

# Voice and consent in anne brontë's the tenant of wildfell hall



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The modern idea of consent usually refers to sexual consent, something that the average adult is ideally intellectually capable of providing or withholding. In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), Anne Brontë weaves a feminist manifesto through a humble woman's rejection of an abusive marriage. Much like some of Anne Brontë's predecessors such as Frances Burney's *Evelina* and even Emily's *Wuthering Heights*, the narrative is told through multiple perspectives and stories. Initially Helen Graham seems to be an object as she is the center of attention, gossip, and mystery. However, Anne Brontë moves Helen beyond the reader's expectation and gives her the ability to consent—whether in saying no to her former husband's tyrannical behavior or consenting to marry Markham in the end—that is realized despite the majority of her presentation being from Markham's perspective. This essay will discuss how Anne gives Helen a voice and the ability to consent (similar to the modern idea of consent) in an otherwise patriarchal society, allowing the novel to become a radical text despite its reliance on an older narrative style.

Brontë subtly asserts her feminist narrative voice through her depiction of marriage and its flaws. In Elizabeth Langland's article "The Voicing of Feminine Desire in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*," she describes Helen Graham's diary entries as "nested" within Gilbert Markham's male authorship and masculine narrative voice (Langland). Because of this, it may seem difficult to see the novel as a radical text, but she declares that the narrative within a narrative as interacting functions that allow for the voicing of Helen's desire. A large part of this is seen in how Anne depicts Helen's marriage with Arthur Huntingdon for what it is: abusive, violent, and

manipulative. Even before they marry, Helen's physical mannerisms depict that he is unwelcome and has potential for danger: " But I had not wandered far before my solitude was interrupted by the only person that could have disturbed my musing, at that moment, without being looked upon as an unwelcome intruder; Mr. Huntingdon came suddenly upon me....immediately I felt his strong arm round my waist and his warm kiss on my cheek, while his keen and gleeful salutation, ' My own Helen!' was ringing in my ear. ' Not yours yet,' said I, hastily swerving aside from this too presumptuous greeting" (Brontë 146) Helen has an introspective moment to herself to pray and is interrupted with the reality of an unwelcome marriage—specifically through Arthur's claim of Helen as his own. Even before their marriage, she rejects this advance of ownership and pushes away from his grasp, emphasizing that she is withholding consent to be treated like an owned object. She later does eventually express desire and love for the rakish Arthur against all odds, but the reality of his alcoholism, gambling, potential adultery, and manipulative behavior force her to consider an alternative to her situation. Despite being the most religious and pious of the Brontë sisters, Anne paints a picture of the brutal reality of marriage's potential to fail, implicating that the finality of marriage should perhaps be reevaluated. She shows how trapped Helen is in a marriage that is ultimately harmful to her and her son's mental and physical well-being. By exposing the conflict between married ideals and actual married lives, she allows Helen to practice consent and withhold it, ultimately by choosing to escape Arthur with her son. Despite any religious piety, she recognizes that moral objectivism of staying in a terrible marriage is misguided and should be challenged.

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Furthermore, Helen's consent and voice build through her occupation as a professional painter. At first, Helen has no choice but to marry Arthur because she has no familial connections or other fiduciary options. However, she cleverly evaluates her resources to be able to choose to escape her toxic marriage. As a painter, she professionally and analytically approaches her work and deviates from the male gaze's preconceived notion of the passive female artist. Arthur believes her work to be purely autobiographical or symbolic of her own identity, as seen in his surprise when Helen gives the female subject of her painting light hair rather than dark hair like her own. While Helen's paintings do have the ability to become a projection of her desire, they more so give her autonomy rather than solely serve as plane for her hopes and fears to manifest. Because she has the talent and enjoyment for painting, she grounds herself in her abilities and takes pride in her work, allowing her to become more comfortable with expressing her emotions in result.

Helen's consent and vocalization of desire is expressed most positively in her eventual acceptance of Graham Markham. In one of the in final scenes of the novel, it is clear there has been a power shift from Graham to Helen. Helen offers herself (for love and marriage) to Graham through a symbolic alignment with a rose that she finds in the garden: " Look, Gilbert, [the rose] is still fresh and blooming as a flower can be, with the cold snow even now on its petals.—Will you have it?" (Brontë 411). Though the reader is only given this moment through Graham's perspective, Helen's bold yet wholesome offering moves him to intense emotion and exemplifies not only his feelings for her but the progressive results of a woman expressing desire.

After entering a marriage on the premise that she will have to “bring up” the husband from a bad place, Helen reevaluates her desire and expresses them carefully but clearly to attain the relationship she wants. When she cannot read Markham’s reaction to the rose (though the reader knows he is emotionally affected by her offer), she clarifies her intention: “The rose I gave you was an emblem of my heart...would you take it away and leave me here alone?” (Brontë 412). Thinking he misunderstood her, she simplifies what she desires from him, directly voicing vulnerability and a wish that was most likely unusual for a woman at the time to express. Though a humble, pious mother, Helen does not hesitate to express her innermost feelings to show Graham that she desires him, showing her autonomy as a proto-feminist character, despite her expression being shown through Graham’s male narrative voice.

Of the three Brontë sisters, Anne paints in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* perhaps the most honest and controversial picture of domestic abuse and the failure of the law during the time period to protect women from unstable husbands. Helen is able to escape her bad situation, but for many women made powerless through marriage, it was probably not so optimistic. However, Anne regardless gives Helen autonomy as an artist, the ability to provide or choose to withhold consent, and a voice for her desire in the novel, canonizing the text as a proto-feminist effort. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* could even be seen as a response to Mary Wollstonecraft’s writings in the late eighteenth century about female suffering in unloving, manipulative marriages. Though a fictional take on an upper-class female’s position, Anne Brontë’s novel radically gives say—and even more radically, longing—to a

woman who is taken advantage of in marriage, challenging female readers to learn from Helen's experiences, analyze their own relationships, and ultimately find an escape from abuse.

## **Works Cited**

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