Invisible Killer in The Tenant of Wildfell Hall

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Introduction

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall has been heralded as one of the classics in the arena of English literature for it challenges the social conventions in defense of women’s rights in the face of their husbands’ physical and psychological abuse resulting from intoxication—an invisible killer in that era. In order to have a better understanding of the then social drinking culture, this paper mainly focuses on the specific performance of alcoholism among the male characters, and explores how it profoundly affects people physically and spiritually, thus exposing the serious consequences of the then prevailing societal vice of intoxication among the Victorians. It is also the aim of the author, as is asserted in the preface to the second edition of The Tenant of Wildfell Hall: “Let it not be imaged, however, that I consider myself competent to reform the errors and abuses of the society.” (Bronte, 3) This declaration indicates Anne’s goal to “heal” the wounds and “educate” rather than simply to “entertain” by probing into the Victorian societal ills. In order to bring social vice to light, Anne Bronte readily adopts representations of illness as her dominant metaphors for social critiques in her two novels, Agnes Grey (1847) and The Tenant of Wildfell Hall (1848). By the time Bronte writes the second novel, she has been heralded for her technique of using illness as a metaphor for cultural disease by focusing on one specific illness, “alcoholism” or “intemperance” (Torgerson, 31).
On the one hand, drinking is a serious preoccupation for the early English Victorians. Choosing not to drink means a man’s cutting himself off from all of his known companions and all of his previous habits. “To abandon drink was to abandon society itself.” (Harrison, 50) Also Sarah Freeman writes, “The traditional view of alcohol was that it was as natural and necessary for survival as food.” (qtd. in Hyman, 452) We can also find evidence from The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, as is said by Mr. Millward, “These things (wines and spirits) are all blessings and mercies, if only we know how to make use of them” (Bronte, 33). They even take it for granted that drink can heal certain diseases, which is regarded as common sense in the 18th century. “Wine was a grand remedy, as good for prevention as for cure, and that drinking the strongest white wines was particularly excellent remedies for gout, hypochondria and venereal infections.” (qtd. in Torgerson, 40). In the words of Arthur’s mother in the text, “I have been accustomed to make him swallow a little wine or weak spirits-and-water, by way of medicine when he was sick” (Bronte, 24). From the above analysis, we know that in the early Victorian Age, consciously or unconsciously, people have regarded drinking as a kind of habitual daily chores, as common as the three meals a day.

On the other hand, the idea of drinking as compulsive behavior out of individual control is not entirely entertained by the early Victorians. In the first half of the 19th century, habitual drunkenness was seen as a behavioral or criminal issue, inflected with ethical connotations. The Victorian drunkard was viewed as viciously depraved, morally bereft, or badly socialized. While one might certainly die from the effects of habitual intoxication, the idea of drunkenness itself as a disease was not widely accepted until at least the 1860s. That is to say, not until the mid-19th century, with the impact of the Beer Act of 1830, did people really change their attitudes towards the once daily-consumed nurturing wine from immoral token to symbol of evil (disease ruining the mind and leading to death). Living at the juncture, Anne Bronte had experienced the severe blow of her family member’s death, her only brother’s increasing addiction to alcohol, particularly of her lifelong affliction with asthma, all of which continued plaguing her deeply. Thus it is no wonder why Anne Bronte finally chose alcoholism as the very illness—invisible killer best suited for a depiction of Victorian societal ills.

I. Alcoholism—The Invisible Killer

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall is a novel trodden with drink. Alcoholism is
ubiquitous within the novel for both the main male characters and the minor ones are addicted to drinks and even die of intoxication. For example, old Mr. Lawrence, Grimsby and Arthur Huntingdon—die of their excessive consumption of alcohol. Compared with Arthur Huntingdon, the former two are less depicted in this novel. For the old Mr. Lawrence, who we even never meet, the author just gives the cause of his death in parenthetical information that Mr. Lawrence’s father has shortened his days by intemperance.

