

Subversion from Within: Anne Brontë, Emily Brontë, and Mary Shelley's Gothic Feminism
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Long before recognized feminist movements began, women were fighting the patriarchal structure of society with the aims of equality and recognition. Woman writers have had to fight to gain a standing with their male counterparts in the literary public eye. For centuries, many women could only achieve success in their contemporary circles by publishing their work under a male or gender-neutral pseudonym. One such woman, Charlotte Brontë, said in a letter to her editor that an early critic of *Jane Eyre* “praised the book if it were written by a man, and pronounced it ‘odious’ if the work of a woman” (Qtd in Margaret Smith 139). In addition to being considered inferior in everyday life, women were also depicted in literature as typically flat characters that fit into a regressive trope or patriarchal stereotype representing all women. Female characters were traditionally cast in one of three roles: the mother, the prostitute, or the divine, “pure” female muse.

In particular, the Gothic genre is full of tropes that reflect a lesser view of women—tropes such as the fainting heroine, the mistreated female servant, and the brooding Gothic hero, who is often revealed to be an abuser. Unsurprisingly, the first use of the term “Gothic” to describe what has become known as Gothic fiction was coined by a man -- Horace Walpole -- when describing his novel, *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764 (Mullan). The narrative follows the Prince of Otranto as he lusts after the young woman his son is meant to marry. A gloomy, isolated setting provides the backdrop for the mystery and drama that ensue. Many authors followed Walpole's example and began writing their own Gothic fiction, and the repeated incorporation of certain tropes became almost exclusively associated with the genre. Such tropes include strange, remote settings, unequal power dynamics between men and women, a young, typically virginal ingenue, captivity, and elements of the supernatural (Bowen). For this thesis, I

will analyze how Anne Brontë, Emily Brontë, and Mary Shelley all used specifically the Gothic tropes of the Gothic “hero”—sometimes merged with the Gothic villain—the Gothic heroine, the use of a frame narrative, and the inclusion of the female servant.

Though the Gothic genre was dominated by male writers, one woman, Ann Radcliffe, wrote in the Gothic genre while it was still early in its conception. Radcliffe contributed an important distinction in the Gothic genre between “terror” and “horror.” The difference, according to Radcliffe, lay in how explicitly shown the threats are within the work. “Terror” deals more with the psychological implications of facing a threat, while horror shows in gruesome detail the threats being carried out. Radcliffe characterized her own work as Gothic “terror” and, according to British Library Scholar John Bowen, she “is concerned with the psychological experience of being full of fear and dread and thus of recognizing human limits” (Bowen). In essence, Radcliffe’s work focuses on the psychological toll that facing threats of violence and the supernatural have on a character in order to demonstrate to readers why they should be careful not to let such events transpire beyond the pages of fiction. Radcliffe provided the foundation for women writers such as Anne Brontë, Emily Brontë, and Mary Shelley to expand upon in their own writing by continuing to demonstrate how the practical implications behind repressive Gothic tropes are dangerous for women in reality. Scholar Kate Flint argues that “a woman will most probably identify with the interests of her sex as depicted within writing;” therefore, finding many demeaning, patriarchal images of women in popular literature served to reinforce gendered stereotypes (31). While men tended to dominate the Gothic genre, some women wrote in the Gothic form and subverted the traditions of the genre. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*, and Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell*

Hall all feature tropes of the Gothic genre, but the female author of each work challenges the genre's traditions in order to grant power to the female characters.

Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* features two romantic interests for the heroine: Arthur Huntingdon and Gilbert Markham. When Helen is a girl first entering womanhood, she meets the young and handsome gentleman Arthur Huntingdon. He immediately catches her fancy with his "certain graceful ease and freedom about all that he said and did, that gave a strong sense of repose and expansion to the mind" (Anne Brontë 166). Huntingdon becomes her first love and first husband, and seems to meet all the requirements to be the story's hero. Yet, before long, Huntingdon's behavior turns. He becomes more manipulative once Helen is his wife, and his behavior turns from manipulative to abusive over time. In one instance, when Helen attempts to push back against Huntingdon's abuse, he says to her, "'Though you stand there with your white face and flashing eyes, looking at me like a very tigress, I know the heart within you, perhaps a trifle better than you know it yourself'" (Anne Brontë 164). Whenever Helen speaks for herself, Huntingdon shuts her down and repeatedly tells her that she is inferior to him in all ways.

The situation only spirals deeper, as he isolates their son from her, confiscates her art supplies, and cuts off her finances. His drinking, gambling, adulterating, and partying overrun Helen's life at Grassdale. Scholar Michelle A. Masse argues that Huntingdon shows how "the trope of the husband allows us to consider how and why the figure who was supposed to lay horror to rest has himself become the avatar of horror who strips voice, movement, property, and identity itself from the heroine" (682). Anne Brontë exposes the ugly truth behind the kind of man the Gothic genre would paint as Helen's husband and hero. Arthur Huntingdon's character represents many Victorian men who acted similarly, and his marriage with Helen reflects the

real-life situation of many Victorian women. Anne Brontë challenges the supposed normalcy of men like Huntingdon and instead calls upon society to recognize the toxicity behind relationships similar to his and Helen's. Arthur Huntingdon also serves as a warning to young women to not be fooled by charming words and a handsome face. As is the case with Helen's initial perceptions of Huntingdon, charm and looks can hide a disreputable character underneath. Anne Brontë encourages young women to instead focus on the character of the men they are drawn to and save themselves potential heartache by considering their romantic partners more carefully.

Contrasting with Huntingdon, Brontë presents Gilbert Markham as Helen's second love and husband after Huntingdon's death. Markham is a simple, well-respected farmer in the town where Helen takes up residence at Wildfell Hall with her young son, Arthur, and servant, Rachel. Unlike Huntingdon, Markham has genuine respect for Helen and women in general. Early in the novel, Markham discusses his thoughts on marriage with his mother and sister:

I was not sent into the world merely to exercise the good capacities and good feelings of others- was I?- but to exert my own towards them; and when I marry, I shall expect to find more pleasure in making my wife happy and comfortable than in being made so by her; I would rather give than receive. (Anne Brontë 46)

Before his relationship with Helen has even begun, the narrative establishes Markham as more of a true partner for her based on his kindness and desire to find a genuine partner as well. In addition, Markham admires Helen's artistic talents rather than seeking to degrade her like Huntingdon does. Markham speaks to Helen on equal terms and respects her boundaries. Because of his character, Helen confides in him. After learning the truth of how Helen fled her marriage, Markham does not condemn her as she expects him to. Rather, he greets her with understanding, further showing that he is the true hero of the story and the true match for Helen.

