

PREFIGURING THE NEW WOMAN IN ELIZABETH GASKELL'S *MARY BARTON*
AND ANNE BRONTË'S *THE TENANT OF WILDFELL HALL*

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ABSTRACT: The Victorian era was a period of prosperity and development for British female novelists. Many of them criticized Victorian morals and values in their writings. Women started to revolt against the *status quo*, and Victorian women's writing began to develop as a means to challenge patriarchy. Subsequently, at the end of the 19th century, Sarah Grand coined the concept of the New Woman. Nevertheless, in this article, I argue that the representation of this concept is previously found in early Victorian literature. Thus, this article aims to analyse female characters in *Mary Barton* (1848) and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) representing the New Woman, exploring how Elizabeth Gaskell and Anne Brontë create female characters who challenge Victorian social standards.

KEYWORDS: New Woman, Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton*, Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Victorian society, gender roles.

PREFIGURANDO LA NUEVA MUJER EN *MARY BARTON* DE ELIZABETH
GASKELL Y *LA INQUILINA DE WILDFELL HALL* DE ANNE BRONTË

RESUMEN: La época victoriana fue un periodo de prosperidad y desarrollo para las escritoras británicas. Muchas de ellas criticaron la moral y los valores victorianos a través de sus obras. Las mujeres empezaron a rebelarse contra las normas establecidas por la sociedad, y la literatura femenina comenzó a desarrollarse como una forma de combatir el patriarcado. Posteriormente, a finales del siglo XIX, Sarah Grand acuñó el concepto de La Nueva Mujer. Sin embargo, en este trabajo sostengo que este concepto puede encontrarse previamente en la literatura victoriana temprana. De este modo, este trabajo propone analizar los personajes femeninos en *Mary Barton* (1848) y *La Inquilina de Wildfell Hall* (1848) que representan a la Nueva Mujer, y cómo Elizabeth Gaskell y Anne Brontë crean personajes femeninos que desafían los estándares sociales victorianos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Nueva Mujer, Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton*, Anne Brontë, *La Inquilina de Wildfell Hall*, sociedad victoriana, roles de género.

INTRODUCTION

The search for equal rights and the feminist social movement are pressing issues for any developed society. Therefore, introducing a feminist ideal like that of the 'New Woman', a conception of women that focuses on women's rights, as Bonnell defines it (1992: 1-2), in the current setting would be relatively straightforward. Nevertheless, trying to introduce this conception of woman in a patriarchal context like the Victorian period, where women had few possibilities to access education and were not entitled to protest against the established social frameworks, would have been much more problematic and difficult. Thus, it seems appropriate here to carry out an overview of the evolution of the feminist movement and the fundamentals that inspired it.

Following Mohajan's suggestion (2022: 3), the development of the feminist social movement can be divided into four big waves. These four waves are delimited by the main social concerns that the feminist movement aimed to change. Thus, they especially focused on issues that women were demanding, such as equal rights and opportunities or women's suffrage. Due to the aim of this work, the focus will be placed on the first wave described by this author. During this wave, women tried to achieve new opportunities, especially related to women's suffrage and social rights like the right to education or to property (Mohajan, 2022: 3).

Determining the starting point of the feminist movement can be problematic, as women's obligations were traditionally relegated to household chores. Consequently, «her work was not perceived as political» and her role in politics was seen as «not socially acceptable» (Lindemann, 2023: 1-2). Before the emergence of the feminist movement, women had to deal with the impossibility of receiving a similar education to men, and the sum of all these factors hindered the social reform that some educated women demanded during the 19th century in the United States and the United Kingdom (Mohajan, 2022: 3). As a result, many critics place the beginning of the first wave of feminism at the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, as Lindemann (2023: 1-2) proposes. This critic describes this important event as the first feminist and abolitionist women's meeting to discuss the social and civil rights of women in the United States.

Nevertheless, there are earlier examples of works by women in Britain concerned with the vindication of women's rights and value of women, like Mary Astell's *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, for the Advancement of Their True and Greatest Interest* (1694) or Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). The latter presents a cutting-edge and straightforward critique of patriarchy and society's established morals. Wollstonecraft focuses on the contradictions of a male-dominated social system in spheres like women's education, which was lacking, and demeaning of women's role in society. This work was criticised because it directly clashed with the prevailing morals and values of the time, which relegated women to a subsidiary position in society.

In this work, Wollstonecraft aims to demonstrate how women's behaviour and prospects were shaped by men's writings, which was the only kind of education they could have access to. Therefore, their only source of education determined women's desires and beliefs exclusively through a male perspective, thus creating, as she directly highlights, more «alluring mistresses than affectionate wives and rational mothers» (Wollstonecraft, 2008: 71). Another consequence of the absence of a proper education for women was their lack of opposition towards their value and role in society, so that their only ambition was «to inspire love» and the contentment of men. Because of this, the author instigates women to fight for the recognition of their value, exact respect, and cherish a nobler ambition (Wollstonecraft, 2008: 71).

Another aspect that Wollstonecraft critiques is the conception of marriage and the distribution of gender roles. As previously mentioned, the image of women outlined by men throughout literature projects a false perception of women that resulted in their being «more prepared to be mistresses than companions of their husbands» (Wollstonecraft, 2008: 250). The author demands that men and women should be equally educated, so that, in doing so, women would be able to develop critical reasoning concerning their own worth and relevance, making it more difficult for men to shape women to their own convenience (Wollstonecraft, 2008: 119).

