

Toxic Masculinity in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

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Under the Supervision of Dr. Loomis

Victorian Britain had a strict structural patriarchy which complicated the lives of men and women. The institution of marriage particularly created an environment of toxic masculinity. Anne Brontë used her novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* as a manual to explore causes and effects of toxic masculinity on the afflicted men and their wives. Brontë then proposed a solution to end the cycle, raising sons to be better men.

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“Go, then, you vixen! He said; but the instant he released my hand he had the audacity to put his arm round my neck, and kiss me.”

(Brontë 174)

Introduction

When first published in 1848 Anne Brontë’s novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* made a splash by offering a fairly unvarnished critique of male behavior as Brontë perceived it from her vantage point in Victorian England. May Sinclair, a British author and suffragist, said in 1913 that “the slamming of [Helen’s] bedroom door against her husband reverberated throughout Victorian England.” A contemporary reader of the novel would name the subject of Brontë’s critique “toxic masculinity.” Other critics of the novel have studied Brontë’s obvious discussion of Victorian masculinity and structural patriarchy, but Brontë’s depiction of male actions and attitudes addressed toxic masculinity as well.

Brontë had a close view of the destruction wrought by toxic masculinity via experiences with her brother, Branwell Brontë. In her introduction to the novel, British author Mrs. Humphry Ward states, “There can be no question that Branwell’s opium madness, his bouts of drunkenness at Black Bull, his violence, his free and coarse talk, and his perpetual boast of guilty secrets, influenced the imagination of his wholly pure and inexperienced sisters” (7). With an example of this behavior and its consequences in her family home, Brontë was able to thoroughly examine what elements cause toxic masculinity, how destructive it can be, and what can be done to construct a solution to those problems. In Elizabeth Gaskell’s biography, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, she describes the issues with Branwell in depth stating,

He thought of nothing but stunning or drowning his agony of mind. No one in this house could have rest; and, at last, we have been obliged to send him from home for a week, with some one to look after him. He has written to me this morning, expressing some sense of contrition. . . but as long as he remains at home, I scarce dare hope for peace in the house. We must all, I fear, prepare for a season of distress and disquietude. (129)

The Brontë household was filled with the same type of torment as in *Tenant*.

There are several main characters in *Tenant*: Helen, her husband Mr. Huntingdon and their son Arthur. Mr. Huntingdon's name is also Arthur but Helen distinguishes between the two, saying, "Arthur (or Mr. Huntingdon, as I prefer calling him, for the other is my child's name)" (360). Helen's disdain for her husband is so great that she refuses to call her husband by his name for it is also associated with her son. With the story of these three, Brontë has woven a cautionary tale of abuse, power and structural patriarchy. Those problems, she seems to point out, cause toxicity.

Within the seemingly perfect Victorian familial structure of husband, wife and child, Brontë tells a story of how toxic masculinity destroys everyone in its wake. Helen suffers physical and emotional abuse at the hands of her husband and watches as her son is taught to behave the same way her husband does. Upon seeing her son suffer from exposure to his father's example, Helen knows she needs to act. She takes a drastic approach, at least for the time she lived in; she takes her son and runs off to Wildfell Hall. She changes their last names and starts again without Mr. Huntingdon. He was dead to her. Once she arrives at Wildfell Hall, her new home, Helen states, "As I intend to be taken for a widow, I thought it advisable to enter my new abode in mourning" (403).

Brontë knew that she had depicted her female protagonist taking drastic measures, and that she had left her male lead exposed. In her preface to the second edition she writes, "I may have gone too far; in which I shall be careful not to trouble myself or my readers in the same way again; but when we have to do with vice and vicious characters, I maintain it is better to depict them as they really are than as they would wish to appear" (15). Brontë was ahead of her time in depicting feminist ideals in her novels.

Shortly after the publication of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* in 1848, Brontë died. More than 30 years later *The Married Women's Property Act of 1882* was passed in Great Britain. This Act addressed several of the injustices that Brontë evoked in her novel. The Act allowed women to gain custody of their children and have access to money without their husband. It is apparent, then, that Brontë's novel was addressing persistent issues of the time. Contemporary readers will recognize that both the book and the Act were addressing problems caused by toxic masculinity in the structural patriarchy. Jackson Katz, in his 2006 book *The Macho Paradox*, explains how toxic masculinity affects contemporary society by

stating “Women and men have familial, platonic, and sexual relationships with each other. How can something that affects women not affect men and vice versa?” (15). Toxic masculinity is a problem that affects everyone, not just the afflicted men. Brontë intricately weaves a tale of pain and problems for society caused by toxic masculinity and how to go about abolishing them for the betterment of all.

Huntingdon is an excellent example of the qualities of toxic masculinity. He is violent towards men and women; he is hypersexual, which he showcases through sexual assaults against his wife and an affair with another man’s wife; and, most importantly, he desires status in the eyes of others. Constantly Huntingdon is seeking to improve his status as a “real” man in the eyes of his peers and the public, his efforts to achieve this are seen through his actions mentioned above. Ultimately these actions cost him everything.

The exact definition of toxic masculinity is very complex and cannot be described easily but Colleen Clemens has done well to summarize it by quoting The Good Men Project, a contemporary website for men, stating

Toxic masculinity is a narrow and repressive description of manhood, designating manhood as defined by violence, sex, status and aggression. It’s the cultural ideal of manliness, where strength is everything while emotions are weakness; where sex and brutality are yardsticks by which men are measured, while supposedly “feminine” traits- which can range from emotional vulnerability to simply not being hypersexual- are the means by which your status as “man” can be taken away.

