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Always Found Guilty: Perception of Women in Early Victorian England

Pokaždé vinna: Vnímání žen v rané viktoriánské Anglii

Bakalářská práce

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Introduction

Women's rights and their position in society have been a major issue given the patriarchal nature of society, and eventually the women's rights movement and the feminist movement arose to fight for women's rights and equality in an organised manner. Discrimination against women is still an issue in the twenty-first century, though their situation in most first-world countries is infinitely better than what it was two centuries earlier. Despite the progress made, gender inequalities still exist.

In this thesis, I will examine societal norms and expectations of women in the early nineteenth century, focusing on two female literary archetypes, the angel in the house and the fallen woman. Their use will be examined in the novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) by Anne Brontë, which made use of these archetypes. Brontë uses them in order to present the ambivalent position of women, and to criticise societal norms which applied to women in the early nineteenth century. She explores these norms and limitations imposed on women as well as the consequences of not complying with them through the characters of Helen Huntingdon and Annabella Wilmot.

This thesis consists of four chapters. In the first chapter, Anne Brontë's life and work will be briefly introduced, with special attention being paid to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. The second chapter will provide an overview of women's rights, focusing on laws about married women, marriage, divorce, and custody of children in the early nineteenth century, followed by a brief overview of the development of women's rights in the latter part of the century. Chapter three will focus on the image of an angel in the house. Firstly, Coventry Patmore's poem which gave it its name will be discussed, followed by an introduction of the archetype itself and an analysis of its use in the *Tenant*. I will focus mainly on the characters of Helen and Annabella. Chapter four will focus on the fallen woman archetype, first introducing the archetype itself, followed by an analysis of its use in the *Tenant*, once again focusing on the characters of Annabella and Helen, as they represent different approaches to the representation of fallen women.

1. Anne Brontë and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

1.1 Anne Brontë and Her Writing

Anne Brontë (1820-1849), writing under the pseudonym of Acton Bell, was the youngest of the Brontë children. Her interest in writing and storytelling began early, as the children created their own fantasy worlds, Angria and Gondal. Anne was the closest with her sister Emily, who was a major influence on her during their childhood and adolescence.¹ Anne wished to become more knowledgeable and experienced, and she decided to take up a position as a governess. She ended up working as a governess for nearly six years, and her second posting ended because of her brother's (who worked as a tutor for the same family) inappropriate behaviour.²

Her first venture into publishing was successful, as the sisters' collection of poems titled *Poems, by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell* (1846) were received favourably by critics, despite only selling two copies.³ Her experience working as a governess largely inspired her first novel,⁴ *Agnes Grey* (1847). The novel follows a young governess, working for upper-class families, and it addresses the difficult position many governesses found themselves in. Compared with Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Agnes Grey* paints a much more realistic picture of the life of a governess.

1.2 *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

Her second novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, tells the story of Helen Huntingdon. The novel can be split into three parts. The first part is narrated by Gilbert Markham, as a young widow, Mrs Helen Graham, moves into a nearby home, Wildfell Hall. She quickly becomes the talk of the community and rumours about her begin to spread. Markham falls in love with her, but she continually refuses him. When he accuses her of loving Lawrence, who is in her brother living nearby, she gives him her diary.

The second part consists entirely of Helen's diaries, in which she describes her marriage to Arthur Huntingdon. He is selfish and spoiled, but Helen is blinded by her love and marries him, resolving to reform his behaviour. As time goes on, she realizes the impossibility of the task she had set herself as his behaviour continues to worsen, and he has an affair with her friend Annabella, who is married to Lord Lowborough. Huntingdon

¹ See Elizabeth Langland, *Anne Brontë: The Other One (Women Writers)*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1989), 8-9.

² Ibid, 14-18.

³ Ibid, 20.

⁴ Ibid, 97.

refuses to let Helen live apart from him or get a divorce, so she resorts to running away to Wildfell Hall to protect their son Arthur from his father's influence.

The third part begins after Markham has read the diaries. He leaves Helen alone, at her own request, and learns she returned to Grassdale to nurse Huntingdon, who is gravely ill. Huntingdon dies, and Markham leaves in search of Helen. He travels to her aunt's home, Staningley, and nearly gives up, only meeting Helen by chance. The two reconcile and get married. The story is told retrospectively, in the form of an epistolary novel with an inset diary. According to Charlotte Brontë, the character of Arthur Huntingdon was inspired by their brother Branwell,⁵ whom Anne unsuccessfully tried to reform. He was addicted to alcohol and opium, which eventually caused his death.⁶

The Tenant was 'an immediate and sensational success,'⁷ though many readers found it coarse and shocking.⁸ Anne Brontë acknowledges the criticism she has received in the preface to the second edition of the novel, where she defends her decisions. She says: 'I wished to tell the truth, for the truth always conveys its own moral to those who are able to receive it,'⁹ and she acknowledges the case depicted in the *Tenant* is an extreme one, nonetheless she says 'I know that such characters do exist.'¹⁰ She defends herself by saying '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.'¹¹

1.3 The Brontë Sisters

Many critics and readers had issues with the topics which were depicted and discussed in the Brontës' novels, as the sisters were not following the standard novel formula and provided an unconventional perspective on certain topics. All three of their main novels, Charlotte's *Jane Eyre*, Emily's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), and Anne's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, were criticised for a multitude of reasons, such as their depictions of religion, sexual matters and bigamy, as well as the lack of a didactic, moralising message, which was generally expected of literature.¹²

⁵ See Patricia Ingham, *The Brontës*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 24.

⁶ See Langland, *Anne Brontë*, 17-18.

⁷ *Ibid*, 22.

⁸ See Ingham, *The Brontës*, 24.

⁹ Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, (London: Penguin Random House, 2016), 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 4.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 4.

¹² See Ingham, *The Brontës*, 89-91.

2. Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century England

Modern readers may ask themselves why Helen has not gone to the authorities after her husband repeatedly mistreated her and her son, or why she has not tried to obtain a divorce from him. To readers in the twenty-first century, these seem to be obvious and straightforward options for anybody in an unhappy marriage. Unfortunately for Helen, the laws of the early nineteenth century, when *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is set, were quite different in regard to women's rights, and especially married women's rights. In this chapter, I will describe the legal rights and obligations of women in the first half of the nineteenth century, and I will also discuss key pieces of legislation which were passed during the course of the nineteenth century, slowly improving women's position in the eyes of the law. In doing this, I aim to explain why Helen's situation was a difficult one, and why her decision to abandon her husband was her only real option to gain freedom and retain custody of her son. This should also shed some light on why certain characters treated Helen so poorly, as she was not adhering to the social norms or laws of the time, as well as why Helen decided to keep her identity and history secret from everyone for so long.

2.1 The Rights of Single and Married Women

A single woman's rights and obligations were, in most aspects, similar to those of a man. For instance, a single woman had the same rights to property, and she was to pay the same taxes as men. However, she could not vote, if she had a brother their parents' estate went to him, and her employment options were also limited. She could not hold a position in the church or in a government office and while it was not illegal for women to become lawyers or doctors, it was nearly impossible to do so, due to societal pressures and the perception that women should not be working at all, much less in highly stressful and demanding positions. These are the only differences, all other laws treated single women and men as having the same rights and responsibilities. If it was so in practice, is a different question.

A married woman's position in the eyes of the law in the first half of the nineteenth century is perhaps best summarised by Barbara Leigh Smith in her 1854 pamphlet, *A Brief Summary, in Plain Language of the Most Important Laws Concerning Women; Together with a Few Observations Thereon*, by a single sentence: 'A man and wife are one person in law; the wife loses all her rights as a single woman, and her existence is

entirely absorbed in that of her husband.’¹³ A married woman had no rights, her property became her husband’s upon marriage, her earnings were rightfully his, and even her body belonged to her husband. She could not enter into contracts, sue, or be sued. Simply, she did not exist as a separate entity apart from her husband. On the other hand, the husband was responsible for his wife’s debts, even those contracted before marriage, and it was presumed the wife acted under her husband’s command, therefore she could not be punished for theft, burglary, etc. if such acts were committed under his influence.¹⁴ While we may consider Arthur Huntingdon’s decision to destroy Helen’s painting supplies and to take away the money she had earned by selling her paintings despicable, legally it was his right to do so. Neither the money nor the supplies were her property, they were his to do with as he pleased.

