Chapter – IV

Anne Bronte: The Cinderella Amongst the Brontes.

Are you lonely here, dear Soul? Is your grave
Too far from your own loved Haworth moors?
Do you turn a stoical or scornful face
To posterity's belittlers of you and yours?

Thus runs the epitaph at Anne's grave in Scarborough. One feels a pang when one wonders whether Anne Bronte would face up to the myriad criticisms and reviews of her two novels, *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* with a stoical or scornful face. The physically frail yet mentally strong sister of the Bronte family did not live that long to reconnoitre the reactions raised by her two novels. Yet, on skimming through the majority of the adverse reviews drawn forth by Anne's output, one feels a dash of surprise not unmixed with indignation to find that most of the critics found Anne's work not up to the mark, when set against those of her more critically acclaimed sisters, Emily and Charlotte Bronte.

E. P. Whipple, in his article "Novels of the Season" brought out in the October, 1848 issue of the *North American Review* (cxl, 354-69), disparagingly decries *The Tenant*
The work seems a convincing proof, that there is nothing kindly or genial in the author’s powerful mind and that if he continues to write novels he will introduce into the land of romance a larger number of hateful men and women than any other writer of the day ... The reader of Acton Bell gains no enlarged view of mankind, giving a healthy action to his sympathies, but is confined to a narrow space of life and held down, as it were, by main force, to witness the wolfish side of his nature literally and logically set forth. But the criminal courts are not the places in which to take a comprehensive view of humanity and the novelist who confines his observation to them is not likely to produce any lasting impression except of horror and disgust. (xli, 354-69)

Yet, a thorough and critical reading of Anne's novels makes one feel that most of the adverse reviews that came her way were unwanted and rather unmerited. Yet, it does surprise one into wondering what on earth could have been the reason for critics and readers becoming so adverse to Anne's works. For one thing, Anne's novels saw the light of day when the novels of her sisters Emily and Charlotte were
already basking in the limelight. Adverse reviews were there for their novels too. Yet books like Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights had already grabbed the attention of discerning critics. When Anne came into the picture, she was already treading on well-ploughed land to make her own mark. Fated to be the Cinderella of the Bronte trio, Anne struggled to launch out on a distinctive course with her carefully written novels.

But strangely enough, none other than Charlotte herself contributed largely to Anne’s denigration as a novelist. Right from the beginning, Charlotte kept babying Anne with words like ‘gentle’ whenever she wrote or spoke of her. These epithets, in Winifred Gerin’s words, ‘stuck to her like a burr which nothing can dislodge’. Over and above that, Charlotte underrated Anne’s The Tenant in even clearer terms when she wrote a letter to W.S. Williams, reader for Smith, Elder and Co, barely two years after Anne had been laid in her grave in Scarborough:

“Wildfell Hall” it hardly appears to me desirable to preserve.
The choice of subject in that work was a mistake – it was too little consonant with the character, tastes and ideas of the gentle, retiring, inexperienced writer…

One queer fact is that, closely related as Charlotte was with her sisters, she never thought twice about making cutting remarks about their works too. Somerset Maugham, in his essay on Wuthering Heights in his The World’s Ten Greatest
Novelists, pinpoints the issue: 'From Charlotte letters, one gathers that she was puzzled and often irritated by Emily, and it is plain she didn’t know what to make of Wuthering Heights; ... She felt constrained to apologise for it. When it was proposed to republish it, she undertook to edit it. One is inclined to say that Charlotte never knew her sister.' (129-30)

Somerset Maugham could as well have said ‘her sisters’.

