PENGUIN CLASSICS

ANNE BRONTË

THE TENANT OF WILDFELL HALL

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维尔德费尔庄园的主人
安妮·勃朗特 著

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The Tenant of Wildfell Hall
维尔德费尔庄园的主人

作者安妮·勃朗特生于1820年，是著名的勃朗特三姐妹中最小的。1841—1845年期间，安妮在约克郡附近小镇的一个人家作家庭教师，《维》即是在她四年生活经历的基础上创作而成，于1848年出版。

庄园女主人海伦不甘忍受丈夫的残暴，毅然离家，带着儿子远走他乡，去追寻独立自主的新生活。在十九世纪中叶的英国，妻子和孩子完全是丈夫的私人财产，一切命运被牢牢地控制在男人的手中。此书对当时的社会传统和法律制度给予了直接、猛烈地抨击，被誉为是"妇女文学"的最早宣言。

安妮于此书出版后一年去世。长期以来，由于姐姐夏洛蒂和艾米莉传世佳作的影响，安妮的出色才华一直没有得到应有的承认，被世人称为"文学界的灰姑娘"。此书在作者死后曾多次再版，因此也为后人提供了给予作者公正评价的机会。

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PENGUIN CLASSICS

THE TENANT OF WILDFELL HALL

Anne Brontë was born in 1820, the youngest of the Brontë family. She was educated at home and, as a child, was especially close to Emily. Together they invented the imaginary world of Gondal, the setting for many of their dramatic poems. Like her sisters, Emily and Charlotte, she tried to make a living as a governess and held two posts, the first with the Inghams at Blake Hall and later with the Robinsons at Thorp Green. Her novel *Agnes Grey* (1847) reflects her experiences in the first post and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is based on her observations of people she met in the second. Her portrayal of Arthur Huntingdon is also drawn to some extent from her knowledge of the terrible sufferings of her brother, Branwell. Written under the pseudonym of Acton Bell and published in 1848, *Wildfell Hall* was also a direct protest against the social conventions and law of the day, and might be described as the first sustained feminist novel. Anne Brontë died in 1849.

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Winifred Gérin worked on the Brontës and their lives for many years. Her *Charlotte Brontë* (1967) won the Heinemann, James Tait Black and British Academy Awards. She also wrote *Anne Brontë*, *Branwell Brontë*, *Emily Brontë*, *The Brontës* (two volumes), and edited *Charlotte Brontë: Five Novelettes*. Winifred Gérin was a Fellow and Member of Council of the Royal Society of Literature. In 1975 she received the O.B.E. for literary services, and in 1976 was awarded the Whitbread Prize for the best biography of the year for her *Elizabeth Gaskell*. She died in June 1981.

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G. D. Hargreaves writes on the history of letter forms and printing. He is a member of the Brontë Society, and his contributions to its *Transactions* include articles on the text of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

Anne Brontë

THE TENANT OF WILDFELL HALL

Introduction by Winifred Gérin
Edited by G.D. Hargreaves

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Of all the Brontë novels *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* needs most to be seen in the context of its author's life, and judged by the circumstances under which it was written.

To the present-day reader the subject might appear outmoded in that it concerns, among other vital issues, the salvation of a man's soul. But the boldness of the central theme and the total frankness with which it is treated, makes it startlingly modern.

Written between 1846 and 1848 and published in the early summer of 1848, it might be said to be the first manifesto for 'Women's Lib'. Taking for her theme a Byronic-style marriage, between wholly-unsuited partners, with a heroine, Helen Huntingdon, driven to leave her atrocious husband; to claim her right to an independent existence and successfully earn her living – and more risky still, to abscond with her son – Anne Brontë was not only shocking the social conventions of the day, but flouting the current laws of the land. In 1848 wives – and still more the children of a marriage – were wholly subject to the husband's control.

May Sinclair, writing in 1913, said that the slamming of Helen Huntingdon's bedroom-door against her husband reverberated throughout Victorian England.