There was a legal way to ensure a woman could retain at least some of her rights after marriage, and this method was frequently utilized by upper class parents to protect their daughters and their property from reckless husbands. As mentioned before, under common law the wife could have no property, could not manipulate with her husband’s property, could not enter into contracts, sue or be sued, she could not make a will without her husband’s permission, which could be withdrawn at any time, her income went to her husband, and her husband could not give her any estates. However, under Equity, a woman’s rights were quite different. She could own property and dispose of it or otherwise treat it as she wished, she could sue (even her husband), and be sued, she could keep her income, if the trade was carried on out of her separate estate, and gifts of property between a husband and a wife were upheld.¹⁵ This division existed because there were two sets of courts—Common Law courts, and Chancery or Equity courts—which in many cases made opposing rulings. Because the courts of Equity were expensive, only the rich were able to escape the unfairness of the common law.¹⁶

¹³ Barbara Leigh Smith, *A Brief Summary, in Plain Language of the Most Important Laws Concerning Women; Together with a Few Observations Thereon* (London: Holyoake and Co., 1856), 4.

¹⁴ See Smith, *A Brief Summary*, 4-5.

¹⁵ See “Report of the Personal Laws Committee (of the Law Amendment Society) on the Laws Relating to the Property of Married Women,” reproduced in the *Westminster Review*, New Series, Vol. X (London: John Chapman, 1856), 353-354.

¹⁶ See Joan Perkin, *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England* (London: Routledge, 1989), 15-18.

2.2 Divorce and Custody of Children

In early nineteenth-century England, marriage was considered to be indissoluble, because Church courts could not completely divorce a married couple. They could grant them divorce *a mensa et thoro*, ‘from bed and board,’ that being a legal separation. If the couple wished to be able to remarry in the future, they had to obtain a Private Act of Parliament. This type of divorce was called *a vinculo matrimonii*. The process was very complicated and expensive. First, a divorce *a mensa et thoro* had to be granted, then the husband had to sue the wife’s seducer for damages and win his case. Only after fulfilling those prerequisites could he obtain the divorce via an Act of Parliament from a wife guilty of adultery. If a wife wanted to initiate the divorce, she had to prove not only her husband’s adultery, but also physical cruelty, bigamy, or incest. The cost of this process in 1853 was between £700 and £800,¹⁷ which, when adjusted for inflation, would in 2019 be roughly between £89,000 and £102,000.¹⁸

A divorce through an Act of Parliament was the only way a person would be able to remarry while their first spouse was still alive until 1857, when the Matrimonial Causes Act made divorce more accessible.¹⁹ It would have been nearly impossible for Helen to obtain a divorce. Divorce, especially in the upper classes and within the aristocracy, came with social repercussions and divorced women were frequently excluded from society as they were no longer considered respectable. The aristocracy disapproved of divorce in general, mainly because ‘the material repercussions were very inconvenient.’²⁰ This is the case of Annabella Wilmot, later Lady Lowborough, whose fate will be discussed later in chapter four.

Another issue Helen was facing was the custody of her son. Even if she were able to divorce Arthur, it is highly likely that her son would have stayed with his father. Barbara Leigh Smith notes that the ‘legal custody of children belongs to the father. During the lifetime of a sane father, the mother has no rights over her children, except a limited power over infants, and the father may take them from her and dispose of them as he thinks fit.’²¹ If the husband was particularly vengeful, he could appoint a caretaker for his children and completely exclude the wife from their care and this was perfectly legal. The

¹⁷ See Perkin, *Women and Marriage*, 22-25.

¹⁸ “Inflation Calculator,” Bank of England, Accessed March 24, 2020, <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy/inflation/inflation-calculator>.

¹⁹ See Perkin, *Women and Marriage*, 22-24.

²⁰ Joan Perkin, *Victorian Women*, (London: John Murray, 1993), 123-124.

²¹ Smith, *A Brief Summary*, 5.

wife's 'limited power over infants' references the Custody of Infants Act of 1839, which permitted the mother to petition the courts to have access to her children, and possibly to gain custody of children under seven years of age.²² Unfortunately for Helen, this Act was not in effect at the time she decided to abandon her husband, and he would have most likely been the sole guardian of their son, were they to separate.

2.3 Development of Women's Rights in the Latter Part of the Nineteenth Century

Women's position in society slowly continued to improve over the course of the nineteenth century, and several key pieces of legislation were passed to make this improvement possible. First, the Criminal Procedure Act of 1853 was passed in order to better prevent and punish aggravated assault on women and children.²³ Following the Custody of Infants Act of 1839, which permitted mothers to petition for the custody of their children under the age of seven, the 1873 Custody of Infants Act ruled that custody should be awarded to whoever is best for the child, allowing mothers to petition for custody of children under sixteen.

Arguably, the most important laws were Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1882, which allowed all married women to hold property as if they were a *feme sole* (an unmarried woman), without the need for trustees. Women were able to enter into contracts and sue without their husbands, and their income was truly their own. There were many more rights women gained as a result of these Acts, but in short, they brought the rights upper-class women enjoyed under Equity to all women under English law.²⁴ Other noteworthy acts include the Matrimonial Causes Acts, and the Married Women (Maintenance in Case of Desertion) Act of 1886, which again gave women more rights over their lives and bodies, as well as protecting them from unfair treatment by their husbands.

²² See Perkin, *Women and Marriage*, 27.

²³ See "Criminal Procedure Act 1853," Legislation.gov.uk, Queen's Printer of Acts of Parliament, Accessed March 2, 2020, <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Vict/16-17/30/enacted>.

²⁴ See "Married Women's Property Act 1882," Legislation.gov.uk, Queen's Printer of Acts of Parliament, Accessed March 2, 2020, <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Vict/45-46/75/enacted>.

3. The Angel in the House

The first of the two opposing yet complementary female archetypes which will be discussed in this work is the Angel in the House. The title is derived from Coventry Patmore's semi-autobiographical narrative poem, *The Angel in the House* (1854), though the image of a perfect wife existed even before his poem was published. Anne Brontë makes use of it, creating high standards and expectations for most of her female characters, as well as having characters refer to Helen as an angel, a pure and virtuous being, leading to Helen having impossibly high expectations of herself. Annabella, the second most important female character of the novel, can also be read as fulfilling the image of an angel. Anne Brontë paints the two main female characters, Helen and Annabella, as being in opposition. One a virtuous woman driven to the end of her wits, only defying her husband in order to take good care of her son; the other a mischievous vixen, only interested in herself and her own amusement, willing to walk over people to get her way. In this chapter as well as the following one, I will argue that the two women have more in common and their position is much more ambivalent than what the norms of the time would have preferred.

3.1 The Poem

Coventry Patmore published his long semi-autobiographical narrative poem *The Angel in the House* first in 1854, and he continued expanding it until 1862, publishing the poem in four books. The reception of the poem was not very favourable at the time of publishing, and even today it 'almost never receives a full or attentive reading, and does not reward one; it would long since have sunk into obscurity were it not for the unforeseen appropriation of its title as a repository for the prevailing Victorian conception of womanhood.'²⁵ The impact of the poem is mainly social, it remains in public knowledge today because it gave a name to the image of an ideal woman.

The poem's narrative begins with a preface, where the poet, Felix Vaughan, tells his wife that he will write a poem about her. The poem itself is composed of a series of shorter lyrical poems which mainly depict Felix's thoughts about Honoria, sometimes also called Honor, and about the ideal woman in general. Some of them are also written from Honoria's point of view. In the first two books, the reader can learn more about

²⁵ Natasha Moore, *Victorian Poetry and Modern Life: the Unpoetical Age* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 39.

Felix's youth and how he met Honoria. Their relationship slowly develops over the course of the narrative, and despite the appearance of another suitor, Frederick, Honoria and Felix get married. The third and fourth book are written in the form of an epistolary novel, the poems being presented as letters between individual characters. Frederick, the previously rejected suitor, reveals in these letters that he is unsatisfied with his life as a married man, he is unhappy with his wife, and that he struggles to overcome these feelings. It is revealed that his wife, Jane, is having similar doubts about their relationship. In the end they overcome these issues and following Honoria's and Felix's example they become devoted to one another.

