society because she exposes the uncontrollable eroticism behind the respectable façade of the married woman, though this expulsion is not without a high cost for patriarchy.” (p. 5).

Therefore, it could be said that Lady Lowborough is the ultimate example of what a 19th century woman should not look like. Then, the narrative from *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* offers this character as another means of challenging the established patriarchal rules of conduct. It could be resolved, then, that the novel does not only offer multiple instances in which the female characters are able to escape abuse, but it also offers female characters who succeed on defying the expectations imposed upon them.

Conclusions

As this work has thoroughly demonstrated, the novels written by the Brontë Sisters challenged the patriarchal expectations of the time on multiple fields and instances and they continue to do so today, as the reader is not left indifferent by the multiple instances in which these novels defy the patriarchal tradition. As a revision of what this work has been dealing with, it could be said that *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* are highly relevant novels in the light of how women were constrained by the patriarchal society in the 19th century and how they were able to resist such oppression and make use of their own voice and will. The three novels that have been explored in this research offer female characters capable of defying the established and accepted rules and could serve as different examples of conduct and inspiration for other women to rebel against the established patterns.

My analysis of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* has proved how the novel offers a main character who is not only brave, strong and independent, but who also challenges what is expected from her due to her gender all throughout the novel. Jane decides to become economically independent in order to free herself and make sure that she does not have to rely on a patriarchal figure in order to survive. Also, Jane feels the calling of education from a very young age which allows her to improve her situation as she is able to apply her knowledge in order to find a job and effect a better judgment of her environment and decisions. It could be said, then, that the novel offers a female protagonist that fights her way to happiness and refuses to be silenced by the patriarchal forces that come in her way.

Through the analysis of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* more instances of female resistance to the patriarchal order can be observed, both through the figure of Cathy, who is continuously manifesting that she rejects the role she is expected to play in society, and Isabella, who decides to experience sexuality even though she is later punished for this. *Wuthering Heights* has been a particularly poignant example in this illustration of female anxiety and desire in the 19th century women in so far as it has offered a wide variety of female characters, and even though some of them effectively demonstrated defiance towards the established tradition (like for instance, Cathy and Isabella), some others could not

overcome the control of the patriarchy, this would be the case of both Cathy Linton and Nelly Dean. Therefore, this novel offers different instances of how women at the time were constrained by what they could and could not do, speak, experience, or feel, and what the consequences would be if they decided to disobey.

Likewise, my reading of Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* demonstrates how the patriarchy influenced women in multiple aspects and how abuse was much more present in the lives of Victorian women than what society would have liked to admit. This work has demonstrated the importance of Helen being able to resist the patriarchal tradition that forced her to stay in an abusive marriage, and has stated how revolutionary it was for a novel to expose a reality that was so silenced. This research has also stated how Helen could help empower women of the time (and also contemporary ones) as she achieves her goals and aspirations even though society dictated a preestablished path for her to follow. This novel also offered other female characters which helped enrich the plurality of female voices and the extent upon which patriarchal discourses were deep inside their thinking, which was extremely useful to analyse in order to discover how the 19th century women were constricted.

To conclude, this research has demonstrated how *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* were educational and they still are today. Therefore, the Brontë Sisters could be related to the following Gilbert and Gubar's claim: "women were not only writing, they were conceiving fictional worlds in which patriarchal images and conventions were severely, radically revised." (p. 44). Especially when it comes to female anxieties and desires, the novels written by the Brontë's allowed (and allow) the reader to empathize with the female characters which suffer the forces and demands of patriarchy, and also offer multiple instances in which these female characters resist the patriarchal rule and succeed on the establishment of a new empowering feminine pattern. This investigation has, therefore, proved correct its thesis statement, which was that these novels written by the Brontë Sisters helped empower women and break up with the established patriarchal thinking.

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