After considering Wollstonecraft's pioneering work, the beginning of the feminist social movement in the United Kingdom could be placed around the beginning of the 19th century and around the middle of the 19th century in the USA with the Seneca Falls

Convention. Despite Wollstonecraft's groundbreaking work, the social dynamics concerning men and women's roles had been settled for centuries. Thus, the ideal of womanhood created by men remained similar during the first half of the 19th century. Near the start of the Victorian period, a perfect example that describes in detail this idealised figure appears in the ode «The Angel in the House», by the Victorian poet Coventry Patmore. This work perfectly encapsulates how men envisioned the figure of Victorian women, as Virginia Woolf criticised in her essay «Professions for Women» (1995: 3):

I will describe her as shortly as I can. She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it –in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others.

In Patmore's ode, inspired and dedicated to his wife, he describes the Victorian woman as the perfect wife and mother, pictured from an ideal male gaze, who was not allowed to question her husband's authority and would maintain a subordinate role. Subsequently, from the poem's title emerges the concept of 'the angel in the house', which encapsulates the same idea Patmore developed in his work. Clifton (2013: 24) clarifies Patmore's idea through her concept of an «angelified woman». She describes it as «the process of Victorian society of turning the ideal woman into an angel, representing the sort of glorification of the woman and her role in the home and in society formed by this model of gendered spheres». Moreover, this author highlights the relationship between the concept of «the Angel in the House» and another one: «the fallen woman». The concept of «the fallen woman» was the antithesis of the Angel in the House (Clifton, 2013: 80). The objective of this antithesis was to warn women of the decadence that would follow if they were not able to control their ambitions and desires (Clifton, 2013: 4).

Both the gender constraints and male guidance imposed on women can be considered the basis for the outrage that caused the New Woman concept to start developing. However, it was not until the late 19th century that the conception of the New Woman was actually conceived and fully developed in Sarah Grand's article «The New Aspect in Woman Question», published in 1894.

In her article, Grand advocates for a radical change in Victorian women's behaviour against patriarchal society. She defends the perspective that women should try to change their positions with men in order to «ape» them (Grand, 1894: 270). Grand's perspective pretends to emphasize men's duplicity while criticizing their illogical point of view. The proposed change between men's and women's positions can be considered a significant breakthrough for a more feminist society because that would allow women to obtain the kind of education that they had been deprived of (272). Grand's article aims to cast aside the «cow-woman» and the «scum-woman» prototypes, which restricted women's capacity for self-development and to become independent of male figures. Both prototypes were created by a patriarchal society that refused to «look up» and grasp the key concept (271).

For Grand (1894: 271), the New Woman is a little above men. According to this author, women, or «the suffering sex» (271), were tired of a male-established social system that confined their activities and aspirations to taking care of the family and household. In contrast, according to Grand, the New Woman would consider having a job as a means of personal development, while at the same time she could take on her household duties. This personal growth would take place not only in a professional

environment, but also encouraged women to start to self-question themselves against what men had traditionally asserted regarding women's position in society. The author invited women to develop a New Woman character and seek their own truth. The concept of 'truth' is strictly related to examining men's actions and being critical of them, in order to reassess women's value (Grand, 1894: 271-272).

Consequently, the New Woman was someone determined to escape from the traditional confines of marriage and the expectations of becoming a submissive housewife. In this sense, literature was one of the few means that women had for educating themselves, so some of them decided to use that tool and start manifesting their dissatisfaction through their writing by proposing alternative female models. However, as Heilmann (2000: 69-71) notes, «New Woman writers sought to counteract any attempt to silence or misinterpret them», as their objective was to «write for women», «write about women», and «in some cases, write woman herself» and this was the perfect medium they had «to address the very specific problems they faced as women». The fear of being censored and the impediments they had to overcome did not deter some female authors from writing, and subsequently, many of them managed to express their discontent. Through the creation of new empowered female protagonists and supporting female characters who somehow challenged social barriers and confronted patriarchy, female writers manifested their dissatisfaction with society, women's lack of opportunities and the dissimilar treatment they received.

Among these female protagonists are the eponymous character in *Mary Barton* by Elizabeth Gaskell and Helen Graham in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* by Anne Brontë, both published in 1848. On the one hand, Gaskell's heroine in *Mary Barton* is regularly represented with an empowering stance that reinforces the determination with which she overcomes the different challenges she confronts during the story. Furthermore, the author highlights the composure she maintains when making decisions regarding men and her own future. As a result, through her actions and her attitude, she defends the value of women and their ability to acquire a leading role in challenging situations. On the other hand, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*'s chapter arrangement first presents a strong-minded character who is very critical of society and its morals. Then, the narrative explains the origin of this attitude. In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, the opening chapters provide a radical vision of the worth of women and their position in society. However, as the narrative develops, the reader discovers Helen's past and is able to empathise with her suffering and circumstances. Following Senf (1990: 455), the story «adopts a narrative structure that focuses on the way that women's views on such subjects are usually silenced». Therefore, the structure seems to determine the adoption of a more feminist approach due to a change in perspective, which offers greater insight into the protagonist's background.

Although New Woman features can be easily recognized in late nineteenth-century fiction, there is still relatively little research linking them to the works of female novelists from the early to mid-Victorian period. Taking this into account, this paper seeks to set forth the relationship between the New Woman concept and how it relates with some female characters in Victorian fiction who seem to pave the way for the emergence of that type of character. Thus, it aims to develop an analysis of the Victorian female writers' depiction of female characters who prefigured the New Woman by embodying some oppositional attitudes against patriarchy and to examine the different characteristics these female characters share. Also, this article aims to show how female character representation in *Mary Barton* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* embodies New Woman features and portrays a critical approach to society and gender morals and values. Finally,

this work will provide evidence of how Elizabeth Gaskell and Anne Brontë can be considered precursors of a New Woman Fiction in the early Victorian period.