The book was an immediate popular success, a further printing being called for in the July, for which Anne wrote a notable Preface in which she declared her special reasons for writing on a subject that, while enthralling the library subscribers, shocked the moralists.

Writing under the pseudonym of Acton Bell, the question of her sex roused the curiosity of all and the condemnation of those who judged the subject unfit for a woman to handle – if woman she were. Her vigorous defence of her motives set out in the Preface established both the character of the book, and of its author. As to her identity, still more her sex, she silenced her critics in a few forceful lines:

> ... I am satisfied that if a book is a good one, it is so whatever the sex of the author ... All novels are, or should be, written for both men

and women to read, and I am at a loss to conceive how a man should permit himself to write anything that would be really disgraceful to a woman, or why a woman should be censured for writing anything that would be proper and becoming for a man.

The success of *Wildfell Hall* caused its author more tribulation than pleasure, for her publisher, T. C. Newby, was a trickster who defrauded her of her dues on the sales of the book (the system of royalties as we know it today was not in operation at the time). Anne received in all only two payments of £25 each, as her sister Charlotte explained to her own publisher, George Smith, after Anne's death, when he successfully, and under some pressure no doubt, secured the copyrights from Newby of Anne's two novels, and *Wuthering Heights*. Of Newby's dealings with her sisters Charlotte made no secret: he must be, she said, '... needy as well as tricky ...' He served the emergent Trollope and George Eliot equally ill. In his dealings with the Brontës, however, he overplayed his hand, attempting to sell the American Rights of *Wildfell Hall* as the work of the already successful author of *Jane Eyre*, 'Currer Bell', and forcing on both Anne and Charlotte the revelation of their identities, which they wished at all costs to avoid. Current prejudice, as the Preface to *Wildfell Hall* sufficiently revealed, ran counter to women's liberty of expression.

The necessary confrontation with Newby obliged Anne Brontë to make the one visit of her life-time to London. Her sister Charlotte's publisher, George Smith (later the highly successful publisher of almost every prominent Victorian novelist) left one of the rare descriptions of Anne Brontë made outside her family circle. '... She was a gentle, quiet, rather subdued person, by no means pretty, yet with a pleasing appearance ... Her manner was curiously expressive of a wish for protection and encouragement, a kind of constant appeal, which invited sympathy ...'*

Behind the fragile exterior (she was very delicate all her life) Anne Brontë was a resolute-minded and highly courageous young woman; as her life and death attest. In choosing the theme she did for *Wildfell Hall*, she was not writing out of ignorance or inexperience, but deliberately, in protest against the social con-

* Cornhill Magazine, December 1900.

ventions and the law, in full knowledge of the facts, acquired during four years as governess in a reputedly respectable household.

From March 1841 to June 1845 she was employed in the family of the Reverend Edmund Robinson of Thorp Green Hall, Little Ouseburn, near York, having already spent a year in another family, the Inghams of Blake Hall, Mirfield. Her first novel *Agnes Grey*, published 1847, reflects the experience gained in this earlier post, and *Wildfell Hall* is the direct outcome of the later experience

She left two direct statements about her situation with the Robinsons, one in a diary written after only a few months with them: the other, at the end of four years. The first reads: '... I dislike my situation and wish to change it for another ...'* The second, dated 31 July 1845, referring to that earlier entry reads: '... I was then at Thorp Green & now I am only just escaped from it. I was wishing to leave it then & if I had known that I had four years to stay how wretched I should have been; but during my stay I have had some very unpleasant and undreamt of experiences of human nature ...' What she had seen and suffered in those four years, reviewed in retrospect, became the inspiration of *Wildfell Hall*.

One might ask why, feeling as she did, she remained with the Robinsons; the answer is she did it for her brother.