(1)

While this is a generalization of all of the complexities that cause toxic masculinity, Clemens highlights the exact areas of toxic male behavior that Brontë examines in the novel. Again Brontë goes in depth and does include the causes and effects that toxic masculinity present in the Victorian British patriarchal structure. In the first section I will discuss how Brontë shows the seduction or manipulation period of a relationship, then the male-peer groups and their complicity in the perpetuation of violence. Violence is often featured in the novel. Brontë probes both violence against men and women, including sexual violence. Together these areas culminate in the degeneration of the afflicted men and their families. Brontë did not want to only criticize however, she also proposes a solution in raising male children

differently so they can end toxicity. Children are the key to the future, Brontë indicates, and everyone is responsible in the process of teaching children.

Critical Context

While British and Victorian masculinity have been examined extensively, there has not been an exploration of toxic masculinity in *Tenant*. Being such a contemporary term it has not been included in any of the critical conversations of that time period or in much of the criticism of more contemporary time periods.

To lay it out plainly there was a strictly structured patriarchal society during the Victorian period, and that left the lives of married women and their children at the mercy of their husbands. It is important to remember that it was during this time that a lot of work was happening in feminism and women's rights, but due to religious beliefs and the familial legal structure, men were the heads of the household. Women had few rights to property or custody of their children. Husbands had authority over land, property, finances and the education and religious beliefs of their children. Laura Berry looks closely at these laws in her article "Acts of Custody and Incarceration in *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*." Berry uses a quote from English barrister William Forsyth from 1850 stating,

The general rule of law in this country is, that the legal power over infant children belongs to the father, and that during his life the mother has none. In the words of Blackstone, "a mother, as such, is entitled to no power, but only to reverence and respect."...[T]he father has, at common law, a right to exclusive custody of his child even at an age when it still requires nourishment from its mother's breast. (34)

This law indicates the degraded value of women and mothers during the Victorian era. What did they bring to the family and how was that valued? The law also indicates how men used the power that they had. All men are not bad and not all husbands were tyrants, but the legal structure allowed for men to become corrupt while women were not able to fight back or protect themselves or their children.

During the 19th Century many British women and some men agitated against these strictures, achieving suffrage for women and eventually The Married Women's Property Act of 1882. The ideas that

Brontë illustrates in *Tenant* are the ones that Victorian women were fighting for; she highlights the importance of women's rights and the elimination of toxic masculinity.

The Act in its entirety is quite lengthy but there are several key points. The first is that married women are granted access to their own money and also the custody of their children, particularly in cases of divorce. This is an important development. Prior to 1882, married women rarely had any right to their own money and the ability to keep it separate from their husband's finances. Upon marriage, until 1882, everything had gone to the husband's control. The second major success of this new act was that married women would have some custodial rights over their children, especially in cases of divorce. As stated earlier by William Forsyth women, during Brontë's time, had no rights to their children or their upbringing.

Tenant can be seen as an example of how legislation like the 1882 Act would benefit women because the main character Helen had no such advantages. She did not have these options at her disposal. These changes Brontë never saw, but worked toward in her writing.

Literature Review

With the historical context of the period of this novel in hand one can begin to look at the critical conversation that has been had around this novel. There are two major components to discuss: a historical look at masculinity in Victorian Britain and toxic masculinity; then the conversation of *Tenant*, itself. Dustin Friedman recognizes, in his article "Unsettling the Normative: Articulations of Masculinity in Victorian Literature and Culture" that there are many "studies devoted to understanding the historical pressures that conditioned normative Victorian masculinity (1080). The first is looking at the historical views on masculinity and how it was constructed in Victorian Britain. A major contributor to this discussion is Ben Griffin and his book *The Politics of Gender in Victorian Britain*. Discussing the political side of gender is a large and varied topic, but Griffin explains structural patriarchy and how that affects the familial structure. Griffin states,

This is just one example of the many ways in which women in the nineteenth century were oppressed by laws that systematically and deliberately served the interests of men. In the middle

of the nineteenth century a married woman could not own property of any kind in her own name and she had no legal right to the custody of her children. In fact married women had no independent legal identity in the eyes of the law: husband and wife were deemed to be one person, and that person was the husband (4).

This is a very precise statement and makes the position of women clear. Griffin continues explaining many of the laws and movements that helped women to gain rights and autonomy. There is an entire section on the impact of the *Marriage Act of 1882* and everything that led up to its passage. Another of the most influential aspects of life that Griffin comments on are the religious and legal parameters that guided patriarchal status. Legally, married women were not seen as independent or autonomous. Griffin states “At the heart of Victorian gender politics lay the legal doctrine of coverture, which held that married women had no independent legal identity” (9). On the religious front there are arguments about marital discord caused by a wife having power over her husband. Again Griffin clarifies, stating “Victorian domestic ideology sought to prevent arguments through the total subordination of women to their husbands. A more democratic model of decision-making in the household would have endangered the male authority that was a fundamental component of masculine self respect” (45). With marriage vows confirming that a woman must obey her husband, the balance was maintained for this way of thinking. With a simple phrase Griffin explains “The most obvious source of male authority was the marriage service, in which wives normally made a religious vow to obey their husbands. Their submission was also enjoined in scripture (51). Eventually there would be changes to this way of thinking in new laws.