The death of Helen’s father “casts a shadow over the entire novel since Bronte uses his drinking to raise the questions about the familial role in intemperance” (Torgerson, 48). It has strengthened Helen’s belief that she can and must bear the duty to save her husband and child; she believes that if Huntingdon has done amiss, she shall consider her life well spent in saving him from the consequences of his early errors, and striving to recall him to the path of virtuous; as for her child, she fears that the bad influence from Arthur Huntingdon may ruin the little boy. From Helen’s declaration, it is obvious that alcoholism has not only the power leading to death for the addicts, but also can affect the others’ mind towards life. Its toxic nature can infiltrate every corner of the world chronically, ruining both physical body and spiritual mind as well.

Besides, the case for Grimsby who meets his end in a drunken brawl is essential in three ways. First, his denial of the severity of alcoholism implies the truth that many Victorians view their drinking habits within the norm. Second, it exposes the then male’s false logic that drinking embodies masculinity. As the description on Grimsby shows that he is regarded as one of the true manly spirits in the novel, and he shows his masculinity to his friends through the amount of alcohol consumed. Last but not least, Grimsby’s intemperance has led to his making use of Lord Lowborough’s gambling habits for his personal gains cunningly. It is no accident for Bronte to introduce the indecent character; Grimsby’s living condition resembles that of the whole Victorian society to some extent, for drinking has become a universal phenomenon like a societal plague that devours people’s psychology.

As for Arthur Huntingdon, the real villain protagonist in the novel, he has been tortured by indulgence to alcohol for long, and his process of intoxication manifests the real living condition of the upper-class in the Victorian era. Arthur Huntingdon’s alcoholism has led to his abuse and even violence to his wife, child, servant and animal, etc., which will be given explicit explanation in the following part.

All in all, alcoholism, or intemperance, is not only like a terrible plague
leading to physical death of the addicts, but also serves as an invisible killer ruining people's mind. It is one of the societal ills, though invisible, ubiquitous and powerful enough to devour the whole person's spirit.

II. Four Types of Abuse Resulting from Alcoholism

In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Anne Bronte brings the issue of alcoholism much closer to home, showing how alcoholism is affecting middle- and upper-class homes instead of following the then more common cultural trend on working-class drinking. The representations of alcoholism or intemperance call into issues of inequality within a culture based on patriarchal hierarchies of power, such as hierarchies based on distinctions of class and gender.

In consequence, Bronte explores the interrelationships between power, abuse and illness. She attributes cultural symptoms of abuse inherent in such hierarchies of power to a misleading societal need for a sense of male superiority to others. Thus social illness, like violence, is a natural consequence of abuse based on discrepancies of authority, but the former is a much more hidden reality, whose effects can be invisible and needs more authorial probing to be brought to light. Bronte's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is just such a case in point; she develops the interconnections between abuse and illness by connecting four manifestations of abuse based on hierarchies of power in gender, age, class and species, i.e. male abuse of women or spousal abuse, adult abuse of children, abuse of those of lower class and man's abuse of animals accordingly.

1. Men's Abuse of Women or Spousal Abuse

Abuse based on hierarchies of gender is highlighted primarily through Arthur's intoxication leading to his abuse of his wife. From the feminist approach, it is a novel about spousal abuse, and about the situation of wives who seek to flee violence. In this angle, "it is a novel that spoke, and continues to speak, to issues of burning immediacy to generations of wives and mothers, and husbands and fathers, to the laws that frame their supposedly private lives and the various tyrannies it perpetuates" (Gerin, 28). From this point of view, it is valuable to get a better understanding of the Victorian marital living condition from the whole text which shows a panoramic picture about spousal abuse in the following two forms.

1. Spousal abuse in the form of neglect/silence.

Indeed, time has manifested the devil personalities of Mr. Huntingdon. After they get married, Huntingdon gradually begins to be tired of the idle, quiet life he
leads. Since the married two are so different in their idiosyncrasies that living under the same roof is a torture to them both. In Helen’s words, “I do all I can to amuse him, but it is impossible to get him to feel interested in what I most like to talk about; while, on the other hand, he likes to talk about things which cannot interest me—or even annoy me—and these please him most of all” (Bronte, 162).