At twenty-five, Branwell Brontë, whose precocious talents had roused extravagant expectations of a splendid career in his doting family, had, after four successive and ignominious dismissals from previous posts, proved himself unemployable. He was not without remarkable gifts: a fluent versifier (well-thought of by such writers as Hartley Coleridge and James Martineau), a passionate lover of literature and music, a good Latinist, a passable performer on the flute; possessed of plenty of Irish blarney, but trained in nothing and, fatally for himself, a very personable young man.

The Robinsons were in need of a tutor for their twelve-year-old son Edmund, and Anne, engaged as governess to the three daughters of the house, proposed him for the post, as a last chance for

* Diary-paper, 30 July 1841.

him. He was interviewed, made an excellent impression, and was engaged.

To begin with, the stimulus of the new and luxurious surroundings acted like a tonic on his shattered morale. The Robinsons were well-connected; Mrs Robinson had church dignitaries and M.P.s among her connections; they rode to hounds and attended the County balls at York; the ambiance perfectly suited Branwell's fastidious tastes; he also suited his employers. After the successive failures of his previous posts his present success was an unhoped-for consummation to his much-tried family. He retained his position for two-and-a-half years. For that reason Anne stayed on with him, despite her increasing dislike of the Robinsons and their whole way of life.

At Thorp Green the ruling spirit was not the master of the house, but Mrs Robinson, a beautiful and unscrupulous woman. Branwell found favour in her sight; unbalanced, gullible and naïve, he believed himself loved by her and returned her advances with an unbridled passion. The intrigue was inevitably discovered (even the children knew of it) and when at last it came to Mr Robinson's knowledge, Branwell was dismissed at a day's notice.

This time, there was no recovery possible. It was not the disgrace that shattered him, but the heart-break of forcible separation from the woman he believed returned his love with an equal love. He took to drugs and drink and died of delirium tremens at thirty-one.

His family was spared no part of his agony. They sheltered him for three years, nursed him as best as they could, wrestling with his drunken bouts and his suicidal attempts; paid his debts to all the publicans at a ten-mile round.

For all this suffering Anne Brontë held herself responsible; had she not introduced Branwell into the Thorp Green household, his life would not have been ruined. Mrs Robinson had been altogether too subtle for both of them. While Anne disliked her, she could not conceive of her debauching Branwell until too late. What broke Branwell's heart was the discovery, a good year after his dismissal, when Mr Robinson conveniently died, that the lady had no intention whatever of renewing contact with him; alleging a bogus clause in her husband's Will that she would be cut off

from her inheritance if she remarried, she effectually kept Branwell at bay; and in due course remarried a wealthy and titled relative, Sir Edward Dolman Scott, with whom she enjoyed a great personal success in London society.

Of all these facts Anne became fully apprised and left her family in no doubt of Mrs Robinson's culpability towards Branwell; a view which, transmitted in time to Mrs Gaskell, coloured her account of the affair in her eventual biography of Charlotte Brontë; a frankness which nearly cost her a libel-action. Mr Brontë himself did not hesitate to write to Mrs Gaskell denouncing Mrs Robinson as his son's 'diabolical seducer ...'*

Looking back on their joint experience at the Robinsons, what impressed Anne most was their ignorance of the world, their unpreparedness for life.

She judged it her duty to save other young creatures as inexperienced as they had been by warning them of the dangers lying in wait for them. She never blamed Branwell for what had happened; she blamed his upbringing.

As she wrote in the Preface to the second edition:

> ... My object in writing the following pages was not simply to amuse the Reader ... I wished to tell the truth, for truth always conveys its own moral ... Let it not be imagined, however, that I consider myself competent to reform the errors and abuses of society, but only that I would fain contribute my humble quota towards so good an aim ... To represent a bad thing in its least offensive light is doubtless the most agreeable course for a writer of fiction to pursue; but is it the most honest ...? Is it better to reveal the snares and pitfalls of life to the young and thoughtless traveller, or to cover them with branches and flowers? ... if there were less of this delicate concealment of facts ... there would be less of sin and misery to the young of both sexes who are left to wring their bitter knowledge from experience ...

