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Candidate session number

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Examination session (May or November)

MAY

Year

2012

Diploma Programme subject in which this extended essay is registered: ENGLISH A1

(For an extended essay in the area of languages, state the language and whether it is group 1 or group 2.)

Title of the extended essay: In what ways are the authors successful in challenging Victorian perceptions of women in 'The Tenant of Wildfell Hall' and 'The Woman in White'?

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The extended essay I am submitting is my own work (apart from guidance allowed by the International Baccalaureate).

I have acknowledged each use of the words, graphics or ideas of another person, whether written, oral or visual.

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Please comment, as appropriate, on the candidate's performance, the context in which the candidate undertook the research for the extended essay, any difficulties encountered and how these were overcome (see page 13 of the extended essay guide). The concluding interview (viva voce) may provide useful information. These comments can help the examiner award a level for criterion K (holistic judgment). Do not comment on any adverse personal circumstances that may have affected the candidate. If the amount of time spent with the candidate was zero, you must explain this, in particular how it was then possible to authenticate the essay as the candidate's own work. You may attach an additional sheet if there is insufficient space here.

THE CANDIDATE HAS DISPLAYED CONSIDERABLE INTELLECTUAL INITIATIVE IN CHOOSING TO COMPARE TWO SUCH CHALLENGING AND CONTRASTING VICTORIAN NOVELS. HAVING STUDIED THE NOVELS INDEPENDENTLY, THE CANDIDATE CHOSE AN ORIGINAL AND SHARPLY FOCUSED LINE OF ENQUIRY WHICH SHE WAS ABLE TO EXPLORE FULLY WITH THE AID OF A WIDE RANGE OF CAREFULLY-SELECTED AND RELEVANT CRITICAL AND CONTEXTUAL MATERIAL.

THE CANDIDATE HAS SUCCEEDED IN PRODUCING A HIGHLY SOPHISTICATED ESSAY, DEVELOPING A FULLY REASONED AND CONVINCING ARGUMENT AND DEMONSTRATING GREAT INSIGHT AND DEPTH OF UNDERSTANDING, OF BOTH THESE TWO NOVELS AND VICTORIAN FICTION AS A WHOLE. THE CANDIDATE'S ANALYSIS IS SUPERB AND REFLECTS HER FLAIR FOR THE SUBJECT AND HER INDEPENDENCE OF APPROACH.

This declaration must be signed by the supervisor; otherwise a grade may not be issued.

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I spent hours with the candidate discussing the progress of the extended essay.

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Assessment form (for examiner use only)

Candidate session number

Achievement level

Criteria	Examiner 1	maximum	Examiner 2	maximum	Examiner 3
A research question	2 ✓	2	2 ✓	2	
B introduction	2 ✓	2	2 ✓	2	
C investigation	4 ✓	4	3 ✓ <i>more precise but not relevant</i>	4	
D knowledge and understanding	4 ✓	4	4 ✓	4	
E reasoned argument	4 ✓	4	3 ✓	4	
F analysis and evaluation	4 ✓	4	4 ✓	4	
G use of subject language	4 ✓	4	4 ✓	4	
H conclusion	2 ✓	2	2 ✓	2	
I formal presentation	4 ✓	4	4 ✓	4	
J abstract	2 ✓	2	2 ✓	2	
K holistic judgment	4 ✓	4	4 ✓	4	
Total out of 36	36		34 ✓		

Name of examiner 1: _____
(CAPITAL letters)

Examiner number: _____

Name of examiner 2: _____
(CAPITAL letters)

Examiner number: _____

Name of examiner 3: _____
(CAPITAL letters)

Examiner number: _____

IB Cardiff use only: B: _____

IB Cardiff use only: A: 105437 Date: 24/5

In what ways are the authors successful in challenging Victorian perceptions of women in 'The Tenant of Wildfell Hall' and 'The Woman in White'?