The story of Felix and Honoria's love resembles the relationship between Coventry Patmore and his wife Emily. During her life, Patmore claimed that while Emily was his inspiration for the poem, she was not the heroine. Despite these claims, we can see clear parallels between certain aspects of their relationship and that of the fictional couple. For example, the way Coventry described Felix's proposal as being made at the end of a walk before they reached Honoria's home, is similar to his own proposal to Emily on a walk in the fields of Hampstead near her home, in both the setting and occasion. The similarities continue with their honeymoon. Coventry and Emily visited Hastings, and their time there is described in the poem, how they spent their days talking, and exploring their surroundings, and their evenings pretending to meet each other again for the first time, and how much they enjoyed themselves.²⁶ Ian Anstruther argues that Patmore's choice of an epitaph for his wife, two lines from the poem, prove that she was indeed the Angel of the poem. The epitaph, which in the poem refers to Honoria, is 'Faults had she, child of Adam's stem, / But only Heaven knew of them.'²⁷

A large, albeit heavily censored source of information are Coventry's letters, as printed in Champneys's biography. In these letters, Coventry says to Emily 'In all you do you are like an Angel in Heaven, where, as Dante says, "everything is done zealously and well,"'²⁸ comparing her to an angel, which is a running theme. He also writes 'All that I have written in the "Angel" about love is much below the intensity and delicacy of the plain reality,'²⁹ suggesting his life with Emily was more idyllic and peaceful than what he was able to capture in his poetry, putting his wife on an impossibly high pedestal.

²⁶ See Ian Anstruther, *Coventry Patmore's Angel* (London: Haggerston Press, 1992), 48-50.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 8.

²⁸ Basil Champneys, *Memoirs and Correspondence of Coventry Patmore Vol. I*, (London: George Bell and Sons, 1900), Accessed March 24th, 2020, <https://archive.org/details/memoirscorrespo01cham>, 138.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 140.

Despite the lasting cultural impact the poem had, it was not received very favourably at first. The first part, titled *The Betrothal*, was published in 1854 and the reviews were disastrous, everything from the story to the form was criticised, and some of the most influential journals, such as *The Times* and *Blackwood's*, ignored the publication completely.³⁰ The few positive reviews the poem had received were from Patmore's friends. A comprehensive and fairly positive review in *The Critic*, published anonymously, was written by his friend William Allingham. Emily was aware of this, writing to him to say: 'I have read the remainder of your review in "The Critic" with great pleasure.'³¹ Other reviews, this time private, came from Alfred Tennyson and John Ruskin, both of whom praised the poem. Tennyson even wrote 'I still hold that you have written a poem which has a fair chance of immortality.'³²

Perhaps encouraged by the support of his friends, Coventry continued to work on the second volume of the poem, *The Espousals*, which was published in 1856 and received worse criticism than the first part, resulting in very low sales. His fortunes changed two years later, when the poem became popular in the United States. When writing volumes three and four, *Faithful for Ever* (1860) and *Victories of Love* (1862), Patmore decided to change the form of the poem, now writing the story in the form of letters. Both volumes received terrible reviews.³³ The poem gained a new audience and steadily climbed in popularity during the mid-1860s, in part thanks to John Ruskin quoting part of it in his influential treatise *Of Queen's Gardens* (1864).³⁴ In 1887, the well-respected Cassell publishing house decided to print cheap editions of the greatest works of literature, and *The Angel in the House* was chosen to be a part of this series. The poem's success was spectacular, selling over 40,000 copies in the first two weeks alone and totalled almost one million copies by the time of Coventry's death.³⁵

As mentioned before, the main significance of the poem is in capturing what men of the nineteenth century would consider to be the ideal wife. It is not necessarily a realistic standard for most women, but it is nonetheless a standard which many wives were expected to meet. The following excerpt from the poem, titled *The Wife's Tragedy*,

³⁰ See Anstruther, *Coventry Patmore's Angel*, 76-77.

³¹ Champneys, *Memoirs Vol. I*, 155.

³² *Ibid*, 165.

³³ See Anstruther, *Coventry Patmore's Angel*, 79-82.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 95.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 95-99.

summarises these expectations:

Man must be pleased; but him to please
Is woman's pleasure; down the gulf
Of his condoled necessities
She casts her best, she flings herself.
How often flings for nought! an yokes
Her heart to an icicle or whim,
Whose each impatient word provokes
Another, not from her, but him;
While she, too gentle even to force
His penitence by kind replies,
Waits by, expecting his remorse,
With pardon in her pitying eyes;
And if he once, by shame oppress'd,
A comfortable word confers,
She leans and weeps against his breast,
And seems to think the sin was hers;
And whilst his love has any life,
Or any eye to see her charms,
At any time, she's still his wife,
Dearly devoted to his arms;
She loves with love that cannot tire;
And when, ah woe, she loves alone,
Through passionate duty love flames higher,
As grass grows taller round a stone.³⁶

In the title of the section itself, Patmore acknowledges that the life of an angel, a life spent trying to reach these standards is a tragedy. The wife devotes her life to do anything she can to keep her husband happy, even going so far as to humiliate herself, while he is mostly or completely ignorant of her sacrifices. The duties of a wife laid out here are manifold. Her main duty is to ensure her husband's happiness and satisfaction, and she must achieve this by any means necessary. Self-sacrifice and self-denial are expected, and almost required, but only on the woman's part. She must be gentle, patient, and quiet, she must love her husband unconditionally and devote her life to him.

3.2 The Image of an Angel in the House

While the archetype was named after the mid-nineteenth century poem, and the term only gained popularity in the latter part of the century, the image of an angelic, perfect wife existed even before Patmore's poem, and would have certainly existed without it. It reached the peak of its popularity in the nineteenth century, coinciding with the rise of

³⁶ Coventry Patmore, *The Angel in the House* (London: George Bell & Sons, 1885), Accessed March 25th, 2020, <https://archive.org/details/angelinhouse00patm>, 74.

the suffragette movement and their fight to improve women's legal as well as social position.

The term 'Angel in the House' covers two different notions, which Peterson defines as follows:

In the narrowest sense the angel was the one near to God, the pious one who kept the family on the Christian path. In secular terms the angel provided the home environment that promoted her husband's and children's well-being in the world; she also provided a haven from its worst pressures through her sound household management and sweetness of temperament. The latter meaning suggests the angel's domesticity, unworldliness, asexuality, innocence, even helplessness in matters outside the domestic sphere.³⁷

The archetype of the angel included ideas and expectations from the 'separate spheres' ideology and the 'cult of domesticity.' Peterson mentions the separate spheres ideology, which distinguishes between the female-dominated domestic sphere and the male-dominated public sphere. Women were almost exclusively confined to the domestic sphere, where they were responsible for running the household — directing the servants, overseeing food preparation, raising the children, and ensuring the house and everything else in the home is to the husband's liking, as the state of his home was a reflection of his status in society. This effectively barred women, mainly in the middle and upper class, from being employed and the only respectable job a middle- or upper-class woman could hold was a governess. Connected with the ideology of the separate spheres is the Victorian cult of domesticity, which was a value system in upper- and middle-class homes. According to this value system, women were supposed to uphold four main virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity—which reflected the woman's four roles: mother, daughter, sister, wife. These four roles and virtues were to be the pillars of a woman's personality and her main concerns.³⁸

The exact role of the angel varied based on her socioeconomic background, age, and marital status. In the middle and upper classes, a young, unmarried woman was to be educated in the accomplishments—piano, needlework, some French, drawing, and painting (with watercolours). As a married woman, she was to take care of the household, love and obey her husband, raise their children, and tend to her family's spiritual and

³⁷ Jeanne M. Peterson, "No Angels in the House: The Victorian Myth and the Pauper Women," *The American Historical Review* 89, no. 3 (1984): 677-708, Accessed February 25, 2020, doi:10.2307/1856121, 677.