The next major component of the discussion on masculinity is the addition of toxic masculinity. Jackson Katz and his book *The Macho Paradox* is a prominent source on the topic. While Katz is speaking to contemporary American toxic masculinity there is a lot of information that can be taken and used in the context of the novel. Katz states “It’s *normal*. And precisely because the mistreatment of women is such a pervasive characteristic of our patriarchal culture, most men, to a greater or lesser extent, have played a role in its perpetuation” (9). Here there is the connection to toxic masculinity and a strict

patriarchal structure. Within a structure that gives one party all of the power and authority then there is the potential that they can use it badly against the other party. Additionally Katz discusses that men need to take charge of solving the problem. Of course women can't be left out of the discussion but real change will need men to act as well in order to work. Katz states,

Men's violence against women is a pervasive social phenomenon with deep roots in existing personal, social, and institutional arrangements. In order for people to understand and ultimately work together to prevent it, it is first necessary for them to engage in a great deal of personal and collective introspection. This introspection can be especially threatening to men, because as perpetrators and bystanders, they are responsible for the bulk of the problem. (19)

Here it is easy to see the struggle that is keeping a solution from advancing forward even in the present day. Katz goes on to mirror Brontë by mentioning that one of the keys to successfully eradicate this problem is through teaching children better. There is an entire chapter in the book devoted to this topic. In short Katz states

Theories differ on the exact nature of this social conditioning, but by far the most influential one of why gender violence is so common in our society begins with the premise that men's violence against women is the result of the power imbalance between men and women, which carries with it a set of cultural messages to boys and men, including the idea that "real" men are *supposed* to control and dominate women. (228)

Katz and Brontë seem to agree that in order to do better with future generations we need to address the root of the problem and fix it from the beginning.

Most of the critical discussion of toxic masculinity and male-peer groups has been gathered from studying prisons and prison culture. Terry Kupers' article "Toxic Masculinity as a Barrier to Mental Health Treatment in Prison" explains how male-peer groups contribute to toxic masculinity and inflame its perpetuation. While not a direct connection to *Tenant* it has great insight into the male-peer group and violence.

In the conversation about *Tenant* and masculinity there are two main areas of discussion. The first area revolves around raising boys or fatherhood. In Judith Pike's article "Breeching Boys: Milksops, Men's Clubs and the Modeling of Masculinity in Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*" she discusses how Helen raises her son Arthur. Other characters in the novel think that Helen is not raising her son to be "manly" enough and Pike explores this idea and the consequences of it. Pike states, "Anne Brontë's novels offer an insightful examination of fatherhood. Critics have yet to address not only the various models of masculinity extant in the Brontë sisters' novels, but also how the Brontës were raising serious questions about fatherhood and the acculturation of boys in Victorian society" (113). This is a great contribution to a section of the story of toxic masculinity and points to Brontë's end game of how to raise children better.

Julie-Marie Strange looks at writing style and masculinities. Since *Tenant* is written in a mixture of letter and diary entry in style, Strange's article "Fathers at Home: Life Writing and Late-Victorian and Edwardian Plebeian Domestic Masculinities" states

Social histories of the late-Victorian and Edwardian British working class enshrine home and family, as Elizabeth Roberts phrased it, as 'a woman's place'. In this model, home was both woman's kingdom and her prison as she navigated, and resisted, the legal and economic structures of patriarchy in an everyday context. (703)

Even in the home the women are constricted and writing is one way to examine the roles of fathers and fatherhood.

Continuing in a similar direction is Priti Joshi in their article "Masculinity and Gossip in Anne Brontë's *Tenant*" arguing that "few have noted that alongside the novel's critique of *existing* modes of masculinity is its portrayal of the *formation* of a new masculinity. ...In *Tenant*, a reformed masculinity emerges by emulating feminine ways" (908). Using gossip which is typically seen as a feminine tool, Joshi argues that Brontë shows it as a tool for masculinity. Joshi reads the novel as a feminist critique of masculinity through the means of gossip.

Merrick Burrow joins the conversation on Victorian masculinity and *Tenant*. In Burrow's article "Healing Victorian Masculinities" there is a great discussion of creating a "new man" by alleviating toxic masculine traits. Looking specifically at *Tenant*, Burrow studies how Helen heals her son Arthur by instilling in him kindness and empathy.

Manipulation

The first step to exploring the qualities of toxic masculinity is looking at the process of seduction through manipulation. Brontë is using Helen and Mr. Huntingdon to exemplify all of the areas of toxic masculinity that are present and how they work together. At the beginning of their relationship Helen's aunt could see through Huntingdon and did not like him, Helen saw his flaws as passion. At first, Helen employs a common tactic used to explain away toxic male behavior by implying that men can't help themselves or "boys will be boys" to coin a common phrase. Helen explains to her aunt that she wishes to help Huntingdon be better than he is on his own, stating,

Yes, provided he is not incorrigible— that is, the more I long to deliver him from his faults— to give him the opportunity of shaking off the adventitious evil got from contact with others worse than himself, and shining out in the unclouded light of his own genuine goodness— to do my utmost to help his better self against his worse, and make him what he would have been if he had not, from the beginning, had a bad, selfish miserly father, who, to gratify his own sordid passions, restricted him in the most innocent enjoyments of childhood and youth, and so disgusted him with every kind of restraint;-- and a foolish mother who indulged him to the top of his bent, deceiving her husband for him, and doing her utmost to encourage those germs of folly and vice it was her duty to suppress,-- and then, such a set of comparisons as you represent his friends to be—. (192)

Giving an excuse that because Huntingdon is male it excuses his behavior, perpetuates toxicity. Katz states "It's *normal*. And precisely because the mistreatment of women is such a pervasive characteristic of our patriarchal culture, most men, to a greater or lesser extent, have played a role in its perpetuation. This gives us a strong incentive to avert our eyes" (9). The argument that Katz makes throughout his book is that men see it as normal and therefore perpetuate the behavior and teach it to the next generation.

At the beginning of the courtship Helen looks past Mr. Huntingdon's toxicity and wishes that she would make up for his flaws. Helen and her aunt have several conversations about it the first one is as follows,

'How so, my dear? Is Mr. Huntingdon a good man?'