Abstract

The question I have chosen to investigate, 'In what ways are the authors successful in challenging Victorian perceptions of women in 'The Tenant of Wildfell Hall' and 'The Woman in White'?' is a study in Wilkie Collins' and Anne Brontë's presentation of females in society. Though neither author necessarily intended their writing to be specifically feminist, both books are regarded as pioneering – and, to a degree, pre-emptive – works of Victorian feminist fiction. I consulted a number of secondary sources, including a review of *The Woman in White* written just ten years after it was published and direct references to Anne Brontë's diary, in order not to limit responses to the texts and the issues within them solely to modern perspectives. Brontë translates her stout moral consciousness, for part of the text, into a defiantly independent female narrator, who echoes the author's religious consciousness and immovable ideals. However, the novel's stumbling structure, and the heroine's return to the role of a wife at the end of the text destabilises Brontë's profound message in contrast to Collins', despite his less eager attempts to establish a female as a moral advisor. Instead, Collins provides three symbols of the heroine: the classic, modest heiress, naïve and weak; the pitied illegitimate daughter, friendless and harassed; and finally Marian, bold, courageous, intelligent, and – alas – undeniably masculine. Although he seems not quite willing to attribute these fine qualities to an entirely feminine creature, he is able, in the contrast of Marian to his gentle hero, and by re-defining the role of women in relationships, to create an influential text, without Brontë's sometimes oppressively didactic tone.

Word Count: 268

Could be more on how relevant was class

Promising



Contents

Title Page	1
Abstract	2
Contents	3
Introduction	4
Narrative structure	5
Animal imagery	8
Setting and property	11
Conclusion	13
Bibliography	14

Word count: 3998

In what ways are the authors successful in challenging Victorian perceptions of women in 'The Tenant of Wildfell Hall' and 'The Woman in White'?

Wilkie Collins and Anne Brontë were both writing their novels in the mid-nineteenth century, when their contemporaries, such as Dickens, were creating self-sacrificing females like Miss Manette in A Tale of Two Cities, who were familiar images of female virtue and thus were warmly received by readers. This was a time when a married woman

ceased to be a person under the law of coverture, which stated that the wife's interests were represented by her husband.¹

Women were regarded as little more than possessions of their husbands, which made the prospect of escape near impossible. Prior to the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act, only four women had secured a divorce from their husbands in an English court, but even after being freed, a woman would have to bear the burden of social prejudice. A virtuous woman was thought pure, obedient and dutiful, so a spinster was, if not despised, thought ridiculous. Although female authors were present at the time, rarely did they dare to indulge in matters of morality or challenging unjust social systems, though men were freely able to do so, again citing Dickens who often satirises and slanders social inequality of classes in Victorian England.

The Brontë sisters are regarded as symbols of female success in this misogynistic system simply through their writing books. For many years their works were published under pseudonyms, but Acton Bell's gender nevertheless "roused the curiosity of all and the condemnation of those who judged the subject unfit for a woman"². Undeterred, Anne responds stoutly in her Preface to The Tenant of Wildfell Hall (1848):

I am satisfied that if a book is a good one, it is so whatever the sex of the author... I am at a loss to conceive ... why a woman should be censured for writing anything that would be proper and becoming for a man.³

This 'proper and becoming' topic is that of a young woman, Helen, escaping her cruel, alcoholic husband with her son – an action that would not be supported by English law at the time. It is not so much the constraint of women that motivates her writing, however, as a sense of responsibility to convey human folly, witnessed in the houses where she was employed as governess. She was, nevertheless, well aware how ill received it would be from the pen of a woman:

¹ Anne Humphreys Breaking Apart: the Early Victorian divorce novel in Victorian Woman Writers and the Woman Question ed. Nicola Diane Thompson (Cambridge University Press, 1999) p. 46

² Winifred Gérin, 'Introduction' to The Tenant of Wildfell Hall (Penguins Books Ltd., 1979, reissued 1984) p. 7

³ Anne Brontë, 'Preface to the Second Edition' of The Tenant of Wildfell Hall (Penguins Books Ltd., 1979, reissued 1984, first published 1848) p.31

when I feel it my duty to speak an unpalatable truth, with the help of God, I *will* speak it, though it be to the prejudice of my name.⁴

By presuming the right to teach morality to men, through the voice of her heroine, Brontë promotes females from the role of humble service to one of self-righteousness and wisdom.