Moreover, the fact that Anne’s novels, especially The Tenant, had a heavy amount of didacticism implicit in its accurate portrayal of a profligate, corrupt society of drunken rowdies, and the subsequent consequences, could have been a reason for its relative unpopularity. The more literature advances towards modernism, didacticism and pedantry seem to become an anathema to art. The tendency of Anne in The Tenant of Wildfell Hall to try and hold up the rough edges of social ills and evils, might have gone against her with the critics. On top of that, Anne had framed out her novel in an epistolary format, thereby diminishing its readability a little. But here, I would attempt to establish as firmly and clearly as possible that all the criticisms down the years that have tended to represent Anne as the Cinderella among the Bronte sisters, do not stand to reason on scrutiny. Much of the pejorative preconception and prejudice that have been levelled at Anne’s works, therefore, call for close analysis so as to facilitate a new approach to Anne’s work.
Before going on into intricate analyses of Anne’s literary output, I would like to raise the question of how much gothic her works were, since the central proposition of my research is to trace the elements of the new Gothic in the Brontës. *Agnes Grey*, written in 1847, does not carry any characteristic features of the gothic in the conventional connotation of the term. No ghosts, no big foreboding, haunting castle-like abodes, no sinister ghoulish character, no hint of mystery can be traced in that book. It is all about ‘governessing’, its myriad hurdles in a stuck-up Victorian society that understands match-making and husband-hunting better than academics. The novel traces the fearless foray of the titular heroine into the world in search of her own identity and independence. After going through various phases of her personal and professional life the heroine emerges a happy woman, contentedly married to a not-so-handsome, yet practical man. The girl becomes all the more benefitted and also wiser for all the pitfalls and bumps she has had to get through in the short span of her life. Not a trace of the conventional gothic can be sniffed out in this story.

As for *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, the story is a bit different. The very title of the novel smacks anticipatorily of the gothic mystery. A little later, as the story moves on into the introductory chapter, the hall comes into the reader’s vicarious view through the awed eyes of the narrator Gilbert:

Near the top of this hill, about two miles from Linden-car,
stood Wildfell Hall, a superannuated mansion of the Elizabethan era, built of dark gray stone ...cold and gloomy enough to inhabit, with its thick stone mullions and little latticed panes, its time eaten air-holes, and its too lonely, too unsheltered situation—only shielded from the war of wind and weather by a group of Scotch firs, themselves half blighted with storms and looking as stern and gloomy as the Hall itself.

How closely similar does the description of the Hall sound to that of *Wuthering Heights* in Emily's sensational novel! Apart from its locational gloom, the Hall exudes a foreboding haunted 'feel' that definitely sets off a gothic ambience:

...the castellated towers of laurel in the middle of the garden, the gigantic warrior that stood on one side of the gateway, and the lion that guarded the other, were sprouted into such fantastic shapes as resembled nothing either in heaven or earth, or in the waters under the earth; but, to my young imagination, they presented all of them a goblinish appearance, that harmonized well with ghostly legends and dark traditions our old nurse had told us respecting the haunted hall and its departed occupants.
To top off the eeriness of the Hall, the readers are set alive with suspense and curiosity about who the mysterious tenant of the Hall is, why she keeps so much to herself, why she behaves in a strange manner and where she originally came from to live here as a tenant. Her very looks are described by Gilbert’s sister Rose in such peculiar undertones as to rouse curiosity rather than to satisfy any:

She is called Mrs Graham, and she is in mourning not widow’s weeds, but slightish mourning — and she is quite young, they say not above five or six and twenty — but so reserved! They tried all they could to find out who she was and where she came from ... (11)

The lady, young, beautiful, yet mysteriously swathed in mourning garb, lives like a recluse, out of sight of the prying commoner, thereby appearing as secrecy incarnate to society. She closely resembles the ur-Gothic heroine in her stunning looks and beauty. Graham, the part-narrator of the novel, is struck with wonder when he sees the lady in the church:

I beheld a tall, lady-like figure, clad in black ... Her hair was raven black, ... Her complexion was clean and pale; her eyes ... were concealed by their drooping lids and long black lashes, but the brows above were expressive and well
The lady is almost sequestered from the rest of Linden-car (the low-lying farmland where the events take place) as she seldom goes visiting or entertains guests. Gilbert, as he watches her, unwatched himself, said to himself not a little ironically, 'I would rather admire you from this distance; fair lady, than be the partner of your home' (14). Little did he know how inextricably his own fate lay intertwined with that of Helen Huntingdon, as the lady was called. Anne Bronte whiffs in an air of the gothic in this portrayal of a character who appears to be as mysterious and unfathomable as the house she lives in. Anne's gothic bent seems to have started right in her childhood when she, along with Emily, had created the mystifying Gondal characters. Yet somewhere down the line, Anne seemed to have lost her avid interest in the creation of these characters. Edward Chitham and Tom Winnifrith observe that Anne was ... showing indifference to Gondal from the beginning of the 1840s, and from then on, only seems to have played at Gondal in order to humour Emily (95).

