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Gender as Biology, Discourse, and Construct: The Form of Space in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* as a Subversion of the Fairy Tale "Blue-beard"

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ABSTRACT

The gendered prescriptions that permeate fairy tales can shape societal structures and perspectives. However, just as literature plays a role in reinforcing societal constructs, it can be used to challenge and subvert them. Victorian society was heavily structured by gender, which through the doctrine of separate spheres, relegated women within the domestic sphere and thus limited their contribution to the mainstream political discourse. It was through literary forms could they enter political discourse and shape the structures in society, especially with regards to gender. This paper looks at the form of space in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* by Anne Brontë (1848) as a subversion of "Blue-Beard" by Charles Perrault (1697) and its relation to shaping understandings of gender as biology, discourse, and construct. Brontë's discourse of gender in Tenant through formative literary experimentation given the relegation of gender discourse in Victorian society—this formative discourse transcending the aesthetic into shaping the sociopolitical—enables gender to be understood as a cultural construct, dismantling and challenging traditional gender norms of prescribed roles and characteristics.

Keywords: Form, space, gender, Anne Brontë, Charles Perrault.

1. Introduction

Glittering, flowing Cinderella gowns and domineering knights in shining armor roam the streets during Halloween. Tiny glass slippers clack on the sidewalk. *Shing*! Rings of costume swords being drawn echo through the night. Fairy tales are often regarded as fantastical narratives, transporting readers away from reality; however, they are, in fact, embedded with prescriptions that shape our society and, as children, subconsciously inform our worldview, particularly with regards to gender ideals.

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However, just as literature plays a role in reinforcing societal structures, it can be used to challenge and subvert these normative expectations and constructs. Victorian society was heavily structured by gender, which through the doctrine of separate spheres, relegated women within the domestic sphere and thus limited their contribution to the mainstream political discourse. It was through literary forms could they enter political discourse and shape the structures in society, especially with regards to gender.

Form is a means of structure and organization in both the literary aesthetic and society (Levine, 2015). Through form, literature can transcend the aesthetic and shape societal structures. This paper will be analyzing the form of space present in the intertextual subversion of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) by Anne Brontë from Charles Perrault's fairy tale "Blue-Beard" (1697) as a means of shaping societal understandings of gender.

Due to the publication history of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Anne Brontë's novel has not gained as much exposure compared to that of her sisters, Charlotte and Emily (Mcmaster, 1982). The novel holds a significance in its contribution to altering societal definitions of gender, however, that deserves to be further studied and understood. To understand the significance of a piece of literature in its contribution to societal understandings of gender, scholars have often used fairy tales as a lens. The intertextuality of fairy tales such as "Cinderella" (Clarke, 2000), "Bluebeard" (Pyrhönen, 2010), "Beauty and the Beast" (McDermott, 2002) in *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Brontë has been widely read by scholars as a means of understanding gender. Similarly, "Cinderella" (Martí, 2017), "Beauty and the Beast" (Campbell, 2015), "Tristan and Iseult" (Williams, 1985) has been noted by scholars of their presence in *Wuthering Heights* (1847) by Emily Brontë. *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen has also been read as a fairy tale (Calderazzo, 2021). This paper fills the research gap of the intersections of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* with fairy tales, specifically, through reading the novel as a subversion of Bluebeard.

The form of space in the intertextuality of these two texts can be read as a notion of transformation. In both narratives, space originates as a notion of confinement, separation, and organization, delineating the boundaries within which the wife and husband may inhabit and interact. This spatial arrangement not only defines their physical relationship but also governs the power dynamics within their relationship—a reflection of the societal expectations of gender roles, particularly those prevalent during the Victorian Era. Due to their spatial confinement, particularly within the domestic realm, the wives come to face the reality of their restricted existence. This enforced limitation reshapes their understanding of the space they inhabit, altering their perceptions of both physical and social boundaries. As they come to an active realization of their confinement, this altered understanding of their space makes them no longer willing to be relegated within the limited space, thus motivating them to escape the boundaries initially prescribed. How the two texts portray this escape, however, differs, with *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* subverting that of "Blue-Beard," serving to push beyond the rigid gender prescriptions of fairy tales as a representation of Victorian gender ideology.

