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How To Be A Gentleman Without Really Trying: Gilbert Markham in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

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<1>Though long neglected as inferior in quality to her sisters' works, Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* has attracted attention in recent years from feminist scholars and narrative theorists alike. Generally, interest has centered around the novel's heroine, Helen Huntingdon, whose flight from an abusive marriage and subsequent development as a professional artist hint at the radicalism of Brontë's message about the proper place of women in society. Many have argued that Helen's journal, which documents in unforgiving detail her marriage to the aristocratic but cruel and philandering Arthur Huntingdon, constitutes the true "heart" of the novel, both structurally and thematically. Indeed, it is within the journal that Brontë seems most explicitly to be exploding the myth of the ideal Victorian marriage. Brontë's contemporaries, certainly, objected to this part of the novel, labeling it as "coarse", "revolting", and "disgusting" in its descriptions of Arthur's behavior towards his wife (Brontë x). And Brontë devotes much of her 1848 introduction to her novel to the defense of this section in particular, arguing that her depiction of the "vile and vicious characters" found there are part of her effort to "reveal the snares and pitfalls of life to the young and thoughtless traveler" (4).

<2>As more and more critics are noting, however, Helen's subversive journal ought not be viewed in isolation, as it comprises little more than half of the novel's total length. It sits nested within a long frame letter written by her second husband, Gilbert Markham, which offers to his brother-in-law, Halford, a history of their prolonged courtship following Helen's escape from Arthur. Perhaps because it lacks the shocking elements of its journal counterpart, the letter has traditionally been dismissed as a potential source of Brontë's "true" message. Interpretations fall generally into two camps: in the first, scholars such as Naomi Jacobs see the letter as a mere buffer to the "horrific

reality” within Helen’s letter, a conventional backdrop that does little more than prepare us for the journal. In the second, scholars focus their attention on Gilbert’s apparent limitations as a suitor to Helen, noting the personal shortcomings and inconsistencies he reveals through his own narration. To these critics, the frame letter is subversive because it undermines Brontë’s apparent endorsement of the conventional marriage ending.

<3>Very few critics have spoken in Gilbert’s favor or discussed the letter and journal as two documents operating together in a reevaluation of the marriage myth. Among these, Elizabeth Langland stands out in her defense of the two-part “doubly retrospective” narration as part of an “exchange” (*Tales* 35) in which “[Helen’s] story is also [Gilbert’s] story” (38). I would like to revisit this exchange, exploring in particular the ways that the grim realities revealed in Helen’s journal instruct Gilbert and inform his letter, inviting him to draw himself as a tentative model of seasoned, disciplined gentlemanhood worthy of Helen as an artist wife. In a rapidly changing culture in which, as James Eli Adams has noted, the ideals of masculinity were characterized best by “shifting contours and internal stresses” (2), such an effort was no small task. As I shall argue, the apparent inconsistencies revealed in Gilbert’s letter are indicative less of his inherently flawed character or of Brontë’s lukewarm endorsement of him as a suitor to Helen than of his difficulties at gentlemanly self-representation due to the new pressures of democratization and modernity.

<4>More than a decade before Brontë wrote her novel, Thomas Carlyle anticipated Gilbert’s predicament in attempting to convey his gentlemanliness: “The old ideal of Manhood has grown obsolete,” he declared; “the new is still invisible to us, and we grope after it in darkness” (qtd. in Adams 1). Indeed, Robin Gilmour identifies the period between 1840 and 1880 as the years in which “the nature of gentlemanliness was more anxiously debated and more variously defined than at any time before or since” (2). These years saw the steady democratization of English society, the breakdown of the rigid hierarchy that had dominated English culture, and the expansion of opportunities for people of the middle class. As David Castronovo points out, “gentility had shifted from condition to process: the gentleman [could] be manufactured; the mists of time [had] given way to the swell of industry” (15). Middle class men were redefining gentlemanhood in their efforts to “legitimiz[e] their masculinity.” Male authors, anxious to distance themselves from the newly disdained femininity of “intellectual labor,” participated in this redefinition, as well, offering as gentlemanly qualities “self-discipline” and “self-assertion” (Adams 6) – both traits that serve in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* to contrast the middle class Gilbert from his aristocratic predecessor, Arthur.