NEW WOMEN FICTION

There is not much research related to the prefiguration of New Woman concept in early Victorian literature, as Sarah Grand's essay was published in 1894. Subsequently, it is not until this author comes up with this conception of womanhood that the focus on the concept and its nexus with literature begins to develop. As Cunningham (1973: 186) argues, the emergence of the notion of the New Woman contributes to «a more realistic characterisation of women in fiction to match their increasing social emancipation». Thus, at the end of the 19th century, a new literary genre emerged, that of the New Woman Fiction.

This new characterisation of women highlights their liberation from the constricting male ideal of femininity, which had been present in literary texts for centuries. Furthermore, in this New Woman Fiction, female characters commented on what women could and should do, instead of describing their position and value in society in traditional terms (Cunningham, 1973: 181). Consequently, the heroines in New Woman Fiction like Lyndall in Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), criticised marriage, female behaviour, or feminine Victorian roles and openly gave their opinion about controversial topics like female sexuality or adultery (Diniejko, n.d.). Ann Heilmann (2000: 32) also highlights how, throughout this new genre, female novelists created female characters with which «the readers could identify» and show how «all women suffered the same injustices».

The construction of a character may share different traits that can be found in real life, like a geographical area or a social class (Schwarz, 1989: 89). This statement supports the idea that, through the embodiment of certain behaviour or morals, fictional characters might be understood as actual representations of people or stereotypes from the reader's society. Fishelov (1990: 422) argues that readers might perceive that some fictional characters can be classified according to social, psychological, or even physical features that enable them to be formulated in one brief phrase. This study argues that the protagonists of the two novels selected can be classified within the same category. Thus, both of them adopt attitudes that resemble, to a certain extent, the determination, courage and willingness to change their situation that New Women openly display in later New Woman fiction. Furthermore, some other concepts like 'the angel in the house' or 'the fallen woman' must be considered in this analysis as they have significant importance in Victorian literature and were highly influential in shaping women's behaviour and thought.

According to Schwarz (1989: 90), it is the description and dramatisation of characters what encapsulates the meaning behind a text, comprising its ideology, politics, and cultural system. Thus, it may be argued that the female characters in both novels carry out a straightforward challenge to patriarchy. It is through their female protagonists that Gaskell and Brontë create models that fit with real-world people and invite readers to think about their priorities and reflect on their values (Cochrane, 2014: 303). Following this idea, as Wollstonecraft highlighted in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (2008: 71), until that moment, women were reading their own supposed beliefs and desires from men's perspective. Consequently, when new female models who express female concerns and goals appear, the female ideal as conceived from a male perspective starts to collapse. It is then that a vindication of the role played by the New Woman emerges in fiction written by female authors.

One of the most important aspects of the new model women at the time were trying to establish was the search for economic independence by finding a job and individual self-development (West, 1955: 55). Therefore, having a job provided women with economic independence and enabled them to decide if marriage was their main objective in life. As Grand (1894: 272) states, «men had deprived women of all proper education». However, economic freedom provided women with sexual and educational freedom, and by doing so, they started to acquire the same self-determination that men had been enjoying. That self-determination was seen by many people as a radical effect that was upsetting the conventions established by men (West, 1955: 56). These claims were misinterpreted, as women were not trying to create rivalry against men but to claim their value and advocate for equal rights.

In conclusion, this New Woman model presented in literature women's wish to be economically, sexually, and intellectually independent. At the same time, women insist on claiming the position they deserve in society and challenge all the morals and values that men have assumed and imposed for centuries. Furthermore, through literature, female writers subtly highlight freedom and equality as central concerns in their fiction to inspire other women.

In this article, we consider four main New Woman features which are present in early Victorian fiction. Firstly, the dissatisfaction displayed by female protagonists with the role and value of women in society and their search for equality. Secondly, their need to have a job to achieve self-development. Thirdly, their characterization as a role model for women to be independent and make their own choices without regarding male authority. Finally, the acquisition of a feminist and determined attitude to accomplish their objectives.

While the previously mentioned characteristics can mostly be appreciated in late 19th-century fiction, there is limited research connecting them to the works of female novelists from early to mid-Victorian literature. However, there is an important piece of research that relates early Victorian literature to Sarah Grand's concept. A noteworthy example of research into early Victorian literature regarding the New Woman is Jennifer Phillips' doctoral thesis: *Anne Brontë's New Women: Agnes Grey and The Tenant of Wildfell Hall as Precursors of New Woman Fiction* (2001). At the beginning of her thesis, Phillips highlights the lack of research on this topic, noting that «critics have generally been hesitant to discuss the New Woman character type concerning earlier Victorian fiction» (Phillips, 2001: 2).

In her thesis, Phillips remarks that Anne Brontë portended the New Woman fiction and contributed to the construction of the radical New Woman by her depiction of female characters in *Agnes Grey* and in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (2001: 2). Both novels aim to show the reader the state of the Victorian woman's question (Phillips, 2001: 134). Therefore, their author indirectly addresses the reader through the criticism and discomfort demonstrated by the female characters for the reader to realise the contradiction in Victorian morals. Phillips provides a thorough depiction of these Victorian morals while she relates them to the protagonists of the novels she is comparing. Her analysis is centred around three key ideas: the re-enactment theory by Heilmann, the German concept of *Bildungsroman* and the presence of *female artistry* in both novels. Principally, she focuses on how the life of Anne Brontë influenced the creation of Agnes Grey and Helen Huntingdon, the pattern that both protagonists follow regarding the *bildungsroman* concept, and how the protagonists' desire to earn a living represents different New Woman features. Consequently, the confluence of these ideas distinguishes Anne Brontë as a precursor of the New Woman Fiction.