While admitting that the case she treated in the novel – Arthur Huntingdon and his set – was an extreme one, she could claim from *personal knowledge* that such characters did exist, and because of that knowledge had felt bound to use her knowledge to warn others. '... if I have warned one rash youth from follow-

* Letters 2 April 1857. Brontë Parsonage.

ing in their steps, or prevented one thoughtless girl from falling into the very natural error of my heroine, the book has not been written in vain . . .'

It was not Branwell's exact story that she could write, but she could and did depict from first-hand knowledge the awful sufferings of a drunkard's death, the fearful spectacle of his growing emaciation and mental agony.

What makes the book so readable today is its total honesty, its psychological truth. So clear-sighted and unbiased is the author, that she shows both the heroine and her odious husband as responsible for the disaster of their marriage. Helen, though young, charming and plucky, is self-righteous and like Annabella Milbanke before her, thinks herself competent of reforming a rake, and so enters cocksure into a fatal marriage against all advice. Huntingdon, though no Byron (he cannot bear his wife to read), is brilliantly described as a second-rate Lovelace, walking with a swagger, driving like a maniac, certain of his attraction for women, and indulged to the hilt all his life; an easy target for the card-sharpers, drug-addicts, lechers who make up his circle. He has no moral stamina to deny himself the least indulgence.

Arthur Huntingdon has, wrongly, been identified as a portrait of Branwell. Branwell had, for all his faults and weaknesses, a feeling heart and an enthusiastic nature; he loved all the arts, and, however unsuccessfully, wanted to practise them. Though vain and self-deluded, he had ideals; Huntingdon had none. Branwell was affable to servants, was highly popular with the villagers, was grateful to the aunt who brought him up; was capable of intense remorse for his misdeeds; Huntingdon had no feelings for anyone but himself; most outrageously insolent towards his servants, malignant in his treatment of dependants; angry with his wife for wearing mourning for the death of her father; sadistic towards his wife. His resemblance with Branwell rests on his total lack of self-control; his blasphemous language, his pleasure in shocking others; his drunkenness.

The character that has many resemblances to Branwell is Lord Lowborough who, despite a life of debauchery, has periods of remorse, is capable of better feelings; he has, also, Branwell's vivid imagination and like him, when jilted by the woman he loved, has

recourse to opium. In Lowborough's frenzied heart-searchings, in his religious torments, his many attempts at reform, his disastrous weakness and returns to the domination of the drug and to the influence of his rotten boon companions, we have a far clearer image of Branwell than in the creation of Huntingdon.

It is evident that at Thorp Green Anne Brontë had the spectacle of such men currently before her eyes, and was a helpless witness of their influence over her brother. What most struck her then, and haunted her afterwards when the experience had taken its toll of Branwell's life, was how ineffectual was the education given boys to affront the battle of life. She bitterly resented the difference in education given boys from girls, their reputed superiority over girls to temptation – of which she had seen the fallacy. In all their judgements on the subject of sex, the Brontës, and Anne most stoutly of all, were eloquent in proclaiming the equality of men and women. While girls, she wrote in her Preface, were to be sheltered from all knowledge of harm, boys, as Helen Huntingdon found, 'were to prove all things by their own experience, while our daughters must not even profit by the experience of others . . .' but be kept in total ignorance (Chapter III). 'Girls', wrote Charlotte Brontë after Branwell's disaster, 'are protected as if they were something very frail and silly indeed, while boys are turned loose on the world as if they, of all beings in existence, were the wisest and the least liable to be led astray . . .'*

The book is often melodramatic, never trivial. It is instinct with Anne's total dedication to truth. Its weakness lies in the structure, in the clumsy device of a plot within a plot. (Did not Emily Brontë use the same in *Wuthering Heights?*) The whole of Helen's married life is recounted in a diary which, as the secondary plot (treating of her life *after* leaving her husband) proceeds and her new life opens, she hands to the man who, knowing nothing of her past, is falling in love with her; her neighbour at Wildfell Hall, Gilbert Markham. She does this in conscience, wishing to spare him the pain of a hopeless passion, since she is still legally bound to Huntingdon.

