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# Motherless Women Writers: The Affect on Plot and Character in the Brontë Sisters' Novels

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Motherless Women Writers: The Affect on Plot and Character in the Brontë Sisters' Novels

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of Honors

By

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The Honors College

Midway Honors Program

East Tennessee State University

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**Introduction to Thesis:**

The idea that an author's heritage and environment can be reflected in the plotline of his/her narratives and in the development of each character is thought-provoking; while it is true that an author's voice may not be the same as the narrator's voice, the work is still influenced by the author and his/her perception of the characters, their world, and their journey. The characters expand from an idea the author has (suddenly or not) into a personality, a heart, and a voice that comes from the author's imagination onto the page the same as plot details might. The way the story unfolds and the way the characters interact with one another must be well crafted before the author is content, and this implies that the author's work is a reflection of his/her actual nature, ideas, and struggle. The Brontë sisters are no different, and I believe that their struggle of being raised without a mother influenced the way they saw the world and the way that each interpreted her loss into each work. What I hope to discover is whether or not being motherless affected plot and character development in the Brontë sisters' novels.

**Approach:**

I believe being motherless at an early age influenced the novels of the Brontë Sisters, and I will examine this in three of their works: Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, and Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. I will be examining exactly how each sister created and interacted with her female characters, and how the plot was devised. I will also investigate how the central female character is affected by the lack of a mother figure or affected by an older female figure in the course of their narratives. These elements will prove whether or not the lack of a mother figure is necessary for the story to develop. I will look into the sisters' backgrounds through biographical accounts to express parallels between the

characters of the novels and the Brontë Family and their acquaintances if any parallels reside in these works. I will be constructing this thesis in the following manner: I will provide a brief discussion of the lives of the Brontë sisters in a background section. I will also introduce and discuss the three sections of each work that best emphasizes the motherless circumstance in each novel. Next, I will provide a parallel section where I will delve into how the elements touched on from the novel coincides with the life of the author. Lastly, I will provide a discussion of the significance of my findings and how those findings are still relevant today.

### **Background:**

The motherless Brontë sisters created works that reflect each of their own personalities and their struggle to find balance in their short, fascinating, and tragic lives. The Brontë sisters lived in an isolated part of England known as Haworth. It was filled with moors and wilds from which the setting of all of their novels came to fruition; as the following quote from *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* emphasizes: “The soil was thin and poor: bits of grey rock here and there peeped out from the grassy hillocks; bilberry-plants and heather—relics of more savage wildness—grew under the walls; and in many of the enclosures, ragweeds and rushes usurped supremacy over the scanty herbage” (Brontë, Anne, Kindle 357-358). The Brontë sisters created plotlines of their novels that were realistically based on the society they grew up seeing and reading about. Their lives are greatly reflected in the plots and the characters they so brilliantly crafted.

The sisters were removed from city life at a young age and brought into the solicitude of the country by their father, perhaps to prolong the life of the children’s ailing mother. The only result of their move, however, was isolation from society into an area where the water was contaminated (and children’s life expectancy was not high), and the death of their mother from

cancer was imminent. The oldest children were then sent to a boarding school where conditions were so dismal that the health of the older children was affected. The conditions left Charlotte in poor health for the remainder of her life. The two eldest daughters died from tuberculosis that they both contracted at the boarding school. This, coupled with the death of their mother, seemed to have a lasting effect on all the remaining Brontë children.

Charlotte, the only surviving child was then returned to Haworth and, along with the remaining children, was looked after by Patrick Brontë their father, who “had a kind heart, though he was rather severe sometimes” (Brontë, Emily 24). This quote from *Wuthering Heights* regarding Mr. Earnshaw seems to apply to their father who, along with their Aunt Elizabeth, reared them with a stern but loving hand. Their educational pursuits were left to them. They were given access to a large library and tutors, but teaching one another seemed to be the most consistent instruction they received. So the remaining Brontë children read to one another, and thus learned together, creating a lifelong bond between them—an unbreakable bond that first took form in imaginary worlds. This bond and their passion stayed with them into adulthood, but was greatly tested when the only son Branwell became an alcoholic and nearly brought the family to ruin.