Gender, in relation to these texts, is read in three notions: biology, discourse, and construct. Gender as biology refers to an assignment at birth that entails a rigid set of expectations and characteristics. Gender as discourse emerges as an exploratory discussion of gender beyond biology. Through gender discourse, gender is explored as a construct: as no longer a singular and fixed definition and set of expectations.

The findings of this paper explore how literary form is utilized as a means for women to contribute to the political discourse of gender, particularly during the Victorian Era. Given the prevalence of fairy tales during the Victorian Era, "Blue-Beard" serves as a proxy for the understanding of gender as biological and as a fixed prescription of roles. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, through the intertextuality of "Blue-Beard," challenges its understanding of gender as biological, putting the notion of gender into discourse and altering societal understandings of gender. Through this, Brontë pushes beyond the bounds of the status quo of gender expectations during the Victorian Era.

The paper will begin by understanding the definitions of gender during the Victorian Era and the manner in which gender structured society. Understanding the historical context will set the stage for reading The Tenant of Wildfall Hall as a contribution to gender discourse in altering the Victorian understanding of gender. Specifically, this reading will analyze space form in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and "Blue-Beard" in its three developmental stages, respectively: confining and prescribing roles for

the heroines; this confinement altering their perception of their space as they come to be aware of their confinement; this awareness pushing the heroines to escape the confines of their space, the manner in which the two narratives do so differing.

2. Data and methodology

This paper draws from Levine's *Forms* (2015) in how, through the simultaneous presence of form in structuring both literature and society, literature can transcend the aesthetic and shape societal structures. Thus, this paper reads society during the Victorian Era as form. Moreover, this paper conducts a close reading of form as space in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and "Blue-Beard." Through the connection drawn by the presence of form in Victorian society and the literary texts can the text be read as a means of altering societal perceptions.

Further, this paper draws from Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1976) in understanding notions of gender. Specifically, Foucault's rejection of the 'repressive hypothesis,' which denotes the repression in the discourse of sexuality from the 1600s to the mid 1900s, inspires the notion of gender as discourse: the contribution and spreading of differing understandings of gender. This allows *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* to be read as a contribution to gender discourse; further, as a rejection of the notion of gender as biology and acceptance of gender as construct.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Gender in the Victorian Era: Biology, discourse, and construct

During the Victorian Era, gender was widely understood as a biological concept and with heavy relation to a person's ability and character. Victorian society was structured hierarchically, with the primary dividing lines being gender and class, although other characteristics also contributed to defining one's identity and status (Cordea, 2013).

The 'doctrine of separate spheres' shaped the foundation for gender ideology during the Victorian Era. This ideology prescribed the division of society and its roles into binary spaces: the domestic sphere, which correlated to women, and the public sphere of government, politics, and business, which correlated with men (Cordea, 2013). While space might be seen as the concerns of architects or geographers, it can also be read as a specific social form, rich in both political and aesthetic distinction. According to literary critic Caroline Levine (2015), forms "mean all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference" (p. 3). Here, in the 'doctrine of separate spheres,' we have one of the clearest societal formations of the Western world in the past 300 years: relegating subjects, women, and men, to their respective spaces.

Despite the understanding of gender as biology and its corresponding characteristics as fixed during the Victorian Era, 'the doctrine of separate spheres' as gender ideology reveals the idea of gender as a construct; thus, the 'doctrine of separate spheres' emerges as a form of gender discourse, capable of being altered and challenged.

Historian Michel Foucault in "Part 1: We 'Other Victorians'" in *The History of Sexuality* (1976) acknowledges the 'repressive hypothesis,' which suggests that the discourse of sexuality during the Victorian Era was silenced, which is similar to the seemingly silenced discourse of gender during the Victorian Era. Despite the ubiquity and significance of how gender structured Victorian society, much of its discourse was monitored and relegated, specifically through the confinement of women within the domestic sphere, whereas men filled the public sphere, dominating and controlling the mainstream political discourse on gender (Honey, 1992).