³⁸ See Lisa A. Keister, Darby E. Southgate, *Inequality: A Contemporary Approach to Race, Class, and Gender*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 228-229.

physical well-being. She was to be passive, not too intellectually oriented, and focus entirely on religion, domestic tasks, and social engagements. Her task was to protect the sanctity of the home.³⁹ From these arose the expectations women placed on themselves, that after marriage they would be able to fix their husbands' bad habits, such as excessive drinking or gambling and lead them back onto a more virtuous path. However, the angel was to be passive, she was not supposed to argue with her husband or tell him what to do, therefore she had to resort to subtle means of manipulation to achieve her goals. These tactics included gentle coaxing and persuasion, making it seem as if it was the man's idea all along, silence, giving the husband the cold shoulder, and the seemingly most powerful tool a woman had were her tears, but only when used in moderation.

In reality, very few women were able to live up to such expectations. For many it was enough if they appeared to be an angel to their friends and family, even if the reality was not as perfect as they would have everyone believe. Some women, such as Millicent in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, made themselves miserable to appease their husbands' every whim and even so their husbands complained, for there was no way to please some of them. If she allowed him to do as he pleased, he would complain of her indifference, that she did not care about him enough. If she attempted to correct his behaviour or entreated him to correct it himself, she would be a controlling and nagging wife who would not let her husband have any fun. The ideal suggests that a woman finds her own happiness in making the people around her happy and comfortable, even if their happiness is at her expense. The reality, however, was often quite different, frequently ending with one or more of the involved parties feeling disappointed.

3.3 Expectations Placed on Women in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

In this section, I will analyse the use of the image of the angel in the house in the *Tenant*, focusing on its general use and why it came about, according to Anne Brontë's portrayal of it in the *Tenant*—what the ideal woman was like, differences in the upbringing of boys and girls, and why men came to have such high expectations of women.

In Victorian England, there were many versions of what an ideal wife should look like and what her behaviour should be. Every man had his ideas of what 'perfect' meant to him. William Acton describes the ideal woman as being 'kind, considerate, self-sacrificing, and sensible, so pure-hearted as to be utterly ignorant of and averse to any

³⁹ See Peterson, "No Angels in the House," 678.

sensual indulgence, but so unselfishly attached to the man she loves, as to be willing to give up her own wishes and feelings for his sake.⁴⁰ Acton's description reflects what the male characters in the *Tenant* describe when talking about how the ideal wife should act. Ralph Hattersley says that when he marries, his future wife must let him do anything he wants to 'without a word of reproach or complaint.'⁴¹ Later on, Huntingdon complains that Helen has a mind of her own and that he would much rather prefer if she was more like her friend Millicent, who 'never gives [her husband] a word of reproach or complaint, [...] she has no will but his, and is always contented and happy as long as he is enjoying himself,'⁴² echoing the same requirements his friend Hattersley mentioned earlier. Helen even acknowledges that her husband's idea of matrimonial duties does not align with hers:

Judging from appearances, his idea of a wife is a thing to love one devotedly and to stay at home – to wait upon her husband, and amuse him and minister to his comfort in every possible way, while he chooses to stay with her; and, when he is absent, to attend to his interests, domestic or otherwise, and patiently wait his return; no matter how he may be occupied in the meantime.⁴³

Women had several options of how to deal with the expectations and duties placed on them by society. Some, like Helen, chose to rise to the occasion and attempted to reform their husbands within the boundaries delineated by their role. Others, represented by Millicent in the *Tenant*, chose to silently accept everything their husbands did even if it was at their expense. The last option shown in the *Tenant* is represented by Annabella, who chose to ignore her role altogether in favour of caring only about herself.

The supposed difference in the nature of men and women was ingrained in society and manifested itself even in their upbringing. A debate about this topic happens early on in the novel during Helen's first visit to Linden-Car, the home of the Markham family. Mrs. Markham decides to criticise Helen for being overprotective of her son, who is five years old at the time, and raising him to be weak and spoiled. Helen disagrees with this assessment, and the conversation leads into a discussion about vice, virtue, and the upbringing of children. This discussion focuses mostly on boys, and most of the people involved argue that boys should not be coddled or shielded, that they should be exposed

⁴⁰ William Acton, "The Perfect Ideal of an English Wife," in *Strong-Minded Women: and Other Lost Voices from Nineteenth-Century England*, ed. Janet Horowitz Murray (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), Accessed April 7th, 2020, <https://archive.org/details/strongmindedwome00murr/>, 129.

⁴¹ Brontë, *Tenant*, 221.

⁴² *Ibid*, 258.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 244.

to temptation to build their character and learn. This leads to Helen pointing out the double standards that exist—boys should learn from experience, whereas girls should be protected and coddled. This implies they are less virtuous; they could not resist temptation if they were presented with any, which stands directly against the idea of women being the defenders of virtue and faith in the home. Helen summarizes her view of the issue by saying ‘[y]ou would have us encourage our sons to prove all things by their own experience, while our daughters must not even profit by the experience of others.’⁴⁴ Anne Brontë uses this discussion as a way to point out the double standards in children’s upbringing and the issues with this approach, especially considering what was expected of women after marriage.

Another reason for these high expectations is that men were rarely aware of women’s sacrifices. Brontë uses a male character, Gilbert Markham, to voice these concerns and in doing so give them more credibility. At first, he acknowledges that he is spoiled by his mother, sister, and other women in his life. Later on, he arrives home late for tea, which his mother readily excuses. He only needs to mention that it is not to his liking, which is his own fault as he was late, and the tea is remade. His sister Rose complains and explains to him that if it were her coming late for tea, she would have to do with whatever was presented to her. She goes on and lists other such double standards she has encountered. When food is made, the best pieces must be saved for the men in the family, the food must be made to their liking, and the home kept neat and tidy for them. This double standard is then summarised by her thusly: ‘I’m told I ought not to think of myself – “You know Rose, in all household matters, we have only two things to consider, first, what’s proper to be done, and secondly, what’s most agreeable to the gentlemen of the house – anything will do for the ladies.”’⁴⁵ Gilbert tries to argue on his sister’s behalf, saying that he would become selfish and uncaring if he was always treated this way without knowing how much his mother and sister have sacrificed. His mother, however, argues that it is his business to please himself, and a woman’s business is to please him.

Due to men being frequently unaware of women’s sacrifices, they did not value them, or they considered them to be perfectly normal and even expected them. Anne Brontë highlights this type of behaviour on Millicent and her husband Hattersley. To Hattersley and his friends, Millicent seems content in her marriage, and she appears to be

⁴⁴ Ibid, 34.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 57.

the perfect wife—quiet, caring, and unobtrusive, letting her husband do whatever he wishes. Privately, Millicent mentions some of her worries to Helen, and she is clearly not as happy as people think she is. Hattersley even admits that he thinks he sometimes oversteps in the way he treats her, saying ‘I positively think I ill-use her sometimes,’⁴⁶ but he tries to excuse this behaviour, blaming it on being under the influence of alcohol and on Millicent herself. Later on, a similar conversation happens again, and this time Hattersley takes Helen’s advice to heart and changes his behaviour for the better. Brontë likely uses this couple to show that men’s behaviour can indeed change for the better through a woman’s influence. This way she subtly showed that Huntingdon’s lack of change was not for lack of trying on Helen’s part, but rather it was due to his resistance.

3.4 Helen Huntingdon as an Angel in the House

From the beginning of her story, Helen is set up to see herself as an angel, to believe that it is her role. Many characters call her an angel, saying she is superhumanly pure and angelic, and even divine. Her second suitor, Gilbert Markham, describes her as such: ‘Was I not certain that she, in intellect, in purity and elevation of soul, was immeasurably superior to any of her detractors; that she was, in fact, the noblest, the most adorable, of her sex I had ever beheld, or even imagined to exist?’⁴⁷ She was raised to fulfil the role of an angel in her marriage and she believes herself to be intelligent, patient, and good enough to rise to the occasion. She thinks she can correct her husband’s behaviour and influence him enough to change his ways. This is part of the angel’s role.