From about 1847, Emily and Anne, inseparable as they were in the years before, seemed to go through a phase of mental distancing. The 'twins' -- as Ellen Nussey preferred to call them -- drifted apart mentally.

Anne's poem "Self-Communion", written between November 1847 and 17th April 1848, contains some lines which couch in poetic words the sad testimony of this
slight rift in their relationship. The poem begins cheerfully enough with a celebration of the joy of friendship:

Oh, I have known a wondrous joy
In early friendship's pure delight –
A genial bliss that could not cloy –
My sun by day, my moon by night.

But as the poem runs on, morbid bitterness of a crestfallen heart comes to the fore:

'My fondness was but half-returned.' (l.187) A certain shrinking back of the soul characterises the lines that follow:

I must check, or nurse apart
Full many an impulse of the heart
And many a darling thought:
What my soul worshipped, sought, and prized,
Were slighted, questioned or despised.

She continues in absolute bitterness to poetically assert her self-controlled identity:

Until at last, I learned to bear
A colder heart within my brest;
To share such thoughts as I could share,
And calmly keep the rest.
So, it becomes evident enough that she and Emily had begun to think apart at a certain stage of their lives. Many of Anne's own observations must have been 'slighted, questioned or despised'. And it is equally plausible that Anne herself had disapproved of many a thought of her sister's. Perhaps she did not approve of the way Emily had written out *Wuthering Heights*. One cannot help noticing the fact that Anne's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* had a number of similarities with *Wuthering Heights* in its depiction of the gothic in character and setting. It was almost as if Anne wanted the readers to notice the similarity, so as to draw an association with *Wuthering Heights*. But then, just as the affinity was established, she veered off in diametric contrast in certain matters, as if to underline the fact that she would prefer certain things to be portrayed in a different manner in *Wuthering Heights*. As far as the similarities are concerned, the titles are really strikingly alike with their references to mysterious, wind-swept houses – one has to do with *Wuthering Heights* – the other with *Wildfell Hall*. The 'W.H.' in the nomenclature of both the books is quite amusing. Besides, many of the characters in both the novels have the same kind of names, all beginning confusingly with 'H' – Hindley Hareton and Heathcliff in Emily's *Wuthering Heights* and Huntingdon, Hargrave, Halford, Hattersley and Helen in Anne's *Wildfell Hall*. Both the novels make good use of the Chinese-box kind of narrative. Lockwood begins the narration in Emily's novel while Gilbert Markham does it in Anne's. Both the novels open with the arrival of a tenant in a remote house. The similarities are not to be wished away for they do underline the suggestion that
Anne, writing presumably in 1847, deliberately incorporates in her novel some likenesses to *Wuthering Heights*, written in 1845-6. The underlying themes of the novels are similar too. Both *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant* deal with marriages of mismatches. In both, there is open portrayal of extra-marital relationships which are carried — quite modernistically beyond the shop-worn questions about fidelity or infidelity. In both, there are scenes of drunken insobriety and violence. The question of life after death arises in both the works. But the mode of treatment of the themes in the two novelists is quite dissimilar. As said earlier, the dissimilarity at times seems purposeful. It is almost as if Anne disapproved of the way in which the gothic side of *Wuthering Heights* — violent scenes, the drunken brawls and the morbid scenes of paranoid love — is portrayed. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* seems to have been meant by Anne as a corrective of sorts, where Anne shows life as more natural, more real. Violence as pictured in *Wuthering Heights* has been toned down in *The Tenant*. An example should suffice to bring out the difference in the two sisters' attitude to and art of representing the gothic of violence in the novels. In chapter xvii of *Wuthering Heights*, one finds a gruesome description of how Heathcliff attacks Hindley Earnshaw in sheer brutality. Isabella, Heathcliff's own wife, reports how he had countered Hindley's weak attempt to stave him off with a loaded pistol:

The charge exploded, and the knife, in springing back, closed into its owner's wrist. Heathcliff pulled it away by main force, slitting up flesh as it passed on, and thrust it
dripping into his pocket ... His adversary had fallen senseless with excessive pain and the flow of blood that gushed from an artery or a large vein. The ruffian kicked and trampled on him, and dashed his head repeatedly against the flags; (137)