Foucault critiques the notion of the 'repressive hypothesis,' arguing and revealing the various ways that since the 18th century, sexuality has been put into discourse. Connecting this idea to the constraints of gender discourse in the Victorian Era, the discourse of gender shows up in literary form. Specifically, women discussed gender through literature because they weren't being talked about explicitly.

However, despite the discourse of gender within literary forms, this discourse was also repressed, as exemplified through the publication history of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Published in 1848 under the pen name Acton Bell, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* was a bestseller when originally released, rivaling Jane Eyre, but Anne's sister Charlotte Brontë banned publishers from reprinting the

book after Anne's death in 1849, claiming that the book was "an entire mistake" and that "nothing less congruous with the writer's nature could be conceived" (Leaver, 2013). Critics of the Victorian Era referred to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* as "disgusting," "revolting," and "brutal," deeming that it was too vulgar to be considered truly great art (Thormählen, 2018). Publishers began to reprint *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* only after Charlotte died in 1854 but with whole chapters deleted. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*'s full scholarly edition wasn't released until 1992 (Mcmaster, 1982).

3.2 Space: Confinement and prescription

Space emerges as a form in the literary world in many ways. It is the amount of freedom granted to an individual to inhabit and possess, both physically and mentally. It is the lines of confinement drawn that prevent an individual from going beyond those boundaries. It also manifests as the distance and proximity between two individuals or objects. These organizations serve to construct a character and their relations to other characters.

In both "Blue-Beard" and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, space is initially used to separate and constrain. Specifically, it is used to confine the women within the domestic sphere and define relationships between the husband and wife, prescribing roles and agencies.

In the story of "Blue-Beard," the eponymous husband leaves his wife in their home for "a journey, which would occupy six weeks at least" (Perrault, 1697, p. 13). Immediately, their location and its relation to the gender of Blue-Beard and his wife underline a binary opposition that enforces and instructs the 'doctrine of separate spheres': while Blue-Beard, the man, leaves his home to occupy the public sphere, his wife is constrained within the boundaries of their home, in the private sphere.

Before Blue-Beard's departure, he presents his wife with a set of keys to the rooms of their home and instructions on how to use the keys. He stipulates,

> These are those of the chests in which the gold and silver plate is kept, that is only used on particular occasions; these are the keys of the strong boxes in which I keep my money; these open the caskets that contain my jewels; and this is the pass-key of all the apartments. (Perrault, 1697, p. 14-16)

Perrault utilizes anaphoric parallelism in Blue-Beard's dialogue to serve two purposes: one, to establish the space, with the consistent use of semicolons metaphorically becoming the walls creating distinctions within the house, laying out the construct of the house for the reader, and Blue-Beard's wife—whereby Blue-Beard expresses a performative generosity that seems as if he is granting his wife freedom and a large abundance of space; second, the short, sharp, organized fragments within the sentence establishing imperatives towards the wife, presenting a paradox, dismantling the façade of agency and freedom initially presented and imposing an immediate unequal power dynamic between the husband and the wife.

This façade is further developed through the metaphorical allusion of keys—an object that seemingly evokes the connotation of access, power, and enlightenment—which, however, is incongruous with reality as Blue-Beard explicitly forbids his wife from using one certain key: "I forbid you to enter, and I forbid you so strictly, that if you should venture to open the door, there is nothing that you may not have to dread from my anger!" (Perrault, 1697, p. 16-17). Through the use of parenthetical expressions in elaborating beyond Blue-Beard's initial instruction of prohibiting his wife from entering the room, Blue-Beard's control of his wife is increasingly amplified as he instructs how his wife should and can inhabit and move throughout the house, further breaking apart the façade of freedom initially presented.