Collins, like Brontë, had no intention of being a feminist writer, indeed any feminist movements in literature are normally accredited to the 'New Woman' concept, which recognisably arose after the publication of The Woman in White (1859-1860), around the 1890s. Nevertheless, Dorothy L. Sayers, in her introduction to The Moonstone states that "he is the most genuinely feminist of all the nineteenth-century novelists"⁵. Unlike Brontë's heroine, the young woman in this text (Laura) does not save *herself* from an unfortunate marriage to Sir Percival, but is rescued by her drawing master, Hartright, and sister, Marian, spurred by the warnings of Anne Catherick who escapes the psychiatric institute in which she had been unjustly placed by Laura's husband. The contrast of these three heroines' roles within the plot and their relationship with male characters highlights the imminent transformation of women in literature and in society. Having been launched towards economic security by the industrial revolution in the 18th Century, England was on the brink of social revolution, which defines modern English ideals of democracy and equality. In light of this, I will investigate the effect these novels may have had on their Victorian readers' perception of women, through their liberation of the female as a narrator, the presentation of gender roles through animal motifs, and the way in which the setting is used to create images of imprisonment and of asylum.

Both novels are written as a collection of first-person accounts, allowing both male and female characters to help narrate the text. Collins grants Marian Halcombe and some other minor female characters a role in narrating The Woman in White, though it can be argued that Marian is not entirely empowered by it. While challenging Victorian decorum by climbing across a roof at night to eavesdrop on the men, she is struck down with a fever (the inevitable hindrance to the typical heroine, particularly those of Jane Austen and Emily and Charlotte Brontë) "that causes her to lose control over her text"⁶ and thus she "proves a failure as a woman writer"⁷. Even with the heart and mind of a man, her vulnerable feminine anatomy succumbs to the weather, and thus Collins implies that even the most stubbornly masculine of females cannot overcome her greatest hindrance: her sex. In The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, the male narration is divided by a large extract of Helen's journal, although, as Elizabeth Langland points out, at this time "women writers had not yet claimed for themselves the

⁴ Anne Brontë, 'Preface to the Second Edition' of The Tenant of Wildfell Hall op. cit. p. 30

⁵ Dorothy L. Sayers 'Introduction' to Moonstone p.vii (J. M. Dent, 1947)

⁶ Tamar Heller Dead Secrets: Wilkie Collins and the female gothic (Yale University Press, 1992) p. 135

⁷ *ibid.* p. 135

authority of speaking directly through a woman as narrator⁸, that is, that authors usually wrote in the third person from the perspective of a woman, avoiding first-hand accounts. In contrast to Collins' novel, it is the man in The Tenant of Wildfell Hall who is struck down, specifically, by his own vices, and the woman who fights for his health and salvation. Anne Brontë will not allow Helen to succumb to the whims of other heroines of the period, but rather makes her maintain the rationality all too often attributed solely to male protagonists.

Although Anne Catherick is not provided with her own narrative, her voice plays an important role as a prophetic symbol in The Woman in White. Her power is derived from her "voice of the rhetoric of dissenting Christianity which... was popular in the nineteenth-century... feminist movements"⁹. Her religious references usually have connotations to the contrast of good and evil; of a female's purity to a man's selfishness, for example in her letter to Laura regarding her engagement to Sir Percival, describing how in her dream "there, behind him, stood a fiend laughing... and there, behind [Laura], stood an angel weeping."¹⁰ She also uses specific Biblical references to validate her anxieties, citing "(Genesis xl. 8. xli. 25; Daniel iv. 18-25)"¹¹ - scenes of dream interpretation, such as Joseph and the Pharaoh - in an attempt to prove that her dreams have prophetic relevance and are not merely fantasy. Although Collins later reveals that Anne's aversions are born of prior experience of Sir Percival rather than foresight, her enigmatic warnings are vital to his eventual downfall, thus ascribing power even to the most vulnerable of females.

Brontë gives Helen a didactic voice, presuming a moral superiority despite her gender. She preaches, with a religious tone similar to Anne Catherick, the corruptibility of mankind, reflected in the metaphor of the path one takes through life. So vital is it to the text, it is included both in the Preface:

Is it better to reveal the snares and pitfalls of life to the young and thoughtless traveller, or to cover them with branches and flowers?¹²

And also later in the text, stated by Helen:

... I see the whole race of mankind (with a few rare exceptions) stumbling and blundering along the path of life.¹³

Brontë, embittered by "unpleasant and undreamt of experiences of human nature"¹⁴ in her post as governess at Thorp Green Hall, uses Helen as an outlet for her own disgust at the frivolous behaviour

⁸ Elizabeth Langland Anne Brontë: the other one (Barnes and Noble books, 1989)