Whereas Huntingdon prevents Helen from doing things such as participating in society or traveling with him, Markham bids her to “do as [she] will with [her] own,” granting her freedom in their marriage of a kind she has not experienced (Anne Brontë 382). The dueling love stories that Anne Brontë presents serve to contrast the typical Gothic man of Huntingdon to an alternate suitor in Markham and replace Gothic men with a suitor who is more desirable to and supportive of a woman. In doing so, she also sets a new standard for how a romantic partner should behave with the object of his affection—the key being mutual understanding and respect.

One of the most notorious men in literature is Emily Brontë’s leading man Heathcliff in her novel, *Wuthering Heights*. Brooding, abusive, and manipulative, Heathcliff meets all the traditional characteristics of a Gothic man except in one respect—he does not get to marry the heroine. Instead, Emily Brontë presents a narrative more grounded in the realistic and weds Catherine to Linton. Scholar Diane Long Hoeveler argues that traditionally, Gothic women will marry the men they have intense feelings for regardless of their rank:

In Gothic novels written by men, the female character often insists on marrying the man of her choice, no matter what his social or economic status. The intense desire to follow her passion into the abyss of social rejection is a potent male fantasy, one that recurs throughout Gothic novels written by men. But female authors do not indulge their female characters in such a manner, for they understand all too well the consequences of familial power. (200)

Instead, Emily Brontë allows her heroine to make a more pragmatic decision, which undermines Heathcliff’s place in the traditional narrative. The decision deprives Heathcliff of what would typically be his—Catherine. Instead, he marries Isabella Linton, and the narrative shows his darker nature taken out on her after Nelly Dean notices that “[Isabella’s] pretty face was wan and

listless; her hair uncurled, some locks hanging lankly down, and some twisted carelessly round her head. Probably she had not touched her dress since yesterevening” (Emily Brontë 114). The relationship between Heathcliff and Isabella follows the more traditional dynamic between a Gothic man and Gothic woman. Isabella is cruelly mistreated by her husband and it drains her of life. While Catherine ultimately faces her own untimely end, the fault does not lie with her husband’s mistreatment or abuse, as there was none from Linton. Upsetting Heathcliff’s place in the narrative forges a new, secondary identity for him—that of the villain.

Unable to cope with his loss of Catherine to both marriage and death, Heathcliff resolves to perpetuate the cycle of abuse with the next generation of inhabitants at Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange. He mistreats both young Cathy and Hareton, and at the novel’s beginning, both are depicted as miserable, unfriendly people. Hareton is set up to be another Heathcliff, and when young Cathy is caught being kind to the young man, Heathcliff tells her, ““as to Hareton Earnshaw, if I see him listen to you, I’ll send him seeking his bread where he can get it! Your love will make him an outcast and a beggar”” (Emily Brontë 243). Heathcliff sees the core of his failures as a result of his twisted love affair with Catherine, so he attempts to convince both Hareton and Cathy that love will make Hareton a weak failure as well in order to punish them both. Though his main objective is the punishment of the younger generation, Heathcliff also genuinely possesses a toxic definition of what love is. His only experience with love is what he experienced with Catherine, which only led to misfortune. Therefore, in Heathcliff’s mind, love leads to suffering. Heathcliff’s manipulation sets the younger generation up to fall into the same despair and misfortune that his generation fell into, and Hareton and Cathy would become miserable people like him.

Despite causing years of unhappiness for both youths, Heathcliff ultimately fails in his revenge plot as well. Hareton demonstrates resilience and a desire to be better, and thus, is able to overcome his abuse. The young man persists in his friendship with Cathy, and caring about her teaches him that he did not have to be the person Heathcliff was turning him into. Once Heathcliff dies, Hareton is able to fully be himself—still a work in progress, but one that is genuinely progressing every day. In the same way that Anne Brontë draws a distinction between men like Arthur Huntingdon and Gilbert Markham, so too does Emily Brontë draw a distinction between men like Heathcliff, caught in their own revenge and seeing themselves only as wronged victims, and men like Hareton, who genuinely want to learn, grow, and be kinder to those around them. Gothic scholar Diane Long Hoeveler states that “men will continue to exist in female Gothic texts, but these men--The Triumph of the Civilizing Process--will not be the dark, brooding, and sexually potent Gothic heroes we saw in Heathcliff” (202-203). Rather, the future of Gothic men in female Gothic texts lies in the promise of prosperity and partnership.

The Gothic hero is harder to find in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, as his presence is dependent upon which character’s perspective the audience is following. The protagonist, Victor Frankenstein, considers himself the hero of the story, but the creature he creates sees Frankenstein as the ultimate villain of the story. For starters, when Frankenstein undertakes his creation of the creature and succeeds, he sees himself as his story’s hero because of his scientific prowess in accomplishing what had never been done before. Upon discovering the secret to creating life, Frankenstein declares that “the astonishment which I had at first experienced on this discovery soon gave place to delight and rapture...what had been the study and desire of the wisest men since the creation of the world, was now within my grasp” (Shelley 32). The scientist then jumps to the conclusion that his discovery is not the end to his research, but merely an

arrow pointing him to his next objective—using that knowledge to create life. Frankenstein casts himself as one of the greatest minds in the world, and his pride leads him to what he thinks is a logical and necessary experiment, yet what he views as a noble undertaking is a gross subversion of nature, as demonstrated later in the story. His hubris in removing women from the traditional reproductive process and taking the endeavor upon himself leads to the narrative's main conflict—the creature's birth and later destructive vendetta. Scholar Hoeveler notes that Shelley's presentation of the Gothic hero shows how “the experiments of Victor Frankenstein replace the maternal womb with chemical and alchemical artifice, only to blast masculine attempts at procreation as futile and destructive” (182). Shelley's argument in *Frankenstein* serves to demonstrate the dangers of removing women from the narrative and seeking to replace them with masculine authority.