In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, epistolary protagonist Helen Huntingdon is similarly left by her husband, Arthur Huntingdon, within the bounds of her domestic sphere, in their home of Grassdale Manor while he is in London, for he has "business to attend to" (Brontë, 1848, p. 218) —he is permitted the physical space to leave the domestic sphere, an agency granted to him by the 'doctrine of separate spheres,' and the ability to act beyond Helen's spatial awareness of his specific whereabouts and activities. Helen expresses her reactive state:

> Oh, it is cruel to leave me so long alone! He knows I have no one but Rachel to speak to, for we have no neighbors here, except the Hargraves, whose residence I can dimly describe from these upper windows embosomed among those low, woody hills beyond the Dale. (Brontë, 1848, p. 219)

Here, the text, like in "Blue-Beard," serves to inform the environment and the relativities and proximities of subjects within it. Helen's isolation is emphasized as Grassdale Manor is described as "dimly" distant to her neighbors—Helen becoming one with the house and domestic—emphasizing the distance between Helen and her neighbors: another paradox as the notion of "neighbors" often suggests camaraderie and intimacy. In addition, the metonymic "upper window" serves as another barrier, as Helen is constrained within the top floor of her residence, distancing between the private and public realms: Helen, the wife, is limited within the private, overlooking the public. Further, there exists the distance between Helen and Arthur—not only shaped by their physical distance but also Helen's incognizance of his dealings and activities in London—in parallel to the narrative of "Blue-Beard," as there emerges a secret of the husband that the wife is unknowing of and longing to uncover. These layers of distance construct concentric circles of detachment, emphasizing Helen's abandoned state physically.

She goes on to question Arthur's activities, reflecting, "But what is he doing—what is it that keeps him away?" (Brontë, 1848, p. 220). Brontë's use of a dash removes the space between Helen's thoughts—beyond Helen's relegation of physical space confined within the domestic sphere, the spatial aspect of her knowledge and thought is also confined as she is limited from understanding her husband fully, just as Blue-Beard's wife is forbidden from mentally understanding what appears behind that forbidden door.

The presentation and acknowledgment of the repression of women in both narratives through space push the Victorian ideals and expectations of gender into discourse. With this initial establishment of space as confinement and limitation, both physically and mentally, can there be a juxtaposition, as later in the story, the relation of the heroine to their space changes. With this alteration, we will see how the notion of biological gender and the roles it suggests as permanent and unchangeable is challenged through the further discourse of gender.

3.3 Space: Altering perception

In both narratives, the initial relegation and confinement of the heroines within their domestic sphere forces them to face the reality of their restricted existence. This realization reshapes their understanding of the space they inhabit, altering their perceptions of both physical and social boundaries.

Blue-Beard's wife, despite his prohibition, unlocks the forbidden closet. After entering, "at first she could discern nothing, the windows being closed" (Perrault, 1697, p. 29). Perrault metaphorically emphasizes the quality of being "nothing" that the wives kept in the closet have become as they remained within their initial domestic sphere—the closed windows, like in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, further metonymically contributing to the notion of limitation and imprisonment. Soon, however, details emerge:

> She began to perceive that the floor was all covered with clotted blood, in which were reflected the dead bodies of several females suspended against the walls. These were all the wives of Blue-Beard, who had cut their throats one after the other. (Perrault, 1697, p. 29-30)

The deliberate use of the term "clotted," to describe blood, with its biological implication of coagulation, metaphorically signifies the loss of individuality among Blue-Beard's former wives. They become amassed as one, hidden and tucked away as "nothing" within the "closed windows." Moreover, the imagery of "suspen [sion]" reinforces this dehumanization. As a term often associated with execution by hanging, in which the neck is broken by a suspended noose, it evokes the violent dismemberment of the body. This detachment of body parts symbolizes the stripping away of humanity, diminishing the women's individuality.

The key used to open the closet door was enchanted; having dropped it into the floor blood upon entering the closet, Blue-Beard's wife couldn't manage to remove the blood stains. Upon Blue-Beard's return and his learning of her disobedience of his commands via the stained key, he threatens her, "You must need to enter the closet. Well, madam, you shall enter it, and go take your place amongst the ladies you saw there" (Perrault, 1697, p. 38-40). Blue-Beard's wife will cease to be a subject, becoming an object instead, joining the others as wall hangings and becoming the space herself, forever relegated within the domestic sphere that amounts to "nothing." This alters the

heroine's perception of her space, as she comes to an active realization of her relegation to the domestic sphere, finally understanding and fearing this limitation and repression as we will later see her efforts to escape.