⁹ Tamar Heller op. cit. p. 124

¹⁰ Wilkie Collins The Woman in White (Penguin Books Ltd., 1994, first published 1868) p. 66

¹¹ *ibid.* p. 65

¹² Anne Brontë 'Preface to the Second edition' of The Tenant of Wildfell Hall op. cit. p. 30

¹³ Anne Brontë The Tenant of Wildfell Hall (Penguin Books Ltd. 1979, reissued 1984, first published 1848) p. 54, 55

of gentry, adopting – through the authoritative stance of a mother raising a child – a sombre tone of judgement on men. Moreover, Brontë uses this scene to express what she perceives as the unnecessary distinctions between the treatment of sexes:

...to teach her how to sin is at once to make her a sinner, and the greater her knowledge, the wider her liberty, the deeper will be her depravity, - whereas, in the nobler sex, there is a natural tendency to goodness... which, the more it is exercised by trials and dangers, is only further developed.¹⁵

Her first-person narration allows her, controversially, to criticise hypocritical beliefs of the time, in this case, that while sin makes man virtuous, it makes woman a sinner, ironically calling men the 'nobler sex' to emphasise her cynicism.

In The Woman in White, however, Marian, whose very nature challenges perceptions of women at the time, contradicts herself by condemning the gender to which she does such justice in her ability to narrate. She upholds and openly expresses the belief that women are "fools"¹⁶ and yet she procures the most respect from characters and readers alike, compared to Laura. Although she is better loved by the hero, Collins does not allow Laura to contribute narration, making her the distant subject of pity rather than empathy. This suggests the only woman who deserves our respect is one who resembles man both physically in her "swarthy"¹⁷ features, and also in the stubborn, fearless elements of her nature. Marian is "the newer kind of heroine... openly intelligent and unafraid"¹⁸, but even so, the Victorian readers believe

such women as she are able stand alone in this world, and a merciful Providence provides that men should fall in love chiefly with the less gifted and self-reliant.¹⁹

That is, that Laura, being weak and dependent, appeals more to the Victorian sensibilities of Hartright, who does not desire an equal as a wife but someone who can rely on him and be a doting subordinate. ✓
Marian is unlovable, yet considered "infinitely more admirable"²⁰ even by Victorian critics, and it is perhaps their inability to pet and pity Marian that releases her from the role of a wife: Collins liberates Marian with a pen (which can be perceived as a "metaphorical penis"²¹, thereby providing her with a metaphorical patriarchy over the text in her sections), rather than subdue her with a husband. The essential irony of Marian's role - a paradigm of a powerful female, who ridicules her sex and

¹⁴ Anne Brontë Diary paper, 30 July 1841

¹⁵ Anne Brontë The Tenant of Wildfell Hall op. cit. p. 57

¹⁶ Wilkie Collins op. cit. p.26

¹⁷ ibid. p. 24

¹⁸ Sue Lonoff Wilkie Collins and his Victorian readers: a study in the rhetoric of authorship (AMS Press, Inc. 1982) p. 138

¹⁹ J L Stewart Rose-Belford's Canadian Monthly and National Review (Nov 1878) p. 587

²⁰ Tamar Heller op. cit. p. 135

²¹ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gulbar The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the 19th Century Literary imagination (New Haven Press, Yale University Press, 1979)

intimidates men - highlights the injustice by making it almost comedic. Collins mocks men for being horrified by their equals, and perpetuating pathetic wives in order to feel superior.

*It is not clear how he
mocks men? By making them pathetic like so,
near*

This weakness in male characters is revealed at the conclusion of the novel. Until this point, Hartright overshadows Marian's role through his attempts to personally drive the investigation, in order to assert his masculinity through redeeming Laura's virtue and attaining her love. This achieved, he submits, admitting "The pen falters in [his] hand"²², and requesting that Marian would "end our story"²³, signifying that a woman is capable of fulfilling his role. Conversely, this is where Brontë's heroine falters, in allowing the narrative to be recaptured and concluded by Gilbert, who ends on a bathetic note: signing off a letter to a friend, thereby making Helen's narrative input a mere detail of his matrimonial conquest. Anne Humphreys, citing The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, argues that the attempt to address the inequality of marriage in a novel

can destabilize the narrative and open fissures through which new types of narrative structures and closures are tried, not always successfully.²⁴

She refers specifically to Helen's "long and repetitive"²⁵ contribution to the narrative, which she claims hinders the climax of the novel. By indulging the female to recount her suffering so intimately through a diary entry, the author has lost the objectivity to express herself coherently; it can be perceived as the fickleness of women, in a society that regarded loyalty to be the greatest virtue of a wife. Consequently, although Brontë's heroine may appear a sober moralist when described from the male narrator's perspective, when given the narration herself she merely encumbers the story, presenting women to be as temperamental as a Victorian reader may expect.