'He is a much better man than you think him.'

'That is nothing to the purpose. Is he a good man?'

'Yes-- in some respects. He has a good disposition.'

'Is he a man of principle?'

'Perhaps not, exactly, but it is only for want of thought. If he had some one to advise him, and remind him of what is right--' (165)

Helen sees a man of passion with a good disposition while her aunt sees that a good disposition is not enough. Mr. Huntingdon does not have principles and Helen believes that she can make up for that by guiding him. The aunt knows that Huntingdon needs to be responsible for his own behavior. The problem is that others cannot be responsible for the principles of anyone other than themselves. As the relationship between Helen and Mr. Huntingdon continues to grow; others share the same sentiments of hesitation as Helen's aunt and disapprove of the match. Helen says, "Mr. Huntingdon's acquaintances appear to be no better pleased with our approaching union than mine" (199). Others can see the truth in the situation and are aware that Huntingdon is not a good man.

This is a small step in the cycle that creates toxic masculinity. Through the "manipulation phase" men test women to see if their actions will be tolerated. Helen sees Huntingdon's faults as passion and believes that she can make up for his shortcoming, Katz puts it simply, "You hear women explaining away men's bad behavior as the result of individual pathology all the time: "Oh, he just had a bad childhood," or "He's an angry drunk. The booze gets to him. He's never been able to handle it" (10). Men are not often held responsible for their own choices and behaviors, and boys can then learn from the adults around them and continue those same behaviors.

Male-Peer Groups

When groups of male peers are together there seems to be a tendency for them to encourage each other to behave badly. It is harder to stand against a group, according to Katz. He states, “by focusing on those aspects of male culture--especially male-peer culture--that provide active or tacit support for some men’s abusive behavior” (7). The largest studies of toxic masculinity in male-peer groups have come from prisons and prison culture. This is not a direct comparison to *Tenant* but there are conclusions that one can draw from male-peer groups and toxic masculinity in prisons. Terry Kupers’ article “Toxic Masculinity as a Barrier to Mental Health Treatment in Prison” has numerous points that will be reiterated throughout the discussion of toxic masculinity. Starting with a definition of toxic masculinity Kupers asserts,

Toxic masculinity is constructed of those aspects of hegemonic masculinity that foster domination of others and are, thus, socially destructive. Unfortunate male proclivities associated with toxic masculinity include extreme competition and greed, insensitivity to or lack of consideration of the experiences and feelings of others, a strong need to dominate and control others, an incapacity to nurture, a dread of dependency, a readiness to resort to violence, and the stigmatization and subjugation of women, gays, and men who exhibit feminine characteristics. (717)

All of the above listed factors work with each other and against each other to create a hostile environment and that worsens in a group. Kupers states “the institutional dynamics play a huge role in inflaming toxic masculinity” (718). Simply put, there are a large number of men together in close quarters and being completely exposed in their daily activities creates a more intense form of toxic masculinity. The male-peer group being together so closely and for such long periods of time are the ways in which the behaviors are exemplified.

There are several examples of toxic male-peer groups within *Tenant*. Huntingdon's friends are very toxic and different scenarios with the group highlight unique aspects of the toxic culture. First there

are the excursions that they have in London together. Mr. Huntingdon purposely leaves Helen at home in the country while he is in London and has only his friends for guidance and accountability.

The time that the men spend in London is filled with debauchery and indulgence in alcohol and drugs. Helen suspects that there is also infidelity. Her assumptions are eventually confirmed at their country home, but she worries the entire time he is in London. Helen pleads with her husband to stay at home away from those men or bring her with him. An example of this behavior pointed out by Helen is Huntingdon's drinking. She says, "Those two detestable men, Grimsby and Hattersley, have destroyed all my labour against his love of wine. They encourage him daily to overstep the bounds of moderation and not infrequently to disgrace himself by positive excess (284). There are many other instances in the novel of the bad influences of this group of men.

While Huntingdon is away from Helen in London she waits for him to return and is disappointed when he does to find that he's been up to no good. Helen exclaims,

Thank heaven, he is come at last! But how altered! flushed and feverish, listless and languid, his beauty strangely diminished, his vigour and vivacity quite departed. I have not upbraided him by word or look; I have not even asked him what he has been doing. I have not the heart to do it, for I think he is ashamed of himself-he must be so indeed, and such inquiries could not fail to be painful to both. (244-245)

His degeneration and over-indulgence are visible. While in the company of his friends in London it is easier for Huntingdon to engage in these behaviors.

Even away from London and its vices, Huntingdon and his peers are up to trouble. While at the country home we see Huntingdon and Helen entertain friends at a house party. During this party Helen can see the damage of the peer group with her own eyes. There is violence, drinking and Helen discovers her husband is indeed having an affair and learns that these men help him to conceal it. One of Huntingdon's friends Mr. Hargrave explains to Helen 'I heard him say,--"I shall manage it, you'll see! (315). Huntingdon believes that he can maintain his affair, keeping his wife none the wiser.

Helen realizes the destruction caused by Huntingdon's male friends. When he is with his peers he gives in to all of the temptations. Helen exclaims, "Well, if you do give up your intimacy with these men, I don't think you will have much cause to regret the loss of their society; for it's my belief they never did you much good" (201). Huntingdon behaves badly in this group of men and their influence is what guides him. Grimsby, a friend of Huntingdon, states "It's all these cursed women!" muttered Grimsby: 'they're the very bane of the world! They bring trouble and discomfort wherever they come, with their false, fair faces and their deceitful tongues' (308). With those attitudes guiding him and his decisions, it is hard to imagine any other outcome for Huntingdon.