<5>Although most mid-Victorians believed that gentleman status “transcended rank because it was a moral and not just a social category,” they retained the sense that “the man of noble birth” must be a gentleman “by right” (Gilmour 3). They also clung to the idea of gentlemanhood as a constant state – an essential and innate quality. Therefore, the aspiring gentleman could be no gentleman at all. To betray a self-consciousness of one’s gentlemanliness, Adams suggests, was to betray one’s own artificiality. As Robert Louis Stevenson put it in his 1888 text *Gentlemen*:

Not to try to be a gentleman at all is so much more gentlemanly than to try and fail! So that this gift, or grace, or virtue, resides not so much in conduct as knowledge, not so much in refraining from the wrong, as in knowing the precisely right. (qtd. in Waters 29)

Though Stevenson’s wry advice reflects a late century awareness of the ridiculousness of the negotiations surrounding gentleman status, Brontë’s 1848 novel remains fraught with contradictions: Gilbert, a middle class farmer who wins the love of his social superior through his attainment of gentlemanly qualities, offers the reader through his letter an indirect guide to the process of ‘becoming’ a gentleman. At the same time, however, Brontë suggests throughout the novel that his innate self-discipline and assertion has ensured his success – that he has in some sense been a gentleman all along.

<6>Evidence of Gilbert’s contradictory status abounds from the very start of the novel. Coinciding with the beginning of Gilbert’s letter, the opening pages address the issue almost immediately. By permitting Gilbert as letter-writer to reflect on the events of the past rather than narrate them as he is experiencing them, Brontë dilutes the appearance of any process he underwent in changing, in “becoming” a gentleman. Gilbert the already-established gentleman narrator has the luxury of writing in 1847 about the events of 1825 and 26, reflecting nostalgically on any efforts he made to change or advance himself. When he announces to Halford, his brother-in-law and correspondent, that his letter will be an “old world story,” too, he is suggesting a past that no longer exists, representative perhaps of his transformation. The “new” world in which Gilbert lives in 1847, by implication, is one in which the question of Gilbert’s gentlemanly status has been answered affirmatively.

<7>In further establishing this distinction between “new” and “old” concepts of gentlemanliness, Gilbert as narrator is quick to identify himself with the middle class in to which he was born. He begins his story by reminding Halford that his father was “a sort of gentleman farmer,” a legacy that requires him to work for a living. He points out

the virtue in such a duty:

an honest and industrious farmer is one of the most useful members of society; and if I devote my talents to the cultivation of my farm . . . I shall thereby benefit, not only my own immediate connections and dependants, but in some degree, mankind at large; - hence I shall not have lived in vain. (9)

This statement is telling in its endorsement of the virtues of honesty and industry, in its consideration of societal “usefulness” as an attractive trait, and in its pointed reference to the benefit of “mankind at large.” All suggest Gilbert’s deliberate self-alignment with the class-based revisions of gentlemanliness that were underway at the time.

<8>Paradoxically, however, the young Gilbert also laments that as a farmer he feels he is “burying [his] talent in the earth, and hiding [his] light under a bushel” (9). His apparent longing for social advancement here suggests the quandary of the new middle class man: how can one be gentlemanly if one is dissatisfied with one’s social position? How can one “become” a gentleman if to undergo any sort of process is automatically to forfeit that status? Though these questions are not – and can not be – resolved, Gilbert’s suggestion of a “talent” that is incongruous with his class, suggests that his abilities are somehow innate – a fact which lessens the sense that he will need to undergo a process of change. The distinctly middle class masculinity that Gilbert projects in the first paragraphs of his letter, then, reveals the contradictory aims that he must negotiate throughout the novel.