When they are talking with each other one day, since it is annoying to Helen that Huntingdon keeps nagging about his former lover, which is definitely unbearable not only to Helen, but to all married women and even to men themselves in return. When Helen argues reasonably, he just gives an answer in casual attitude. “You are too severe upon the poor lady, but never mind, Helen, I never loved any of them half as much as I do you; so you need not fear to be forsaken like them.” (Bronte, 165). It is Huntingdon’s own fault obviously, however, when Helen gets really crossed at his dissipating behavior, with no word spoken, Huntingdon just spends the whole day in “fidgeting about from room to room, watching the clouds, cursing the rain, alternatively petting, and teasing, and abusing his dogs” (Bronte, 165). He does not show any “sigh of a humble and contrite spirit” for his own wrong-doing and even has no intention to advance the relationships at all. (Bronte, 165)

It is a kind of silent and indifferent abuse to Helen, for all Huntingdon’s mute behavior just indicates his self-conceit and patriarchal arrogance. Such an irresponsible attitude from a husband is due to the embedded gender discrepancy and social conventions to women and marriage; women are inferior to men inborn and they are just a piece of possession of their husbands. No true freedom and identity are available, they are actually the slave of their husbands.

2. Spousal abuse in the form of verbal violence.

The “cold war” between the couple soon changes from silent indifference to verbal abuse and even violence on Huntingdon’s side. He keeps himself alone in the dining-room and takes an unusual quantity of wine, and under the effect of alcohol, he beats his beloved dog and shouts sharply at Helen and complains that she should not have let the dog go out. Apparently, it is none of Helen’s business, yet it is actually his violence that scares the little dog away. In reality, the focus of Huntingdon’s violence is on Helen to some extent, as Sir John Duke Coleridge once remarked, “Across much of Victorian society a wife was still regarded as a kind of inferior dog or horse.” (qtd. in Ward, 152) It is no use for them to negotiate with their husbands; they dare not and, of course will not.

Even when Helen has found out the illegitimate relationship between Huntingdon
and Annabella, still what she can do is keeping in silence and bearing it herself, since what matters is that, in Huntingdon's opinion, nothing is wrong or improper on his side. "If you had not seen me, it would have done no harm [...] What have I done? It was nothing—except as you choose to make it a subject of accusation and distress", and "it was a woman's nature to be constant—to love one and one only, blandly, and forever" (Bronte, 185). Such an impudent attitude of Huntingdon towards marriage symbolizes the spousal abuse physically and spiritually, for Helen has no choice but burst into tears, suppressing all the bursting emotions.

Later on, in their domestic life, Huntingdon still shows dissatisfaction with Helen now and then. Once when Huntingdon comes back from his journey, after breakfast, he begins to find fault with everything on the table and declares that they have to change the cook. Since it is the same cook as usual, and Huntingdon has been pretty well satisfied with her before, then what is wrong on earth? Huntingdon's following reproach gives the answer clearly: "You must have been letting her get into slovenly habits then, while I was away. It is enough to poison one—eating such a disgusting mess!" (Bronte, 199) The verbal abuse is not enough. At the same time, he pettishly pushes away his plate violently. What has changed actually is that Huntingdon has become more addicted to alcohol, leading a totally dissipating life. He is careless towards everything except imbibing excessive wine, "for I have an infernal fire in my veins, which all the waters of ocean cannot quench" (Bronte, 199). So he abstains wonderfully well from seeking to solace his cares in wine ever since, although he knows clearly that such indulgence can injure his health, and does more harm than good; he contributes all to his wife's unnatural, unwomanly conduct. In his view, everything Helen does is wrong; she is cold-hearted, hard insensate; her sour, pale face is perfectly repulsive; her voice makes him shudder. (Bronte, 253) Intemperance has led to his irresponsibility and indifference to everything, with all displeasing to the eye, spousal abuse has been one of the ways for him to express his discontent.