In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Helen Huntington similarly grows to come to a realization of her confinement, whereby her perception of the space in which she is relegated to is altered.

For one, there is Arthur's alcoholism, which Helen describes as "his comforter, his recreation, and his friend, and thereby sunk deeper and deeper, and bound himself down forever in the bathos whereinto he had fallen" (Brontë, 1848, p. 260). Here, space confines both Arthur and Helen. On one level, the "bathos" of alcoholism subjugates Arthur to a space where he is consumed by alcohol, below and separate from everything else. Helen, being confined within the same space as Arthur, is thus also pulled into this chasm. The notion of depth connotes a sense of darkness: reflective of both Arthur and Helen's inability to see light; in other words, they are blinded by the constraints of darkness as they are unable to see beyond their current state.

Helen further discovers her husband's affair with Annabella Lowborough following a tip from Walter Hargrave, an acquaintance of Arthur, during a dinner party. She leaves the house to see her husband and Lady Lowborough in conversation. Helen listens to their conversation, hearing Lady Lowborough say to Arthur, "'Ah, Huntingdon!'... pausing where I [Helen] had stood with him the night before—'it was here you kissed that woman!'" (Brontë, 1848, p. 301). Brontë's deliberate play on space—placing Annabella in the same spot where Helen, the day before, had shared an intimate moment with her husband—foreshadows a sense of loss and replacement: the space no longer belongs to Helen. This notion is further emphasized through Annabella's use of "that woman." "That" suggests a sense of peripheralization, as Helen is no longer the only inhabitant of the space within her home; further, she is no longer the only inhabitant in her husband's focus.

Annabella goes on to ask Arthur,

> 'But tell me, don't you love her still—a little?'... placing her hand on his arm, looking earnestly in his face—for I [Helen] could see them, plainly, the moon shining full upon them from between the branches of the tree that sheltered me. (Brontë, 1848, p. 303)

The displacement of Helen from her space is enforced here—a similar spatial maneuver to what Blue-Beard's wife is facing—as she is relegated to the periphery, rendered object instead of subject. As she becomes located within the shadowed, hidden trees, Arthur is within a juxtaposing space under the full, shining moon with Annabella, who has replaced the space where Helen once stood. The moonlight is reminiscent of follow spot spotlights, which serve to bring extra focus to the main character on stage—shining on Annabella and Arthur, while Helen becomes hidden in the dark. Arthur replies to Annabella, "'Not one bit, by all that's sacred!' he replied, kissing her glowing cheek" (Brontë, 1848, p. 303). The representation of Annabella in the spotlight and space where Helen once stood is reiterated through her "glowing cheek"—further, in correlation with Arthur's kiss, highlighting his departure from her.

As Annabella exits the conversation, Helen writes, "There he stood before me; but I had not strength to confront him now… I was well-nigh sinking to the earth" (Brontë, 1848, p. 303). Yet, while Arthur has departed from this space—as his role as a man allowed him to do so, just as the 'doctrine of separate spheres' suggests—Helen remains trapped within the confines of this space.

Beyond these products of Helen's confinement,

> My [Helen's] greatest source of uneasiness… was [her] son, whom his father and his father's friends delighted to encourage in all the embryo vices a little child can show, and to instruct in all the evil habits he could acquire—in a word, to "make a man of him" was one of their staple amusements. (Brontë, 1848, p. 350)

Brontë further pushes gender into discourse as she emphasizes the need to "make a man of" little Arthur. In other words, if gender was considered biological as Victorian society deemed it, and with it came the roles and expectations for the binary genders of the Victorian era, why should there be a need to nurture these characteristics? Shouldn't it come biologically? This idea is further highlighted by the use of "embryo", where Brontë emphasizes and asserts the susceptibility of humans as children to instructions that shape our worldview—just like that of fairy tales. The need to condition children to act according to gender roles thus pushes gender into the notion as a cultural construct. With gender as a construct, gender roles no longer are fixed and set in stone.