A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing, published by Elaine Showalter in 1982, provides a precise and detailed analysis of female writers as a basis for feminist criticism in literature. In this feminist analysis, Showalter examines literature written by women from the 19th century to the early 20th century and defines her book as «an effort to describe the female literary tradition in the English novel» (1982: 11). Showalter (1982: 9) dwells on the perspective of women writers and «the ways in which ‘female self-awareness’ has expressed itself in the English novel». Furthermore, she underlines how «women writers were united by their roles as daughters, mothers and wives» (1982: 15). The style with which women’s fiction in Victorian literature is written conveys a special meaning for the female reader to appreciate.

Furthermore, the book follows a chronological evolution and helps the reader comprehend the process that the female Victorian fiction follows. Showalter named the period between 1840 and 1880, in which *Mary Barton* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* were written as the «Feminine phase» (Showalter, 1982: 13). She describes this phase as «the period from the appearance of the male pseudonym in the 1840s to the death of George Eliot in 1880» (13). During this phase, both Gaskell and Brontë played an important role as they helped to establish the framework for the development of female characters in fiction, while contributing to the development of an emerging genre, New Woman Fiction, at the turn of the century. Furthermore, Showalter also describes the «Femenine phase», covered from 1880 to 1920 «or the winning of the vote» and the «Female phase», which comprises «from 1920 to the present» (13).

In this work, I will demonstrate how not only the protagonists but also other female characters in both novels represent New Woman features and how Anne Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell can be considered pioneers of the New Woman Fiction.

MARY BARTON

In *Mary Barton*, three main female characters represent protofeminist features concerning the New Woman and its role in fiction: Mary Barton, Esther Barton and Mrs. Wilson.

Mary Barton, the novel’s protagonist, has to deal with different issues that appear throughout the story, which shape the character’s behaviour and personality into a resilient and determined New Victorian Woman.¹ Soon after the death of Mary’s mother, we can appreciate one of the first features of the New Woman in Mary’s personality: the desire to self-develop. It is at that point that she decides to take «her own way» as she knows she «must do something» (Gaskell, 2008: 25). «The force of her strong will» (25) enables her to achieve her dream: to be a dressmaker. Although her father, John Barton, sees dressmaking as a «troublesome business» (26), after not being able to get Mary a job as a dressmaker, it is Mary’s self-determination that convinces Miss Simmonds to give her an opportunity. This self-determination perfectly represents how Gaskell tried to portray a female heroine who would search for greater autonomy and self-actualisation (Brown, 2000: 347). Her strong will, perseverance, and resilience, despite the terrible conditions that Miss Simmonds offers her, can be seen as a symbol of one of the most important features of the New Woman: the desire for professional self-development.

Male characters’ reactions, like the one John Barton displays when Mary gets her job, also have an important role in the appearance of the New Woman features. Arbitrary events, like the death of Mary’s mother or the death of Harry Carson, cause male characters to overreact and display unbridled behaviour, like becoming enraged or

¹ This concept is coined by the author of this article.

making use of any kind of means to seek vengeance. This idea perfectly coincides with what Kucich (1990: 193-194) suggests, that male emotion tends to lead to impulsive violence and destruction to other characters, especially women. Mary's father, John Barton, is the most representative example of this furious behaviour, and, through his reactions, the writer highlights how female characters are forced to control their feelings in order to be able to cope with men's outbursts of wrath and lack of self-control. In chapter ten, the writer depicts this situation: «If her father was at home it was no better; indeed, it was worse. He seldom spoke, less than ever; and often when he did speak, they were sharp angry words, such as he had never given her formerly. Her temper was high, too, and her answer not overmild; and once in his passion he had even beaten her» (Gaskell, 2008: 114). This passage clearly reveals that John Barton is unable to control the anger he feels because of his wife's sudden death and how Mary has to cope with the consequences, although she has also lost her mother. Later in the chapter, Mary begins «to wonder how she could have behaved to him as she had done», displaying the prototypical Victorian woman's behaviour of self-control and submission (114). This subordinating role continues, and finally, Mary tells her father of «her repentance for her fault» (114). Nevertheless, Mary's behaviour completely challenges her father's authority in chapter eleven after her father encounters Esther and tries to control Mary, fearing she will become just like her aunt. Her reaction is bold, being «so remarkably free from all control» or seeking refuge «in obstinate silence» due to the «indignation of being so cross-examined» (124).

The epitome of Mary's evolution within this chapter is the rejection of not only Jem Wilson's offer to marry her, despite her father's wishes, but also the rejection of Harry Carson's proposal, even though he is completely determined to have her. Mary's resolve and courage are represented in two different ways concerning each man's character. On the one hand, she rejects Jem Wilson's offer by stating that silence as a means of consent «does not do with her» (Gaskell, 2008: 126). Mary's answer strengthens the idea that women have a voice and the right to express themselves and decide who they want to be with and what their desires are. On the other hand, despite Carson's self-confidence in his «young, agreeable, rich and handsome» (132) features and persistence, Mary, once again, decides about her future and realises she does «need not be penitent to such a plotter!» (134). Finally, Mary scorns Harry Carson «for plotting to ruin a poor girl» (134). As Brown (2000: 348) suggests, Mary seems to act decisively in her rejection of her suitors, challenging the established social conventions. The embodiment of freedom and choice displayed by Mary in these examples imply that she has the New Woman's self-determination to decide who to marry or what to do in life, despite what close male figures believe.