Huntingdon's drinking friends also reinforce the hierarchies of power in gender. Several of the subplots strengthen the effect of spousal abuse, for example, when in the social party, Mr. Hattersley drinks so much that he behaves like a "wild beast" and his wife Milicent cannot bear his disgrace and intends to escape from the scene. Unfortunately she is captured by her brute husband. He then rudely pulls her hands from her face, "How dare you tell such a lie." (Bronte, 218) This is the approaching and commanding order from her brute husband. In response, Milicent dare not give
her response in the same manner. She just pleads like a child to his parents reluctantly: “Do let me alone. Remember, we are not at home.” (Bronte, 218) Milicent’s answer implies that she has suffered from spousal abuse frequently at home and has endured it for a long time. Her pleading does not gain mercy from her husband at all, on the contrary, her husband inquires in a much harsher manor, “No matter; you shall answer my question!” (Bronte, 218) The tormentor's much harsher requirements stand for patriarchal order she has to abide by. Then he attempts to extort the confession by shaking her and remorselessly crushing her slight arms in the grip of his powerful fingers. Such beastlike deeds make a ironic contrast to Milicent's sheepish attitude towards her husband's spousal violence. In front of a dominating husband, women lose the right to speak and even dare do nothing to refute even when faced with violent abuse.

ii. Adult Abuse of Children

The adult abuse of children within the novel’s hierarchies of power can be shown from Huntingdon’s treatment of his son from birth. Connecting wine, masculinity and abuse, Arthur Huntingdon has done his utmost to subvert Helen’s labors and transformed the innocent, affectionate, tractable darling into a selfish, disobedient and mischievous boy; thereby preparing the soil for those vices he has so successfully cultivated in the little boy’s perverted nature. (Bronte, 256) Huntingdon’s abuse of the little creature is not in a direct verbal form as the way he treats his wife, however, it has the potential to ruin the younger generation in the long run. Under Arthur Huntingdon’s effect, little Arthur gradually learns to tipple wine like his papa, to swear like Mr. Hattersley, and to have his own way like a man, even sends his mama to devil when she tries to prevent him. Huntingdon’s ideal of alcoholism serves as an invisible killer, which can affect the vulnerable young generation. It also indicates the omnipresent effect of the societal ills, which may be inherited from one generation to another.

iii. Abuse of the Lower Class

The awareness of social hierarchy is deeply embedded in people’s mind in that era. From the depiction on Huntingdon’s abuse of his cook Benson, we know that the lower class has been living without respect and dignity from their masters. As is described in the text, one day, Huntingdon drinks a good quantity of wine after returning from his journey, and then he begins to find faults with everything on purpose. He shouts at Helen for the dissatisfying meal, “Be quick, Benson—do
have done with that infernal clatter! And don't bring the cheese! Unless you want to make me sick outright" (Bronte, 199). In fact, nothing is wrong with the cook and the meal, Huntingdon's abuse of his servant can be interpreted as his not wanting to lose face in front of his wife. He intends to show his "Being" and his identity from his superiority to the others. In response to Arthur's criticism, Benson just acts as follows:

He removed the cheese according to his master's order, and did his best to effect a quiet and speedy clearance of the rest, however, quite unfortunately, when he hastily pushed back of Huntingdon's chair, he was stumbled at the carpet, casing a rather alarming concussion with the crockery in his hands, save the fall and breaking of the a saucer-tureen. (Bronte, 199)

It is just Benson's unintentional deeds, however, Huntingdon swears at him with savage coarseness. His abuse makes Benson pale in the face and trembling of the body, as timid as a little cat. When Helen rebukes for Benson, Huntingdon becomes more irritated, "What could you mean, Helen, by taking the servant's part against me [...]. Poor man, indeed! But do you think I could stop to consider the feelings of an insensate brute like that, when my own nerves were racked and torn to pieces by his confounded blunders?" (Bronte, 199) This declaration manifests the true relationship between the upper and the lower class. The former have taken it for granted that they have the absolute power to manage life of the latter, and it is the servants' duty to conform to the rules and requirements of their masters. So how dare Helen plead for Benson? Abuse here, in a way, functions as a symbol of identity, status and hierarchy.

iv. Abuse of Animals

In The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, Anne Bronte has tactfully depicted man's abuse of animals. This happens on the day when they first quarrel with each other:

Huntingdon locked himself in the dining-room and took an unusual quantity of wine, then he approached to the sofa, where his beloved dog was taking the liberty of jumping upon him and beginning to lick his face, then he struck it off with a smart blow; and the poor dog squeaked, and ran cowering back to Helen. When he woke up, about half an hour later, he called it again; but Dash only looked sheepish and wagged the tip of his tail. He called again, more sharply, but Dash only clung closer to Helen, and licked her hand as if imploring protection. Enraged at this, his master snatched up a heavy book and hurled it at his head. The poor dog set up a pious
outcry and ran to the door. (Bronte, 166)

This is the narration from the angle of Helen, which has vividly showed Huntingdon’s abuse to a little dog after he has drunk excessive amount of wine. All the living souls should and must act according to his will. Huntingdon’s violence to the little dog reinforces the ubiquitous effect of the maneuvering patriarchal and hierarchical power. The little dog stands for all the living creatures in the world, so all of them share the same fortune; being submissive in the suffocating living space.

III. Femininity—Healer of Alcoholism

Undoubtedly, Anne Bronte’s in-depth exploration of the four varieties of abuse, as are analyzed above, tackles the social problems of physical and moral deterioration resulting from intense alcoholism, demonstrating the then society’s hierarchies of power in gender, class, etc. However, Bronte does not stop exposing the societal illness in the male figures-dominated level; she incorporates the counterpart-heroin’s invasion on the masculine domain of power, social status, and voice, etc., embodying the tension of masculinity vs. femininity, thus in a way, Bronte’s novel contains the characteristics of New Woman Fiction, and “re-enacts the ‘gentlest’ Bronte as an influential feminist whose ideology informed the construction of the radical New Woman” (Phillips, introduction).

In other words, Bronte’s fictional world not only serves as a canvas to depict the panoramic picture of male intoxication and to expose the morally debauched gentry and aristocratic world, but functions as a microscope for us to peep into the feminist ideological world, the subordinate females’ ideal and endeavor to conquer the societal ills, helping the morally corrupted male drunkards get salvation. In a broader sense, it is Bronte’s re-definition to female and femininity in the Victorian society, reclaiming then women’s identity and function, who “can abandon their ideological sanctioned roles and use work as an agent of personal fulfillment and sense of principle”. Meanwhile, Bronte’s “conception of feminism—that women who abandoned the bourgeois hearth and worked were not immoral—contradicts the immortality that the Victorians associated with the New Woman and the New Woman fiction of the 1890s” (Phillips, 2).

In The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, Bronte endows the heroine—Helen a kind of salvation power—femininity, represented from Helen’s direct intervention with Hattersley’s recovery, her escape from the villain husband for the sake of little Arthur’s good education, and her final return to Arthur Huntingdon for his salvation.
Firstly, Helen helps Hattersley get reformation by showing him his wife—Millicent's sentimental letters, containing her true concern for his own health, which serves as an indicator of the affectional impact between husband and wife, and demonstrates the indispensable role women play in the Victorian marital construction.

While, compared with Helen’s intervention with Hattersley, she acts more resolutely to prevent little Arthur from progressing further in the vice of alcoholic environment, even forcing her son to have tartar-emetic, intending to achieve his physical aversion to the effect of wine. In order to get rid of his father’s “corrupting intercourse and example”, Helen chooses to leave her husband and pursue for an independent life with her child. (Bronte, 312) Helen’s removal of her son from her husband’s presence counteracts the then social marital law that children are the legal property of the fathers. Though encountered with the historical prejudice and realistic dilemma, Helen chooses no longer to be the “submissive wife whose excuse for being was to love, honor, obey—and amuse—her lord and master and manage his household” (qtd. in Phillips, 3). Instead, she breaks the confined cage of patriarchal ideological bondage and courageously escapes from the male-dominated domain, applying the females’ unique weapon to claim their position and identity. As is recommended by Zhou Ying, “With no hope to get divorced and without property for a married woman like Helen, her final departure enables her to be a precursor with resolve and capability to support herself, thus manifesting Anne Bronte’s pioneering endeavor to explore the new feminist domain.” (Zhou, 34).