When the group is hunting together they indulge in violence. Hunting groups are a very unique environment for toxicity to flourish. Pike argues, "Violence against animals becomes almost a compulsory part of boyhood" (115). Young Arthur is exposed to these activities and the stalking, killing and competition within these situations create a specific environment that heightens toxic masculinity. Pike continues, "Huntingdon tries to remove his son from his mother's influence by including their young son in his debauched fraternity" (117). John MacKenzie in his article "The imperial pioneer and hunter and the British masculine stereotype in late Victorian and Edwardian times" located in the book *Manliness and Morality* states plainly "Generally the object of the hunt was the male of the species" and continues "Horns perfectly symbolised the war of males for sexual conquest" (180). The competition and encouraged violence are a result from the literal hunting of the male of the species and the importance of proving their own dominance. By hunting the males of the species and then displaying the horns gathered from that hunt there is a natural competition that grows between the men on the hunt for conquest. In *Tenant* the men that have gathered at the house party and engage in hunting together. The men want to prove their skills, the danger that they can overcome and be seen as the best and most manly. In an environment of violence and competition it breeds conflict and violence. Pike points out "Anne Brontë clearly shows how many men condone such behavior as part of raising the boy" (119).

Helen can also see the direct correlation between male-peer groups and the corruption of her son. When they are all together Huntingdon's friends encourage young Arthur to behave as they do.

MacKenzie continues with the hunting groups stating “Discipline for the young was to take precise forms: obeying orders from elders and superiors, training in firearms, acceptance of violence as part of the natural order, preparation for war and a strict separation of sexual roles” (176). The violence is encouraged and expected which creates many problems. The pressure from the group of men it makes it impossible for Helen to intervene and correct his behavior let alone intervene for young Arthur. They are drowning out all other influences. Another example of this problem happens when Helen examines Huntingdon’s behavior. Helen states

‘He kept his oath about gambling (not a little to the surprise of us all), though Grimsby did his utmost to tempt him to break it, but now he had got hold of another habit that bothered him nearly as much, for he soon discovered the demon of drink was as black as the demon of play, and nearly as hard to get rid of— especially as his kind friends did all they could to second the promptings of his own insatiable cravings.’ (205-206)

While there is some progress made on one of Huntingdon’s vices, he picks up another, and his friends are always working on tempting him back into any bad habits that he quits.

It is a constant battle for Helen and Huntingdon, and young Arthur is constantly at risk of the same influences and sufferings. Helen exclaims,

My greatest source of uneasiness, in this time of trial, was my son, whom his father and his father’s friends delighted to encourage in all the embryo vices a little child can show, and to instruct in all the evil habits he could acquire— in a word, to ‘make a man of him’ was one of their staple amusements; and I need say no more to justify my alarm on this account, and my determination to deliver him at any hazard from the hands of such instructors. (361)

It is clear to Helen the only way to raise her son to be better than his father is to take him away from those influences. She says “my child must not be abandoned to this corruption: better far that he should live in poverty and obscurity, with a fugitive mother, than in luxury and affluence with such a father (362).

The male-peer groups hold a direct connection to male violence, since violence is perpetuated more readily in these groups, as the novel suggests. The violence extends beyond the groups and into the

home resulting in domestic and sexual violence. Both physical violence and verbal abuse can happen regularly.

Violence

Helen shows us the depths of her husband's violent tendencies. A male stranger has an innocent interaction with Arthur and Helen is quick to react. Immediately the reader can sense she has a trauma response to Mr. Markham's first interaction with Arthur. Mr. Markham is a neighbor of Helen and Arthur and eventually Helen's new love interest. Helen can only see danger in men and fears for Arthur before there is any danger present. Her first instinct is to protect her son.

'I was not harming the child, madam,' said I, scarce knowing whether to be most astonished or displeased; 'he was tumbling off the wall there; and I was so fortunate as to catch him, while he hung suspended headlong from that tree, and prevent I know not what catastrophe.'

'I beg your pardon, sir,' stammered she;-- suddenly calming down,-- the light of reason seeming to break upon her beclouded spirit, and a faint blush mantling on her cheek-- 'I did not know you;-- and I thought--' (32)

Men are the enemy for Helen and she is desperate to save her son from the influence of their behavior. The list of injuries that Mr. Huntingdon has done to cause Helen's reaction is lengthy. Part of Helen's trauma is her condition of being trapped by matrimony in a violent situation. Marriage was a binding institution in Victorian Britain and women had little ability to escape without severe repercussions. Helen states "Believe me, matrimony is a serious thing" (148). Griffin discusses the severity of what a woman loses legally with marriage, stating "the fear that giving married women any kind of legal rights would cause discord in the home" (37).

The first domestic violence Helen experiences happens before she is married, with her future husband. Brontë writes, "Go, then you vixen!' he said; but the instant he released my hand he had the audacity to put his arm round my neck, and kiss me" (174). The quote is a very telling one. Not only does Mr. Huntingdon assault Helen by putting his arm around her neck and kissing her, but he also blames her for his actions. Upon their first meeting they dance and after Helen concludes "There might be, it is true, a

little too much careless boldness in his manner and address, but I was in so good a humour, and so grateful for my late deliverance from Mr. Boarham, that it did not anger me” (151). Very quickly in the novel this happens again. There is another assault before they are even married. Huntingdon starts,

Silence again? That means yes. Then let me add, that I cannot live without you, and if you answer No to this last question you will drive me mad.-- Will you bestow yourself upon me?-- you will!’ he cried, nearly squeezing me to death in his arms.

‘No, no!’ I exclaimed, struggling to free myself from him-- ‘you must ask my uncle and aunt.’

‘They won’t refuse me, if you don’t.’

