

Failure Of Middle-Class Masculinity In The Bronte Fiction

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Abstract:

In this article I describe the descent of men who claim to be the heroes of the novels. They are either rejected or humbled down to stoop to conquer the love of women who are the heroines of the novels. These men are mostly middle-class people and it is only when their inordinate masculinity fails that they are found agreeable to the feminist heroic women. I also try to show here that in the event of aberrations women may be so bold as to challenge and flout the sacrament and may even turn assertive in the Bronte fiction.

Keywords: descent of men, humbled down, middle-class people, inordinate masculinity, feminist heroic women, sacrament

The male attributes of valour, and valiance, virility and violence, and power – money power and muscle power – constitute masculinity usually for personal as well as social welfare. But when violence and power devoid of virtue take precedence over the rest and assume inordinate proportion, then they create havoc, especially in a middle-class stratum of society and invite the failure of its masculinity.

“To strive, to seek, to find and not to yield”¹ – so enthused by Tennyson was the charge of Victorian temper that meant adventure, exploration, and expansion in socio-economic and scientific spheres. The charge worked for both good and evil. And England was afloat on the current of progress and prosperity augmented by scientific advancement, as a result of which the sea of faith began receding, and that of science and materialism started surging ashore. Lest the whole of humanity could be engulfed, the Poet Laureate was constrained to suggest a compromise;

Let knowledge grow from more to more,
But more of reverence in us dwell,
That mind and soul according well,
May make one music as before.²

But the economic prosperity achieved and retained did, as it does, give rise to complacency which in turn was responsible for brawl and bickering, drink and debauchery among some men that led them to their fall, called the failure of their middle-class masculinity. In other words, money and a moneyed-class society lay at the base of the pernicious indulgence which inevitably was responsible for the failure of that middle-class masculinity.

In Anne Brontë’s second novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* we come across such men who seem to be attitudinally foppish, and the Novel reveals as to what extent Victorian society could indulge men, and through that indulgence, make them Tyrants over women. The heroine Miss Helen marries against her aunt’s precaution, a reprobate sensualist of her own choice to reform him with her

angelic touch. She thinks, "I might have influence sufficient enough to save him from errors, and I should think my life well spent in the effort to preserve so noble a nature from destruction."³ She repeats the same with confidence, "I will save him" and "If he has done amiss, I shall consider my life well spent in saving him from the consequences of his early errors."⁴ Such feminine belief that a sweet woman can reform a reprobate is an attribute of feminism. We know how sweet Sophia could reform Tom Jones into a gentleman, who was basically "a beggar, a bastard, a fondling." But Helen finds to her utter dismay that the reprobate persists in his fall and failure, and the naivety of Helen's plan becomes apparent; no restraint can be acceptable to someone who has been indulged for thirty-six years of his life. And therefore, not only is his own life at risk but hers and their son's as well.

Helen, of course, flees from the contamination and steels herself against over-indulgence of her son, both to protect him and to help him cultivate restraint. But Huntingdon's down fall goes unchecked, and Helen, out of wifely duty, returns to a very ill husband. At the point she returns, Huntingdon is not in the danger of dying, but she notes that "his long habits of self-indulgence are greatly against him."⁵ Anne has structured the illness and subsequent death (arriving sooner) to emphasise the evil effects of indulgence in dissipation. For, the relapse in Huntingdon's illness is the result of his own infatuation for persisting in his appetite for drink and sex. More than the habit he had the means to afford to assuage his inordinate hunger. Such indulgence Anne Brontë identifies with a male lack of self-restraint in the dissolute habits and drunken brawls of Huntingdon's friends. We see the same in the abuse of their innocent pets and lovely wives. This discloses their emptiness and the failure of their vanity.