The Brontë children that I am focusing on are the three daughters, who wrote about what they felt, what they saw, who influenced them, and lastly who never had a chance to influence them (their late mother). The Brontë sisters all led melancholy lives while trying to create stimulating lives for themselves through their own actions and hard work. The family did not have much fortune to gain the daughters an advantageous marriage, so they were left to provide for themselves and to deal with their unwell and unhappy brother Branwell. The only option the young sisters had was to get an education that would allow them to teach at community schools

or as governesses at surrounding estates, since women's writing was not well received. The Brontë sisters thus made their own way and had firsthand insights into the life of educators and governesses, a main component of *Jane Eyre*.

The Brontë sisters each are described as having personalities as different as the works that each produced. According to biographical accounts, Emily Brontë was the dark sister and is depicted most of the time as a recluse who tried to keep her writing to herself. Emily Brontë's dark and almost wild nature truly is reflected in the characters and plotline of *Wuthering Heights*. Charlotte, on the other hand, is the most written about sister and is nearly always described as the most sensible and realistic one (in her adult years), which is also greatly emphasized in her novel *Jane Eyre*. Less is known about the youngest sister Anne, but by all accounts she was compassionate, gentle, and loyal to her family (especially Emily), which is captured at least in sections of *The Tenant of Windfell Hall* (Ingham, Mark, and Barker).

### ***Wuthering Heights***

The tone of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* is supernatural, dark, romantic and driven by many devices. The most prominent device is the absence of a mother figure, which emphasizes the fact that being motherless did have an effect on Emily Brontë, who used motherless characters to allow for the story to take place. *Wuthering Heights* has two main female characters who get into complicated situations because they lack the guidance of a mother. The only older female figure who has a presence in the novel is Nelly, but she cannot be classified as a "mother figure." The affected characters, Cathy and Catherine (as I will refer to them), have lasting influences in their lives. Both are influenced by the strongest character, who is not the mother (as with Cathy), or they are forced into a life they never sought because of their

mother (as with Catherine); either way the presence of a mother would have not allowed for the story to take place. The lack of a mother figure in *Wuthering Heights* becomes clear in three sections of the novel: the rearing of Cathy after the death of Mrs. Earnshaw, her wild nature and short adult life, and the life of Catherine after her mother Cathy's death.

I. Cathy is an unusual female character for the Victorian era. She is passionate, dark, and impulsive. Cathy emphasizes everything Emily Brontë was, just as this novel reveals Emily Brontë's own experience, apparent as everything in the novel comes about as a result of Mrs. Earnshaw's death. The death of the mother character creates a void in the central female character Cathy, who is wild by nature because she lacks her mother's guidance and education. Cathy loses her mother in the most important transition of her young life, the one from a girl to woman. At this point in the novel, Heathcliff also enters the plot, creating an avenue for Cathy's impulsive nature. Heathcliff is the playmate her mother was quite against before she passed: "Mrs. Earnshaw was ready to fling it out of doors: she did fly up, asking how he could fashion to bring that gipsy brat into the house, when they had their own bairns to feed and fend for?" (Brontë, Emily 24).

*Wuthering Heights* does have an older female character, Nelly, who takes a prominent role after the death of Mrs. Earnshaw; however, she is not an authority figure for Cathy, as Cathy never listens to her requests or her concerns. Cathy, therefore, has no one to rein her in, to curve her impulses or her resulting arrogance that surfaces in the novel and begins to create a selfish young lady. As Nelly explains, "At fifteen she was the queen of the country-side; she had no peer; and she did turn out a haughty, headstrong creature! I own I did not like her after infancy was past; and I vexed her frequently by trying to bring down her arrogance" (Brontë, Emily 44). The guidance Cathy lacks is not supplied by the father character either as he just allows his

children (and Heathcliff) to do as they wish. This implies that the late mother was the most authoritative of the couple, and Mr. Earnshaw often traveled while the children were young, leading to the next section of Cathy's journey—her unsatisfying adult life.

II. Without the guidance of a mother during her childhood and adolescence, Cathy develops into an unpolished young woman. She is greatly changed when, after an accident, she spends several months at the Lintons' estate. This change brings about the greatest struggle in the novel, the separation of Heathcliff and Cathy, and this struggle results in the obsession the two characters soon develop for one another. Brontë implies Cathy has no one present to help her become civil and a fully functional adult (though Nelly tries), so she becomes a mirror image of the person who is the most influential in her life. Heathcliff's wild nature leaves its mark on Cathy as she does not have much in the way of self-restraint and even has moments of uncultivated outbursts like Heathcliff such as the following:

She stamped her foot, wavered a moment, and then, irresistibly impelled by the naughty spirit within her, slapped me on the cheek... Little Hareton, who followed me everywhere, and was sitting near me on the floor, at seeing my tears commenced crying himself, and sobbed out complaints against 'wicked aunt Cathy,' which drew her fury on to his unlucky head: she seized his shoulders, and shook him till the poor child waxed livid. (Brontë, Emily 48)

Cathy is thus not the person she would have been if her mother had lived; without a mother she becomes unruly, and yet as an adult she tries to hide this nature to fit into the Linton society. Cathy, therefore, leads two separate lives as Nelly explains:

In the place where she heard Heathcliff termed a 'vulgar young ruffian,' and 'worse than a brute,' she took care not to act like him; but at home she had small



inclination to practise politeness that would only be laughed at, and restrain an unruly nature when it would bring her neither credit nor praise.

(Brontë, Emily 45)

Cathy is then influenced further by those around her, and though she loves Heathcliff as this line suggests, “he shall never know how I love him: and that, not because he’s handsome, Nelly, but because he’s more myself than I am. Whatever our souls are made of his and mine are the same” (Brontë, Emily 55), she slowly begins to see a life with him as her path to ruin.

Heathcliff leaves to make himself a better man for Cathy who is no longer his mirror image. Upon his return, Cathy lacks the guidance of her mother again and fails to realize that she has a wonderful life and a husband to whom she should be loyal; she seems to forget the happiness marrying Edgar has brought since Heathcliff’s departure. Cathy is too intertwined with Heathcliff once again, and when they reunite, she is not aware of the errors she makes and becomes wild and cruel to those around her until she is unable to cope with the loss she has brought upon herself. Heathcliff states: “Teach me now how cruel you’ve been— cruel and false. Why did you despise me? Why did you betray your own heart, Cathy?” (Brontë, Emily 109). Cathy wills herself to death because she was never taught how to cope with the challenges of life. Cathy just ignored her problems for years because she was never given any other means to survive life’s disappointments and thus when she is reminded of her past, the thin veil of denial she put into place fails and she is overwhelmed by her life. This leads to the second half of the novel, the life of her daughter.

III. In the second half of *Wuthering Heights*, young Catherine comes into the story, and she is raised in isolation. She is naïve about the love triangle that brought her mother to her end. Raised by her kind and sheltering father, Catherine is kept away from the woes that are not far

from her at *Wuthering Heights*. She has never known her mother, and this creates a curiosity in the young girl as well as a longing to know more of the family she can know. This creates a way for Heathcliff to get to her as well. As a result, Catherine becomes a captive under Heathcliff's control, as a result of her mother's actions, which also leads to her state of ignorance via her father. Catherine's becoming a young woman alone without her mother's love (like her mother before her) leads to her danger as she is forced to stay under Heathcliff's roof.

Catherine's choices are made for her, and she is still left in darkness about her family—Catherine, being so sheltered then she withdraws emotionally to a great extent because she does not know better measures for dealing with her new surroundings, as Lockwood notes when he first meets her:

I was pleased to observe the 'missis,' an individual whose existence I had never previously suspected. I bowed and waited, thinking she would bid me take a seat. She looked at me, leaning back in her chair, and remained motionless and mute... She never opened her mouth. I stared— she stared also: at any rate; she kept her eyes on me in a cool, regardless manner, exceedingly embarrassing and disagreeable. (Brontë, Emily 6/7)

Catherine is also forced into a union with her cousin Linton because Heathcliff is trying to undo the misdeeds in this generation that occurred during the last through Cathy. Catherine is the focal point of Heathcliff's revenge towards her father and his vehemence towards her late mother until his untimely death, freeing Catherine at last. The motherless aspect of *Wuthering Heights* is greatly highlighted in the affects seen in Cathy's wild nature as a child and as an adult because of her unusual and motherless upbringing at Wuthering heights as well as Catherine's unfortunate fate until Heathcliff's demise.

### **Parallels of Plot and Character:**

The life of Emily Brontë and the plot of *Wuthering Heights* share many parallels, most obviously, the death of a mother. However, there are other similarities as well, such as an unsupervised childhood on moors and wilds, isolation from outside society, and dealing with an alcoholic (in both instances, brothers). There are three characters in *Wuthering Heights* that seem to have the most basis in reality. The first character is Cathy who appears to be a self-portrait of Emily Brontë; the character seems to reflect all of the traits that Emily was known for. Since this work is fiction, the character Cathy compared to Emily Brontë is exaggerated for this purpose. Secondly, Catherine seems to be a representation of Anne Brontë, as the character in the beginning is sweet and compassionate and loyal to her family to such an extent that she goes in search of them and then refuses to leave her cousin after her arrival.