After meeting Huntingdon, as she is getting to know him more, she slowly starts noticing some of his undesirable personality traits and behaviours, such as his selfishness, quick temper, and cruelty towards her and others. Instead of heeding her aunt’s warnings about his character, she decides to look at these flaws as challenges to be overcome. She argues on his behalf that his behaviour can be corrected ‘if he had someone to advise him, and remind him of what is right,’⁴⁸ that as a married man he would have less time to consort with his friends whom she considers a bad influence. The worse he is, the more she wishes to be able to reform him. Huntingdon even supports this idea, as Helen reports his words to her aunt, saying: ‘if he had me always by his side he should never do or say

⁴⁶ Ibid, 288.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 83.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 148.

a wicked thing.’⁴⁹ Helen’s conviction runs deep, she says that she would be willing to sacrifice her own happiness if it meant making him happy.

They get married, and as time goes on, Helen realizes that reforming someone’s behaviour is not an easy task. At first, she claims to be happy to serve him in any way he wishes, but she is starting to notice his flaws more and more, and he is not open to her suggestions of changing his behaviour, as he starts being cruel and neglectful. She notes that ‘Arthur is selfish, [...] he likes to be pleased, and it is my delight to please him, – and when I regret this tendency of his, it is for his own sake, not for mine,’⁵⁰ and this is merely four months after they were married. His character flaws—selfishness, gambling, and intemperance—which he claimed would be fixed by her angelic presence, turn out to be his favourite pastimes and behaviours that he does not wish to give up. At this point Helen acknowledges multiple times that she has chosen this life for herself willingly, that she has ‘no right to complain’⁵¹ and that she does not regret her decision. Helen believes she has seen the worst of his behaviour, that if he changes it must be for the better, and she is ‘determined to bear [his behaviour] without a murmur.’⁵² Unfortunately for her, his behaviour worsens further, as he tries to turn their son against her and he even reads her diary and destroys her paintings and painting supplies. She decides to leave him, thus becoming a fallen woman who disregards societal rules as well as the laws, which will be discussed later in chapter four.

Despite vowing to never return to her husband, Helen willingly comes back to Grassdale to nurse him after a particularly nasty accident. The job of taking care of patients and administering medicine typically fell to the women in the family.⁵³ Her decision to do this is the beginning of her rise and by the end she is once again considered an angel in the house. In her book on the management of one’s household, Isabella Beeton notes that most women should be prepared to act as a nurse at some point in their lives and she gives some advice to those who will find themselves in such a situation. Beeton describes the duties and requirements of someone taking on the role of a sick nurse. The person should have compassion and sympathy for their patient and their suffering, they should have good temper and quiet manners, be neat-handed and observe order and

⁴⁹ Ibid, 149.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 203.

⁵¹ Ibid, 209.

⁵² Ibid, 246.

⁵³ See Janet Horowitz Murray, *Strong-Minded Women: and Other Lost Voices from Nineteenth-Century England*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), Accessed April 7th, 2020, <https://archive.org/details/strongmindedwome00murr/>, 80.

cleanliness in their work. Moreover, the sick-room should be quiet, there should be no talking or whispering around the patient, and the nurse should try to not disturb her patient.⁵⁴ The position of a nurse fits with the role of the Angel, as this is where all of her best qualities, such as gentleness, patience, and a nurturing nature, could manifest.

Helen, for the most part, fits with this description of a good nurse. She returns to him willingly, after hearing his friends had abandoned him and she dotes on Huntingdon, listening to his every word and fulfilling nearly all of his whims. As he is starting to recover, her doubts creep back in and she is struggling to maintain her conviction as she writes in her diary: ‘I am exerting my utmost endeavours to promote the recovery and reformation of my husband, and if I succeed what shall I do? My duty, of course, – but how?’⁵⁵ Her resolution stays strong, and she even exclaims that she would give her life to save Huntingdon if it was a possibility. He does not believe she has returned to him out of a sense of duty, and he accuses Helen of only helping him to make herself look better in the eyes of God. He continues to say that she will surely abandon him as soon as she has secured her place in Heaven, and then she will not even lift a finger to help ease his suffering. She, of course, defends herself from these accusations. Huntingdon’s health takes a turn for the worse because he disregards his doctor’s advice. He starts abusing Helen’s devotion, as she spends nearly all her time in his sick-room and he demands her attention and care more and more frequently, to the point she can barely get any sleep or go outside to get some fresh air.

She is also forced to give up raising and educating her son Arthur for the time being and leave him with her friend Millicent, as she is not able to take care of him properly and at the same time be at Huntingdon’s disposal at all hours of the day. All of these sacrifices are in line with what was expected of a wife. When it becomes clear Huntingdon’s life is nearing its end, he becomes desperate and keeps asking Helen to stay with him and to save him. She writes in her diary that he ‘clings to me with unrelenting pertinacity – with a kind of childish desperation, as if *I* could save him from the fate he dreads.’⁵⁶ Nothing Helen could do would save him, but this change in his behaviour shows that he did indeed believe she was capable of saving him from damnation and he dies holding her hand.

⁵⁴ See Isabella Beeton, *The Book of Household Management*, (London: S.O. Beeton, 1861), Accessed April 7th, 2020, https://archive.org/details/b21527799_1017-1020.

⁵⁵ Brontë, *Tenant*, 430.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 445.

Overall, Helen Huntingdon is a typical representative of the angel in the house for most of the novel. She attempts to reform her husband's behaviour, as was expected of her. Unfortunately, she is met with resistance from his side, which makes this task impossible. Her conviction and devotion to him waver, but her sense of duty prevails once again when she hears about his injury and subsequent illness. She returns to nurse him, and this act of selflessness solidifies her return to the status of an angel.

3.5 Annabella Wilmot as an Angel in the House

The character of Annabella Wilmot, later Lady Lowborough, may not seem to fit the image of the angel in the house at first glance, but in this section I will argue that she fulfils many of the characteristics that were described earlier in this chapter.

Lord Lowborough, who ends up marrying Annabella, describes his requirements and hopes for a wife as this: 'if I could get a wife, with fortune enough to pay off my debts and set me straight in the world – [...] [a]nd sweetness and goodness enough [...] to make home tolerable, and to reconcile me to myself.'⁵⁷ His description of the right wife for him matches the characteristics of the angel—she must be kind and sweet, manage the home to her husband's liking, and reform his behaviour. With these characteristics in mind, he chooses Annabella. Upon realising he stands a chance to win her favour, he starts pursuing her and she accepts his advances. Eventually, he falls in love and describes her as being 'the most generous, high-minded being that can be conceived of'⁵⁸ and he already idolizes her, saying that she will 'save [his] body and soul from destruction.'⁵⁹

Later on, when they have been married for roughly eight months, they come to visit Helen and her husband at Grassdale. Helen remarks that she noticed a difference in Lord Lowborough's countenance. She writes in her diary, saying 'I will do the lady the credit to say that her husband is quite an altered man: his looks, his spirits, and his temper are all perceptibly changed for the better since I last saw him.'⁶⁰ In a few months of matrimony, Annabella has managed to reform her husband's behaviour, and he is looking much happier than before, this being the main duty of the angel. A similar situation occurs two years later. As Helen struggles to rectify Huntingdon's behaviour, Annabella, his lover, sweeps in and only needs to mention that she does not like some of his habits to

⁵⁷ Ibid, 195.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 197.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 197.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 228.

make Huntingdon change them, at least for the duration of Annabella's presence.

Annabella even mentions this to Helen, saying:

You saw with regret the sad habits he was contracting, I know; and I know you did your utmost to deliver him from them, – but without success, until I came to your assistance. I told him, in few words, that I could not bear to see him degrade himself so, and that I should cease to – no matter what I told him, – but you see the reformation I have wrought; and you ought to thank me for it. [...] But I desire no thanks.⁶¹

In a way, Annabella has achieved more with regard to reforming men than Helen, and yet she is, for the most part, portrayed as her opposite. She does not perfectly fit the image of an angel, but she has and displays some of the main characteristics which were expected. Ironically, in some respects she was more successful as an angel than Helen, despite being portrayed as a fallen woman for most of the novel, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

⁶¹ Ibid, 317.