<9>Crucial to Gilbert’s elucidation of his own attainment of gentlemanhood is the novel’s two part structure. As noted already, the novel’s outer frame letter contains within it Helen’s entire journal of her marriage to Arthur Huntingdon, supposedly transcribed word for word by Gilbert for his brother-in-law Halford’s benefit. Likewise, the events of the novel are separated from Gilbert’s telling by twenty years. The displacement of narrator serves several purposes: first, it operates to overcome Brontë’s situation as the female author of a book largely written to instruct men about proper masculinity. She enlists Gilbert as her narrator and puts his story in the form of a letter exchanged between two men. Helen’s horrific story, presumably, is edited and approved by the male author of the letter; so, too, is it contained within a journal rather than shared in person. This limits scenes in which Helen may be said to directly instruct Gilbert. Instead, Gilbert is seen as teaching himself through reading and observation, rather than undergoing direct instruction from his wife – which would undermine his authority and disqualify him as a model of gentlemanliness. Most importantly, Brontë’s use of the journal eliminates the problem of having to depict in detail Gilbert’s

transformation, which, as we have noted, a true gentleman would never have to undergo. By displacing much of the ungentlemanly behavior onto another character (Arthur) who is confined to the journal, Brontë allows Gilbert simply to read Helen's journal, learn about the mistakes of his predecessor, and correct them through his own behavior. This seemingly effortless learning is evident when Gilbert confides to Halford at the conclusion of Helen's account of her first marriage that he must "readily forgive [Helen's] hard thoughts against . . . [his] sex . . . when [he] saw to what brilliant specimens her experience had been limited" (380). Not only is Gilbert reinforcing his image here as a self-teacher who came to his realizations on his own, he is sarcastically designating Arthur as the "brilliant specimen" whose example he need not follow.

<10>If Arthur's role is significant in instructing Gilbert and, indirectly, the reader, Helen's is more so. As Elizabeth Langland has noted, "Helen's narrative rewrites Gilbert's"; it "subordinates his narrative to hers . . . by providing the answers Gilbert and the reader seek" (Langland 39). These statements ring true on many levels. For the first hundred and twenty pages of the novel, Helen is a mystery to young Gilbert and the reader alike; we, like him, see Helen not as a young wife on the run, but as an often needlessly secretive widow. Like him, we learn about her primarily as a subject of (often erroneous) town gossip, and like him, our curiosity is raised about her relationship to Frederick Lawrence, who turns out to be her brother. In many ways, we are guilty of the same misjudgments that our narrator Gilbert recalls in himself – a fact that not only maintains our interest, but contributes to the instructional quality of the novel. In making Helen the source of our speculation – or, as Langland would say, the "focalizer" – Brontë is enacting through our relationship to her narrative the same transformation she wishes to enact in the gentleman to his wife. In her hands, Gilbert learns to respond to Helen not just as "object," but as "subject." In her hands, we as readers are put in a situation that reverses the established pattern in which the male is the source of mystery and the female the source of observation. Helen is Gilbert's mystery, and as a new gentleman of the middle class he must come to understand her through his own efforts – efforts from which the gentleman by birth is excused.

<11>This idea of Gilbert's deeper understanding of Helen is central to his efforts to distinguish himself from Arthur, and thus to his rough sketch of gentlemanliness revised. The primary lens through which he communicates this understanding to the reader is through his frequent references to scenes in which Helen is working on her art. Having the benefit of her journal, which details so many misunderstandings between herself and Arthur that center around her art, Gilbert is able to write himself in direct opposition to his predecessor, often crafting whole scenes that seem deliberate reenactments – repetitions with a difference – to the ones described in the journal. In this way, he

communicates not only the propriety of appreciating art, but also the gentlemanliness of intellectual companionship with one's wife.

<12>In sketching out the picture of her new love, Arthur, young Helen establishes quickly in her journal his disinterest in art – whether it be hers or anyone else's. She mentions, without judging him, an incident in which he uses art as an excuse to court her, steering her at one point away from other suitors to look at a painting by Vandyke, but then telling her to “Never mind the picture, it was not for that I brought you here (138). Later, in a hasty effort to interpret Helen's own art, Arthur foreshadows the shallowness of his expectations for his wife by likening the female subject of her self-proclaimed “masterpiece” to “a very Hebe . . . thinking there will come a time when she will be wooed and won . . . by as fond and fervent a lover, and she's thinking how . . . tender and faithful he will find her” (151). The implication is that Arthur, as a gentleman by birth, does not care for art, and, perhaps, cares less to “read” Helen as anything other than what he desires her to be.