Catherine is also likely to be a reflection of Anne because Emily and she, according to biographical accounts, were closer to one another than they were the other members of their family. Lastly, Hindley shares many characteristics with Branwell, the only male child of the Brontë family, with his high-strung nature as a child and his eventual alcoholism. The only difference is that Branwell did not have the loss of a wife to drive him to turn to alcoholism; he had the obsessive love for his employer's wife instead, and needed guidance and motherly love.

### ***Jane Eyre***

The plot of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* is influenced by many elements of the life of the author, such as the morality and religious beliefs that are present throughout the novel and are values that Patrick Brontë tried to instill in all of his children. The main focus of *Jane Eyre*,

however, is the life of an orphaned girl whose story is driven by the death of both her parents. Jane's lack of a mother figure is the main plot device and driving force of the novel. Jane loses her parents at an early age, and because of this, she is placed into the care of an emotionally distant guardian. Jane is a troubled child who has issues with life, and at times an obsession with death, which gives the novel a supernatural tone and is no doubt brought about by her parents' death. Later in the novel Jane also faces the loss of Miss Temple who leaves Lowood School (and Jane) to find a governess position; however, this event allows Jane to follow her example and find her place in the world at Thornfield Hall. It is also during her time at there that Jane's lack of contact with society becomes all too clear through her interactions with Mr. Rochester. The effects of not having a mother are highlighted in three sections of *Jane Eyre*: the time Jane spends at her Aunt's estate, her time at Lowood School for the underprivileged and her time with the kind Miss Temple, and her life at Thornfield Hall.

I: *Jane Eyre* is a strong and moral heroine whose personality is defined by the loss of her parents as a young child. At the beginning of the novel Jane longs for escape from her loveless relatives. She needs to feel the love and closeness that only her family can give (but refuses), and this need no doubt stems from the loss of her parents, intensified by the maltreatment she receives instead of love at Gateshead Hall, as the following quote conveys:

I was a discord in Gateshead Hall: I was like nobody there; I had nothing in harmony with Mrs. Reed or her children, or her chosen vassalage. If they did not love me, in fact as little did I love them. They were not bound to regard with affection a thing that could not sympathise with one amongst them... I know that had I been a sanguine, brilliant, careless, exacting, handsome, romping child—though equally dependent and friendless—Mrs. Reed would have endured my

presence more complacently; her children would have entertained for me more of the cordiality of fellow-feeling; the servants would have been less prone to make me the scapegoat of the nursery. (Brontë, Charlotte 7)

Jane has nothing in terms of money, beauty, or connection; she was not allotted any of these elements from her late parents and does not receive the elements she needs from those entrusted with her care. This creates Jane's longing for respect, love and escape, which become the main elements she searches for. Jane also becomes fascinated with death because of the loss of her parents and her uncle, and this coupled with extensive reading becomes the means by which she first gains escape from the loss and mistreatment she is faced with in her early life. Jane also slowly becomes strong-willed, self-reliant, and brave as she does not receive guidance or sanctuary from years of abuse and finally strikes back, which leads to her next journey—the move to Lowood School.

II: On Jane's removal from Gateshead Hall, she is unaware that her safety has been put in jeopardy, no doubt from her lack of knowledge of the world. Being raised as an unequal member of her family, she embraces being taken away from all that she has come to know as this quote captures:

If I had lately left a good home and kind parents, this would have been the hour when I should most keenly have regretted the separation: that wind would then have saddened my heart; this obscure chaos would have disturbed my peace: as it was I derived from both a strange excitement, and reckless and feverish, I wished the wind to howl more wildly, the gloom to deepen to darkness, and the confusion to rise to clamour. (Brontë, Charlotte 36)

Jane hopes for a better life and a way to uncover the misdeeds her relatives have done her but is unable to manage either at Lowood. The conditions are worse than those she faced at Gateshead, and Jane's Aunt Reed convinces those in charge that Jane is a deceitful child. Jane's treatment is worse than that of the other girls, which is highlighted when she breaks her slate and is publically shamed by Mr. Brocklehurst:

“My dear children,” pursued the black marble clergyman, with pathos, “this is a sad, a melancholy occasion; for it becomes my duty to warn you that this girl, who might be one of God's own lambs, is a little castaway: not a member of the true flock, but evidently an interloper and an alien. You must be on your guard against her; you must shun her example; if necessary, avoid her company, exclude her from your sports, and shut her out from your converse. Teachers, you must watch her: keep your eyes on her movements, weigh well her words, scrutinise her actions, punish her body to save her soul. (Brontë, Charlotte 44)

This section of the novel does, however, allow Jane to grow close to a couple of female characters who are kind to her, and through their presence she is able to experience love and acceptance which she has longed to receive. This section also showcases Jane's spirit as Helen, her dear friend, dies of consumption. As a result of this and Jane's ordeal, Miss Temple, an older female character, takes steps to improve the school. Lowood becomes a place where Jane gains an education, the element she needs to be self-sustaining. Miss Temple is kind to her but is placed in the novel for a specific purpose as she leaves Jane behind for an opportunity to depart from Lowood. The placement of Miss Temple is so that Jane can follow her example of advertising as governess, which allows Jane to find her way to the next section of her story, working at Thornfield Hall.

III: In this section, Jane leaves Lowood and arrives at Thornfield Hall, where yet another isolated existence begins. Jane only has the servants, Mrs. Fairfax and her ward to keep her company, which leaves her longing for more companionship, interaction with diverse groups, and people who have common interests with her. Her longing for connection no doubt stems from the loss of her mother, father and Miss Temple. Jane needs to find a connection with someone who can give her all the elements that are missing from her life, as the following quote suggests, “I desired more of practical experience than I possessed; more of intercourse with my kind, of acquaintance with variety of character, than was here within my reach” (Brontë, Charlotte 74). Longing for something more leads Jane to carry a letter into town, which, inadvertently, creates a way for her to interact with Rochester.

The amount of contact and bantering between the two parties shows that Jane lacks the knowledge that she could be in danger of being attacked by a strange man. This is a shining example of Jane Eyre’s lack of societal contact, resulting from having no mother (or father) to introduce her to it and no doubt make her aware of its dangers, as the following quote conveys: “Have you seen much society?” “None but the pupils and teachers of Lowood, and now the inmates of Thornfield” (Brontë, Charlotte, 84). This section of the novel has one other female presence, Mrs. Fairfax, who does try to intervene in the budding relationship between Jane and Rochester: “I am sorry to grieve you, but you are so young and so little acquainted with men, I wished to put you on your guard. It is an old saying that ‘all is not gold that glitters’ and in this case I do fear there will be something found to be different to what either you or I expect” (Brontë, Charlotte 269). Mrs. Fairfax does not seem like a mother figure, however, because she is commonly described in the following manner: “Nor do I particularly affect simple-minded old

ladies. By-the-bye” (Brontë, Charlotte 89). She is seen as being foolish by Mr. Rochester and Jane is influenced by his opinion of her.

Mrs. Fairfax’s concerns and opinions do not sway Jane from continuing her interlude with Mr. Rochester. Mrs. Fairfax is a no-nonsense presence but does not seem to be a mother figure in Jane’s eyes and is used more as a foreshadowing device by Charlotte as Mrs. Fairfax frequently alludes to the anguish Jane will face if she continues to aspire to be with Mr. Rochester. Jane becoming romantically attracted to the master of the estate where her ward is seems to promote her level of interaction with society, and yet Jane is swayed by their time together:

An influence that quite mastered me,--that took my feelings from my own power and fettered them in his. I had not intended to love him: the reader knows I had wrought hard to extirpate from my soul the germs of love there detected; and now, at the first renewed view of him, they spontaneously revived, green and strong! He made me love him without looking at me. (Brontë, Charlotte 153)

Jane is inexperienced and sheltered, and Rochester is a man with the wisdom of worldly pursuits. Jane falls for him because he is the first male individual who treats her as an equal, who respects and loves her, and who gives her a sense of family. The motherless aspect in *Jane Eyre* is definitely the main theme throughout and is the only real way for Jane to end up at Thornfield Hall and with Mr. Rochester.

