

It would be fair to say that *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* by Anne Brontë is a cautionary tale for young girls before they embark on marriage. Although written in the mid-nineteenth century, it still has relevance today, even though present-day laws allow women more rights over property and children.

The book has two narrators, the first written as a series of letters to J. Halford Esq by a farmer named Gilbert Markham. People in the vicinity become curious about a new tenant of the nearby rundown Wildfell Hall. Gilbert visits her and soon finds himself falling in love with her. The narration switches to the tenant herself, who goes by the name of Mrs Graham. Her voice is heard by means of a diary, which she eventually allows Markham to read. It covers the middle of the book and deals with her earlier life and the reason for her taking the tenancy of the Hall. The device of describing her past life in a diary allows the reader to see events as if in the present, rather than looking back, which would have had the effect of colouring the viewpoint of each event with later experiences.

Mrs Graham's real name is Helen Huntingdon. She comes across as a woman with a strong character, but almost overwhelmed by circumstances. At the start of the book, Helen is a young woman of 18 who has been brought up by her aunt and uncle at Staningly. Her aunt recognises that Helen is attractive and tries to warn her about how it would encourage the attentions of undesirable men. Helen naïvely replies that she is quite capable of being able to recognise the truly objectionable and, in any case, would be able to persuade her prospective husband to turn away from any unacceptable behaviour.

During a visit to London, Helen meets the handsome and charming Arthur Huntingdon and, despite warnings from her aunt and knowing that he is a bit of a rake, she falls in love and marries him. Her attempts at reforming him fall on deaf ears, though there is the suggestion that he is influenced by the obnoxious Grimsby. Huntingdon spends long periods living it up in London, leaving Helen at Grassdale Manor bringing up their son Arthur and spending time painting. He returns for the shooting season, along with his coterie, who stay for several weeks. It is on one of these occasions that Helen discovers that Huntingdon is having an affair with the beautiful and flirtatious Annabella. At the same time, he starts encouraging the young Arthur to take alcohol and adopt bad language and unacceptable behaviour. This makes Helen decide that she has no choice but to leave.

A woman had few rights in a marriage at the time *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* was written, being effectively the property of her husband. This meant that Helen's flight and destination had to be a secret. As an accomplished artist, she planned to keep herself and Arthur by selling paintings, but Huntingdon learned of the plan and destroyed her paintings and painting materials, at the same time, taking all her jewellery and money. Later, he engaged a governess to remove Arthur from Helen's care, but she managed to slip away to Wildfell Hall, which was owned by her brother, Frederick. He provides her with artist's materials so that she can start painting again. It was very unusual at the time for a woman to be able to keep herself in such a way.

The narrative returns to Markham, who expresses his love to Helen and seems unable to understand her apparent coolness. He had been consumed by jealousy when he saw her with Frederick, whom he assaulted, but later expresses regret. Gilbert is devastated when he learns that Helen has returned to Grassdale, but via letters from her to Frederick, he learns that she returned to nurse Huntingdon, who was now ill. The description of Huntingdon's decline and eventual death is based on Anne Brontë's own experience caring for her brother Branwell,

who died of alcoholism. Gilbert finally persuades Helen to marry him and her aunt to accept him. The fate of other characters follows the moral path of most Victorian novels; Frederick marries a lovely woman, Grimsby is killed in a brawl and Annabella goes abroad and fades into obscurity. However, the group expressed doubts about Gilbert himself, who is portrayed as having a short fuse, often bad-tempered and inclined to hurt people.

Part of the discussion considered the question of the source of the wealth of Huntingdon and his friends, not to mention Helen's family; something that the book doesn't consider.