Victor Frankenstein fails in both managing his creature and caring for his family. He does not act morally, and even when he is on the verge of assuming responsibility for a mistake, he recants and justifies his prior actions. For example, near the end of the novel, Frankenstein, after examining his past, tells Captain Walton that “I feel myself justified in desiring the death of my adversary. During these last days I have been occupied in examining my past conduct, nor do I find it blameable” (Shelley 156). Despite the creature's actions being a direct result of Frankenstein shunning it, Frankenstein excuses himself from blame for the misfortune the creature brings about and his ultimate desire for the creature's death. Even the few times Frankenstein appears to take responsibility for his failings, he later recants and re-excuses himself from any accountability. Mary Shelley demonstrates, through the character of Victor Frankenstein, what the fate of the supposed Gothic hero would realistically be if his behavior is

left unchecked—his lack of growth or ability to take responsibility for his actions leads to his downfall and to great misfortunes for others.

In contrast to the Gothic hero is the gothic heroine. Traditional Gothic literature features a vulnerable woman who is subject to an unequal power dynamic between herself and the gothic hero (Mullan). Over the course of the novel, the heroine is faced with numerous threats to her physical and psychological well-being. The heroine's fate differs depending on the Gothic novel in question, but even those that provide a happy ending for the heroine still depict her as a one-dimensional, muse-like character rather than a well-rounded, fully developed character. Later Gothic women authors, such as Anne Brontë, Emily Brontë, and Mary Shelley, present their women in uniquely interesting ways that contribute to the discussion of women in the Gothic, particularly in terms of granting women power and agency.

Anne Brontë presents a strong-willed and independent heroine in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* with the character of Helen Huntingdon. Though she could easily have fallen into the same position as other Gothic heroines, Helen evolves over the course of the novel and breaks away from the genre's gender constraints. Helen is raised in the same way that most respectable Victorian women were raised—in a household that prized morality, accomplishment, and traditional gender roles. Helen has a strong sense of morality, yet that morality begins to deviate from the traditional Victorian values as she undergoes a kind of awakening through her marriage to Arthur Huntingdon. Helen's ability to seize agency leads to her emancipation from her rakish husband and success in her new life.

When Helen first meets Arthur Huntingdon, she is quickly taken in by his charms. Bored with the rigid constraints of a society gathering, Helen finds an amusing reprieve in the company of her new acquaintance, Arthur Huntingdon. She takes notice of the "certain graceful ease and

freedom about all he said and did, that gave a sense of repose and expansion to the mind” (Anne Brontë 106). Despite the warnings of her aunt, Helen falls for Huntingdon and the two marry. Not long after their marriage, Helen and Arthur begin to drift apart. Arthur’s behavior grows more reprehensible as the years pass, and he no longer takes the same trouble to hide his flaws and insatiable toxic habits from his wife. At first, Helen believes it is her job to amend her husband’s flaws. She sees her role in their relationship as that of the fixer—she is there to fix his flaws and transform him into a good man. Huntingdon exploits her belief, convincing her that ““the very idea of having you to care for under my roof, would force me to moderate my expenses and live like a Christian—not to speak of all the prudence and virtue you would instill into my mind by your wise counsels and sweet, attractive goodness”” (Anne Brontë 135). Once the pair are wed and Huntingdon’s behavior remains unchanged, Helen attempts to rationalize it in a way that minimizes the implications of his actions, such as the verbal abuse, constant partying, and thinly veiled affairs. When she cannot find excuses for him, she chastises herself for being the one to fail him. Eventually, Helen must make a choice—continue living her unhappy life or take a stand.

Rather than resigning herself to her fate or letting her life be dictated by her abusive husband, Helen seizes the opportunity to flee with their young son Arthur to Wildfell Hall, Helen’s childhood home. Society would condemn a woman who fled her husband, yet Helen never falters in her determination to escape Huntingdon. Her motivations were not selfish, but aligned with her son and her desire not to see him end up like his father. Before Arthur’s birth, Helen states that “if I am ever a mother, I will zealously strive against this *crime* of over indulgence- I can hardly give it a milder name when I think of the evils it brings” (Anne Brontë 177). When her son’s future is in question, Helen’s regard for society’s version of morality does

not hold out. Instead, she begins to form her own moral code to follow, one which prioritizes the well-being of her son and her ability to oversee his education in order to ensure a brighter future for them both. She takes their fates into her own hands.

Helen is largely successful in her venture to be independent from Huntingdon because of her artistic talents. Since she was a young girl, Helen had painted in her aunt and uncle's house, but only insofar as it was acceptable for an accomplished young woman to paint. When she moves to Huntingdon's house, Helen is ridiculed by her husband for her painting and not given a proper room to paint in. When she takes up residence at Wildfell Hall, Helen is able to convert the primary entertaining room in the house into her own studio and capitalize on selling her works for profit. Scholar Antonia Losano points out that when describing how Helen receives visitors in her new home, "Brontë represents Helen not in the feminine role of hostess but in the decidedly unfeminine role of preoccupied and grumpy genius, toiling away at a painting with no time for society" (79) This presentation of her character allows Helen to transcend her role as accomplished society woman and step into her true identity as a serious artist and working mother. Since Helen is successfully able to sell her works and maintain her lifestyle in Wildfell Hall, the audience can infer that her artistic talents are on a professional level.

Not only is Helen able to claim professional and financial agency from her painting, but she is also able to claim personal agency as well. Part of Huntingdon's emotional abuses towards Helen involved his stifling her individuality. He would tell her what she was and what she was not and left no room for argument. Traditionally in the art world as well as marriage, Huntingdon, as a man, would hold power as the agent who defines Helen. He attempts to do so repeatedly, and he tells Helen that he wants her to be his inspiration to be a better man, much like how a traditional muse serves as inspiration to the artist. Huntingdon uses manipulation tactics to

constantly put responsibility for his character onto Helen as his wife and muse and attempts to mold her into a version of herself that is more appealing to him. Instead, Helen breaks free of the gendered role of the subject and is able to claim power as an agent in her own right. When Helen is free of Huntingdon, she is free to finally define herself just like an artist finally able to create her own vision. A woman functioning as a professional artist was not common in Brontë's time because, as scholar Losano states, "a woman holding a brush threatened to disrupt the proper flow of aesthetic desire, placing it in the hands of the female subject rather than relegating women to the role of desired object" (44). Helen's role as an artist, and therefore as an independent agent, disrupts the unequal gendered power dynamic traditionally present within Gothic literature. Rather than being helpless to the men around her, Helen claims her power and is able to dictate her own life, which leads to her happiness with her son and a new, more congenial husband.