Healthcliff, almost looks like a monster-figure of the ur-gothic when he, after this horrendous spate of fiendish behaviour, just walks away asking the servant to 'wash away that stuff' (referring to the blood that had oozed out of the wounds of the fallen man). The gothic here seems rather more sensational than real. In real life so much of devilish inhumanity is seldom found. Moreover, it is really unbelievable that after going through such sickening torture, Hindley should be alive the next morning. But in Anne's novel the gothic is there, set in through little incidents here and there that work collage-like to make up the picture of Anne's protagonist out of a harried woman, persecuted beyond toleration in a marriage full of broken promises. The woman marries for love and trust, yet lives to see the loss of both, in her unfortunate marriage to Arthur Huntingdon. To top it off, there were the drunken cronies of Arthur who even tried to take liberty with the hapless Helen and subject her to lewd insinuations and undignified behaviour, while Arthur turned an insouciant eye to all this. In fact, at these times, he used to be too busy himself with his own episodes of surreptitious liaison with another woman, Lady Lowborough. Helen had to be dragged through all this mental torment. When she fled her troubles and sought
shelter in Wildfell Hall, her persecution did not end. The curious eyes of a thousand and one neighbours, their enthusiastic conjectures as to who she is and what her past is, continued to haunt her life with the ghostly shadows of her past. Yet, she had no choice but to bring herself round to tolerating it all. This new gothic of insurmountable mental torment is much more plausible than the crude violence of Wuthering Heights. As for physical strifes, Anne comes very close to the scene of violence just referred to from Wuthering Heights, at the beginning of Chapter XIV of The Tenant. Markham, driven by green-eyed jealousy, seethes with vengeance against Mr. Lawrence. When the two are accidentally brought together riding side by side, Mr. Lawrence keeps up gentle banter quite civilly. Yet, Gilbert Markham is just waiting for him to make one single faux pas so that he can get a chance to 'open the floodgates of (his) soul' and pour out the 'dammed up fury that was foaming and swelling within.' (91). The moment Mr. Lawrence makes a slightly snide remark, Gilbert attacks:

Impelled by some fiend at my elbow, I had seized my whip by the small end, and — swift and sudden as a flash of lightning — brought the other down upon his head. It was not without a feeling of savage satisfaction that I beheld the instant, deadly pallor that overspread his face, and the few red drops that trickled down his forehead, while he reeled a moment in his saddle, and then fell backward to the ground (91)
Gilbert shrinks back in horror to think that perhaps he had killed the hapless man. Yet, the moment he finds him moving and writhing, all his malice floods back and he remarks with shocking meanness: 'It served him right—it would teach him better manners in future' (91).

How very human it is for Gilbert to expose himself to such rude schadenfreud. His behaviour, though rather shameful, is more natural than Heathcliff's in *Wuthering Heights*, when the latter binds up Earnshaw's wounds after beating him mercilessly black and blue. The savagery of his attacks does not really go down well with his sudden and incomprehensible display of tenderness in nursing the wounds of the beaten one. Yet, Anne's Gilbert behaves consistently, even if he behaves consistently mean. There lies Anne's psychological realism in contrast with Emily's rather high-flown melodrama.

Both the novels pivot round the central theme of marital discord. In both the novels marriages go on the rocks because of extramarital liaisons. What makes the two novels different from each other is the treatment of the same theme. In *Wuthering Heights*, Cathy, under the spell of a momentary attraction towards uppy snobbery, marries Edgar Linton, instead of Heathcliff, but lives to regret her choice bitterly. When Heathcliff shows up in her life again, her pent-up attraction for him brims over. Yet, union between the two is impossible for the bondages of a legal marriage. Hence, Emily has to take recourse to death to perpetuate the stormy love of this hapless couple. So Cathy dies, but not before an awesome display of passionate
intensity on the part of Heathcliff and herself. Heathcliff mocks Cathy's husband in front of her and she eggs him on with her indulgent silence. He breaks through barriers to meet her when she lies dying in her room. Cathy overwhelms him with a raging passion that only matches his own. Yet, all said and done, one does not really get to see much of Edgar Linton's faults. One still keeps wondering how much he has merited the betrayal of his wife. Readers are not allowed an inroad into his perspective, thereby, tending to make the narration a bit one-sided. The treatment of gothic display of furious love is more sentimental and sensational than anything else. But Anne's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* presents a different picture. Anne, more interested in portraying the gothic hidden in horrors of everyday living, rather than ghosts and spooks, had started the highlighting of marital discord as one of those unrestful topics right in her first novel, *Agnes Grey*. There, one gets to witness the embedded cruelty in the ordinary way of life in a family where young boys intensely enjoy the torment of little birds. Anne here highlights the gothic hidden in their routine existence. Rosalie Murray, one of the young ladies, marries into a rich family for its wealth and status. Agnes, the governess, has the dismay of seeing her, some few years later, a mere shadow of the vivacious coquette she used to be before marriage. Now known as lady Ashby, Rosalie tells Agnes of her dissatisfaction in marriage:

' I detest that man!' whispered lady Ashby, with bitter emphasis...'I thought he adored me, and would let me have
my own way; he did pretend to do so at first, but now he does not care a bit about me... He will do as he pleases, and I must be a prisoner and a slave. (693)

This gothic of passion and unrest caused by a rough-and-tumble married life is carried over in more clear terms in The Tenant. The Tenant is a story of double temptation and double failure: that of Huntingdon's and that of Helen's. Helen starts out as a pert, saucy, spirited girl who dares the chance of marrying a probable "reprobate", with the notion of saving her incomparable spouse. Yet, passing days make her realise that her conviction has been vain, her beliefs have come to nought. She stands shattered emotionally when she comes face to face with her husband's infidelity (in chapter xxxiii):

I must know the truth at once. I flew to the shrubbery. Scarcely had I reached it when a sound of voices arrested my breathless speed. 'We have lingered too long; he will be back,' said lady Lowborough's voice. 'Surely not dearest! ' was his (Huntingdon's) reply, 'but you can run across the lawn, and get in as quietly as you can: I'll follow in a while.' (238)

The anagnorisis of Helen's shattered home and honour is driven home when Helen hears her husband assert to the other women that he detests his wife Helen:
'But tell me, don't you love her still – a little?' said she (Lady Lowborough) placing her hand on his arm and looking earnestly in his face... 'Not one bit, by all that's sacred!' he replied, kissing her glowing cheek' (238)

Helen's ravaged being goes through its final spiritual rape, when in chapter XL, Huntingdon eviscerates her portfolio, rifles through its contents, and in the process, vandalises her privacy beyond restoration. Helen gathers up the shreds of her torn soul and manages to salvage a part of her own existence – her diary:

I could not bear the idea of his amusing himself over my secret thoughts and recollections; ... Oh, I would sooner burn it all than he should read what I had written when I was such a fool as to love him! (287)

Helen's graduation from a "fool" of a girl who can't tell a profligate in a thousand, to a mature, hardened woman of substance is effected by her continual struggle against her husband and herself. Reversing the usual fictional progress from pre-nuptiality to marriage, with the suggestions of happy post-nuptially in the horizon, Anne Bronte begins with post-nuptiality to show a breakage, thereby, leaving the heroine free for a pre-nuptial status, where she can consider prospects of a better re-marriage.
"Through this journey from "I love him" to "I hate him", emerges a different personality – that of Anne Bronte's 'New Woman'. She is strong, confident and wiser for her suffering. Anne's Helen reminds one of famous lines of W. B. Yeats's lines, though taken out of context: '...All changed, changed utterly. A terrible beauty is born.'

A terrible beauty indeed: mystifying in her sequestered existence, Helen with her pride, her aloofness, her strength, her beliefs, stands as the confident 'New Woman' who has the courage to make it on her own in the big, wide world. The point to be driven home here is that, Helen, portrayed with the gothic brush and the colours of all her tribulation and spiritual petrifaction, strikes one as more real than the passionate, blitzy Cathy of Wuthering Heights who sounds rather far removed from the real world of humdrum existence. She seems to be a creature of the tumultuous world of passions, emotions and stormy feelings where routine problems of food, lodging and honour do not hold much water. Passion is supreme there. She is more ethereal but Helen with her plethora of very realistic problems, stands rooted in the terra firma of actuality.