The Novel critiques the conventional manly ideal even as it criticizes male indulgence. Even in *Agnes Grey*, Anne Brontë recognizes the extent to which manliness is associated with drinking, swearing, riding, hunting and killing. There are gentlemen who are out on their expedition against the hapless partridges. In fact the base of their emphasis on their drinking and hunting is their contempt for the feminine. Anne Brontë defies in *The Tenant* this ill-conceived male attitude to women.

Anne Brontë in her second novel demolishes two vain views strongly (but wrongly) held high with regard to the upbringing of their (Huntingdons') son that the male child should be encouraged to drink and dance like his father if not "The poor child will be the veriest milksop that ever was sopped...[you] will treat him like a girl,...spoil his spirit and make a mere Miss Nancy of him,"⁶ and that the father should bond with the son at the cost of the mother, and that she should be made foolish and contemptible. Mr. Huntingdon's indoctrination of his little son into boyhood (and consequently into manhood) means that he "learnt to tipple wine like papa, to swear like Mr. Hattersley, and to have his own way like a man and [send] mamma to the devil when she tried to prevent him."⁷ Anne critiques male education and the whole of the Victorian patriarchal system, to expose its vanity and repose faith in feminist propriety.

The artist dies, not his/her art. This is the autonomy of art over life. Anne died, but her art survives the ravages of time, and has a moral purpose to serve, a social responsibility to point an anomaly out in a particular stratum of society,-- an anomaly responsible for the failure of that stratum, the cause of its failure being lack of reason and restraint and propriety.

Lack of reason and restraint and propriety compounded by plenty of means blind middle-class men to the virtue of women to such an extent that they treat young uninformed women as the object of their enjoyment. They exploit and squeeze these women and throw them in anonymity as though they are inferior creatures. Women are "buttressed by the cultural views of women [held by men] as sexual commodities, dehumanized and devoid of autonomy and dignity."⁸ Misogynists like James and Helstone in *Shirley* and Ashby and the likes in *The Tenant* are mad for women and at the same time

are women-haters and women-killers. Their masculinity lies in their brutality that ultimately invites their fall and failure.

In the entire Brontë fiction, Mr. Rochester's fall in *Jane Eyre* is a classic case of the failure of middle-class masculinity. In possession of the large fortune received in marriage, Mr. Rochester, tall, dark and strongly built, hides his lunatic wife Bartha in the third-storey room of his Thornfield Hall, and reports himself of having enjoyed the companionship of three continental mistresses—Celine, Giacinta and Clara—to finally drag a drab existence of dissipation, not of debauchery. In order to drive his monotony away one late afternoon, he goes riding for pleasure, with his dog pilot by the horse's side along the slippery road, and then suddenly there "was a clattering tumble" that arrested Jane's attention:

Man and horse were down. They had slipped on the sheet of ice which glazed the causeway. The dog came bounding back, and seeing his master in a predicament, and hearing the horse groan till the evening hills echoed the sound, which was deep in proportion to his magnitude. He sniffed round the prostrate group, and then he ran upto me; it was all he could do—there was no other help at hand to summon. I obeyed him, and walked down to the traveler, by this time struggling to free himself of his steed.⁹

Though this accident is a physical incident, it is a sustained metaphor suggestive of Mr. Rochester's fall from the horse's height, and by implication, the failure of his middle-class masculinity. The fall prophesizes the failure of his atheletic body, his social rank and economic status. And ironically, it is all the more significant, because a plain, parentless, penniless young girl like Jane is providentially there for his rescue. The helpless man in his 'Predicament', opposed to women in their predicament in the Brontë novel is desperate for her help:

'I cannot commission you to fetch help,' he said;
'but you may help me a little yourself, if you will be so kind.'

She comes close to him and then "He laid a heavy hand on my shoulder, and leaning on me with some stress, he limped to his horse. Having once caught the bridle he mastered it directly."¹⁰ She helps him ride back home and admits: My help had been needed and claimed; I had given it."¹¹ And he would need it; she would give it.