<13>Arthur's failing, as well as Helen's apparent love of art, are points of which Gilbert is constantly aware in his letter to Halford. He stages his own genuine interest in Helen's art in his description of his first visit to her home, during which he conveys an innate ability to understand her as “subject.” Gilbert establishes her seriousness through the following description:

She bid us be seated, and resumed her place behind the easel – not facing it exactly, but now and then glancing at the picture upon it while she conversed, and giving it an occasional touch with her brush, as if she found it impossible to wean her attention entirely from her occupation to fix it upon her guests. (42)

Rather than lobby for her fuller attention, Gilbert reports in his letter that he seated himself, noting quietly that her painting is both “faithfully drawn and coloured, and elegantly and artistically handled.” Though it is not labeled, he recognizes correctly as “a view of Wildfell Hall, as seen at early morning from the field below, rising in dark relief against a sky of clear silvery blue, with a few red streaks on the horizon (42). His compliment, coupled with his thorough, vivid description, designate him as an art appreciator where Arthur was not – a gentleman who, lacking social rank, demonstrates his propriety instead through his sensitive, intelligent behavior.

<14>A second scene from Helen's journal further illustrates Gilbert's tendency to repeat and “correct” scenes in which Arthur behaves poorly. In this scene, Helen's single-

mind attraction to Arthur has led her to create and conceal sketches of his face on the backs of her paintings. When Arthur discovers the existence of these secret sketches – significantly, only as the result of his disinterest in the better-constructed paintings that lie on the fronts of the canvasses on which they are drawn – his self-gratification leads to violence and destruction that again foreshadows the events of their ill-fated marriage. He first draws her portfolio deliberately away from her and even “button[s] his coat upon it with a delighted chuckle” at her futile struggles against him. Though he has little interest in her work, he is diabolically excited to possess evidence – in the form of secret pictures of himself – that he has won Helen to his heart. Even when Helen is able to “wrench the portfolio from him,” he manages to “abstract the greater parts of its contents” (151) for himself.

<15>The violence of the scene suggests the degree to which Arthur, who clearly here lacks any self-discipline, is interested only in Helen’s feelings toward him. Gilbert restages this scene in the letter, also during his initial visit to Wildfell Hall. Briefly left unattended while Helen visits with her art dealer, Gilbert writes that he decided to “amuse” himself by looking at her pictures. His amusement, however, soon turns to “considerable interest” (44), and in his explorations of her studio he comes upon a painting of Arthur. In examining the picture, Gilbert looks seriously at what Arthur did not: the quality of the art work itself. Unlike Arthur, he does not consider the art in relation to himself. Instead, he comments extensively and accurately both on Helen’s work and on the character it reveals in its subject:

It was the portrait of a gentleman in the full prime of youthful manhood – handsome enough, and not badly executed . . . there was a certain individuality in the features and expression that stamped it, at once, a successful likeness. The bright, blue eyes regarded the spectator with a kind of lurking drollery . . . while the bright chestnut hair . . . seemed to intimate that the owner was prouder of his beauty than his intellect – as perhaps, he had reason to be; – and yet he looked no fool. (45)

The telling, which is privileged in that Gilbert the letter writer is already informed of Arthur’s character through the journal, is interesting in that it makes a deliberate effort to convey younger Gilbert’s ability to read character through art, even as it conveys Helen’s ability to capture character as a skilled painter. Gilbert even places this painting chronologically in relation to Helen’s others, noting expertly that it has “less freshness of colouring and freedom of handling” (44) than the more recent one he has already examined.