Emily Brontë provides another example of a female character capable of defining herself in *Wuthering Heights*. Academic opinions differ as to whether Catherine Earnshaw Linton is a likeable character or not. Her complexity is the chief source of her agency, as she defies any box that society or literature would try to put her in. She is a lady by Victorian standards in that she comes from a respectable family, but in her remote home of Wuthering Heights, she is allowed to run wild in childhood and early youth, which contributes to her sense of freedom. She is shown several times in the novel to be selfish and mean, yet her flaws contribute to her authenticity as a female character. Catherine is not a passive caricature of a woman, but rather, she deals out as much drama and spite as the men in the novel. Her refusal to let her life be dictated by the men around her grants her power that is normally denied to women in the Gothic. Whether or not she is ultimately likeable is irrelevant. Catherine's power comes from her ability

to define herself regardless of what other characters, or even readers, think of her. She is shown as the metaphorical author of her own story, as symbolized by the description of her library as “select, and its state of dilapidation proved it to have been well used, though not altogether for a legitimate purpose; scarcely one chapter had escaped pen and ink commentary” (Emily Brontë 16). Rather than accepting a story as written, Catherine imposes her commentary. Similarly, she does not subject herself to what society or the confines of the Gothic genre expect of her, but instead, she imposes her will and claims agency over her life.

A prime example of Catherine showing independence uncharacteristic of the Gothic heroine is when she chooses to marry Linton over Heathcliff. Typically, the Gothic heroine marries the Gothic hero, but Catherine knew the implications of a marriage with Heathcliff and chose the more secure and acceptable match, demonstrating her awareness of her situation as a woman and how she would need to be provided for. While it would have seemed empowering to have Catherine marry for passion, Emily Brontë was aware of the social restrictions placed on women. Instead, literary theorist Diane Long Hoeveler argues that Emily Brontë chose to focus on how “the sorrows and follies that ensue are the result of this unnatural choice [pragmatism over passion], and yet, Brontë suggests, this is the best choice that has been held out to women” (194). One of the few ways a woman had power was her choice of husband. If Catherine had married Heathcliff, she would be poor and cast off from her family and society. By marrying the more socially and financially secure Linton, Catherine shows that she ultimately prioritizes her own security over Heathcliff, which is a much more empowering decision.

Despite her undeniable power, Catherine is still doomed to let her faults—such as selfishness and stubbornness—keep her from ultimate happiness. She is barely aware of her faults, admitting that “I thought, though everybody hated and despised each other, they could

not avoid loving me...” (Emily Brontë 94). Her ignorance to her faults, as well as ignorance of others’ feelings, contributes to the cycle of misfortune that she helps create. The novel demonstrates that Catherine is either unable or unwilling to learn from her mistakes, which leads to her unhappy ending.

Her daughter, Cathy, shows how a woman can still be independent, strong, and fully developed, but in a more positive way. When the audience first encounters Cathy, she is described as beautiful, but unfriendly, much like her mother. Lockwood notices how “the only sentiment [her face] evinced hovered between scorn and a kind of desperation, singularly unnatural to be detected there,” which provides evidence that the young girl is used to being unhappy and that her unhappiness is undeserved (Emily Brontë 9). Readers learn, through the narrative’s non-linear structure, of the mistreatment that Cathy experiences under Heathcliff’s care for so many years. Both she and Hareton are set up to continue the tragic cycle of misery that began with the generation before them, but Cathy, like Hareton, is able to learn from her mistakes and amend her past behavior. As she grows closer to Hareton, Cathy tries her best to amend her behavior when she does something to offend him. For example, Cathy often expresses her negative views of Heathcliff. Though Hareton is no stranger to mistreatment under their caretaker, it is difficult for him to hear criticism of his primary caretaker. Cathy, upon realizing Hareton’s discomfort, strives to make things easier for him:

She showed a good heart, thenceforth, in avoiding both complaints and expressions of antipathy concerning Heathcliff, and confessed to [Nelly] her sorrow that she had endeavored to raise a bad spirit between him and Hareton; indeed, [Nelly didn’t] believe she has ever breathed a syllable, in the latter’s hearing, against her oppressor, since. (Emily Brontë 243)

Cathy's ability to recognize and meet someone else's need indicates a more positive outlook for the future inhabitants of Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange, as many of the failings of the previous generation lay in their inability to compromise or develop emotional maturity. She works to build a foundation of friendship with Hareton, which eventually leads to a much healthier love story than the one her mother had with Heathcliff and Linton.

In *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley provides a much bleaker look at female characters, showing not what a strongly written example of a woman looks like, but rather, what the reality is when women are left out of the narrative. There is no clear Gothic heroine in Shelley's text because of the lack of women in the foreground. Additionally, as *Frankenstein* scholar Johanna M. Smith points out, "no women in the novel speak directly: everything we hear from and about them is filtered through the three masculine narrators," making it even harder for audiences to receive an authentic look at Shelley's women (270). The closest candidate is Elizabeth, Victor's love interest. Elizabeth is little more than a human archetype: passive, silent, pleasing, home-oriented, meek. From her first introduction in the story, she is described as being there for Victor to marry one day, which prevents her from being able to achieve anything else:

I have often heard my mother say that she was at that time the most beautiful child she had ever seen, and shewed signs even then of a gentle and affectionate disposition. These indications, and a desire to bind as closely as possible the ties of domestic love, determined my mother to consider Elizabeth as my future wife; a design which she never found reason to repent. (Shelley 20)

The audience does not know if Elizabeth would want anything else out of life because the audience never hears her inner thoughts, and she does not say many words during the text, either. The audience primarily hears her voice through letters she has written to Victor, which

may not reflect her true thoughts or feelings. Since the audience does not get to hear from Elizabeth very often, her reliability as a narrator in her letters must be questioned. In the moments when Elizabeth does speak directly, she is either pandering to Victor or quickly silenced and her words rendered meaningless.

