

EDUCATION OF CHILDREN IN THE TENANT OF WILDFELL HALL BY ANNE BRONTE

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Abstract: *The paper analyses the manner in which the education of children was done in the beginning of the 19th century and how this is revealed in the pages of “The Tenant of Wildfell Hall”, the second and also the final novel written by the English writer Anne Bronte, the youngest of the famous Bronte sisters. Despite enjoying enormous success after its publication in 1848, after its author’s death, Charlotte Bronte - Ann’s eldest sister - refused to republish it. She considered it to be too shocking as it dealt with themes like alcoholism, the ability of women to have paying jobs that enabled them to support not only themselves, but also their families, themes that were considered taboo or the “inhibited, polite, orderly, tender-minded, prudish and hypocritical” Victorian society [1]. We focus on the observations as well as on the subtle mentionings and allusions made in the novel with regard to some of the most important aspects of the Victorian Era education: the schooling of children, the differences between the education of boys and that of girls, the educational differences between the social classes.*

Keywords: education, children, 19th century

1. Introduction

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, one of the two novels written by Anne Brontë and published under the pseudonym of Acton Bell, was considered by many critics of the time and especially by her sister, Charlotte, a mistake. After the death of Anne, at the age of 29, Charlotte did everything in her power in order not to republish the novel and to keep it out of the public eye, despite the fact that its first publication was a huge success, all the copies being sold in the first six weeks. One of the main themes of the novel, alcoholism, and the vivid depiction of the struggle of the main heroine to save her son from his father’s vice, despite the lack of support and even opposition from society and from the legal system, made the book unsuitable for the Victorian sensibilities. Charlotte Brontë’s

determination to see *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* sink into oblivion is clearly expressed: “*Wildfell Hall* it hardly appears desirable to preserve. The choice of subject in that work is a mistake”[2].

During the reign of Queen Victoria, people started to view education as a very important element for the success of a child in life, education being also considered to be a vital element that helped to build the morality of the people and to shape their character. It was a task that was undertaken not only by the public schooling that started to become more robust during this period, but also by the parents and even by the community where one lived, a task that was continued throughout the entirety of a person’s life.

The novel is divided into three parts. The narrator, Gilbert Markham, recounts about

his gradual falling in love with a mysterious woman, Helen Graham, a widow who rents an Elizabethan mansion, Wildfell Hall, and who becomes a source of gossip for the people of the village. This gossip becomes ferocious when Eliza Millward, the vicar's daughter, the one who was courted first by Gilbert Markham, started slanderous rumors when she understood that the man she expected to marry had fallen out of love with her because of Helen.

2. Education done by the family

The opening pages of the novel show us how strong a father's authority was during the Victorian Era. The main hero had high ambitions regarding his schooling, but his father assured him "it was all rubbish", and exhorted him, "with his dying breath, to continue in the good old way, to follow his steps, and those of his father before him, and let my highest ambition be to walk honestly through the world, looking neither to the right hand nor to the left, and to transmit the paternal acres to my children in, at least, as flourishing a condition as he left them to me." We imagine that the high ambitions the narrator speaks of involve furthering his education and that the condition of "industrious farmer" was not a very appealing one, but he had no choice but to obey his parent's wish and to console himself with the thought that by improving agriculture he will help not only himself but mankind at large too.

Victorian mothers also seem to be quite influential but in different areas. Mrs Markham did her best to ensure her child grew confident and always told him he was capable of great achievements. She is the one who is mostly responsible for the behavior of the children and for their appearance in society. Gilbert is very careful about the way he comes in front of his family and makes sure that he changes his clothes and his shoes before he meets them. The family is also the place where the children learn about the roles they will later play in society and within their own

families: the man is the one who has to earn the money, while the woman does the household chores and takes care of the children, making certain that once the husband or the sons are at home, their comfort is assured. One of their main duties is to solace their spirit and soothe their "ruffled temper with the company and conversation". The difference between the educational messages sent to the boys and those received by the girls is seen even from the food that is put on their plates. The dishes are cooked in order to please the male palates, no matter what the women's tastes are. As in all household matters, there are two things to consider: "what's proper to be done; and, secondly, what's most agreeable to the gentlemen of the house—anything will do for the ladies."

The elder siblings have to be role models for the younger ones and they have to help with their education even when the latter rebel and test the limits of those around, like in the case of Fergus, Gilbert's brother and the buffoon of the family.

The family have an important say in the choice of the children's spouses. The women usually have to marry somebody their parents choose and the men also take into account parental advice, hence Gilbert's hesitation to propose to Eliza Millward who is "guilty" in the eyes of the prospective mother-in-law not only of insignificance, but also of poverty, a "capital sin". Once married, each of the spouses will have to do his/her allotted duty — the man's being to please himself and the wife's to please her husband.

In this part of the novel we discover two opposing styles of educating young boys. That supported by Mrs Markham and by the Vicar who embrace the idea that a child has to be exposed to all sorts of temptations in order to teach him temperance, and that of Helen Graham's, who is of the opinion that avoidance of the things that are pernicious is the best modality to keep a child out of trouble. The former believe that Arthur, Helen's son, is already "too old" to be tied

to his mother's "apron strings". Her attempts to try to keep the boy away from alcohol are seen as the surest way to turn him into a "fool" who will only learn to despise the gifts of God.

The villagers think they have the right to interfere in the lives of those that do not follow the unwritten rules of the community and try to convince Mrs Graham to adopt their ways of raising her 5-year old son. In their opinion, he exercises too little, sees too few people, spends too much time with his mother, is not allowed to drink any sort of alcoholic beverage.