<16>The comparison becomes even more direct when Helen returns to the room and realizes that Gilbert has disturbed, like Arthur before him, a likeness of her first love. Where Arthur took malicious delight in his acquisition, however, the youthful Gilbert is full of respectful apology: “I fear it will be considered an act of impertinence . . . to presume to look at a picture that the artist has turned to the wall.” When Helen – also greatly composed compared to her last showing – disguises her “serious annoy[ance]” beneath a smile and “begs [he] will ask nothing [about the painting] . . . for his curiosity will not be gratified,” Gilbert concedes that he “was only going to ask . . . if [she] had painted it [herself]”(45). His statement, which as narrator he deems as “sulky” of his former self, nonetheless promotes Gilbert as genuinely interested in Helen’s painting where Arthur was not, and willing to concede where Arthur was not.

<17>Gilbert, in including these scene repetitions in a letter that encases Helen’s journal, is very deliberately crafting through oppositions to Arthur an art work of his own: a model of gentlemanliness that replaces Arthur’s seductive and forceful charm with modest artistic sensibility, and Arthur’s rash need for personal adoration with respect and self-discipline.

<18>Despite Gilbert’s best efforts to convey his intrinsic merits, scholars’ opinions of Brontë’s “gentleman” figure have been almost universally less than favorable. Terry Eagleton has called him “touchy and overbred” (Nash 130), while Andrea Wescott argues that Brontë’s depiction of him serves “as a critique of the ideal country gentleman” (Nash 107). Naomi Jacobs questions his legitimacy as a narrator, altogether, placing him alongside *Wuthering Heights*’ Lockwood as a bumbling suitor whose frame story we must “discard” as representative of “the public world” which permits atrocities such as those relayed in Helen’s journal to take place (204). Elizabeth Signorotti, meanwhile, explores the similarities between Gilbert and Arthur, alleging that the former “unwittingly reveals himself” in his letter as “a selfish, manipulative boy who hungers for conquest” (21). Signorotti asserts that Gilbert’s incorporation of Helen’s journal into his letter indicates his fruitless desire to “contain and control her” through the “appropriation and editing of [her] history” (21).

<19>When one examines the ambiguity surrounding the gentleman figure that Gilbert is supposed to offer, however, the incidents of his questionable behavior becomes less offensive. Consider, for instance, Gilbert’s often-questioned recounting of his first glimpse of Helen in church, in which he reveals his own arrogance. As narrator, he points out humorously his own ironic miscalculation, recalling with some possible exaggeration his initial thoughts toward the woman who would later become his wife: “I would rather admire you from a distance, fair lady, than be a partner of your home,” he recalls

thinking, and noting her “inexpressibly provoking” “expression of quiet scorn.” According to his older narrator self, young Gilbert assumes also that “she thinks me an impudent puppy . . . she shall change her mind before long, if I think it worth while” (15). Although the resultant picture we receive of this youth is not flattering, it does seem that his older self is poking fun at the imperfections, making them more ridiculous than malicious. Though clearly such a youth is in need of some transformation, the reader is not horrified as he or she is, for instance, when Helen recounts Arthur kicking his own dog.

<20>With this sense of the elder Gilbert’s playfulness with his youthful self, we can begin to reevaluate the criticisms that have been directed at his behavior. Terry Eagleton’s complaint of his “tender idealizations and bursts of histrionic wrath” (130), for instance, seems to point to the conflict of interest that Brontë faced in conceptualizing his character as a gentleman whose transformation she must find a way to convey. In terms of the irony with which the narrator Gilbert treats his self-portrait, these “bursts of wrath” are both exaggerated to comic levels to downplay the seriousness of the mistakes they represent and tempered by the “tender idealizations” that Brontë uses to instate Gilbert as the superior specimen of masculinity. Gilbert’s ambiguous but humorous handling of his youthful self is apparent once again in this invocation to Halford:

[Helen] . . . seemed bent on showing me that her opinions respecting me, on every particular, fell far below those I entertained of myself. I was naturally touchy . . . Perhaps, too, I was a little bit spoiled by my mother and sister, and some other ladies of my acquaintance; – and yet, I was by no means a fop – of that I am fully convinced, whether you are or not. (32)

Calling himself “touchy” and “spoiled” demonstrates once again Gilbert’s light degree of self-reflection, while his firm contention that he was “by no means a fop” (Brontë 32) reinforces the conventional idea that he has not changed state, from “fop” to gentleman, but only maximized his better qualities over time. The fact that Halford may think otherwise about his friend, opens up, paradoxically, the possibility that Gilbert really *was* on some level a fop, and some sort of transformation took place. The comment, which has for so long served as evidence of Gilbert’s limitations of self-reflection, thus takes on a different light, as its contradictions speak to the pervasiveness of the issue of ‘being versus becoming’ a gentleman in Brontë’s novel. So, too, does it suggest that an honest, humble ability to make fun of one’s self is not a bad quality for a gentleman to have.