‘I’m not so sure of that-- my aunt dislikes you.’

‘But you don’t, Helen-- say you love me, and I’ll go.’

‘I wish you would go!’ I replied.

‘I will, this instant,-- if you’ll only say you love me.’

‘You know I do,’ I answered. And again he caught me in his arms, and smothered me with kisses.

(186)

Huntingdon is continually assaulting Helen before they are married and gradually increases the violence after the marriage. While there is not a direct incident expressed of a serious sexual assault, Huntingdon does not respect her boundaries and the abuse escalates. Sexual violence was very common in these situations because a husband was the Lord and master over his wife and his wife’s purpose was to obey her husband. Unfortunately Huntingdon is not the only man to assault Helen.

One of Huntingdon’s friends also assaults Helen after his advances are rejected. Helen confides in Mr. Hargrave that she plans to leave Huntingdon thinking that she would be able to trust him. Over several pages their exchange is explosive. Hargrave starts “I must speak: my heart will burst if I don’t! I have been silent long enough, and you must hear me! Cried he, boldly intercepting my retreat to the door” (368). He is now blocking her ability to leave and it escalates from there. Hargrave continues “I must not be denied! Exclaimed he, vehemently; and seizing both my hands, he held them very tight, but dropped upon his knee, and looked up in my face with a half-imploring, half-imperious gaze” (368). Again men

are restraining her and forcing themselves physically onto her, holding her where they want her to be. As this assault continues Mr. Hargrave threatens her with more physical harm as well as telling her husband about their encounter. Eventually Helen snaps,

I never saw a man go terribly excited. He precipitated himself towards me. I snatched up my palette-knife and held it against him. This startled him: he stood and gazed at me in astonishment; I daresay I looked as fierce and resolute as he. I moved to the bell, and put my hand upon the cord. This tamed him still more. With a half-authoritative, half-deprecating wave of the hand, he sought to deter me from ringing. (369)

Helen is so threatened and scared she feels the need to get a knife to protect herself. It is so telling that she has been in this situation many times and knows that what a man will respond to in this situation is violence. Helen looks as fierce and resolute as he is and that speaks volume about this particular assault, she has had enough. At this point in the novel she has decided to leave Huntingdon and does not want any other abusive man to interfere in her life.

The violence is not restricted to physical, there is also emotional violence and verbal abuse. There are several ways that Huntingdon perpetuates these abuses against Helen, first by committing infidelity. Helen confronts Huntingdon about his having an affair with a friend's wife and their exchange is intense, Helen begins,

“Well, then, Arthur, how can you call it nothing-- an offence for which you would think yourself justified in blowing another man's brains out? Is it nothing to trifle with your friend's feelings and mine-- to endeavour to steal a woman's affections from her husband-- what he values more than his gold, and therefore what it is more dishonest to take? Are the marriage vows a jest; and is it nothing to make it your sport to break them, and to tempt another to do the same? Can I love a man that does such things, and coolly maintains it is nothing?”

Huntingdon responds saying,

‘You are breaking your marriage vows yourself,’ said he, indignantly rising and pacing to and fro.
‘You promised to honour and obey me, and now you attempt to hector over me, and threaten and

accuse me, and call me worse than a highwayman. If it were not for your situation, Helen, I would not submit to it so tamely. I won't be dictated to by a woman, though she be my wife.'

(254)

There is a lot to unpack within this interaction. Helen begins with the accusations of Huntingdon's infidelity and the way he values the feelings of everyone involved. Not only is he betraying his wife, he is lying to his friend and damaging his friend's wife in the process. He has destroyed two marriages and all of the friendships and trust between everyone. Helen makes sure to bring this to his attention and ask him how he values his wedding vows? Huntingdon turns the tables on her by saying that she is actually the one disrespecting their vows. Turning himself into the victim and blaming Helen for his own actions is as toxic as cheating on his spouse. One of the methods of healing toxic masculinity is for a man to take accountability for one's own actions. Katz states

Call it feminist or not. If there is any hope of dramatically reducing the high levels of men's violence to which we have become accustomed, we are going to have to find a way to look beyond individual perpetrators and their problems to the culture that produces them. This societal introspection is a daunting task, ... It is a lot easier to focus on external enemies, however elusive, than it is to look inward. (33).

Getting to the core of the problem is complex and it is difficult to look at one's own involvement in the perpetuation of the problem.

There is continued violence beyond this as well. Some of the emotional and verbal abuse that Helen suffers comes from her husband's constant teasing. Helen says "his favorite amusement is to sit or loll beside me on the sofa, and tell me stories of his former armours, always turning upon the ruin of some confiding girl or the cozening of some unsuspecting husband (226). Again here he is flaunting his infidelity and the ruin of numerous marriages purely to torment his wife. Huntingdon is using this abuse to dominate his wife and control her. Katz discusses the way in which this type of mentality is damaging for everyone stating, "When we ask men to reject sexism and the abuse of women, we are not taking something away from them. In fact, we are giving them something more valuable— a vision of manhood

that does not depend on putting down others in order to lift itself up” (270). Huntingdon thinks that by putting Helen down and flaunting his ability to get other women he is lifting himself up.

Another type of violence common within toxic masculinity is male on male violence. As mentioned in an above quote Brontë shows how men are constantly in competition with each other. Huntingdon’s affair with his friend’s wife makes it clear. Not only is he trying to out do his friend with his sexual exploits, but there is also the threat of physical violence. Helen points out that if she had been unfaithful he would “blow the brains out” of the other man. What makes it less of an offense for Huntingdon to be unfaithful rather than Helen? There is a double standard and Huntingdon immediately responds with imagined violence when there is an imagined offense against him. Huntingdon’s resorting to violence is problematic, Katz points out “The idea that violence can solve anything is itself the crux of the problem” (53). Violence is not the answer and only breeds more violence in response.