### **Parallels of Plot and Character:**

The life of Charlotte Bronte and the life of the main character of *Jane Eyre* have many similarities such as the loss of their mother, being in the care of an aunt, spending time at a



distant school as children, having terrible living conditions, being in isolated locations, being involved with an older man, making a living as a governess. All of these elements seem to prove that Charlotte Brontë took scenarios from her own life and created her most famous work. There are numerous characters in *Jane Eyre* who appear to have a basis in reality as each of these characters reflect members of the Brontë family. This concept can be analyzed by looking at each individually.

First, Jane has definite parallels with the author. Both are sensible and moral, and both are described as not being typically beautiful. Second, Jane's Aunt Reed seems to be a reflection of the Brontë sisters' Aunt Elizabeth—perhaps not in the portrayal of her temperament but more as a reflection of her behavior since she was supposed to have a chosen favorite of the Brontë children whom she doted on, Branwell. Next is James Reed, Jane's cousin, who seems to be Charlotte Brontë's interpretation of her brother Branwell. According to biographical accounts, he bullied the two youngest daughters from time to time and also was an alcoholic, very near the same fate that James faces in the novel—bringing ruin to himself and his family. Next is Helen, the childhood friend of Jane, who dies as a result of the conditions at Lowood.

She is likely Charlotte Brontë's interpretation of Maria and Elizabeth Brontë, the two elder sisters who, along with her, undertook the conditions at their own Lowood School and lost their lives. Lastly, I believe that Edward Rochester is a character who is made in the image of Arthur Bell Nicholls, the man who loved Charlotte Brontë for years and was finally able to marry her. The description of Mr. Rochester is a great description of his real life inspiration: "My master's colorless, olive face, square, massive brow, broad and jetty eyebrows, deep eyes, strong features, firm, grim mouth,—all energy, decision, will,—were not beautiful, according to rule; but they were more than beautiful to me" (Brontë, Charlotte 153).

### *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

The plot of Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is affected by many elements that the author was subjected to in her lifetime, including social and societal pressures. The most significant plot device of the novel, however, is the use of the central motherless character, Helen. The novel is dictated by male narrator Gilbert Markham, whose one-sided perspective makes the plot push forward through numerous misunderstandings with the heroine. Helen's story begins with her in the care of her aunt and uncle. Her story slowly unfolds through Gilbert's investigation. The plot of the novel displays how a young woman, who longs for love and closeness, can be led down the wrong path by a handsome, cunning and charismatic suitor and how she can be so naive that she defies an older female presence, Aunt Peggy Maxwell, by marrying Huntingdon. Through the course of the narrative Helen tries to make amends for her past and escape her gloomy future with her incompatible husband. For the purpose of clarity, I discuss the events of the novel in order of their occurrence, not in the order in which they occur in the novel. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* has three sections that highlight the effect of being motherless and the act of defying an older female character has on the plot and characters deployment. These sections are as follows: Helen's introduction into society as well as her courtship with Huntingdon, Helen's unhappy marriage to Huntingdon, and her life at Wildfell Hall.

I: The main female character of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is Helen, and the beginning of her story highlights just how young and naive she is. Helen is orphaned and left in the care of her aunt and uncle; as a result, Helen sees herself as having worldly experience and believes that

she is incapable of being fooled by the façades that certain types of man can present. She believes she is capable of seeing people as they truly are:

You need not fear me, for I not only should think it wrong to marry a man that was deficient in sense or in principle, but I should never be tempted to do it; for I could not like him if he were ever so handsome, and ever so charming, in other respects; I should hate him—despise him—pity him—anything but love him.

(Brontë, Anne 1864-1866)

Helen is not as impervious to a deceitfully handsome face as she believes, however, and though she has sustained the loss of her parents, the actual result is that her loss leaves her with the belief that she is more experienced than most. Helen is head-strong and defiant to a flaw, evident in her interactions with her aunt. For example, she completely disregards her aunt's warning regarding shallow men and outward appearances: "It is foolish to wish for beauty. Sensible people never either desire it for themselves or care about it... Beauty is that quality which, next to money, is generally the most attractive to the worst kinds of men; and therefore, it is likely to entail a great deal of trouble on the possessor" (Brontë, Anne 1848-1849). Helen also refuses to marry Mr. Boarham, who is willing to give her an advantageous union. Helen is convinced she knows best; however, she is overwhelmed many times by her skewed judgment, and her longing for passion through attractive company, rather than true affection through companionship, leads her right into Mr. Huntingdon's web.