4. The Fallen Woman

The fallen woman is the second archetype which Anne Brontë uses in the *Tenant*. It was originally used to describe a woman who had lost her innocence and thus fallen from the grace of God. The typical meaning is the sexual fall, when a woman takes part in any sexual activity out of wedlock, whether she benefits from it or not.⁶² As with any archetype, it exists on a spectrum of severity, depending on how the author or artist chose to treat the subject. Cases which were treated with more leniency existed and were written about, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

4.1 The Fallen Woman Archetype

The archetype of a fallen woman was most frequently used when referring to prostitutes. In the nineteenth century the word ‘prostitute’ was used more widely, referring not only to women selling their bodies for money, but also to women living with men outside of marriage, women with illegitimate children, or women who had any sort of sexual relations with men outside of marriage, for profit or for pleasure.⁶³ While in real life the line between a respectable and a fallen woman was often unclear, in art it was usually clearly demarcated and thus prostitutes were considered fallen women by default. In this chapter, I will be focusing on fallen women in literature.

The usual fate of a fallen woman in literature was thus: first came the inevitable discovery of behaviour society considered unacceptable—such as having an extramarital affair, being selfish, demanding, demeaning, greedy, or displaying lust of any kind—which was the start of her fall, followed by various social repercussions. A divorce or life apart from her husband and children if she was married, expulsion from society and even from her family.⁶⁴ Family, as we have seen before, was the domain of the angel and thus no place for a fallen woman who was outside of society, alone.⁶⁵ The continuing downward trajectory of her fall ends, according to Victorian conventions, with the woman dying destitute and alone, with no hope of redemption to serve as a warning to any who may contemplate following in her footsteps.⁶⁶ Sally Mitchell points out that Thomas

⁶² See Linda Nochlin, “Lost and Found: Once More the Fallen Woman,” *The Art Bulletin* 60, no. 1 (1978): 139–53, Accessed March 17, 2020, doi.org/10.2307/3049751, 139.

⁶³ See Judith Flanders, “Prostitution,” The British Library, The British Library, February 13, 2014, <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/prostitution>.

⁶⁴ See Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 150-161.

⁶⁵ See Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon*, 155.

⁶⁶ See Nina Auerbach, “The Rise of the Fallen Woman,” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 35, no. 1 (June 1980): 29–52, Accessed April 15th, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1525/ncl.1980.35.1.99p01382>, 35.

Hardy's Poem "The Ruined Maid" presents the archetypal narrative of a lower-class fallen woman:

The "lost and ruined maid" lived and died in a "humble cot." Her dying prayer was for the man who ruined her. Her father has gone insane, her mother is "hastening to decay," but the man who ruined her "gaily sings" round the "festive board/Where wealth and wine and wit is found." These are the essential features. [...] The rich man got off scot-free; the poor girl who foolishly listened to his flattery suffered.⁶⁷

The second case, which began appearing more frequently throughout the nineteenth century was one where a woman's fall was presented with sympathy. In this case she was shown the understanding that her fall might not always be the result of personal greed, which was suggested as the most common reason for women turning to prostitution. Sometimes it was a necessary decision, a sacrifice she was forced to make due to her circumstances, financial, social or otherwise.⁶⁸ In his essay, William Rathbone Greg notes that 'we believe, upon our honour, that nine out of ten originally modest women who fall from virtue, fall from motives or feelings in which sensuality and self have no share; nay, under circumstances in which selfishness, had they not been of too generous a nature to listen to its dictates, would have saved them.'⁶⁹ If this was indeed the case, there was an option for her to repent her sins and redeem herself. Family frequently played an important role in rehabilitating a fallen woman into society, a way to once again show how integral it was to a woman's respectability and position in society. Family was implied to be the only respectable and honourable position for a woman, her given role as a daughter, wife, and mother was always tied to family. This more sympathetic portrayal still ensured women were in some way punished for their disregard for societal rules. The harshness of the punishment and whether it was temporary or permanent was at the author's discretion, but rarely did the punishment fit the crime.⁷⁰ Typically most or all of the blame was placed on the woman, and rarely any on the man, though the crimes which made a woman fall typically required two parties to be involved, once again showing the double standards between the two genders.

⁶⁷ Sally Mitchell, *The Fallen Angel: Chastity, Class, and Women's Reading, 1835-1880*, (Bowling Green, OH, Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1981), 8.

⁶⁸ See Auerbach, "The Rise of the Fallen Woman," 31.

⁶⁹ William Rathbone Greg, "Why Women Fall," in *Strong-Minded Women: and Other Lost Voices from Nineteenth-Century England*, ed. Janet Horowitz Murray (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), Accessed April 7th, 2020, <https://archive.org/details/strongmindedwome00murr>, 411.

⁷⁰ See Noehlin, "Lost and Found," 140-143.

It is believed that the archetype can be traced back to the Bible, with Eve who was seduced by the Devil himself being the first woman to undergo this fall and thus setting a precedent for future generations of women. It sets the precedent that a woman was to remain innocent, an experienced woman was not desirable. This also showcases the double standard of expected and permitted behaviour of men and women which existed throughout history. In the nineteenth century specifically, men in the middle- and upper-class were expected and permitted to have extramarital affairs. Respectable men tried to keep their affairs quiet, and their wives were expected to tolerate them.⁷¹ Due to this, many people accepted prostitution ‘as an inevitable feature of society, needed to satisfy men’s desire for sexual activity outside marriage,’⁷² but they stressed that they were a separate, inferior class of women with no hopes of ever rejoining society. However, a woman could not have an affair because it was seen as infringement on the rights of the husband, as his wife was considered his property. This dynamic can be seen in the *Tenant*, when Helen notices Huntingdon and Annabella, Lady Lowborough, flirting. Arthur proceeds to laugh at the incident and at Helen’s seriousness, stating that it meant nothing, he was drunk and not himself, and even muttering to himself that no harm would have happened had she not noticed. Clearly, her feelings on the situation do not matter to him. When Helen decides to ask him what he would have done if he were in the position of Lord Lowborough, or if any of Arthur’s friends behaved the same way towards Helen. He replies: ‘I would blow his brains out.’⁷³ Effectively, he thinks that he can do as he pleases, but no other man can encroach on his property, that is make advances to his wife without suffering his wrath.

In the *Tenant*, Anne Brontë uses both of the aforementioned versions. The first version, the more traditional representation of a fallen woman, is presented on the character of Annabella Wilmot. The second, milder version, where a fallen woman can redeem herself is shown on the character of Helen Huntingdon.

4.2 Annabella Wilmot as a Fallen Woman

Annabella Wilmot, later Lady Lowborough, is portrayed as the typical representation of a fallen women, as she fulfils, or at least appears to fulfil, all of the main characteristics of the archetype as they were described in the previous section. Annabella's last name,

⁷¹ See Sally Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2009), 268.

⁷² Murray, *Strong-Minded Women*, 388.

⁷³ Brontë, *Tenant*, 234-235.

Wilmot, is an allusion to John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, a Restoration libertine and poet known for his satirical and erotic work. In the early nineteenth century, his work was ignored or heavily censored,⁷⁴ his career and poetry being condemned outright on moral grounds.⁷⁵ The allusion's purpose was to indirectly evoke a woman's sexuality, which further contributed to the archetype of the fallen woman.

Her first offence is marrying for money and status rather than for love and openly talking about it. While this was not an uncommon occurrence, it was generally not spoken about, especially not as brazenly as Annabella and people who are privy to her situation talk about it. Huntingdon talks about her, saying: 'the artful minx loves nothing about him, but his title and pedigree.'⁷⁶ Even before marrying Lord Lowborough, Annabella herself says: 'as for [Lord Lowborough], I thoroughly despise him; but then, I suppose, it is time to be making my choice.'⁷⁷ This is in stark contrast to Lord Lowborough's perception of their developing relationship, as he is in love with her and is already planning their future at this point. Neither should one so openly wish for the death of their spouse, and yet Annabella mentions that she cannot wait for her husband to die, saying: 'I should not mind if his Lordship were to see fit to intoxicate himself every day: I should only the sooner be rid of him.'⁷⁸ It seems ironic that she wishes he would return to his old habits of drinking and gambling, because he credits her with reforming him and ensuring he does not engage in those activities again. In fact, he changed his behaviour on his own, before marrying her.