Chapter twenty-three is a turning point in the novel's plotline, but also a key moment in Mary's character development. Job tells Mary that Jem Wilson is accused of murdering Harry Carson. For the reader, this is a turning point owing to Mary's determination. At first, she does not believe what Job is telling her, but when he confirms it, she rapidly commands him to help her demonstrate that Jem Wilson is innocent:

Well, Job, you'll not refuse me this, I know. I won't mind you think, if you'll help me as if he was innocent. Now suppose I know –I knew, he was innocent, –it's only supposing, Job, –what must I do to prove it? Tell me, Job! Isn't it called an «alibi», the getting folk to swear to where he really was at the time. (Gaskell, 2008: 241)

This passage proves how Mary handles the situation and starts searching for solutions to demonstrate Jem's innocence. The tenacity with which she questions Job and the perseverance with which she tries to understand how to keep Jem clear of entering

prison evinces that she assumes all the responsibility in a pivotal moment, adopting an active role in problem-solving situations. Mary embodies the New Woman in not being scared to acquire an active role and looking for solutions in complex situations. Her attitude contrasts with the male characters' behaviour in previous moments in the novel, like John Barton's rage and lack of control. By the end of the chapter, Mary realises that her father is the murderer of Harry Carson, although her reaction is quite surprising: «Yet oh! How sorely Mary's heart ached; for more and more the fell certainty came on her that her father was the murderer! She struggled hard not to dwell on this conviction; to think alone on the means of proving Jem's innocence; that was her first duty, and that should be done» (Gaskell, 2008: 245). The determination Mary displays in this passage represents a clear evolution in her character.

That process continues in the next chapter, although the focus on her character's evolution is more directed toward her lack of fear. In chapter twenty-four, Mary addresses Margaret in order to explain her plan to help Will and thus, she demonstrates her determination: «When I know I'm doing right, I will have no fear, but put my trust in Him; for I'm acting for the innocent and good, and not for my own self, who have done so wrong. I have no fear when I think of Jem, who is so good» (Gaskell, 2008: 252). Mary strongly states that fear has no impact on her, although the situation is getting more and more complicated. Moreover, in her speech, she reinforces the idea of determination as a key trait of her character by «acting for the innocent and good», while displaying great courage when doing so.

Finally, through the character of Margaret, one of Mary's closest friends, and her singular relationship with Mary, the narrator helps the reader to perceive the impression that Mary's evolution is provoking further changes on different characters around her: «Margaret began to love her again; to see in her same, sweet, faulty, impulsive, loveable creature she had known in the former Mary Barton, but with more of dignity, self-reliance and purpose» (Gaskell, 2008: 252). The use of nouns like «dignity», «self-reliance» and «purpose» is closely related to the evolution of Mary's character into someone who would more closely embody the idea of the New Woman. This behaviour is observed by Margaret, who has been able to notice Mary's change in her personality and realise her decision to be recognised and respected for her efforts and decisions, despite being a woman. Furthermore, the determination displayed by Mary towards Will's situation is strongly related to «dignity», «self-reliance» and «purpose». These three nouns embody New Woman principles, and their personification in Mary's character entail a turning point in her and the story's evolution.

Finally, after her efforts and consistency, Mary helps prove that Jem Wilson is innocent, marries him, and they both move in together. It is surprising how, after everything Mary has achieved in her homeland, she has to move to Canada because she is not accepted in her own country. Nevertheless, she feels fulfilled in this new society, which can be appreciated in Mary's cheerful representation at the end of the novel: «At the door of the house, looking towards the town, stands Mary, watching the return of her husband from his daily work; and while she watches, she listens, smiling» (Gaskell, 2008: 378).

Taking into consideration other female characters, Esther Barton is an important one involved in Mary's evolution due to her marginal situation. Esther is a strong-minded woman who decides to leave Barton's house after receiving numerous reprimands from the head of the family. This event causes Mary's mother to grieve her absence, leading, according to John Barton, to her wife's death. The succession of these events generates a lot of anger inside John Barton toward his sister-in-law, which can be appreciated in chapter ten: «He flung her, trembling, sinking, fainting, from him, and strode away. She

fell with a feeble scream against the lamp-post, and lay there in her weakness, unable to rise» (Gaskell, 2008: 122). This display of rage and anger causes an emotional impact on John Barton, who later realises his brutality and excess of violence against Esther: «He believed she deserved it all, and yet he now wished he had not said it. Her look, as she asked for mercy, haunted him through his broken and disordered sleep; her form, as he last saw her, lying prostrate in helplessness, would not be banished from his dreams» (123). John Barton's attitude and subsequent remorse highlight the lack of self-control and outbursts of wrath, against female characters, which male characters embody. Such aggressive scenes may be interpreted as a straightforward criticism of the violence against women and men's impulsive behaviour at the time.