Anne makes wonderful use of what Robert Heilman characterised as the 'new gothic' in Charlotte Bronte. Anne does not let the gothic in the conventional sense of eerie, spooky ghostliness penetrate more than the veneer of her description of Wildfell Hall and its mysterious tenant. But that is only the tip of the iceberg. Her actual use of the gothic – in the new sense – comes out through her accounts of Helen's tribulation and her agonizing petelia from a hopeful young maiden to a mature, weather-beaten woman of substance. The gothic uncanny comes in the
description of Helen's torment in the hands of her husband, Arthur and his rowdy cronies. The gothic comes through the horrifying accounts of her spiritual ravaging – her mental pulverization.

Yet, Anne did not recount all these terrifying incidents just for exciting the gothic awe. Anne herself gives an ex cathedra observation on her aim of writing:

`My object in writing ... was not simply to amuse the Reader, neither was it to gratify my own taste, nor yet to ingratiate myself with the Press and the Public: I wished to tell the truth, for truth always conveys its own moral to those who are able to receive it. But as the priceless treasure too frequently hides at the bottom of a well, it needs some courage to dive for it ... (Preface to the second edition, III).`

Indeed, she did dive for the truth – the truth of the heart of darkness – the truth that people stash away in closets – the truth of a diseased social milieu. And it needed some doing on Anne’s part to make her feminine voice heard amidst a babble of criticism voiced by a very chauvinistic, patriarchal Victorian literary caucus. An unsigned review in the summer 1848 edition of *Spectator* spared no words in berating her:

*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, ... suggests the idea of considerable abilities ill applied. There is power, effect, and
even nature, though of an extreme kind, in its pages; but there seems in the writer a morbid love for the coarse, not to say the brutal; so that his level subjects are not very attractive, and the more forcible are displeasing and repulsive, from their gross, physical or profligate substratum.'

E.P. Whipple in his article "Novels of the Season" in the October 1848 edition of *North American Review* does not find much to gloat over in the delineation of Helen's character:

Helen, the heroine, is doubtless a strong-minded woman, and passes bravely through a great deal of suffering; but if there be any lovable or feminine virtues in her composition, the author has managed to conceal them. (355)

Anne's portrayal of Helen gets decried by yet another unsigned review in *Athenaeum* (July 8, 1848), too:

The position of the wife with regard to her husband's paramour is, ... treated with a sort of hard indifference... (670)

This allegation of implausible characterization extends beyond Helen to the other characters as well. Some other critics find it hard to believe that the drunken scenes
that followed many an alcoholic spree in *The Tenant* could ever happen in real life.

An unsigned review published in *Literary world* (12 August, 1848) blares out its objection against Anne's character cast:

...What a set of boorish cubs, nauseating profligates, and diabolical ruffians, does he present us, as specimens of social life...! when or where was there such a state of society, such a jumble of character and manners as he describes... (29).

All criticisms against Anne's fictioneering is topped off by the disparaging, demoralizing comment in the review in *Sharpe's London Magazine* (August 1848, VII):

...We consider the evils which render the work unfit for perusal (for we go that length in regard to it,) to arise from a perverted taste and an absence of mental refinement in the writer, together with a total ignorance of the usages of good society, rather than from any systematic design of opposing the cause of religion and morality. (181).
Going through all these reviews, a modern reader would feel picqed that a work of
careful, yet quiet, subdued and much underplayed talent should be thus
misunderstood and berated. Some find Anne's depiction of the drunken brawls too
morbid to be real. They feel that such extremities do not happen in real life at all. But
what about Branwell, Anne's own brother? Frustration led Branwell to sink into the
nadir of alcoholism and addiction. Anne had the misfortune to watch her own brother
giving himself up little by little to profligacy and disintegration. She had first-hand
experience to draw upon, when she sketched out the scenes of drunkenness in The
Tenant. No wonder she asserted with mystifying surety in her Preface to The Tenant:
'such characters do exist.' (4). This makes it surprising to see that a set of
critics could find this kind of behaviour so unusual and improbable, considering that
these things did happen in society. As Charles Kingsley says in Fraser's Magazine
(April 1849, XXXIX):

'There are foul and accursed undercurrents in plenty, in
this same smug, respectable, whitewashed English society,
which must be exposed now and then; and society owes
thanks, not sneers, to those who dare to shew her the
image of her own ugly, hypocritical visage' (418).

