

Windows as liminal spaces in the tenant of wildfowl hall



The Brontë sisters utilized particular spaces in their novels as places of transgression and feminine power, often allowing characters to transcend the confines of civil society, and to commune more closely with the natural world. In *Jane Eyre*, different spaces such as Gateshead, Lowood School, Thornfield Hall, and Ferndean Manor allowed Jane varying levels of agency in her life and her relationships. Emily Brontë created a tense triad between *Wuthering Heights*, Thrushcross Grange, and the moors in *Wuthering Heights*; the energies tied to the estates and the spiritual wildness of the natural world influenced the behavior of the characters throughout the novel. Anne Brontë's use of space and of windows in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* subtly communicates ways in which the characters transgress social and emotional norms.

Tenant is a novel of tempestuous emotion and trauma, coolly swathed in the textual layers of Gilbert's letters, Helen's diary, and Anne's writing as a whole. The dynamic use of space as a filter allows for the characters' emotions to be fully felt and confessed. Brontë artfully uses transparency of windows as spaces for transgressive interactions; windows almost attain the status of pseudo Christian confessional. Three specific scenes in *Tenant* harness the liminal power of the window to emphasize the boundary being approach, crossed, or broken. During Huntingdon's pursuit of Helen, he literally enters the library by jumping through a window. When Helen shares Millicent's powerful letters with Hattersley, he must move to the window to fully process his emotions. Finally, at the end of the novel, Helen and Gilbert almost humorously pass in and out of a window to retrieve a white Christmas rose before eventually agreeing to marry. These three instances use the

window almost as a processing structure through which to reveal truths and experience vulnerability.

Huntingdon's unusual entrance through the library window metaphorically continues the 'hunting sport' he is returning from; he "threw up the sash, and sprang in" (135) through the window from outside, inappropriately interrupting Helen's creative work in pursuit of her as his 'prey'. Huntingdon literally transgresses the spatial boundaries dividing the interior and exterior world, and also violates the norms of proper movement between spaces. The unusual entrance foreshadows Huntingdon's interruptive character in Helen's life, and unnatural nature of their later marriage, in which he violates the ordinary boundaries and laws of marriage through adultery (as well as psychological abuse).

Later in the narrative, Helen reveals letters from Hattersley's wife for him to read; this revelation, which utilizes the written word of a woman as a direct and potent influence on a man's morality, must be processed by Hattersley near a window in the library. Hattersley's vulnerability upon hearing his wife's true opinions are manifested in his bodily reactions of blushing and crying, as well as an element of introspection and emotional processing that takes place while "staring out of the window". Reading Millicent's letters provides transparency and enlightenment, both of which are physically manifested with the structural presence of the window. The transparency of windows allows for honest communications between men and women; truth is allowed to 'pass through' the gender norms that ordinarily separate candid interactions.

The most significant and literal window-based transgression in *Tenant* is also a romantic flirtation and a culmination of the novel's marriage plot.

Additionally, it is told from Gilbert's male perspective rather than Helen's female one, though all scenes in the novel were created by a female (Anne Brontë), emphasizing the feminine voice over the male. Helen communicates her feelings for Gilbert by "[throwing] open the window and [looking] out" (411) and picking a flower, which she then presents to him as "an emblem of [her] heart" (412). When he misunderstands, she throws the rose back out the window and shuts the window "with an emphasis"; he then leaps out of the window to retrieve it, and the moment is saved. Interestingly, his jump out of the civilized world and into the natural world neatly parallels Huntingdon's earlier movement from the natural into the civilized; Gilbert, in contrast, brings a physical part of nature back into the bounded interior, which is further reflected in his genuine and truthful love for Helen. The scene is particularly transgressive because Helen almost proposes to Gilbert, asserting her claim over the narrative and reversing traditional gender roles of a Victorian marriage plot. The window is an essential element of the spatial and emotional organization of the scene; Helen accesses the symbolic rose, which allows her to transgressively and openly express her love for Gilbert. The scene allows the characters to finally reach an element of emotional transparency after several miscommunications and misunderstandings throughout the novel.

Anne Brontë's harnesses the visceral power of space and transparency to directly express deep emotion. She also describes the structural boundaries of the physical world as a way for the characters in the novel to breach social

and gendered boundaries. The liminality of the window-spaces in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* often transparently express the deeper themes of the text itself, as well as the reality of the female experience in modern Victorian society.