Annabella frequently uses her body and flirts with men to get her own way, which was characteristic of fallen women. Just after Lord Lowborough proposes to her, Helen finds her 'standing before my toilet-table, composedly surveying her features in the glass, with one hand flirting her gold-mounted whip,'⁷⁹ and this image of her firmly shows her as being the one in control of the situation, smug and satisfied with what she has achieved so far. Even when she reforms Huntingdon for a time, she does it by threatening to withhold something, likely her affection, from him.

She has very little respect for her husband, as she carries on with her affair with Huntingdon even after her marriage. Helen even notices them flirting during Annabella's

⁷⁴ See James William Johnson, *A Profane Wit: The Life of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester*, (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2004), 3.

⁷⁵ See David Farley-Hills, ed., *Earl of Rochester: The Critical Heritage*. (Routledge, 2014), 9-12.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 197.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 197.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 271.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 199.

first visit to Grassdale. She writes in her diary about ‘seeing her seated there, listening with what seemed an exultant smile on her flushed face, his soft murmurings, with her hand quietly surrendered to his clasp’⁸⁰ and later Huntingdon ‘ardently pressed [her] unresisting hand to his lips.’⁸¹ This offense is made even worse by the fact that Annabella is breaking the laws of hospitality by carrying on with their affair while she is a guest in Helen’s home. She even convinces Huntingdon’s friends to occupy Helen and Lord Lowborough so she can meet with Huntingdon in private. Helen notes she tells Annabella ‘if I found reason to believe that she will continue her criminal connection with Mr. Huntingdon, I should think it my absolute duty to inform her husband of the circumstance.’⁸² Despite all the warnings, Annabella’s affair with Huntingdon lasts for several years, and it is implied the younger of her two children is actually Huntingdon’s. Lord Lowborough eventually finds out about her infidelity, and he is devastated, exclaiming ‘she has duped me all this time’⁸³ and Helen agrees with him, saying ‘[s]he is a wicked woman, [...] she has basely deceived and betrayed you.’⁸⁴

Most of what is said about their further proceedings in life comes from hearsay or from second-hand accounts. Shortly after Annabella and her husband leave Grassdale, after the discovery of her infidelity, it is reported that ‘they keep entirely separate establishments; that she leads a gay, dashing life in town and country, while he lives in strict seclusion at his old castle in the north.’⁸⁵ Lord Lowborough retains custody of both children, as was the father’s right by law. Annabella does not seem too bothered by this, in fact, Helen remarks that it seemed she never loved her children, and that she may even be relieved to no longer have the responsibility of raising them. This contrasts with the angel in the house, where most of Helen’s decisions were informed by what was best for her son, including the one that led to her fall from grace.

Lord Lowborough ends up divorcing Annabella and remarrying, this time his marriage seems to be much happier. The last thing we hear of Annabella is this:

Sometime before Mr Huntingdon’s death, 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

⁸⁰ Ibid, 232.

⁸¹ Ibid, 232.

⁸² Ibid, 339.

⁸³ Ibid, 341.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 341.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 348.

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. But this might be only a report: she might be living yet for anything I, or any of her relatives or former acquaintances, can tell; for they have all lost sight of her long years ago, and would thoroughly forget her if they could.⁸⁶

It must be noted that none of these reports are confirmed, they are simply rumours, which conveniently fit with the Victorian tradition of a fallen woman's fall into poverty and obscurity, followed by her death.

Annabella's character arc closely follows the typical case of a fallen woman. She begins by having an extramarital affair, which is inevitably discovered and leads to her divorce and subsequent exclusion from London society, leading her to leave for continental Europe, where she supposedly falls into poverty and dies. Brontë may have intended for her to be a counterbalance to the angelic Helen, but to some Annabella's life may seem much more fulfilling than Helen's. In the following chapter, it will be discussed how Helen can also be read as a fallen woman, albeit her case is milder, and she is able to return to the status of an angel in the end.

4.3 Helen Huntingdon as a Fallen Woman

Helen Huntingdon is the second female character which represents a fallen woman. During the course of the novel, we can see her character arc change quite dramatically. She starts out as an angel, and her angelic status is slowly broken down by Huntingdon's behaviour and her reactions to it. Eventually, she becomes a fallen woman, running away from her husband and breaking several laws in the process, but in the end, she is able to redeem herself and rise once more to being an angel. In this section, her fall from grace as well as her time as a fallen woman will be discussed. While she is a fallen woman, her case is less severe than Annabella's, which was not commonly depicted in literature, though many such cases could be found in reality.

The reader's first introduction to Helen is as Mrs Graham, a young widow who has moved into the neighbourhood. She is introduced via gossip and is not painted in the most favourable light. Immediately, she is judged for being a woman living on her own. This way, Anne Brontë exposes the prejudice against women who were not living under formal or informal protection of a male relative, even though there was nothing illegal

⁸⁶ Ibid, 456.

about it. Her faults do not end there. Supposedly, she was not welcoming or civil to her visitors, and she seems to be ignorant of ‘household matters, and all the little niceties of cookery, and such things, that every lady ought to be familiar with.’⁸⁷ They even expect her to not have the civility to return their visit. Over time, more rumours about Helen spread throughout the neighbourhood, and other characters continue to remark about her lack of respectability, and some even refuse to be associated with her.

Only later on is the origin of her fall explained, once we can read her diary. We can see Helen’s struggle and hear her doubts about her marriage, which start to creep in quite early on. Mere eight weeks after her marriage Helen remarks that if she had known Huntingdon as well as she knows him now, she would not have loved him, nor would she have married him. Four months into the marriage, after their first quarrel, she writes in her diary saying: ‘for the first time in my life, and I hope the last, I wished I had not married him.’⁸⁸ Stevie Davies calls her act of locking her door against her husband and thus denying him access to her person, which he was entitled to by law, ‘a memorable act of feminist defiance.’⁸⁹ This downward trend continues, with Helen realising that marriage is nothing like she imagined it, but for now she is determined to bear it, saying ‘my bliss is sobered, but not destroyed; my hopes diminished, but not departed; my fears increased but not yet thoroughly confirmed.’⁹⁰ Her conviction continues to waver, and after some time she acknowledges that her idea of reforming Huntingdon was foolish, and that instead of changing him for better, she has actually changed for the worse. She exclaims ‘I am no angel,’⁹¹ casting away the label and all the expectations that come with it.

Her downfall continues, as her feelings for Huntingdon deteriorate further, especially after she learns of his affair with Annabella. She struggles with her feelings, saying ‘no true Christian could cherish such bitter feelings as I do against him and her’⁹² and she considers herself a prisoner in her current life. She tries asking her husband if he would let her leave with her child and the remains of her money, which he refuses. She then asks if she could have their son and leave him all her property, to which he responds

⁸⁷ Ibid, 15.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 210.

⁸⁹ Stevie Davies, introduction to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, by Anne Brontë (London: Penguin Radom House, 2016), xxiv.

⁹⁰ Brontë, *Tenant*, 239.

⁹¹ Ibid, 267.

⁹² Ibid, 313.

‘no – nor yourself without the child.’⁹³ As much as we may consider this behaviour cruel, it was his legal right, his wife and child were his property and he was the one to decide their fate. Helen starts planning her escape, which is discovered by Huntingdon who stops her. She plans it again, with the help of her brother, who very reluctantly agrees, though he attempted to suggest every form of reconciliation. Nevertheless, she ends up deserting her husband.

She justifies her decision by stating she is not running away from her husband to protect herself; she is aware of her mistake and she knows she must bear its consequences, but she still insists that ‘it is not I that am guilty.’⁹⁴ She is doing this ‘in duty to [her] son, [she] must submit no longer; it was absolutely necessary that he should be delivered from his father’s corrupting influence.’⁹⁵ This is in line with W. R. Greg’s thinking that most women fall because of selflessness rather than selfishness,⁹⁶ and it means she will have the option to redeem herself in the future. Helen eventually redeems herself by returning to nurse Huntingdon when he is ill and she returns, once again, to the status of an angel.