Relying on a critic's interpretation:

The authors use animal imagery to denote the prescribed gender roles in society. Dogs are a recurrent image used in The Woman in White, for example Marian's description of the shot spaniel, in which Collins makes use of the symbolism "the poor little dog's eyes were glazing fast, and there were spots of blood on the glossy white side"²⁶ to give an allegorical meaning. White is associated throughout the novel with Anne Catherick, as she refuses to wear anything but white upon her guardian's request (hence the title, 'The Woman in White'), and also as an image of the pure, virginal victims of man: of Laura Fairlie, and so when stained with blood, portrays the suffering of these two characters. Furthermore, it is a familiar metaphor of a virginal bride's irreversibly lost chastity. Marian's contemplative comment "the misery of a weak, helpless, dumb creature is surely one of the saddest of

²² Wilkie Collins op. cit. p. 569

²³ ibid. p. 569

²⁴ Anne Humphreys op. cit. p. 46

²⁵ ibid. p. 46

²⁶ Wilkie Collins op. cit. p. 182

all the mournful sights the world can show”²⁷ clarifies the breadth of the image; Marian doesn’t simply mourn the spaniel, she mourns any creature that cannot defend itself – she mourns for women. Although Collins presents these two women as lowly subjects of pity, he continues to empower Marian, illustrating a progression in the ideal of a heroine: she contemplates the victim, rather than becoming the victim. ✓

Brontë, too, uses dogs as a symbol of female status. She illustrates Helen’s relationship with Mr. Huntington through a short interaction with his pet:

“his favourite cocker... took the liberty of jumping upon him and beginning to lick his face. He struck it off with a smart blow; the poor dog squeaked, and ran cowering back to me... He called again, more sharply, but Dash only clung closer to me... Enraged at this, his master snatched up a heavy book and hurled it at his head.”²⁸

Brontë does not use such profound symbolism as Collins, as she simply utilises the dog as a metaphor for wives being a possession of their husbands. However, she also portrays the other side of this companionship: the dependence the man has upon the animal, and his jealous need to be loved, though he cannot offer mutual affection. Throughout the text, Brontë makes several references to Shakespeare, which suggests the metaphor of the dog may too be a reference to a scene in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, in which Helena, desperate for Demetrius’s love, cries out:

“I am your spaniel; and, Demetrius,
The more you beat me, I will fawn on you.
Use me but as you spaniel, spurn me, strike me,
Neglect me, lose me...”²⁹ ✓

The dog is not just a plaything for man, but the doting victim of its owner’s violence, begging to be injured for the sake of its master’s joy; an image made more apparent when the narrator is the subject of the metaphor. Brontë, like Collins, allows Helen to contemplate this relationship rather than simply experience it, as she progresses from a classic heroine to a more independent woman. haw

Brontë highlights Huntingdon’s vicious nature through repeated reference to him as a hunter, particularly while courting Helen. When he approaches her “stained with the blood of his prey”³⁰, though this image is essentially one of barbarism, Helen, victim to her own naivety, is not repulsed. The images of slaughter empathise with Helen’s pride, which has been bruised to the amusement of ✓

²⁷ Wilkie Collins op. cit. p. 182

²⁸ Anne Brontë The Tenant of Wildfell Hall op. cit. p. 225

²⁹ William Shakespeare, A Midsummer Night’s Dream ed. Harold F. Brooks (Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1979, reprinted Thomas Learning, 2000, first published 1600) Act II, Sc. I, lines 203-206, p.40.

³⁰ Anne Brontë The Tenant of Wildfell Hall op. cit. p. 177 ✓

Huntingdon; these blood stains are not a potent image of tattered virtue, but of a proud girl's tattered ego. It is, nevertheless, a provoking message of the brutality of courtship, when ignorant girls are preyed upon by more experienced gentlemen. Though these roles may not have been particularly controversial at the time, Brontë's empathy with the victim highlights the potential cruelty of relationships.