Elizabeth's one moment of near agency occurs when she alone believes that Justine is innocent of the murder the creature committed. She shares her knowledge with Victor, who initially encourages her. Yet Victor and the court ultimately silence Elizabeth—Victor by not rising to her defense when she attempts to speak, and the courtroom men by outright ignoring her. As a result, Justine hangs for a crime she did not commit. As the novel progresses, Elizabeth is not bold enough to speak out in so direct a way again. In the instance of the courtroom scene, Elizabeth and Justine are both ultimately victims in different ways. Shelley showcases tragedy in her novel through a variety of characters' misfortunes, as, according to scholar Diane Long Hoeveler, "everyone in Mary's corpus is a victim, but her female characters are the victims of victims, and thus doubly pathetic and weak" (159). Victor's guilt leads to his silencing Elizabeth and condemning Justine—consequences he could not prioritize over his own need to remain free from public blame over the creature's misdeeds. His decision strips Elizabeth of her agency and Justine of her life.

One area where women are not only included, but also traditionally expected to participate is in matters of reproduction. When Victor decides to create life, he does not even mention it to Elizabeth, his prospective wife, further showing how Victor subverts the reproductive process. Elizabeth, as Victor's eventual wife, should have been privy to any thoughts he had on creating life, but she was kept in the dark. Instead, her story ends when she is brutally murdered at the hands of the creature. Victor hears her scream and rushes into the room

to find “she was hanging there, lifeless and inanimate, thrown across the bed, her head hanging down, and her pale and distorted features half covered by her hair” (Shelley 140). The creature murdering Elizabeth in her bed emphasizes the nature of the tragedy. The bed was where she was meant to spend her wedding night, and later, presumably, a bed is where she would give birth to a child of her own. Instead, the creature that her husband gave life to without her turns her bed into her deathbed before her time. Shelley calls attention to the injustice done to Elizabeth by implementing a similar tone to that which she uses to describe Justine’s fate earlier in the narrative and creating dissonance between the reader and the story. Shelley’s characters, according to literary scholar Devon Hodges, “do not escape traditional female destinies—to be mother, wife, dead, or some combination of all three—but the novel subverts the form of female destiny by defamiliarizing the narrative sequence, making it seem unnatural, inadequate” (157). Readers are left disturbed by the fates of Justine and Elizabeth, though they share the same fate as many Gothic women who came before them, such as Matilda in Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*. The way in which Shelley presents their fates as “inadequate” brings to the readers’ attention the trend of the treatment of Gothic women and calls upon them to no longer ignore the injustices women who are silenced and mistreated in their narratives, as their fictional situations are indicative of a larger societal problem.

One of the ways an author can further call attention to women’s voices within a work is through their choice of narrative structure. Anne Brontë, Emily Brontë, and Mary Shelley all wrote within a framed narrative structure, meaning that the text features multiple layers in which different characters assume the role of narrator in order to tell their story. Often, the narrative layers feature information from different times in the narrative, usually by relaying events that happened months, or sometimes years, before the present timeline of the work. In addition,

different narrative layers are often denoted by a change in medium. For example, a story being relayed to the audience by letters could shift to an entry from a diary, a lengthy oral retelling of events by another character, or to a completely different set of letters. Scholar Jeremy Hawthorn argues that the presence of a frame narrative requires active readers to understand whose voice they are hearing within a text, as voice and narrative frame affect “not just how we are told something but what we are told, and what attitude we take towards what we are told” (65). Each of my authors’ narrative frames reveals something about their points of emphasis for the work, whether that emphasis is on authenticity, intersectionality, or representation.

Both Anne and Emily Brontë construct their narrative frames through a similar basic structure: a male character provides the outer layer of narration happening in present-time, and a female character provides the inner layer of narration on events that transpired in the past. Gilbert Markham provides the outermost narrative frame in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* through letters he sends to his brother-in-law, Halford. Halfway through Markham’s account of how he met and grew closer to Helen, the narrative switches to Helen’s diary entries. The audience then learns Helen’s side of the story, which details the events leading to her residency at Wildfell Hall. Allowing the readers to view private letters and diaries connects them with the characters by providing authenticity to the tale. Though epistolary form had declined by the Victorian era, scholar Antonia Losano argues that “the prevalence of letters and journals as the raw materials for the novel suggests that Brontë aims at absolute realism, a ‘true story’ feeling” (90). The absence of an omniscient narrator removes a barrier between the narrative and the audience, and it allows the audience to become a participant in the story on the same level as the characters who are meant to be reading the same artifacts in tandem with the audience.

Anne Brontë uses the frame narrative to not only promote her belief in the “truth” of the story, but also to give Helen the opportunity to speak for herself. Helen’s frame in the novel comes in the form of her diary, which is a medium that the audience can assume has not been edited. Diaries are not typically written to be read by outsiders, so readers—and Markham—are given Helen’s undiluted thoughts and feelings from her young adulthood, through the trials of her marriage, to her present residency at Wildfell Hall. Furthermore, Helen only allows Markham to read the diary after she has decided he is worthy of her explanations. Helen faces much scrutiny from the residents of the village after her arrival, but she does not seek to give them excuses for her behavior. Markham alone is allowed entry into her private thoughts, despite how dangerous the reveal could be for Helen should Markham decide to publicize her unlawful flight from her husband with her child. Helen tells Markham that she had fond feelings towards him because she had “joy to find that you had some depth of soul and feeling after all, and to hope that I had not been utterly mistaken in your worth,” and she is proven right when he does not condemn her for her actions, but regards her even more for them (Anne Brontë 101). Gilbert Markham is not entitled to hear Helen’s story simply because he wishes to know it. Instead, Anne Brontë gives Helen exclusive ownership over her past—Helen then has the authority to decide who gets to hear it, and who does not, prioritizing the narrative’s female voice.

Emily Brontë takes a similar approach to her narrative framing in *Wuthering Heights*, but to accomplish a slightly different end. The outermost narrative frame in *Wuthering Heights* belongs to Mr. Lockwood, the new occupant of Thrushcross Grange. He learns the sordid tale of Heathcliff, Catherine, and the other former occupants of the land through the tales of Nelly Dean, who provides the innermost narrative frame. Having been there herself, Nelly is able to

share the story with the authority of a first-hand account. Thus, the reader can believe the accuracy and emotional truth of what she shares with Lockwood. The reader can also assume that, like Helen's diary, Nelly's oral account is not edited, as she is actively telling it to Lockwood. Her story begins after Lockwood requests to hear it one night, which does not give Nelly time to think about how she will share it before beginning. The narrative allows Nelly to give her unaltered opinion on the events of the past, and her bold personality means she holds nothing back—she shares every thought, opinion, and emotion that she felt at the time. Her “normalcy” in that way allows the audience to identify with her and believe in Nelly's narrative authority (Shunami 452). In addition, Nelly is also a member of the working class. She would traditionally have less of an ability to openly or publicly speak than a woman of a higher class, giving her what scholar Bette London calls a “doubly marginalized” position as a woman in the middle-class (36). Emily Brontë gives Nelly the power to provide the bulk of the narrative to the audience, showing a form of intersectional feminism that includes not only women, but women of the lower class as well.