The parents' teachings result into two categories of women well exemplified by Eliza (childish, with a gentle voice and resembling a "pretty playful kitten"), the woman most likely to marry, and by her sister, Mary ("a quiet, sensible girl, who patiently nursed their mother, through her last long, tedious illness, and been the housekeeper, and family drudge"), the future spinster. As far as boys are concerned, the two opposing categories are exemplified by Arthur Huntingdon, a gambler, an alcoholic and a cheater and Gilbert Markham, reliable, honest, hard working.

3. Education done by the community

In society, the more senior members feel it as their duty to impart their knowledge to the less experienced ones. It is the members of the community who take immediate measures once they see that the rules of what they perceive as good behavior are not followed. When Mrs Markham hears of the newly arrived widow, who lives isolated from the tightly knit community, she makes it her mission to visit her and to tell her of the right way of behaving. The fact that the young woman does not reveal all the information necessary to satisfy the curiosity of her visitors is not as considerable an offence as the discovery that she does not master the "household matters, and all the little niceties of

cookery, and such things, that every lady ought to be familiar with [...] what every respectable female ought to know". However, the most objectionable thing in the eyes of almost those around her is her strong refusal to take into consideration another marriage.

For the community, the social value of a person is given by his or her reputation. The women have to comply with a lot more unwritten regulations than men in order to keep theirs unmarred, especially when the power of gossip can destroy an innocent person's life.

4. Education done by the church

Attending Mass every Sunday is a must. The vicar also has the role of teacher and one of his missions is to preach the teachings of God both in church as well as during "private lessons".

Reverend Michael Millward "was a man of fixed principles, strong prejudices, and regular habits, intolerant of dissent in any shape, acting under a firm conviction that his opinions were always right, and whoever differed from them must be either most deplorably ignorant, or willfully blind. [...] Though he had a fatherly kindness for the well-behaved, he was a strict disciplinarian, and had often sternly reproved our juvenile failings and peccadilloes [...].

Sometimes, the worthy gentleman would reprove my mother for being over-indulgent to her sons, with a reference to old Eli, or David and Absalom [...].

The vicar transmits not only the words of God filtered through his own interpretation, but he assumes the role of messenger of the will of the community with regard to its straying members, the following fragment of a dialogue between him and Mrs Graham being an illustrative example of this reality: "It is my—duty—as—your pastor," said I, 'to tell you both everything that I myself see reprehensible in your conduct, and all I have reason to suspect, and what others tell me concerning you.'"

When words fail to convince the “culprit” to change, the vicar appeals to coercion. Mrs Graham shall no longer consort with his daughters and he urges Mrs Markham, and probably a lot of other parishoners to avoid any a contact with her.

Gilbert, influenced by the opinions of those around him, accuses the woman of his dreams that she favors another man, Mr Lawrence. He later strikes Lawrence and makes him fall from his horse. Even though Helen Graham does not know about the confrontation, she still refuses to marry Gilbert and in order to justify her behavior she gives him her diaries.

The second part of the novel, represented by Helen's diaries, describes her marriage to Arthur Huntingdon, a handsome, clever man, yet selfish and hedonistic, who manages to manipulate Helen into marrying him. At first Helen believes that she can change him in a gentle manner and by offering a good example. Nevertheless, the birth of their child, Arthur, makes Huntingdon jealous as the boy claims on Helen's attention. Mr Huntingdon spends all his time with a group of degraded friends with whom he drinks and mocks those of finer character.

Helen asks her husband to grant her a divorce only when she learns from Walter, another man who courts her, that he has an affair with Lady Low borough, but he ridicules her and refuses.

The apex of Arthur's wickedness is his attempt to corrupt their son by encouraging him to drink alcohol and to use foul words. These deeds finally determine Helen to try to save her child by running away with him, but her plans are discovered when her husband reads her diary. Enraged, he burns her painting tools that she intended to use in order to earn a living. It is her brother, Mr Lawrence, the one who helps her to find a secret refuge at Wildfell Hall.

In *Part Three* we find out that Helen asks Gilbert to leave her, the only acceptable, solution, due to the fact that she is not free to marry him. He can not but agree and

soon hears that she has returned to tend to her husband who has fallen gravely ill and who is terrified of the fate that awaits him after death. The English woman of the 19th century has to do her duty no matter how badly her husband treats her. The only acceptable justification for Helen's leaving her husband is the saving of the child. The illness has not changed Arthur Huntingdon's character and he is still unwilling to assume responsibility for his actions. By creating a character who does not want to repent even when he knows his days are numbered, the writer wants to convince the readers even more about Helen's being justified in leaving her lawful wedded husband.

A year later, Gilbert is led to believe that Helen is going to marry Mr Lawrence, but he soon discovers that his former rival will marry a different woman, Esther Hargrave. He goes to Grass dale and there he encounters a Helen who has now become a wealthy woman with whom he reconciles and then they get married. Helen's new marriage and wealth represent the reward the author offers Helen for her suffering, a suffering that has brought about more wisdom and that has annulled her past disobedience and conceitedness.

5. Conclusion

After having analyzed Anne Bronte's novel, we can find some ideas regarding education that are still applied in today's pedagogy: the need for the children to move, to have space to run around, to read books, the importance of playing with toys as well as with animals, of going on trips, of spending time in the right company. Ann Bronte's novel shows how the Victorian Age children start to be appreciated for their “childish” qualities, no longer for their resemblance to adults. Gilbert is grateful to Arthur for the fact that “Through him I was at once delivered from all formality, and terror, and constraint. In love affairs, there is no mediator like a merry, simple-hearted child—ever ready to cement divided hearts,

to span the unfriendly gulf of custom, to
melt the ice of cold reserve, and overthrow

the separating walls of dread, formality and
pride.”

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