Helen longs for connection and yet believes she is too mature to follow the sage advice of her aunt. This seems to be derived from the loss of her parents and exasperated by the unyielding nature of her aunt's will. Helen is positive she is capable of making her own decisions and even more positive that she can help to fix the corrupt nature of Mr. Huntingdon, whom she decides is

everything she has ever longed for in a husband. However, his nature is dark, and he uses manipulation and mental abuse on Helen while they are in the courting stage, which haunts her: “You may think it all very fine, Mr. Huntingdon, to amuse yourself with rousing my jealousy; but take care you don’t rouse my hate instead. And when you have once extinguished my love, you will find it no easy matter to kindle it again” (Brontë, Anne 3227-3228). Helen is too naive and overconfident to realize that her Mr. Huntingdon is a thoughtless partner whose provoking behavior only intensifies in the next section of her story their marriage.

II: Helen is soon isolated from everyone she knows, and her happiness as a new bride quickly progresses into disillusionment: “Arthur is not what I thought him at first, and if I had known him in the beginning as thoroughly as I do now, I probably never should have loved him, and if I loved him first, and then made the discovery, I fear I should have thought it my duty not to have married him” (Brontë, Anne 2795-2796). Helen finally realizes that her aunt was correct in her assessment of Huntingdon and men like him as she sees that her new husband is not respectable. Huntingdon is temperamental, self-destructive and adulterous. Further still, he soon becomes a terrible influence on their impressionable child:

The little fellow came down every evening in spite of his cross mamma, and learned to tipple wine like papa, to swear like Mr. Hattersley, and to have his own way like a man, and sent mamma to the devil when she tried to prevent him. To see such things done with the roguish naïveté of that pretty little child, and hear such things spoken by that small infantile voice, was as peculiarly piquant and irresistibly droll to them as it was inexpressibly distressing and painful to me. (Brontë, Anne 4640-4643)

This section of the novel again highlights the headstrong and proud nature of Helen and how she seems to want to keep her remaining family in the dark about her abusive husband. Helen is looking for closeness with her new little family—no doubt because she has lost the closeness of a mother and the respect of her aunt.

Helen loses access to the ones she loves and only gains a husband who disrespects her by actively trying to turn their son, whose rearing is the only love and happiness Helen has in her life, against her. Another element highlighted in this section is Helen's own nurturing nature; she tries to give her child a regular, loving life while being a mother who is ever present. Helen displays a selfless love towards Master Arthur but also uses a stern hand for the child's well-being—as well as to offset his father's actions. Helen's becoming a mother (despite trouble within the marriage) further highlights that she is seeking the closeness and love that was lost to her as an orphaned child. She protects her son from being motherless partly by staying with his abusive father, but also by saving up for their safe departure from his presence. Helen's protective and loving nature toward her son is greatly highlighted in the next section of her story her freedom and reentry of Thornfield Hall.

III. Helen fully progresses into a strong independent woman in this section of the novel. She risks her life and her freedom to leave Mr. Huntingdon and move to Wildfell Hall. Helen lives alone and provides for herself through her drawings. She also reconnects with her opinionated spirit after being removed from Huntingdon. Helen realizes that the education of young women (no doubt by their mothers or surrogates) is a very important element in a woman's life and is something she was incapable of receiving herself: "I would not send a poor girl into the world, unarmed against her foes, and ignorant of the snares that beset her path; nor would I watch and guard her, till, deprived of self-respect and self-reliance, she lost the power or

the will to watch and guard herself” (Brontë, Anne 529-531). Helen thinks only of the education and protection of her son and no longer considers other people’s opinion of her. Helen does still seek companionship; however, she finds it with her son, nursemaid, and soon—despite her objections at first—Mr. Markham.

This section of the novel shows just how far Helen will go to protect her son, even gaining reproach for not allowing him the freedom to withstand temptation: “If you would have your son to walk honourably through the world, you must not attempt to clear the stones from his path, but teach him to walk firmly over them—not insist upon leading him by the hand, but let him learn to go alone” (Brontë, Anne 480-481). This section also gives Helen access to another older female presence Mrs. Markham, however, Helen has complete disregard for her opinions, and even has spirited interactions with her on more than one occasion, thus proving that she does not consider her a mother figure, but someone who knows nothing of her son’s rearing as the following highlights, “Would you use the same argument with regard to a girl?’ ‘Certainly not.’ ‘No; you would have her to be tenderly and delicately nurtured, like a hot-house plant—taught to cling to others for direction and support, and guarded, as much as possible, from the very knowledge of evil” (Brontë, Anne 514-516). Helen slowly reaches a point in her narrative where she is content to be alone and solely make a life for her son; an act her mother was unable to do for her. Her position changes when she allows Gilbert to revive her (as Huntingdon’s health fails him) and she realizes that she and Master Author can have a happy healthy family, which is the very situation Helen searched for during the course of her entire narrative. The motherless aspect in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* becomes clear in how Helen is brought up and how she is fooled into an abusive relationship with Huntingdon because she lacked guidance that only her mother would have given her.