If we regard Helen’s intervention with Hattersley and her son as a resolute response to the patriarchal ideals, then it seems contradictory that why Helen finally chooses to come back to Arthur Huntingdon and take care of the debauched husband. As a matter of fact, Helen has gone through a process of inner heart development, highlighting the conflict of masculinity vs. femininity. In the Victorian age, the concept of women as “angel in the house” has been deeply embedded in the mind of both females and males. Huntingdon regards Helen as his saving angel, even in his final death; he begs to Helen that she must save him since it is the duty of a wife. “Helen, you must save me!” (Bronte, 425) If he dies, then Helen should plead for his death. Huntingdon’s verbal demand, or command to be precise, indicates the embedded ideology of male superiority and patriarchal authority. Meanwhile, Helen herself is not alone in her original illusion that it is her role to save her husband. Helen once tells her aunt that, “I shall consider my life well spent in saving him from the consequences of his early errors [...] I would willingly risk my happiness for the
chance of securing his.” (Bronte, 142) However, the discrepancies between the reality of her marriage and her naive thought disillusion her initial ideal, declaring in the end that, “he may drink himself dead, but it is NOT my fault” (Bronte, 309).

She even requires the written agreement when Huntingdon wants to see his son, since excessive intoxication has rendered the oral promise unreliable. Actually, this is the absolute verbal victory of Helen, embodying a radical ideological change of the female in that era.

In a sense, Helen’s return to Arthur during his final illness highlights the function of femininity to help her husbands get salvation. Though filled with self-confidence to help Arthur get reformation, Helen allows Huntingdon’s excessive unjustifiable demands on her, even undermining her own health. In fact, the seemingly inconsistent process has seen Helen’s growth from a typical naive Victorian girl to a much mature and independent New Woman. It is just through the tension of masculinity vs. femininity that Helen gradually comes to wake up from her initial disillusion and applies unique methods, such as verbal strike, escaping action and ideological change, etc., to re-claim female rights and re-find their social position, thus re-defining female identity.

Conclusion

Among the three Bronte sisters, Anne Bronte is the most direct and straightforward in her use of literature as social critique; her use of representation of illness for those purposes is the most overt. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is well-known for its sustained portrayal of Victorian alcoholism nowadays. (Torgerson, 21) It gives a panoramic picture about the living condition of the upper class alcoholics. Her representation of alcoholism works with the historical shift from thinking about intemperance as a moral crime to re-conceptualizing alcoholism as a disease. By applying alcoholism to the Victorian upper class, Anne Bronte has provided an in-depth commentary on the unhealthy state of society, reflecting primarily on hierarchies of power in gender, age, class and species, as is analyzed above in the paper. Thus, the representations of intemperate effect are profoundly exposed since intoxication not only embodies a physical illness which can lead to death, but also implies the societal ills that can ruin people’s psychology and spiritual mind.

Whereas, Bronte’s second novel not solely focuses exclusively on the illness of male alcoholism, but re-positions the heroine and endows her courage to counteract more than just stand on the marginal society, working as an outside observer and
Commenting on the societal vices. Instead, Helen is much more actively engaged in the familial story unfolding around her. In Torgerson’s view, “Helen’s new position in relation to the nexus of power expresses a new dimension in the Bronte’s exploring the female counterpart to male alcoholism” (Torgerson, 57). Intervened directly with the alcohol abounded world, Helen reacts in her unique way to counteract the morally corrupted society, whether it being verbal persuasion to Hattersley and verbal defiance to Huntington’s command, or practical action to get away from the villain husband with her son pursuing moral purity, particularly her ideological change in the end, all of which manifest Helen’s growth from a submissive wife with naive disillusion to a much more self-reliant woman. The idiosyncrasy of feminism embodied in Helen, a New Woman, has been taken for granted as a kind of medical healer to cure the vice of intoxication, thus challenging the social hierarchy and demonstrating the indispensable role women play in that era.

All in all, Ann Bronte has succeeded in resorting to the then prevalent societal vice of alcoholism, or intoxication, as a lens to probe into and scrutinize the conflict between masculinity and femininity, exposing the severe consequences of excessive drinking culture in Victorian social life, meanwhile, foreshadowing the coming forth of New Woman and New Woman Fiction.

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