Brontë challenges the gender construct of the status quo, exposing the imbalance within, as confronted with her husband's influence on their child, Helen's defiance fails:

> First attempted to keep him always with me, or in the nursery… these orders were immediately countermanded and overruled by his father; he was not going to have the little fellow moped to the death between an old nurse and a cursed fool of a mother. (Brontë, 1848, p. 350)

Helen has no control over the space her family inhabits, despite this being the only space she is prescribed. This thus pushes her to realize the confinement and limitation of her current state, both physically and concerning her agency, pushing her to escape beyond the prescriptions of the 'doctrine of separate spheres'—beyond the notion of gender as biology. Challenging the status quo, Brontë's construction puts gender into discourse, as with the subversion and collapse of the rigidity of Victorian gender norms, gender becomes a cultural construct of flexibility.

3.4 Space: Escape and female agency

As the heroines become actively aware of their confinement, this altered understanding of their space changes their relation with their space as they are no longer willing to be relegated, thus motivating them to escape the boundaries initially prescribed. How they do so, however, differs, with Brontë subverting the gendered narrative of "Blue-Beard".

In "Blue-Beard," as the heroine becomes aware of her confinement and what this confinement entails, she longs to be saved by her brothers: "I pray thee, to the top of the tower, and see if my brothers are not coming.... the poor distressed creature called to her every now and then, 'Anne! Sister Anne! Dost thou not see anything coming?'" (Perrault, 1697, p. 43-44). She does not seek to move out of the space, but instead to be taken out: more specifically, she seeks for her brothers to save her. She is unable to actively move, both within her space, as her sister moves to the "top of the tower" for her, and out of her space. Her sense of helplessness is further underlined through Perrault's use of ecphonesis in the heroine's calling for her sister—hyper-feminizing the heroine's voice as an allusion to the stereotypical and biologically prescribed sensitivity and sentimentality within the feminine body.

On the other hand, at Helen's realization of her confinement in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, she reacts differently, subverting the biological prescription of gender enforced in that of "Blue-Beard". She decides, "I would privately sell what pictures I had on hand… and some of those I should thereafter paint… I would contrive to dispose of my jewels" (Brontë, 1848, p. 352). Converse to the representation of the prescribed gender roles of the Victorian Era through Blue-Beard's wife, Helen's motivation and active escape of her space places the rigid notion of biological gender and its roles into discourse. This discourse enables the reader to reflect on the social acceptance and normalization of the gender expectations of the status quo, just as the heroines did in their realization of their confinement.

Imagining Helen in Blue-Beard's castle in the place of his wife, it can be asserted that she would, just as she does so in her home with Arthur, actively seek to escape and mobilize herself. In other words, it's not that the space creates the subject, it's that the subject creates the space. Brontë creates a subject that dismantles the fixed notion of gender as biology during the Victorian Era, pushing for gender as discourse as she explores what a woman can do beyond her instructed roles, creating a character who will *actively* seek escape, who will *actively* alter the space around them, and not allow the space to define them.

4. Conclusion and policy implications

Brontë's discourse of gender, possible through formative experimentation in literature given the restricting of gender discourse in Victorian society—this formative discourse transcending the literary into pushing forward the sociopolitical—enables gender to be understood and analyzed as a cultural construct, dismantling and challenging traditional gender norms of fixed relegation and prescription.

The findings of this paper reveal the potential of gender discourse through the utilization of literary form during the Victorian Era. Further, through form, literature can contribute to the shaping of gendered understanding of politics and society.

Author biography

Cindy Chen is a senior at Shanghai American School Pudong Campus in Shanghai, China. She is passionate about English literature, specifically on understanding the simultaneous role literature plays in reinforcing and challenging societal constructs. She hopes to utilize her explorations in a future career as an academic. She hopes to teach classes exploring the intertextuality of fairy tales throughout literature and its significance as a commentary on gender politics, inspiring others to understand and study literature for its significance towards society.

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