Collins, on the other hand, associates one of his more devious characters with an adoring relationship to animals. The art of this is not purely in the contrast, but in revealing Fosco's character as a more complex character than the generic Victorian husband. The Count's ability to command animals through affection, such as his canaries – “pretty little cleverly trained creatures [which] perch fearlessly on his hand”³¹ – illustrates his relationship with women. Particularly, his “once wayward”³² wife has been endeared into submission, as Marian acknowledges:

her cold blue eyes... are generally turned on her husband, with the look of mute submissive inquiry which we are all familiar with in the eyes of a faithful dog.³³

Here, Collins highlights the common characteristic in Fosco with the rest of his gender; his wife is no more of a companion to him than a dog.

Even Marian, the most empowering symbol of her sex, is not immune to him. She admits

If he had married a tigress, instead of a woman, he would have tamed the tigress. If he had married *me*... I should have held my tongue when he looked at me, as [his wife] holds hers.³⁴

Collins has indulged a female character to compare herself to a tigress, and rise above the metaphor of the pet dog, yet even in this elevated state, man rules over her. The author further confounds the metaphor when Fosco takes up Marian's diary and effeminately expresses an attachment to her, claiming “Under happier circumstances how worthy I should have been of Miss Halcombe”³⁵. It appears after all that Marian can be loved, though not by any ordinary gentleman. Fosco, a frivolous foreigner, is not as conservative as the English gentlemen, and contrasts their predatory behaviour – as Marian expresses it:

He would blandly kiss his white mice and twitter to his canary-birds amid an assembly of English fox-hunters, and would only pity them as barbarians.³⁶

³¹ Wilkie Collins op. cit. p. 195

³² *ibid.* p.192

³³ *ibid.* p. 191

³⁴ *ibid.* p. 192

³⁵ *ibid.* p. 303

³⁶ *ibid.* p. 195

This image summarises the reason he can adore Marian, because he is not of the English Victorian society; he, like Marian, is a living symbol of liberality and revolution, and is superior enough in her eyes to pity the traditionalists.

The setting, often claustrophobic, plays a vital role in both texts. It acts both as a metaphor for the women's state of mind and being, and more literally, in The Woman in White, to represent Anne Catherick's incarceration and Laura's entrapment in marriage. Blackwater, for example, is described to be "situated on a dead flat, and seems to be shut in – almost suffocated... by trees"³⁷, which act both as a method of keeping Laura *in* and the Cathericks *out* – a symbol of the boundaries constructed and controlled by patriarchs, which nonetheless are broken through by Anne, like the walls of her asylum (perhaps more accurately described as a prison). In ways, she is a more potent symbol of female revolution than Marian – Sir Percival is more afraid of Anne, believing her to know his secret. Collins later reveals that, great symbol as she may be, she "really did *not* know"³⁸ the secret she spends so long attempting to convey; she is silenced. Silence in itself plays a central role in creating a sense of claustrophobia and helplessness: in the text both Marian- by her illness, and Laura- by her ignorance, are condemned to be useless at fighting their part against Sir Percival's male dominion.

Brontë uses Gilbert's description of the garden to introduce Helen's wasted youth and degradation even before the character:

a garden – once, stocked with such hardy plants and flowers as could best brook the soil and climate, and such trees and shrubs as could best endure the gardener's torturing shears, and most readily assume the shapes he chose to give them, - now having been left so many years, untilled and untrimmed, abandoned to the weeds and the grass, to the frost and the wind, the rain and the drought³⁹

This is an unmistakable image of Helen's once strong character, resilient to agony, a pliable victim to violence, eventually left solitary and vulnerable –unmistakeable, that is, in retrospect, but as an introduction only hints at her experiences. For fear of her name "spreading... till it reach the ears of someone who will carry it to [her husband]"⁴⁰, Helen must seclude herself, and moreover, is forced to be indebted to her brother in order to escape. The constraints of debt and seclusion, however, are largely self-imposed by pride, not from being possessed by another, like Collins' females. She does not harbour any shame in leaving behind a life of wealth to become self-sufficient and repay her