Much of the scholarship on Nelly Dean revolves around her likability or reliability. As with Catherine Linton, I argue that ultimately, neither of these facts matters. What matters is Emily Brontë's choice to have the main mode of storytelling come from a middle-class woman. Whether or not Nelly's story is entirely factually accurate is not as important as the clear, emotional truth to the experience as she remembers it. Her first-person perspective is inherently skewed, yet it allows readers to see an under-represented perspective in Victorian and Gothic Literature—the female servant. Nelly's enthusiasm to share her story with Lockwood is not, as scholars like Gideon Shunami suggest, the result of her desire to exercise control over those at Wuthering Heights and the Grange. Rather, Emily Brontë allows Nelly to share a perfectly

normal emotion—from what the readers learn of her relationship with the other characters, it is highly unlikely that anyone has asked Nelly her side of the story before. It is only logical that she would be excited to share her thoughts, especially with an eager listener. By choosing Nelly Dean as the primary narrator in *Wuthering Heights*, Emily Brontë gives power to a woman from whom power is traditionally withheld.

Frankenstein by Mary Shelley continues to be an outlier in terms of how it portrays a Gothic feminine. Unlike the works of Anne and Emily Brontë, Shelley's text does not feature any female-narrated frame. Instead, all three narrative frames feature male characters as narrators: Captain Walton, Victor Frankenstein, and the Creature. By not allowing any of the women in the novel to directly speak, Shelley furthers her point on the dangers of excluding women from the narrative in a very literal sense. She exposes the injustice and imbalance of hearing only the masculine side of the story by ventriloquizing female concerns through male voices. Literary scholar Devon Hodges points out that rather than using a female character to directly voice gendered concerns, "[Shelley] is given the opportunity to intervene from within, to become an alien presence that undermines the stability of the male voice" (157). When *Frankenstein* was originally published, not even readers knew yet that the author was a woman, and since the narrative frames are all focused on men, the default voice behind the text would have been a masculine one. Thus, Shelley is able to use voices that society would have been more receptive to—male voices—and subvert them to expose their underlying unreliability.

Though none of *Frankenstein's* narrative frames features a woman's voice, Shelley makes the choice to have the ultimate witness to the story be a woman. Captain Walton provides the outermost narrative layer in the form of letters he sends to his sister, Margaret Seville. As the recipient of Walton's letters, Mrs. Seville is given the power to share them—or not—with the

reader. The audience can, therefore, assume that they are only able to read *Frankenstein* in the first place because the witness of the story is allowing them to know what she knows. Mrs. Seville's presence also allows the audience to watch the events of the story unfold from the same detached position she is in. In having the audience slightly removed from the events of the story, they are allowed to view the misfortunes of the characters while heightening their awareness of the narrative's implications. Scholar Beth Newman argues that "the frames thus mark the exclusion of Mrs. Saville— and the reader as well— from the horrors of the narratives they contain, and signal an immunity from the seductiveness of the voices that first utter them" (159). The immunity that Newman refers to is women's ability to cease listening to oppressive male voices after seeing the negative effects that a male-dominated story has on women. Instead, Shelley calls upon women to break free of their gendered roles and use their voices to push back against the patriarchy that confines them.

The discussion of women in the Gothic, while important, is also guilty of limiting itself to the leading women. While researching for this thesis, I discovered there is not much scholarship on characters such as Justine, the Frankensteins' maid, or Rachel, Helen Graham's maid. Furthermore, most of the scholarship on Nelly Dean focuses on whether or not she is likeable or reliable and not the larger implications of Nelly, a middle-class working woman, as the primary storyteller. An intersectional feminist argument must include not only the treatment of Gothic heroines, but also the treatment of their ever-present female servants, who often undergo the action alongside their mistresses. Scholar Eve Lynch points out that "with most of the inside servants being women, the social lines between the female servant and the mistress of the house become blurred, causing anxieties among the upper-class Victorians who wished for the social roles to remain more defined" (93). Yet, all three of the authors I am examining in this thesis are

women of the middle-class who use their works to promote the idea that upper-class women and their female servants could have profound and constructive bonds. Such is the case with female servants in Anne Brontë's, Emily Brontë's, and Mary Shelley's works.

When Helen flees her husband in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, she is accompanied not only by her son, but also by her faithful servant, Rachel. Though not a focal point in the novel, Rachel is a constant presence. She is Helen's confidant and supporter throughout Helen's failing marriage and flight to Wildfell Hall. Shortly after Arthur is born, Helen employs Rachel to assist her. Helen considers Rachel a qualified lady's maid and nurse because "she had nursed [Helen] and coveted to nurse [her] child, and was moreover so very trustworthy" (Anne Brontë 194). Rachel even attempts to warn Helen against Huntingdon's behavior and tryst with Lady Lowborough in an attempt to spare Helen future heartache, and Helen returns her trust and respect by confiding her feelings to Rachel. While incognito, Helen is understandably concerned with keeping her son close and, on numerous occasions, describes how she does not like for him to be out of her sight. The only person that Helen trusts to look after her son is Rachel, who is the sole person that Helen will leave Arthur alone with. Her absolute trust in Rachel and Rachel's unwavering loyalty to Helen reveal the women's profound bond—the only ones they can rely on when they flee are each other. While planning their flight, Rachel understands the scandal of what Helen plans to do, but "she so hates her master, and so loves her mistress and her nursing...she applauded [Helen's] resolution and consented to aid [her] with all her might—on one condition only—that she might share [Helen's] exile" (Anne Brontë 283). The two become co-conspirators in Helen's flight, and Rachel's reassuring presence keeps Helen motivated to go through with her plans.