In regards to the violence against women by men there are many underlying issues within the structural patriarchy and society that perpetuate more violence. For example, men are taught domination and control of women is the expectation of a “real man” and anything less denies them their masculinity. Legally, emotionally, financially and physically, men are in charge. After Helen makes her escape with little Arthur, Huntingdon searches for them. Helen says

It seems Mr. Huntingdon is making every exertion to discover the place of my retreat. He has been in person to Staningley, seeking redress for his grievances— expecting to hear of his victims, if not to find them there— and has told so many lies, and with such unblushing coolness, that my uncle more than half believes him, and strongly advocates my going back to him and being friends again. (407)

Huntingdon wants to get them back in his control and will lie to try to accomplish his end. Katz explains the results of this mentality in depth but summarizes by stating

Theories differ on the exact nature of this social conditioning, but by far the most influential one of why gender violence is so common in our society begins with the premise that men’s violence against women is the result of the power imbalance between men and women, which carries with

it a set of cultural messages to boys and men, including the idea that “real” men are supposed to control and dominate women. The ultimate solution to the problem of men’s violence against women, therefore, is equality between the sexes. (228)

If Huntingdon did not believe that Helen and Arthur were his to control then Helen would not have felt it detrimental to leave him and save their son from his example.

Katz is a contemporary figure in the study of toxic masculinity but the problem has existed for a long time and Brontë recognized it.

Degeneration

The ramifications of constant toxic masculinity for a man can be degeneration. A culmination of the excess in drink and other substances causes great physical distress and decline in health. Not all men use alcohol or drugs but the use of them causes a decline in health. In addition to the use of alcohol and drugs there is also the emotional suppression that is very unhealthy for the person and their relationships with others. John Springhall in his article “Building character in the British boy: the attempt to extend Christian manliness to working-class adolescents, 1880-1914, located in *Manliness and Morality*, states “Manliness, as understood in this environment, was often identified by the middle class as synonymous with ‘hooliganism’ – an elongated ‘rite of passage’ in which manly was to be reached through swaggering, brawling and the oblivion induced by either alcohol or violence” (70). The continued use of alcohol, drugs and violence that is encouraged to show manliness takes a great toll on the men.

Huntingdon is constantly engaging in excess consumption of alcohol and other substances.

When he is under the depressing influence of the after-consequences, he bemoans his sufferings and his errors, and charges them both upon me; he knows such indulgence injures his health, and does him more harm than good; but he says I drive him to it by my unnatural, unwomanly conduct; it will be the ruin of him in the end, but it is all my fault; and then I am roused to defend myself, sometimes with bitter recrimination. This is a kind of injustice I cannot patiently endure. (336)

Helen can see what he is doing and that he is blaming her for his actions. Without acknowledging his own choices and their consequences Huntingdon is doing himself harm. A while after Helen has escaped her husband she gets word that he is fatally ill. Helen returns to nurse her husband in the end, she writes “He cannot linger long. He suffers dreadfully, and so do those that wait upon him” (464). Even when facing death Huntingdon is terrible to those that care for him. When Helen returns they have a confrontation and Helen is cautious about letting Huntingdon see their son again.

In most cases the greatest cause of decline in mental and physical health of these men is that they are emotionally repressed. One of the effects of toxic masculinity is that men are restrained from expressing their emotions. Being emotional is seen as a feminine trait and therefore unacceptable for men to engage in. The only emotion that toxic men engage in is anger. Beyond that, it is only for women to display emotion. Denying emotional expression is unhealthy and toxic masculinity makes it impossible for men to have a healthy outlet for their emotions. Kupers studies this in prison culture but the same conclusions can be made outside of prison as well. In a space where men feel that emotion makes them feminine they will repress their feelings so that they may have to resort to violence as a form of expression. When men may try to handle their other emotions, Clemens states, “in a culture that equates masculinity with physical power, some men and boys will invariably feel like they are failing at “being a man” (2).

Repressing emotions is damaging. Going back to more of the work of Kupers in the prison systems it is easy to see the role that toxic masculinity plays in the treatment of male mental health. Kupers explains “According to the code, a *real* man does not display weakness of any kind, does not display emotions other than anger, does not depend on anyone, is never vulnerable, does not snitch, does not cooperate with the authorities, and suffers pain in silence” (718). Mr. Huntingdon’s life is an example of all these consequences culminating in his ultimate demise. Huntingdon does not have the ability to express his emotions or look to anyone to help him until it is too late. After Helen and her son flee, Mr. Huntingdon is free to do as he pleases and continues to drink. Eventually he becomes ill and Helen comes back to care for him. Helen refuses to bring Arthur with her for fear his father’s influence will resume. In

the end Huntingdon blames Helen for the downfall of his life and health. The reluctance of Huntingdon to take responsibility for his own actions derives from his toxicity.

Relationships of every kind suffer greatly in a toxic environment. Huntingdon loses his wife, son, and friends as a direct result of his behavior. Not having close relationships is unhealthy and adds to the physical and emotional degeneration that Huntingdon suffers. Helen always wanted the best for her husband but could only suffer so much before taking their son and fleeing. Young Arthur will suffer not having his father in his life but the damage is less than what his father suffers at the hands of toxic masculinity. As seen in the above sections, Huntingdon loses his friendships from the toxic behaviors he displays. Huntingdon caused several marriages to fall apart as well as his own. Beyond the infidelity and lies there was physical violence and the friendships cannot survive in those conditions. Katz explains “today’s victimized boys will one day be men, many of whom will develop emotional and substance abuse problems linked to their traumatic childhoods” (41). Without the proper development in childhood they have less of a chance to grow into healthy and functioning men. Joshi exerts “*Tenant* targets the bad behavior of upper-class men. But, it also censures the silences that enshrine and perpetuate such behavior” (911).