**Plot and Character:**

The life of Anne Brontë and the life of the main female character of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* share many similarities, such as the death of a mother character, being taken care of by an older aunt, a passion for drawing, living an isolated life, dealing with a male relation with an alcohol addiction. All of these elements seem to prove that Anne Brontë took elements from her own life to create her last work; and this, added to the fact that there are numerous characters in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* who have a basis in reality and seem to reflect people who were involved with the Brontë family, seems to reinforce this concept. First, there is Helen, who is very much like the author herself sharing a passion for drawing, a mutual forgiveness for their fellow man, and kindness towards those in their life.

Second, Aunt Peggy seems to be a representation of the Brontë sisters' Aunt Elizabeth. She is a nurturing character but also one who tries to persuade Helen's way of life, which is not so different from what Elizabeth attempted to do with Anne Brontë during her childhood. Next there is Arthur Huntingdon who seems to have come about by taking elements from Branwell, as both are alcoholics and high-strung men who seek to dominate the people in their lives and establish their masculinity. Last is Gilbert, who seems to be a representation of a young man, named William Weightman of whom Anne was extremely fond but was never able to establish a relationship with. In the novel the relationship between Helen and Gilbert is the opposite of Anne and William as Gilbert longs for a relationship with Helen and she is reluctant; Anne was actually quite fond of William, but there were no signs that he returned that affection.

**Significance/Discussion:**

The reason I investigated the Brontë sisters and their works was because as female authors they faced many adversities in their lifetime, and I think that it is important to understand that creative figures—female or male—have difficulties in their lives and can use those adversities to their advantage and find recognition, to inspire future generations, and to help those who look up to their brilliance. I find it interesting that from the barren moors, a motherless childhood, and the isolation of Haworth these three women were able to find inspiration and write great works of fiction and self-reflection which are still relevant today. I think it is important to understand the motivation behind great works of literature, and though these works are fiction; there are still many elements that are from each author and her interpretation of the life that they all shared on the moors. I investigated the following question: Did being motherless affect plot and character development in the Brontë sisters' novels? Upon researching the Brontë sisters through the use of biographical accounts and one work from each, I have found links between their lives and their novels, which I believe supports the fact that the childhood loss of their mother created the path that each novelist took to create her works.

These works are true reflections of the authors' lives in many instances. I have found sufficient evidence that their struggle of being reared without a mother did influence the way that each saw the world and the way that each took her view and created, interacted, and brought to life the central female characters in each of their novels. The element that each of the works share after all is the loss of a mother character; in all three of the novels this plot device is strategically placed and possibly accompanied by the loss of a surrogate mother, or by deifying a mothering figure and these accompanying plot devices were placed in the plots for particular purposes which allowed the continuation of the narrative. This plot device and its accompanying devices could be compared to the popular women's novels of the time. However, these devices



can also be linked to the Brontë sisters' own knowledge of the situations that were portrayed in their works. The motherless character plot device has grounds in their lives, and each novel that they wrote has parallels to the author who created it. Thus, all the elements are present to convey that their lives were reflected in their works, and each sister wrote about what she knew, whom she interacted with, who influenced her, and lastly who was unable to influence her, the late Brontë mother.

After my investigation of the lives and novels of the Brontë sisters came to a close a notion of why their works have stood the test of time became apparent. The Brontës created characters (after themselves) who are a part of a larger group of motherless characters. These types of characters have been present in literature as far back as myths and fairytales which suggests that the motherless pattern is present in works because it is identifiable with the audience and the writers of the works. Today is no different as the Brontë sisters' novels are still read, movies are adapted from their pages, and other works are created that emulate their ideas because these works touch the lives of the modern reader. Being raised without a mother or even the lack of a positive role model (be it male or female) is present today just as it was in the Victorian Era. So, modern readers continue to revisit these novels because they feel a strong connection to the motherless characters and the difficulties these characters all face without a positive role model in their lives.

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