In addition to being trusted with Arthur, Rachel is also fiercely protective of Helen, which shows the genuine affection between them. For example, when Gilbert Markham comes to visit Helen, he describes how “I owe Rachel a grudge to this day for the look she cast upon me...the sour, suspicious, inquisitorial look that plainly demanded ‘what are *you* here for, I wonder?’” (Anne Brontë 79). Rachel is well aware of what her friend and mistress has been through in her previous relationship, so she takes upon herself the role of Helen’s protector against outsiders and, especially, against men. The two women are always presented as an understanding partnership and constant source of comfort for each other, which shows the emphasis that Anne Brontë places on the importance of women having close female friends. Rather than placing them in competition with one another, as scholarship on the household dynamics of the Victorian Era argues, Anne Brontë emphasizes the companionship between the women despite their different economic situations. Scholar Eve Lynch states that “if the servant could break into and break apart neat class distinctions, the mistress of the household found herself in the uncanny position of seeing her role as mother and domestic guardian replicated in the labors of her female employees” (95). With class barriers blurring, tensions often arose within Victorian households. Rachel and Helen do not get caught up in societal dynamics, but are instead brought together by a common empathy and affection for one another and mutual respect that helps them both through the trials they face over the course of the novel. Rachel also serves to illustrate how the trials that women face, particularly in the Gothic Genre, are not exclusive to the Gothic heroines. Where their mistresses go, their maid servants or nurses also tend to go. Anne Brontë places Rachel at important moments in Helen’s story and gives narrative attention to her thoughts on the matter in order to constantly remind readers that Rachel has no less of a personal stake in the narrative than Helen, regardless of their differences in class.

When scholarship discusses *Wuthering Heights* and its female servants, Nelly Dean appears once again at the forefront. While I will be further arguing her importance as I did in the previous section on her role as a narrator, my discussion of female servants in the text will not be exclusive to Nelly. Much of the *Wuthering Heights* scholarship does not look favorable on the outer narrative and its focus on the next generation. Yet, as I have included Cathy and Hareton as important characters in my analysis of the work, I also argue that Zillah deserves a place in *Wuthering Heights* scholarship. She plays a more minor role than Nelly Dean, and yet, her presence serves its own purpose. Zillah appears in a few key scenes in the narrative. She is the one who leads Lockwood to Catherine's room over his first night in *Wuthering Heights*. She could have taken him to another room, but her decision to place him in the old mistress's room leads Lockwood to his first encounter with Catherine's ghost. Though Zillah likely did not have that specific aim in mind, she knew the significance of the room. When taking Lockwood to Catherine's old room, she instructs him to "hide the candle and not make a noise, for her master had an odd notion about the chamber she would put [Lockwood] in, and never let anybody lodge there willingly" (Emily Brontë 15). Since Heathcliff's temperament has already been established, Zillah shows a strength of character in not being cowed by the thought of his anger. Furthermore, Emily Brontë grants her the power to introduce Lockwood for the first time to Catherine, which sparks his initial interest in the tale and leads to its subsequent telling.

Another key aspect to Zillah's character is her description within the narrative. When Lockwood first sees her, he describes her as "a lusty dame, with tucked-up gown, bare arms, and fire-flushed cheeks" (Emily Brontë 6). Zillah is also later described as wearing a red shawl that she often wears. Scholar William Crisman points out that "the lustiness, the flush, the bare skin, and the lifted skirt all emphasize sensuality" (27). Sex is often associated with violence,

misfortune, and the forces of evil when applied to a female character. For example, in Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian*, Olivia is trapped in an unhappy marriage after being raped by Schedoni; therefore, for Olivia, sex is associated with violence and unhappiness. Another example lies with Matilda in Mathew Lewis's *The Monk*. One of the chief ways that Matilda is able to manipulate Ambrosio is by using her sexuality. Thus, in her case, sex is a tool to bring about the vile deeds she wishes to commit. Yet despite the Gothic genre's treatment of a woman's sexuality, Zillah remains unaffected by the drama of the narrative despite her open sensuality. Emily Brontë presents not only a female servant as a developed character, but part of her development lies in her ability to express her sexuality and have the narrative accept its normalcy. The narrative also does not restrict Zillah's description to simply her sexuality. It does not hide that side of her character, but she is also described as "rational" and "benevolent" by Lockwood (Emily Brontë 14). In presenting even her lower-class women realistically, Emily Brontë challenges and corrects the Gothic genre's tradition of neglecting female servants.

In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the maid Justine is executed for a crime she did not commit, making her a victim of both the creature and his creator. When the creature murders Victor Frankenstein's younger brother, William, the family's loyal servant Justine is accused of the deed. Despite Justine's testimony and Elizabeth's attempts to convince the court of Justine's innocence, the maid is condemned and hanged. Justine's death could have been avoided had Frankenstein admitted to animating the creature and revealing what he knows of the creature's involvement, but he remains silent. Instead, he describes repeatedly how "the tortures of the accused did not equal mine" (Shelley 56). Despite the fact that Justine is wrongly accused of murder and dies for it, Frankenstein sees himself as the poorer soul, which takes away even the status of "victim" from Justine. An innocent woman dies because of Frankenstein's pride and

shame, which illustrates Shelley's argument on the tragedy of how women—especially Gothic women—are treated. Justine's death serves as a double tragedy. The innocent loses her life, and Elizabeth loses "[her] playfellow, [her] companion, [her] more than sister" (Shelley 58). Without Justine, Elizabeth loses the only close female friend that she has, and is largely isolated to only interactions with Frankenstein until her death at the creature's hands. Thus, Shelley demonstrates, amid the male-dominated tale, the importance of female friendships and the tragedy of losing them.

Though Justine is a lower-class woman employed by the novel's leading family, her death is an important moment in the narrative. Her death marks a turn in Frankenstein's character, as for the first time, the reader gets a vivid glimpse at his flawed character. Though his creature also murdered his brother, Frankenstein was not in Geneva when the incident occurred, so he cannot claim much responsibility for it beyond creating the creature. In the case of Justine's death, Frankenstein had several moments where he could have confessed what he knew of the true murderer in order to save the girl, but he did not out of shame. Therefore, Justine's death weighs the most heavily on his conscience and sends Frankenstein into a spiral of concealing the existence of the creature from others despite the subsequent tragedies. The further Frankenstein gets into trouble because of the creature, the less he feels he could confess to his part in the tale because of the sheer number of misfortunes that could have been avoided had he come forward sooner. The first truly inciting incident is Justine's death and his failure to support her. By having a female servant at the center of such important moments in the text, Shelley extends her argument on the treatment of women to an intersectional feminist argument. Shelley argues that all women, regardless of class status, deserve better treatment in both literature and life.