Not only is Helen not complying with societal norms, she is breaking laws by deserting her husband and taking away their son, as the custody of children always belonged to the father, and the mother had no power over them beyond infancy.⁹⁷ The income she earns by selling her paintings, which she treats as her own, saying ‘I shall have so much more pleasure in my labour, my earnings, my frugal fare, and household economy, when I know that I am paying my way honestly, and that what little I possess is legitimately all my own,’⁹⁸ is not actually hers, it legally belongs to her husband and she is technically stealing from him. She is even aware of all her wrongdoings, and she is determined to bear the consequences, whatever they may be. At the end of Huntingdon’s life, when he wishes to see their son, she forces him to sign away his right to the custody of young Arthur before she brings him to see his father. She thinks she has won and finally gained custody of her son, but in fact such a contract would not have been legally binding, as the husband had the right to revoke it at will.⁹⁹

While Helen may not be a typical representative of the fallen woman archetype, it is clear that she fulfils some of the characteristics of a fallen woman. Though she

⁹³ Ibid, 306.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 307.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 386.

⁹⁶ See Greg, “Why Women Fall,” 411.

⁹⁷ See Smith, *A Brief Summary*, 5.

⁹⁸ Brontë, *Tenant*, 393.

⁹⁹ See Smith, *A Brief Summary*, 4-5.

maintains her innocence, the people around her clearly think her guilty. Helen is punished for trying to protect her son, that is, for doing what was expected of her as an angel. Despite being considered a fallen woman, she is more virtuous than many characters which are considered more respectable than her.

Conclusion

Writing about issues considered too delicate or immoral to be discussed openly was always a risky choice, as the author could expect harsh criticism. Despite this, Anne Brontë decided to challenge social issues and inequalities she perceived in the society of early nineteenth century England. She focused on the legal and social position of upper-class women, criticising the generally accepted roles women were supposed to fulfil. Instead, she showed their position was much more ambivalent, with her characters being able to fulfil two different roles at the same time or blurring the line between them, making her readers question who was truly at fault.

The aim of this thesis has been to examine societal norms and expectations of women in the early nineteenth century, focusing on two female literary archetypes, the angel in the house and the fallen woman. Their use was examined in the novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* by Anne Brontë. Chapter one briefly introduced Anne Brontë, who together with her sisters went against the norms of the time in her writing, and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, which is then introduced, is no exception. Chapter two provided an overview of the legal position of women in early nineteenth-century England, focusing on laws which applied to married women, laws about marriage, divorce, and custody of children; followed by a brief overview of the development of women's rights in the second half of the nineteenth century. The laws of the time made it impossible for Helen to pursue any kind of legal action against her husband, she would not have been granted a divorce or custody of their son.

Chapter three focused on the image of an angel in the house, first introducing Coventry Patmore's poem which gave the archetype its name, followed by an introduction of the archetype itself. The angel in the house presented the image of a perfect wife, one who was always concerned with her husband's and children's well-being, as well as with running the household, frequently sacrificing her own happiness in the process. Then its use in the *Tenant* was analysed, exploring the origins of the high expectations that were placed on women and contrasting them with the reality where women had very little influence over their husbands, and reforming them was impossible unless they wished to reform themselves. Chapter four focused on the fallen woman archetype, first introducing the archetype followed by an analysis of its use in the *Tenant*, where Brontë used it in two variants. The typical one is represented by Annabella, who falls and is not able or willing to work to restore her position in respectable society. The

second variant is represented by Helen, who falls through necessity rather than greed, and is able to redeem herself by her selfless behaviour. This is what makes her position so ambivalent.

Throughout the novel, the position of both Helen and Annabella was shown to be ambiguous using the two archetypes, the angel in the house and the fallen woman. In the *Tenant* Brontë explores the norms and limitations imposed on women as well as the consequences of not complying with them through these two characters.

Resumé

Tato bakalářská práce je zaměřena na problematiku vnímání žen v rané viktoriánské Anglii, obzvláště na dva hlavní archetypy ženských postav té doby, kterými jsou „anděl v domě“ (angel in the house) a „padlá žena“ (fallen woman). To vše je zkoumáno v románu *Dvojí život Heleny Grahamové* (1848) od Anny Brontëové, který zpochybnil soudobé představy o pozici ženy ve společnosti. Brontëová tyto archetypy používá k představení ambivalentní pozice žen a ke kritice společenských norem raného devatenáctého století. Tyto normy, omezení a následky jejich porušení zkoumá především na postavách Heleny Huntingdonové a Annabelly Wilmotové.

Tato práce se skládá ze čtyř kapitol. V první kapitole je krátce představena Anna Brontëová a její romány. Nejvíce se soustředím na román *Dvojí život Heleny Grahamové*, o kterém tato práce pojednává. Anna je také krátce srovnána se svými sestrami, Charlotte a Emily.

Ve druhé kapitole se zabývám právním postavením žen v raném devatenáctém století v Anglii. Podle tehdejších zákonů měla svobodná žena většinu práv a povinností jako muž, které s její svatbou zanikly a stala se efektivně součástí osoby manžela. Rozvod byl v této době velmi drahý, a tedy těžko dostupný a opatrovnictví dětí bylo ve většině případů dáno otci, matka měla velmi omezenou moc nad svými dětmi. V poslední části je popsán vývoj zákonů týkajících se práv žen ve druhé polovině devatenáctého století.

Ve třetí kapitole je rozebírána problematika „anděla v domě.“ Nejprve je zde představena stejnojmenná narativní báseň Coventryho Patmora, která dala této představě ideální manželky její jméno. Poté je zde krátce představen archetyp „anděla v domě,“ který popisuje roli ideální ženy. Tato ideální žena se měla vždy starat o svého manžela a děti a zároveň měla v režii celou domácnost. Často tak obětovala svoji spokojenost, jen aby byl její manžel šťastný. Dále je analyzováno jeho použití v románu *Dvojí život Heleny Grahamové*, konkrétně na postavách Heleny, která je andělem po většinu děje, ale zjišťuje, že její představa o manželství a roli anděla je velmi naivní, a Annabelly, která se jako anděl chová, jen když je to pro ni výnosné.

Čtvrtá kapitola je zaměřená na archetyp „padlé ženy,“ který popisuje ženu, která přišla o svou nevinnost a upadla v nemilost. Tento archetyp je v románu prezentován dvěma způsoby, jako nenávratné zavržení společností v případě Annabelly, a jako krátkodobý úpadek v nemilost v případě Heleny.

V průběhu románu je postavení Heleny i Annabelly ukázáno jako ambivalentní, a to pomocí archetypů „anděla v domě“ a „padlé ženy.“ Brontëová v románu zkoumá normy, omezení a následky jejich porušení týkající se žen v raném devatenáctém století. Ambivalenci postavení žen ve společnosti Brontëová znázorňuje na svých ženských postavách. Helena, která upadla v nemilost, je představena jako někdo, kdo jedná v rámci svých přesvědčení a morálních povinností vůči svému synovi, i když tak nejedná v souladu s očekáváním společnosti. Annabella Wilmotová, která je sobecká až krutá, je představena v protikladu k Heleně a po většinu románu je „padlou ženou.“ Přesto i ona má některé dobré vlastnosti „anděla v domě.“

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Annotation

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This bachelor's thesis is focused on the perception of women in the early Victorian era in England, especially focusing on the as the two most common female literary archetypes, the Angel in the House and the Fallen Woman. This is examined in the novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) by Anne Brontë, which challenged the contemporary ideas of a woman's role in society. Brontë uses the archetypes in order to present the ambivalent position of women, and to criticise societal norms which applied to women in the early nineteenth century. She explores these norms and limitations imposed on women as well as the consequences of not complying with them through the characters of Helen Huntingdon and Annabella Wilmot.

Anotace

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Tato bakalářská práce je zaměřena na problematiku vnímání žen v rané Viktoriánské Anglii, obzvláště na dva hlavní archetypy ženských postav té doby, kterými jsou „anděl v domě“ a „padlá žena.“ To vše je zkoumáno v románu *Dvojí život Heleny Grahamové* (1848) od Anny Brontëové, který zpochybnil soudobé představy o pozici ženy ve společnosti. Brontëová tyto archetypy používá k představení ambivalentní pozice žen a ke kritice společenských norem raného devatenáctého století. Tyto normy a omezení, které byly aplikovatelné především na ženy, a následky jejich porušení znázorňuje především na postavách Heleny a Annabelly.