Now, that Jane is a governess in Mr. Rochester's Thornfield Hall to teach Adele is apparent. Equally apparent is the thronging of aristocratic ladies and gentlemen sunk deep in drink and dance, where Miss Ingram and the likes would assume air to look attractive and beautiful and their sole vocation in life would be to win a handsome, wealthy man as husband in marriage and depend on him. They are temperamentally dismissive of girls like Jane, and because of their intellectual poverty they fail to understand men, and lose their body and soul in the gilded company. They are mere womanish women. They do not enjoy "Freedom from sex determined role."¹² Charlotte Brontë is sorry for their wretched lot, and so she counsels them caution:

It [flirtation] does good to no woman to be flattered by her superior, who cannot possibly intend to marry her; and it is madness in all women to let a secret love kindle within them, which, if unreturned and unknown, must devour the life that feeds it, and if discovered and responded to, must lead... into miry wilds where there is no extrication.¹³

And what does not meet the eye is opposed to them: she is Jane, a feminist woman, away from the centre, recoils in the corner, and lives in the periphery. And because she is intellectually sound and

mentally alert, she discovers her space in Rochester's heart and he emotionally responds to her. Miss Ingram and the likes are decentred, because "he is not their kind." Jane then occupies the center-stage. It is by their nature and necessity that both fall in love:

I believe he is of mine- I am sure he is- I feel akin to him- I understand the language of his countenance and movements: though rank and wealth sever us widely, I have something in my brain and heart, in my blood and nerves that assimilates me mentally to him.¹⁴

They are soul-mates. Charlotte Brontë believes, as does Anne, or Richardson before them, in the sanctity of the institution of marriage without any impediment. Their marriage is arranged to be solemnized in the house of Lords before society. But Mr. Rochester has to pay the price for being secretive about the existence of his insane wife Bartha. To hide is a sinful act, almost a crime:

Sir, your wife is living: that is a fact acknowledged this morning by yourself. If I lived with you as you desire—I should then be your mistress: to say otherwise is sophistical – is false.¹⁵

Jane is a feminist woman of principles and integrity as she ought to be. Therefore she cannot live with him as his mistress. The dramatic dissolution of solemnization of the arranged marriage right at the threshold of the church-gate was but inevitable. When there is a conflict between passion and the compulsion of law and principles dictated by conscience,

I will keep the law given by God; sanctioned by man. I will hold to the principles received by me when I was sane, and not mad—as I am now. Law and principles are not for times when there is no temptation: they are for such moments as this, when body and soul rise in mutiny against their rigour; stringent as they are, inviolate they shall be.¹⁶

As feminist women, Charlotte's heroines are conscientious; they believe in the fairness of love and its culmination in a fair, happy marriage. So, when Rochester commenced courting her, she desired that she must remain fair in others' eyes also. Lest Mrs. Fairfax should misconstrue their meetings as clandestine and misjudge her, Jane requested her master to communicate his intention to the fair lady, which he did. Though Mrs. Fairfax did not disbelieve the fairness of their love, she doubted its culmination into marriage:

Equality of position and fortune is often advisable in such cases: and there are twenty years of difference in your ages...Try to keep Mr. Rochester at a distance: distrust yourself as well as him. Gentlemen in his stations are not accustomed to marry their governesses.¹⁷

Difference in age between the lovers in Charlotte's fiction does not matter. Jane and Rochester had overcome it. Lucy and Paul in *Villette* transcend it. Again, Caroline is not Robert's equal in fortune in *Shirley*, nor is Louis Shirley's. Lovers in the Brontë world either forget the socio-economic barrier, or they defy it. But if they, especially the male lovers, pronounce it, they are humbled down, and meet the failure of their masculinity. But in Victorian England the barrier was not normally bridgeable. And if it was bridged over, the consequences were abnormally far from being acceptable or reasonable. In Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, Rebecca (Becky sharp), a governess marries Rowdon, the rich Cowley's son. In her letter to Miss Briggs, she expresses her nuptial happiness:

With tears, and prayers, and blessings, I have the home where the poor orphan has ever met with kindness and affection... I am wedded to the best and most generous of men... my Rowdon... his noble race has shown such unparalleled affection.¹⁸

But the ‘unparalleled affection’ does not last long. The father disowns the son for his marrying an orphan, deserted girl of no fortune whose “mother had been on the stage.”¹⁹ She then seeks pomp and pleasure in the glittering underworld of the polite London society, finally to be separated from her husband and son. With her vanity now gone, “she busies herself in works of piety.”²⁰ Besides the socio-economic oddity, the match, contracted on infatuation, obviously lacked love, and so it failed.

Thackeray as a male satirist punished Rebecca for going beyond her station and status, and made her a scapegoat of his patriarchal ideology. Rowdon is declared innocent. Rebecca is dehusbed, bereft of her son. With Jane, who is the creation of a feminist writer, the matter was quite different. Charlotte Brontë believed in the fairness of love beyond status.

“Love is real: the most real, the most lasting, - the sweetest and yet the bitterest thing we know,”²¹ says Caroline to Mrs. Pryor. Love fulfilled is the sweetest; unfulfilled the bitterest thing. Whether in a Dickens novel or in a Brontë novel, love is love. Only its treatment varies. Love in Dickens is not as passionately manifested as in the Brontës. But in either case to make their love lasting and successful, lovers have to undergo hard tests and overcome impediments. When they establish that their “affection is reciprocal and sincere and minds and harmonious, marriages must be happy.”²² In such cases, estate and connections can neither be a condition nor an impediment to the cherished union. We, therefore, see that when Shirley’s despotic uncle Mr. Sympson forces her to marry Samuel Fawthrop for twice her money and respectability, she refuses him point-blank, for he is a profligate whom she is not “resolved to esteem- to admire- to love.”²³ He is not a ‘suitable’ and ‘proper’ match for her. By refusing the profligate masculinist Fawthrop, Shirley averts the mistake Helen made by accepting the profligate masculinist Huntingdon.

Charlotte Brontë’s heroines-- Frances, Shirley or Jane are cautious feminist women and try to be always right, but sometimes they could judge wrong. Despite all his agreeableness, kindness and goodness to Jane, Mr. Rochester seemed “proud”, “sardonic”²⁴, and kept a “strange fire in his look”²⁵ to her. And Jane missed to mark these masculinist traits in him. Though his sternness had “a power beyond beauty” which impressed Jane to feel that he “shed the real sunshine of feeling over me [her],”²⁶ he had not perhaps forgotten the power of his property and the lower station of Jane. If he did not plot profligacy, he at least fancied to penetrate with his wealth her proud heart and make her the object of the strange fire of his look, and Jane had made the mistake of accepting Rochester as her home--her only home, by stopping her ears against the voice of conscience that kept her warning of possible separation and grief prophesized in a dream at night before the wedding day. If the pressure of passion was too strong to resist, equally strong was the obstacle of moral compulsion raised by the impediment. This is how she got herself caught in a conflict between passion and compulsion.

In *Wuthering Heights* Emily Brontë creates a somewhat similar situation of conflict between passion and moral compulsion. Heathcliff is adopted by Catherine’s father Mr. Earnshaw, and allowed to be a playmate of the girl, and both grow up together and love each other intensely and passionately. But Catherine is to be married off to Edgar Linton, the sophisticated but weak, respectable but undemanding gentleman of Thrushcross Grange. To Mrs. Nelly Dean Catherine expresses the intensity of her passion for her Heathcliff:

If all else perished and he [Heathcliff] remained, I should still continue to be; and if all remained and he were annihilated, the universe would turn to be a mighty stranger: I would not seem a part of it. My love for Linton is like the foliage in the wood: time will change it, I am well aware as winter changes the trees. My love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rock beneath: a source of little visible delight, but necessary.