<21>Even the famous and often cited scene in which Gilbert attacks Frederick Lawrence betrays both the narrator's desire to appear "gentlemanly" and his gentle irony in self-reflection. Convinced because of rude gossip and minimal evidence of what he will soon learn is far from the truth – that Helen and Frederick are lovers – young Gilbert resolves to seek revenge on the one man who has treated Helen respectfully from the start. Though he has resisted the speculations of his neighbors that Frederick is the father of Helen's son (because, as young Arthur's uncle, Frederick bears a resemblance to the child), his observations of the two together have led him, understandably, to question his doubts to the fact. From his own perspective, Frederick is a scoundrel, and he wants by defending Helen's honor to fulfill conventional expectations for gentlemanly behavior. Since these expectations prove inadequate when he misapplies them, Gilbert the letter writer recounts them with self-mockery that has often been interpreted as ungentlemanly violence. After describing when he threw Frederick from his horse and rode away "with a feeling of savage satisfaction" (109), for instance, Gilbert the elder commends his youthful self sarcastically on deciding to return to his victim: "It was no generous impulse . . . it was, simply, the voice of conscience, and I took great credit to myself for attending so promptly to its dictates" (110). Gilbert's irony in recalling the "great credit" he felt he deserved for expressing concern over a man he has attacked for no reason is inescapable to the close reader. And as his telling separates himself as narrator from the man who committed so purposeless a crime, so, too, does it attempt to lessen the gravity of the deed and distance the reader from the mysterious transformation it pre-dates. Meanwhile, Gilbert's mention of the "voice of conscience" that causes him to lament his actions returns us, paradoxically, to the conclusion that the seeds of gentlemanliness were within him all the while.

<22>Undoubtedly, Gilbert is a complex character. As a middle class mid-Victorian man, his gentlemanliness is, as Carlyle had anticipated a decade earlier, an image for which both he and Brontë seem at times to be groping. Throughout the novel he conveys his attention to Helen and her journal through the scenes he chooses to recount in his own letter. He defines himself self-consciously, as though aware of the burden he carries as the narrator of Helen's tale. Never does Gilbert feign perfection, but looks back at his own mistakes with irony and honesty.

<23>Significantly, at the novel's conclusion he is as solidly identified with the middle class as he was at its start, expressing genuine shock when he learns that Helen is his social superior. So upset is Gilbert to discover that he is no longer on equal financial or social footing with the woman he hopes to marry, he turns "white" and "sickly" in the face, fearing that his gentlemanly intentions will be called in to question now that his love has been "reinstated in her proper sphere" (457). Gilbert's apparent mortification at

this thought further reveals the precariousness of his position as a new middle class gentleman of process and action.

<24>*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* , then, emerges as a novel as much influenced by its consideration of class as it by its obvious attention to gender relations. Brontë's self-declared intent to attempt to "reform and correct the abuses of society" (3) is accomplished not solely through Helen's journal as an effort towards marriage reform, but through Gilbert's letter, in establishing his gentlemanly behavior as a correction to Arthur's abuse. The model of gentlemanliness that Gilbert offers rests on virtues that can be attained through character rather than birth: honesty, self-discipline, loyalty, and artistic sensitivity. In depicting these virtues in himself, Gilbert is often caught between suggesting their intrinsic nature and indicating that they are the result of deliberate cultivation. Though his efforts to resolve this dilemma often make for multiple interpretations, he ought not be faulted too harshly for the ambiguity of his situation. He is, after all, charged with the task of becoming a gentleman without really trying.

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