George Moore, the critic, who rated Anne's works very high at

* Letter to Miss Wooler, 30 January 1846. Fitzwilliam Museum.

a time of their eclipse, has a most interesting comment to make on this fault in the book's construction in his *Conversations in Ebury Street* (1924). He considered that the 'weaving of the narrative in the first hundred and fifty pages revealed a born story-teller', but deplored that half-way through the book Anne broke down.

> Not from lack of genius but of experience. An accident would have saved her, almost any man of letters would have laid his hand upon her arm and said: You must not let your heroine give her diary to the young farmer ... Your heroine must tell the young farmer her story, and an entrancing scene you will make of the telling ... The presence of your heroine, her voice, her gestures, the questions that would arise and the answers that would be given ... would preserve the atmosphere of a passionate and original love story. The diary broke the story in halves ...*

How right was Moore! By the device of the diary the drama that wrecked Helen's life is seen at one remove, not in the heat of action, in the palpitating moments of hurt and disillusion, at the height of anger and recrimination.

Despite this error in the author's technical skill, Moore recognized in *Wildfell Hall* a 'quality of heat, one of the rarest qualities', which, taken together with all her other qualities, would, had she lived ten years longer, have given her a place beside Jane Austen, perhaps even a higher place ...'†

Moore went on to say: '... If Anne had written nothing but the *Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, I should not have been able to predict for her the high place she would have taken in English Letters. All I should have been able to say is: An inspiration that comes and goes like a dream. But her first story, *Agnes Grey*, is the most perfect prose narrative in English literature ...' A high claim indeed.

Perhaps Moore would not have been so categorical in his praise of *Agnes Grey* but for the blemish in *Wildfell Hall*, but as it was he went on to assert: '... *Agnes Grey* is a prose narrative simple and beautiful as a muslin dress ...' adding: '... it is more difficult to write a simple story than a complicated one ...' He

* Conversations in Ebury Street 218.

† CES. 219.

recognized from the very opening sequences of the story – the arrival of Agnes at the house of her employers – that 'we are reading a masterpiece ... Nothing short of genius could have set [the details] before us so plainly and yet with restraint ...'* '... it is the one story in English literature in which the style, characters and subject are in perfect keeping ...'

Charlotte Brontë made no secret of her dislike of *Wildfell Hall*. Her feeling about it could not be unbiased (though surely not hostile as George Moore believed) for to her it evoked too painfully the ruin of a once-admired brother, and its disastrous effects on Anne's health and spirits. She, rightly, ascribed Anne's subsequent death in great part to the burden it laid on her. Respecting Charlotte's feelings, Smith, Elder, waited her own death before finally publishing *Wildfell Hall* in a one-volume edition in 1859. Since then, it has regularly been included in all collected editions of the Brontës' works.

Moore's comparisons with the freshness and sweetness of *Agnes Grey* – its candour and realism and poetic grace, may help the reader of *Wildfell Hall* to see not only its imperfections but also its greater profundities, its deeper significance to the earlier work. One of the important features of *Wildfell Hall* is in the portrayal of the deterioration – not of Huntingdon alone – but of the heroine, Helen Huntingdon, who set out with such a high spirit, such infectious gaiety and hope upon her way. It is her growing awareness of the harm her husband is doing her, the hatred and the anger that is eating into the natural charity of her disposition, that decides her to leave him. She is no patient Griselda, but a strong-minded young woman who clearly weighs up the issues facing her: the destructive effect of the marriage on herself and its powerlessness to benefit Huntingdon. When, to torture her, he begins to force the boy to drink and imposes his mistress in the household as governess to the child, Helen, like any modern woman, walks out on him, taking her son with her.

Holding the strong religious convictions that she did, this, of course, could not be the end of the tale for Anne Brontë. To her, the wreck of Branwell's life was not merely a mortal tragedy; it

* CES. 222.