Nelly, I am Heathcliff. He is always in my mind: not as a pleasure any more than I am always a pleasure to myself, but as my own being.²⁷

The passage in its entirety is perhaps the profoundest piece of poetry in the whole bulk of Brontë poetry. The images employed in the contrast indicate that while Catherine's love for Linton is ephemeral, subject to change and decay, her love for Heathcliff is eternal, and transcends time and space. By identifying herself with him she painfully tries to prove that she is part and parcel of himself who is the uncaused cause of all that looks existing: he is the essence of all existence. This is how Emily Brontë is at great pains to convince us that the nature of love that existed between the two was asexual, unearthly and spiritual. And because of conventional confinement, her tormented heart remained eternally hungry for Heathcliff. For their love was larger than life.

With Emily passion is an all-sweeping force to break the bounds of conventional morality and of reason, with Charlotte "passion is enrolled in the service of a severe moral philosophy that constitutes her individuality."²⁸ Jane refused to get herself 'sunk in the silken snare of sex' and defile her divine passion by including in the unlawful relationship with her passionate lover Mr. Rochester, for that relationship based on 'beauty, youth and grace' could 'be well for a while' only. After youthful charms gone and ephemeral infatuation over, the 'delusive bliss' could turn into perpetual 'remorse and shame'. She therefore prefers being a village schoolteacher at Morton to being Rochester's mistress at Thornfield or Ferndean. Jane is a feminist heroine.

Jane feels some instinctive prompting and hears "mysterious summons"²⁹ to see Mr. Rochester. She sets for Thornfield. She is told there that the lunatic demon, Bartha Mason set fire to the hall (as it was her habit), and that while saving her Mr. Rochester became "indeed blind and cripple."³⁰ It was an artistic necessity vis-à-vis moral compulsion that the lunatic should go of her own accord: she got herself burnt to death. This is how the impediment was gone. And Mr. Rochester was left at Ferndean maimed and miserable, with John to serve him, Pilot to protect him, and Mary to cook for him. This is how his proud independence and haughtiness were gone, and along with which was gone his middle-class masculinity. But what remained constant all along between them was their mutual love for marriage, and they married and lived happily to the sweet will of God and enjoyed the sanction of their society forever after.

Notes and Reference

1. Tennyson, *Ulysses* L.70
2. ---. *In Memoriam* [published in 1850 after a prolonged revision of 16 years] was welcomed by first readers, because it tried to solve a problem that haunted them, a conflict between science and religion". 'Epilogue', L. 25-28.
3. *The Tenant*, P.121
4. *Ibid.*, P. 122
5. *Ibid.*, P.361
6. *Ibid.*, P. 11
7. *Ibid.*, P. 286
8. (Quoted) *Feminisms*, Lizkelly, *A central Issue: Sexual Violence and Feminist Theory*, P. 347
9. *Jane Eyre*, P.114
10. *Ibid.*, P.116
11. *Ibid.*, P.117
12. (Quoted) Berg in *Feminisms*, P. 24
13. *Jane Eyre* P. 116
14. *Ibid.*, P.174
15. *Ibid.*, P.301

16. *Ibid.*, P. 314
17. *Jane Eyre*, PP. 266-77
18. William Makepeace Thackeray (1847), *Vanity Fair: A Novel without A hero* (Dean's Uassics. London, 1960)P. 65
19. *Ibid.*, P.42
20. *Ibid.*, P.248
21. *Shirley*, P. 366
22. *Ibid.*, P.366
23. *Ibid.*, P. 444
24. *Jane Eyre*, 149
25. *Ibid.*, P. 154
26. *Ibid.*, P. 248
27. *Wuthering Heights*, P. 81
28. David Cecil, *Early Victorian Novelists*, P.107
29. *Jane Eyre*, P. 451
30. *Ibid.*, P. 432