Esther's determination is like Mary's. It is perfectly seen in chapter fourteen when Esther meets Joe Wilson to inform him about Mary's relationship with Harry Carson. During their conversation, Esther decides to warn Jem about Harry's intentions with Mary and the future that awaits her niece if she decides to marry Harry Carson. On that occasion, Esther displays some of the New Woman determination, which in some cases seems authoritative as when she claims, «'You must listen to me, Jem Wilson,' she said, with almost an accent of command» (Gaskell, 2008: 155), or later on when she insists on being paid attention to: «'You must listen,' she said again, authoritatively, 'for Mary Barton's sake'» (155). She ends up reiterating her commanding words, «'You must hear it, and I must tell it; and then see after Mary, and take care she does not become like me'» (156).

Esther's character and determination in that encounter with Jem Wilson denote a protective intention over her niece in order to prevent her from following her aunt's steps and reaching decadence. She «commands» exact orders to Jem about what he must do if he wants to protect Mary's figure. However, her position as a woman is not much respected because she lives in the streets and drinks heavily. This situation, as Swenson (1993: 55) suggests, underlines a moral problem caused by society, which cannot be attributed to Esther alone.

Nevertheless, Esther's marginal situation does not hinder her from protecting her niece, so that along with a strong determination, courage is another New Woman feature that Esther embodies. In chapter twenty-one, the narrator describes how she gathers evidence from the scene where Harry Carson was murdered: «She stepped forward to examine. It proved to be a little piece of stiff writing-paper compressed into a round shape. She understood it instantly; it was the paper that had served as wadding for the murderer's gun» (Gaskell, 2008: 227). Finally, when Jem Wilson gets arrested, Esther decides to bring this evidence to her niece, Mary, so that she can help him demonstrate his innocence. Nevertheless, with her overall behaviour, determination and courage, despite her situation, Esther encapsulates a set of New Woman features, which extol the figure and strength of female characters in *Mary Barton*.

There is a third female character who is closely related to Mary: Mrs. Wilson, Jem Wilson's mother. The character's development in the story and her reaction towards Mary reveal some details of the Victorian perspective on women. Nevertheless, as the story unfolds, Mrs. Wilson starts embodying New Woman features too, as her attitude toward Mary results in a maternal relationship, while helping each other save Jem.

When Jem gets arrested and the police finds the gun that frames him, the policeman mentions that Jem and Harry Carson quarreled about a girl. He reveals that this girl is Mary, and Mrs. Wilson's first reaction is to insult Mary and place the blame for the entire situation on her: «'Mary Barton! the dirty hussy! to bring my Jem into trouble of this kind. I'll give it her well when I see her: that I will'» (Gaskell, 2008: 218). Mrs. Wilson's first impulse is to blame another woman and, by doing so, she reinforces

Victorian values that extol and protect male figures while slandering women. However, Mrs. Wilson's attitude completely changes when she confronts Mary and listens to her version of the story. Then, Mrs. Wilson displays a strong determination and overshadows the feeble character she showed when her son was arrested. Mrs. Wilson directly addresses Mary and tells her that she «will not be afeared» (Gaskell, 2008: 270) and will go to Liverpool to support her son despite what the doctor said. Her character's evolution similarly shows a New Woman determination that enables her to make her own decisions and collaborate with another woman to achieve what they both desire: the freeing of Jem Wilson.

The evolution of Mrs. Wilson's character towards the figure of Mary is complete at the end of chapter thirty-six when she consoles Mary after John Barton dies: «They sat together, on the same chair, their arms encircling each other; they wept for the same dead; they had the same hope, and trust, and overflowing love in the living» (Gaskell, 2008: 364). This scene reinforces Heilmann's remark (2000: 59) that «New Woman female characters» side «with their supposed rivals» and offer each other «sustained help at times of emotional and marital crisis».

Through the characters of Mary, Esther and Mrs. Wilson, Gaskell epitomizes New Woman features like the determination to self-develop, the acquisition of a solidary attitude toward other women, or the portrayal of a woman role model figure who takes her own decisions. Moreover, as Patsy Stoneman (1987: 45-47) remarks, in Gaskell's fiction, female characters «exercise responsibility» and through «good sense», they «confront real crises». As all these features are present in *Mary Barton*'s female characters, we could consider this novel a clear example of New Woman Fiction.

THE TENANT OF WILDFELL HALL

In Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, it is principally two female characters who represent feminist vindicative features related to the New Woman and her role in fiction: Helen Huntingdon and Mrs. Peggy Maxwell. Nevertheless, there are other female characters' interventions, like Mrs. Hargrave's or Millicent's, that will be used in the analysis to provide a different perspective on female character's behaviour.

Helen's character is first presented through the perspective of Gilbert Markham, Helen's future husband and narrator of the novel. She is seen as a discreet and dour woman who directly clashes with the established social morals. She also challenges them through the use of irony, for instance, when she asks Mrs. Hargrave about the equal treatment between men and women: «'Granted; –but would you use the same argument with regard to a girl?'» (Brontë, 1998: 29). Nevertheless, Helen's attitude acquires a more straightforward position when it involves her son Arthur and his education: «'I think it a very excellent plan,' interrupted Mrs. Graham with imperturbable gravity. 'By that means I hope to save him from one degrading vice at least. I wish I could render the incentives to every other equally innoxious in his case'» (Brontë, 1998: 27). Helen certainly expresses a critical perspective on social values concerning men and the normalisation and acceptance of some vices like drinking alcohol. Furthermore, she criticises the introduction of these harmful customs from a very young age and she plainly rejects this kind of behaviour being taught as normal and adequate to children.