³⁷ Wilkie Collins op. cit. p. 174

³⁸ ibid. p. 487

³⁹ Anne Brontë The Tenant of Wildfell Hall op. cit. p. 46

⁴⁰ ibid. p. 400

debts, but rather is proud of “my labour, my earnings, my frugal fare”⁴¹. The repetitions of the possessive ‘my’ emphasises her consciousness of her sole ownership and her independence. Through this, the author deconstructs the Victorian gender role of women, showing them to be capable of being an individual parent and provider, and not simply an obedient accessory to her husband. *Widowhood*

Even claustrophobic images of being surrounded by darkness, such as her “plain black silk dress”⁴² and “black veil”⁴³, both constituent to her disguise as a widow, but also symbolic of her humbled status, and also the “bleak and barren fields”⁴⁴ surrounding her house, do not succeed in imprisoning her, but “echo back [her] own sense of hope and freedom”⁴⁵. She is not walled *in* by these defences, but rather Huntingdon – a symbol of male oppression – is walled *out*. Earlier in Helen’s diary, she describes how she “must sparkle in costly jewels and deck [her]self out like a painted butterfly”⁴⁶, using a modal verb to convey it as an act of obedience, to which Helen willingly complies to amuse her husband, and which, Brontë makes clear, she is pleased no longer to oblige when an independent woman. Marian, in The Woman in White, expresses a similar distaste, stating in a bitter tone, denoted by a tricolon of positives, that she is “condemned to patience, propriety, and petticoats for life”⁴⁷, using constrictive and superfluous female dress of the era to symbolise similarly redundant ideals of being female in Victorian England.

Unlike Brontë’s heroine, Hartright, Laura, and Marian perceive their lowered status as a shameful hinderance to Laura’s happiness. Furthermore, Laura, whose nerves have been damaged by marriage, cannot contribute to her own salvation as Helen does, and so Collins reveals the weakness of the stereotypical heroine. She is, rather, humoured by her carers, and led to believe that her paintings are sold to make contribution to costs, whereas they are kept by Hartright, ironically as “treasures beyond price”⁴⁸. This is the summit of Hartright’s success as the male; his wealthy heiress now poor and dependent. Innocently mimicking Sir Percival, he concludes that “neither Marian nor Laura should stir outside the door”⁴⁹, enforcing the supposed fragility of women, and the necessity of man to act as protector, provider, and – importantly – possessor, and yet, it is all done out of Hartright’s admirably feminine love and respect for these women. *write*
why 'admirable'?

⁴¹ Anne Brontë The Tenant of Wildfell Hall op. cit. p. 398

⁴² *ibid.* p. 395

⁴³ *ibid.* p. 395

⁴⁴ *ibid.* p. 397

⁴⁵ *ibid.* p. 397

⁴⁶ *ibid.* p. 230

⁴⁷ Wilkie Collins op. cit. p. 174

⁴⁸ *ibid.* p. 433

⁴⁹ *ibid.* p. 389

Collins' introductory statement hardly encourages the reader to expect a tale of female empowerment, calling itself "the story of what a woman's patience can endure, and what a Man's resolution can achieve"⁵⁰, and yet The Woman in White is described as being "extraordinarily feminist"⁵¹. Hartright conforms to the creations of the author's contemporaries, yet provides a subtle but profound appreciation of female characters, not merely by challenging perceptions of women, but also their husbands. Brontë provides for the reader a more powerful heroine, whose pain is felt more directly than Collins' distant female victims, yet it is this potency that emphasises the bathos of the conclusion, when she is won back into marriage. She does, nonetheless, continue to challenge Victorian expectations by allowing her heroine to marry below her social status, and for love, like Collins' Laura, but Collins is also able to maintain Marian as a symbol of independence and equality. This could be attributed to Collins having greater confidence in addressing the topic, as it was considered more appropriate for a man to do so than it was a woman. Consequently, though both succeed in addressing gender inequality, the male author, ironically, provides a more potent challenge to Victorian perceptions of women than the female.

*What an excellent piece of work - and a true
delight to read.
Difficult to criticise.*

*The comparison of the presentation of women by Collins
- Brontë is an intensely - original one. Candidate's argument
is convincing but she tries to cover too many aspects and
so sometimes the essay lacks evidence & clarity. Both
would need an overall explanation of who the characters are.
There is also rather a heavy reliance at times on critics.*

⁵⁰ Wilkie Collins op. cit. p.1

⁵¹ Tamar Heller op. cit. p. 111

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