As for the criticism against the portrayal of Helen's character, one finds it difficult, in
the first place, to figure out what E.P. Whipple meant by 'lovable or feminine virtues'.
If being lovable and feminine is synonymous with being weak, dependent, sweetly tolerant and fatalistic, then we should be thankful that Helen did not fit the bill. For, that kind of lovability and femininity would only have succeeded in making a worm out of her. Without such virtues, she stands admirably as the woman of substance who has the courage and determination to fend for herself and be her own mistress. The basic fact about Helen is that she does not conform to the conventional picture of the coquettish, shy, man-hunting Victorian heroine. This is what must have irked a number of critics into despising her character. One of Charlotte Bronte's letters to W.S. Williams (September 1848), where she speaks up for herself and Anne, might serve very well to vindicate Anne's unconventional characterisation:

The standard heroes and heroines of novels are personages in whom I could never from childhood upwards take an interest, believe to be natural, or wish to imitate... Were I obliged to copy any former novelist, even the greatest, even Scott, in anything, I would not write. Unless I have something of my own to say, and a way of my own to say it in, I have no business to publish. Unless I can look beyond the great Masters, and study Nature herself, I have no right to paint. Unless I can have the courage to use the language of Truth in preference to the jargon of Conventionality, I ought to be silent.
Sure enough, ‘Truth’ it was that Anne was seeking to unearth, for hers was the zealous aim of reforming whatever little of society she could. She stated her objectives very clearly in her Preface to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*:

... If I have warned one rash youth from following 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, (IV)

And in order to go about her task Anne took it upon her own frail self to expose the myriad vices of society and its many anomalies. What strikes one as very evident is Anne’s contempt for the run-of-the-mill Victorian husband-hunting woman. She holds up the theme through exemplary instances of girls like Rosalie Murray in *Agnes Grey* and the unfortunate young Helen in *The Tenant*. Both the girls, flighty and reckless in the vigour of youth, marry for the dreamy notions of romantic love. Anne carefully grinds this idea of romantic love to smithereens with the portrayal of the break-down of their respective marriages. The highlighting of tormented marriages brings out yet another serious issue that Anne wanted to explore – the thousand and one anomalies of the marriage Act in Anne’s own time. Helen’s diary brings to the fore the fact that Helen, who had been swallowing the insult of watching her husband dallying about with other women – Annabella first, and then Miss Myers, the governess –
could not obtain a divorce though Annabella's husband, under the same circumstances, could. Helen has no legal right to the sole possession of her diary, her paints, her canvas, her pictures or the earnings from those pictures. She has no legal right to property (being property herself!). She cannot even call her son her own. She has to steal and smuggle him away from the husband's clutches. A thoughtful Anne, disturbed by the bafflements of a very lopsided marital law, plucked up the courage to point out the faults of the social and judicial set up of the day. Years later, the case of a certain Mrs. Norton made the headlines when the unfortunate lady was penalized by her husband with an allegation of adultery with some Lord Melbourne. Though she was proved innocent, her husband deprived her of her children, denied her maintenance and claimed for himself all that she had earned by writing pamphlets. All of these he could legally do, for the law considered the woman to be *ferne covert* who had no legal existence of her own, thereby having no right to property. After a lot of indignant publication on this issue in articles like "The Non-existence of Woman" in *North British Review* by Caroline Cornwallis in August 1855, and 'The Property of Married Women' in *Westminster Review* (October 1856), the first Married Women's Property Act was passed in 1882. But the astonishing fact is that writers like Anne were intellectually so ahead of their times that they had already explored the loopholes of the legal status of women. And Anne did it all through her vivid, moving and tragic characterisation of the suffering woman, traumatized by the harrowing experience of a marriage gone awry. Anne's use of the new gothic lies in her detailed and horrifying account of the spiritual and existential
outraging of a woman trapped in matrimonial bondage. Her gothic comes through the
unheimlich-in the chapters which delineate Helen's mental disintegration. Anne does it all beautifully, without once breaking the protective sheath of realism that lends the singular air of plausibility to the novel. Yet unfortunately, much of her talent has gone critically unnoticed. While alive, Anne's life was one big struggle against ill health and adverse circumstances, fortified by a strong determination to win through at all costs. After death, her battle against posterity's ill-born image of her and her works is still afoot. Hopefully, that, too will be fought with courage and determination to ultimate victory.


Magazine . XXXIX , Apr. 1849.


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