Her stance against socially accepted conduct is opposed to traditional values with regard to the position of women, and while her argument mainly focuses on the value of women and her need to be taken into consideration:

‘Yes, of course,’ replied I, determined to be as provoking as herself; for, when a lady does consent to listen to an argument against her own opinions, she is always predetermined to withstand it— to listen only with her bodily ears, keeping the mental organs resolutely closed against the strongest reasoning’. (Brontë, 1998: 31)

Helen’s reply and especially her use of words are noteworthy. When she mentions how women have to withstand «against the strongest reasoning», a subtle criticism about the imposition of men’s beliefs appears. As Bekler (2022: 729) highlights, Helen «can be regarded as a challenge to prescribed gender roles». Furthermore, she insists on defending the value of women by «keeping the mental organs resolutely closed» (Brontë, 1998: 31) and maintaining a firm position. Consequently, she defends the right of women to stand against opinions imposed by men and exercise critical reasoning as a New Woman.

However, the protagonist’s perspective on women opposes the traditional values of Mrs. Hargrave, who tries to convince her son about what she believes to be the proper role of women within marriage: «‘Then, you must fall each into your proper place. You’ll do your business, and she, if she’s worthy of you, will do hers; but it’s your business to please yourself, and hers to please you’» (Brontë, 1998: 50). Mrs. Hargrave’s standpoint pushes women aside to a traditional submissive role that prioritises the husband’s future and wellbeing instead of their own self-development.

The antagonism to Mrs. Hargrave’s vision is strictly reflected in Helen’s viewpoint when discussing with her aunt, Mrs. Peggy Maxwell, the worth of marrying a man like Arthur Huntingdon. During their conversation, Helen makes clear her conviction that there should be a right of women to choose a worthy husband:

‘I know it is; and I know there is truth and sense in what you say; but you need not fear me, for I not only should think it *wrong* to marry a man that was deficient in sense or in principle, but I should never be *tempted* to do it; for I could not like him, if he were ever so handsome, and ever so charming, in other aspects; I should hate him—despise him—pity him—anything but love him. My affections not only ought to be founded on approbation, but they will and must be so: for, without approving I cannot love. It is needless to say I *ought* to be able to respect and honour the man I marry as *well* as love him, for I cannot love him without’. (Brontë, 1998: 112-113)

Helen’s reply gathers New Woman features like choosing a morally and socially respectable man to be a New Woman’s husband. Her conviction clearly intends to influence young Victorian women to reflect on their values and choose a man who is worthy of it, excluding qualities such as being «handsome» or so «charming». Thus, this New Woman statement pretends to adjust Victorian superficial interests to the New Woman’s sensible and worthy standards.

Nevertheless, after kissing Helen without her consent and being caught by her aunt, Arthur Huntingdon persists and finally achieves his goal of marrying Helen. The role of the ideal husband, played by Arthur, starts to vanish after some time, helping Helen realise that she made the wrong decision marrying him. Through the depiction of the protagonist’s self-reflections and her marriage experience, Anne Brontë stands for the women who were silenced and were suffering a similar experience to Helen’s (Bekler, 2022: 734). Helen’s realisation of Arthur’s real character involves a critique of a patriarchal society that ignores women’s true needs and the lack of decision-making women had regarding marriage:

‘To be sure, I might have known him, for every one was willing enough to tell me about him, and he himself was no accomplished hypocrite, but I was wilfully blind, and now, instead of regretting that I did not discern his full character before I was

indissolubly bound to him, I am *glad*; for it has saved me a great deal of battling with my conscience, and a great deal of consequent trouble and pain; and, whatever I *ought* to have done, my duty, now, is plainly to love him and to cleave to him; and this just tallies with my inclination'. (Brontë, 1998: 171)

Although everyone advised her, it is remarkable that Helen has no other option than to simply «love» and «cleave» Arthur, despite her «inclination» totally opposed to it. Helen's speech and her gladness to discover Arthur's real character after marrying and not before, reveal the deference women had to adopt regarding marriage.

This deference is also reflected later in the chapter when Helen starts to question herself about why she married Arthur in spite of his attitude and actions: «I well know I have no right to complain. And I don't and won't complain. I do and will love him still; and I do not and will not regret that I have linked my fate with his» (Brontë, 1998: 176). The use of present and future strengthens the idea that Helen has no other option than to accept her destiny despite her unhappiness. This idea highlights what Senf (1990: 447) suggests, that the author tries «to focus the reader's attention on questions of gender, particularly on the manner in which male authority shapes women's lives». Nevertheless, Helen does not resign herself to accepting this future and decides not to commit the same mistake when raising her son Arthur: «'My little Arthur! There you lie in sweet, unconscious slumber, the tiny epitome of your father, but stainless yet as that pure snow, new fallen from Heaven –God shield thee from his errors! How will I watch and toil to guard from them!'» (Brontë, 1998: 203).

Notwithstanding her displeasure regarding her marriage, Helen challenges the values of a patriarchal society and its marriage norms by denying her marriage with Arthur: «'Then I must stay here, to be hated and despised. –But henceforth, we are husband and wife only in the name'» (Brontë, 1998: 260). The courage in denying her marriage bond suggests the feminist stance and the determination that characterised New Women. The series of discourteous actions by her husband Arthur have forced Helen to learn about the reality of marriage. Therefore, she advises Esther when she doubts whether to get married:

'When I tell you not to marry without love, I do not advise you to marry for love alone – there are many, many other things to be considered. Keep both heart and hand in your own possession, till you see good reason to part with them; and if such an occasion should never present itself, comfort your mind with this reflection: that, though in single life your joys may not be very many, your sorrows at least will not be more than you can bear. Marriage may change your circumstances for the better, but in my private opinion, it is far more likely to produce a contrary result'. (Brontë, 1998: 318)

Helen's advice to Esther presents a woman's critical perspective on marriage in the Victorian period, suggesting how happiness and comfort, usually assured through marriage, may not be as true as they might seem or be promised. Furthermore, the advice that Helen provides to Esther portrays a caring attitude towards other women, revealing a sense of sorority, aimed at preventing women from committing the same mistakes regarding marriage.