Raising a Son

Perhaps Brontë’s most important contribution in her novel are the instructions for how to combat toxic masculinity. Young Arthur is the promise of a better future for everyone. Even though he is the gold at the end of the rainbow, Helen has many obstacles that she has to overcome to raise her son as a good man. One of the biggest obstacles is the role of women and mothers in the structural patriarchy. Wives were not the heads of the households and did not have custody or control over their children legally. The child’s care was entirely left to others in the societal structure of the British Victorian upper class. With his mother’s influence and importance completely disregarded it is easy to see how toxic masculinity can hinder the next generation and continue. A complete dictatorship within the family unit is harmful to all parties. Mutual respect and influence with a child’s future are important. Huntingdon does not want Helen to be in charge of their son.

Children in Victorian England were often put into the care of a governess or others and all of that is decided by the father. While some men might have taken their wives' wishes into consideration, it is within their power to make all of the decisions considering their child. Education and influences are included in these decisions. Removing Helen from the equation can put her influence out of sight and young Arthur would not have the benefit of her teachings. Helen explains, "He said I was not fit to teach children, or to be with them" (395).

The reason that Huntingdon wants to remove Helen from their son's influences directly relates to his own toxic traits, Helen wishes to teach Arthur empathy and compassion. Unfortunately others also believe that Helen should not be teaching her son those things. Throughout the novel Helen is constantly berated by those around her about making her son "too soft" and emotional. Helen's neighbor, after she escapes, exclaims

"But my dear, I call that doting,' said my plain-spoken parent. 'You should try to suppress such foolish fondness, as well to save your son from ruin as yourself from ridicule.'

'Ruin! Mrs. Markham!'

'Yes it is spoiling the child. Even at his age, he ought not to be always tied to his mother's apron-string; he should learn to be ashamed of it,'

'Mrs. Markham, I beg you will not say such things, in his presence at least. I trust my son will never be ashamed to love his mother!' said Mrs. Graham, with a serious energy that startled the company (36).

This is a spectacular example of the societal expectations of men and mothers. Somehow a mother's love will "ruin" her son for a man cannot be seen as emotional. The same neighbor continues that conversation by stating "Well, you surprise me! I really gave you credit for having more sense.-- The poor child will be the veriest milksop that ever was sopped! Only think what a man you will make of him, if you persist in-- -' (38").

Since toxic masculinity views emotion and empathy as a weakness, toxic parents do not teach their sons these skills. Pike's article "Breeching Boys: Milksops, Men's Clubs and the Modelling of

Masculinity in Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*" is based entirely on this concept stating "Anne Brontë offers a trenchant critique of how fathers in the upper and middle classes are instilling in their young sons corrupted models of manliness" (113). Berry also notes that "Anne and Emily Brontë will recognize in childhood an answer to the dilemma of selfhood" (38). With the right tools children can be raised confidently and the cycle of toxicity can be extinguished.

Adding to wanting to teach her son, Helen, wants to make sure he is not emulating his father. Burrow states it plainly, "Helen's greatest concern is to purge "young Arthur" of the influence of his father's "harmful masculinity" both in terms of inherited tendencies and behavior learned from a man who teaches his young son to drink alcohol, to swear, and to verbally abuse his mother" (201).

Continuing in this same train of thought Pike continues,

Anne Brontë, in contrast, paints a powerful portrait of how gentlemen of the upper classes, instead of acting charitably and as protectors of their dependants, often abuse their masculine privilege and inculcate these same unmanly behaviours in their sons. She exposes how the conventional rearing of boys condones aggressive and even violent behaviour, often directed against females in these middle-class households. Rather than seeing such behaviour as unmanly, fathers perceive it as a necessary step to manhood, marking their separation from their mothers and other women in the household. (113)

Reiterating the result of that separation Pike continues, "While separation from the female sphere is central to the rearing of boys, Anne Brontë shows show this separation can evolve into a contemptuous view of women (115).

Conclusion

In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Anne Brontë has constructed a critique of toxic masculinity and the part that structural patriarchy plays in creating it. Taking it a step further Brontë notes the effects of toxic masculinity on everyone involved and most importantly how to combat the problem. Ridding society of toxic masculinity is beneficial to all and there has to be a team effort to achieve its removal. Men and women are negatively affected by toxic masculinity. It is ruinous. Many others have put together

pieces of Brontë's ideas but Anne Brontë had the entire puzzle and only recently has the use of the phrase toxic masculinity evolved to describe what she knew. *Tenant* was certainly ahead of its time and is a key feminist text in its style of writing and its critique of toxic masculinity. Garton asserts, "women's diaries were characterized by tensions between the writing of a private self and a desire for a public record" (44). While the Brontë sisters have cemented their place in literature and feminism, Anne Brontë stands out as the more aggressive writer and *Tenant* was the result of her desire to advocate for change. Contemporary feminist Sara Ahmed speaks to the same issues of structural patriarchy stating,

It is personal. There is no question: it is personal. The personal is structural. I learned that you can be hit by a structure; you can be bruised by a structure. An individual man who violates you is given permission: that is structure. A girl is made responsible for his violence: that is structure. . . .
A structure is an arrangement, an order, a building; an assembly. (30)

Anne Brontë gave us insight into toxic masculinity more than a century before there was name for it and we are still discussing it in the present day. Creating a better environment for children to grow is key to eliminating toxic masculinity and greater equality for all.

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