Authors such as Anne Brontë, Emily Brontë, and Mary Shelley were well aware of the societal restrictions placed on women and how those restrictions applied to literature, specifically to the Gothic genre. The social and marital situations presented in the novels I have chosen to analyze are not exclusive to the world of fiction. Male-dominated society wanted women to believe that their treatment was justified and that they could not change it. Women were largely prevented from speaking publicly about their issues, and those who did were often undermined or overshadowed into silence. European women's scholar Elizabeth Fox-Genovese argues that "men silenced women because women's voices challenged or subverted men's view of the world" (531). Each of my chosen authors experienced some form of silencing from men in their lives, whether it was editors, brothers, fathers, or husbands. Yet, Anne Brontë, Emily Brontë, and Mary Shelley were able to subvert their gendered restrictions by including proto-feminist messages into their works and not publishing under their given names. Anne and Emily Brontë published their works under the male pseudonyms Acton and Ellis Bell, respectively. Mary Shelley elected to leave her name off of her novel when it was first published as well, crediting the text as simply "by the Author." In leaving their names off of their works, these given authors were able to generate a larger initial readership of their works, rather than being discounted as trivial simply because women novelists were not as widely accepted as serious authors.

With a larger initial readership, Anne Brontë, Emily Brontë, and Mary Shelley were able to circulate their message to more readers. Scholar Devon Hodges argues that "[the female author's] other option [rather than conforming to societal expectations] is to deform, to transgress literary structure from within—demonstrating the inadequacy of the paternal narrative by opening it up to what it excludes" (156). Anne and Emily Brontë were able to demonstrate what the male narrative excludes by providing strong heroines, healthy relationships, and inter-

class female friendships, and realistically depicting the consequences of toxic, hyper-masculine actions. Mary Shelley was able to demonstrate what Hodges calls the “inadequacy of the paternal narrative” by showing readers what the extreme consequences would be of so drastically removing women from the narrative and diminishing them to inferior characters who face tragic ends (156). My chosen authors were aware that they had a message to share with other women, but that their voices were restricted. Yet, women were some of the largest consumers of fiction. Gothic feminism scholar Diane Long Hoeveler points out that with female authors writing for female readers, “the female Gothic novelistic tradition became a coded system whereby women authors covertly communicated to other women—their largely female reading audience—their ambivalent rejection of and outward complicity with the dominant sexual ideologies of their culture” (5). Thus, female authors could embed gendered messages in their works that challenged their female readership to no longer be compliant to society’s restrictions, as they were not alone in their desires for better treatment.

Reading novels was one of the only ways that Victorian women were able to experience the world since society frowned upon young women engaging actively with their surroundings outside the domestic sphere. Helen Huntingdon points out this imbalance in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* while visiting with Gilbert Markham and the other townsfolk by stating ““you [her neighbors and society at large] would have us encourage our sons to prove all things by their own experience, while our daughters must not even profit by the experience of others”” (Anne Brontë 27). Women were expected to know right from wrong but were prevented from gaining the life experiences necessary to learn the difference. Scholar Kate Flint, in her text *The Woman Reader: 1837-1914*, quotes English essayist James Hain Friswell when he wrote that “fiction provided possibly the only sort of education which many middle and ‘higher’ class women could

be said to have” (Friswell, qtd in Flint 144). The irony lies in that though most women got their lessons from reading fiction, most fiction at the time was written by men. Avid readers themselves, my chosen authors knew both the dynamics of readers and the dynamics of popular authors, so they made sure to create fiction that circulated messages of strength, hope, and change for women.

Though many men resisted messages of strength and positivity for women, not all Victorian men were against expanding women’s roles. Justin McCarthy, Victorian era writer for the *Westminster Review*, was publicly against the trend of one-dimensional, muse-like female characters in fiction:

There is no good end attained by trying to persuade ourselves that women are all incorporeal, angelic, colorless, passionless, helpless creatures, who are never to suspect anything, never to doubt anyone, who regard the whole end and passion of human life as ethereal, Platonic love, and orderly, parent-sanctioned wedlock. Women have especial need, as the world goes, to be shrewd, self-reliant, and strong; and we do all we can in our literature to render them helpless, imbecile, and idiotic. (McCarthy, qtd in Flint 280)

Much like the Brontës and Shelley, McCarthy knew that it was regressive to restrict women to passive roles and that fiction had to reflect the more comprehensive roles that women should transcend to within society since formal education for women still lacked in substance. The logical supplement to a deficient educational system for women was novel reading. If those novels were ones written by women such as Anne Brontë, Emily Brontë, and Mary Shelley, the women reading them were learning how to recognize the dangers of their gendered confines within society and challenge the roles they had been placed in. All three of my chosen authors

are considered proto-feminists due to the societal commentary their works make in favor of better treatment for women. They laid the foundation for following generations of female authors, such as Virginia Woolf and Louisa May Alcott, who took inspiration from the Brontës and Shelley and became renowned authors themselves.

Anne Brontë, Emily Brontë, and Mary Shelley all subverted traditional tropes of the Gothic genre in order to communicate messages of empowerment to their female readers. Though male writers dominated the literary world at the time these women were writing, the Brontës and Shelley proved that women were worthy of merit as writers in their own right. My chosen authors withheld their gender from early publications of their novels, allowing them to be judged on their talents rather than preconceived gender notions. Anne Brontë wrote in her preface to the second edition of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* that “I am satisfied that if a book is a good one, it is so whatever the sex of the author may be” (Anne Brontë 5). She and the other authors I discuss in this thesis show her assertion to be true. Furthermore, writing in a genre that was typically repressive to women allowed them to correct the gendered oppression common to the Gothic, namely found in devices such as the Gothic hero, the Gothic heroine, the implementation of the frame novel, and the inclusion of female servants. Anne Brontë, Emily Brontë, and Mary Shelley demonstrate through their writings how women can take charge of their own narratives and break free of their gender and societal confines.

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