Nevertheless, marriage might not be the problem, but the man one marries, as the end of the story clearly discloses from Gilbert's perspective: «As for myself, I need not tell you how happily my Helen and I have lived and loved together, and how blessed we still are in each other's society, and in the promising young scions that are growing up about us» (Brontë, 1998: 417). The scene represents how choosing a worthy husband is a clear indication of living a pleasing marriage and life.

Regarding advice and the portrayal of adult women as voices of experience, Mrs. Maxwell embodies the many women who learned after marriage that the ideal presented to them was not as self-fulfilling as promised. Therefore, her advice to Helen when she has to decide whom to marry betrays Mrs. Maxwell's experience and wish that she does not commit the same mistakes:

‘Never fear, my dear! The male fools and reprobates will never want for partners while there are so many of the other sex to match them; ‘but do *you* follow my advice. And this is no subject for jesting, Helen, I am sorry to see you treat the matter in that light way. Believe me, *matrimony is a serious thing*.’ And she spoke it *so* seriously that one might have fancied she had known it to her cost; but I asked no more impertinent questions, and merely answered. (Brontë, 1998: 112)

In this case, Mrs. Maxwell's advice focuses on the value of reason and the self-worth of women. Moreover, this argument can also be observed when she advises Helen regarding Arthur Huntingdon's attitude and temperament by making religious references and focusing on rationality: «‘Mr. Huntingdon, I suppose, is not without the common faculties of men: he is not so light-headed as to be irresponsible: his Maker has endowed him with reason and conscience as well as the rest of us; the scriptures are open to him as well as to others’» (Brontë, 1998: 150). The narrative draws the reader's attention to the advice given by Mrs. Maxwell to Helen and how Helen gives the same to Esther after not listening to her aunt. This series of events is a critique of marriage conventions in Victorian society and how different generations of women suffer the same situation because of society's norms and double standards.

As evidenced in the above analysis, Anne Brontë resorts to the characters of Helen and Mrs. Maxwell to exemplify the evolution that women may undergo due to marriage and how society condemned women to the sole role of being submissive wives and mothers after marriage. Her portrayal of such female characters partially clashes with societal expectations about gender roles and values and illustrates the gradual empowerment of women who come to approach the New Woman attitude, as their priorities go beyond men's desires and expectations.

CONCLUSION

Mary Barton and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* share a similar trend concerning female characters and what will be the New Women's behaviour. In both stories, the protagonists display a determined attitude that directly clashes with social values and norms. This determination also involves a courageous attitude. On the one hand, it leads Mary to stand up for Jem, actively contributing to Jem's release and hence, playing an active and leading role in complex situations. On the other hand, it drives Helen to escape with her son Arthur to protect him from her father's vices and herself from the distressing situation she had been experiencing since the beginning of her marriage.

In both stories, the evolution of both characters is noteworthy. In the case of Mary, she decidedly rejects marriage and prioritises herself and her self-development. In the case of Helen, she adopts a similar attitude to Mary's, although her focus is different. Helen's attitude completely changes after marrying Arthur and realizing the reality behind Arthur's public mask. Both characters experience complex situations that transform their attitude into what would be defined later as New Women's behaviour, serving as an example with which the readers of both novels could identify, as Heilmann (2000: 32) remarks. Both stories reflect common injustices for women, inviting female readers to consider their situation and position in some facets of society, like marriage or

family. Both Mary and Helen face difficulties with their respective families and challenge imposed gender expectations. Moreover, although they overcome these difficulties by choosing to self-develop personally and professionally, they also have to face their husbands' expectations. Nevertheless, their dissatisfaction with marriage and their supposed role makes them acquire a determined and protofeminist attitude that puts their value and future ahead of their husbands. Therefore, Mary and Helen can be regarded as accurate Victorian approaches to the New Woman concept.

In both stories, not only protagonists but also secondary characters set a role model for the upcoming late Victorian New Women. In *Mary Barton*, Esther and Mrs. Wilson approach New Woman characters that exemplify the 'fallen woman' and an evolution to a more feminist attitude, respectively. While Esther portrays the endurance and adaptability of New Women despite the complex situations they have to face, Mrs. Wilson represents the idea of women's solidarity and mutual support that New Women provide to each other in order to rise against social injustices that are prejudicial to women. In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Mrs. Hargrave represents the protection that New Women provide to other women in order to keep them away from unsafe situations. Furthermore, this character plays a very significant role in the protagonist's development. Mrs. Hargrave's advice and attitude are later mimicked by Helen, who represents her New Woman evolution when trying to protect Esther Hargrave.

The representation of female protagonists embodying New Woman features and a critical perspective on society and the various dynamics that relegate women to a submissive role in marriage or labour make *Mary Barton* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* perfect examples of the New Woman in early Victorian Fiction. Hence, this transforms Elizabeth Gaskell and Anne Brontë into precursory authors of New Woman Fiction almost fifty years before Sarah Grand coined the concept of the New Woman. Furthermore, the portrayal of secondary female characters, who represent other female perspectives and support other female protagonists in their predicament, serves as an example of sorority and New Woman attitude, which establishes unconventional role models for women to imitate and help claim their position and true worth in society.

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