





Not An Angel, Just A Woman: Domestic Abuse and the Signifi- cance of Space in *Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and Netflix's *Maid*

Alyson Baugh

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, by Anne Brontë, was published in the Victorian period, and Netflix's TV series *Maid* was released in 2021. Despite being from different time periods, both stories explore domestic abuse, particularly through the significance of space and environment. Both texts use their individual stories to explore the double meaning of space and the reclamation of domestic spaces, and to redefine what makes a home a home.

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Alyson Baugh
Ball State University

“Home” is a word often associated with security and comfort, but for those experiencing domestic abuse, home can be a source of suffering and confinement. Texts such as the Netflix TV show *Maid* and the classic novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* by Anne Brontë bring the issue of domestic abuse out of the shadows and into the light with an exploration of space and how environment and domestic abuse are intrinsically tied together. Each text approaches the questions of space in unique ways. Similarities show the persistence of domestic violence and the influence of the environment on domestic abuse as a societal and cultural issue across time periods. The texts accomplish this by exploring the double meaning of space, and by showing the reclamation of domestic spaces and the possibility of finding safety and community after escaping domestic

abuse. In both *Maid* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, women fight back against domestic violence, not with a physical weapon but with their upending and reclamation of space in a society that pushed them into the margins.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall is a novel written by Anne Brontë and published in 1848 under the pseudonym Acton Bell. In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, the main character, Helen, falls in love and marries Arthur Huntington. Arthur eventually becomes abusive towards Helen. Helen sticks to her beliefs that she can change Arthur until their child becomes involved, Arthur's negative influence on their child growing by the day. To protect her son, Helen leaves Arthur and finds refuge at Wildfell Hall. There, she meets Gilbert and begins to move forward.

The second text explored in this

essay is *Maid*, a TV show released by Netflix in 2021 that tells the story of Alex, a young woman escaping an abusive relationship. The show begins with Alex and her boyfriend arguing. Her boyfriend throws a dish at her that almost hits their daughter, Maddy. This prompts Alex to realize she needs to leave. To provide for Maddy, she becomes a maid. Alex eventually returns to her boyfriend when he helps her in her moment of need after her mother's suicide attempt, only for the abuse to continue. When Maddy is in danger once again, Alex leaves a second time, this time for good.

Spatiality is central to both texts, particularly domestic spaces, transitional spaces, and the meaning of home. In her book *Space, Place, and Gender*, Doreen Massey writes, "Space is formed out of the particular set of social relations which interact at a particular location" (168). Space is not just the physical nature of an environment; it is the construction of the space through purpose, design, emotions, perceptions, symbolism, and so much more that turn a physical environment into a lived space. Massey further argues that space is formed and interpreted based on:

The specificity of the interactions which occur at that location [nowhere else does this precise mixture occur] and in part out of the fact that the meeting of those social reactions at that location [their partly happenstance juxtaposition] will in turn produce new social effects. (168)

Social relationships add to the construction of space but also complicate the meaning of an indifferent space. For example, a house is just a house until social relations make it home. The unique union of specific social instances and the spaces in which they happen are what allows a space to be understood by the participants within that space. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and *Maid* both explore this matter of space, complicating ideas of home, entrapment, and ownership of space.

This polarization between home and entrapment is illustrated in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, which shows how space can be complicated by emotion and perception. In the novel, Helen escapes to Wildfell Hall to hide from her abusive husband. Early in the narrative, Helen cares a lot about fitting the societal

standards. Once she arrives at Wildfell Hall, she no longer tries to fit into society but extricates herself from it completely. She becomes practically a recluse, and the space of Wildfell Hall allows her to do so. Wildfell Hall represents a transitional space in Helen's journey by being both a place of freedom and a prison. Helen has escaped her abusive marriage, and she recognizes the safety Wildfell Hall gives her. She says, "Surely in this spot, I could remain unknown" (Bronte 306). Yes, Wildfell Hall gives her safety, security, and shelter, but it is also a place of solitude and anonymity. She has moved to a village where she has no friends and no connections except for her son and her brother. She has even left her identity behind, using the alias of Helen Graham. No one can truly know her. Revealing her story could be complicated and even dangerous, especially in a village prone to gossip. Helen is isolated, has lost all sense of familiarity and connection, and is, for all intents and purposes, unknown. Wildfell Hall is simultaneously a means of freedom and a prison.

Maid also tackles this friction of home as a place of security and entrapment. After Alex's mother

harms herself during a manic episode, Alex is comforted by her abusive boyfriend and aided in taking care of her mother. This leads to Alex returning to live with her boyfriend, where things seem to be going well for a while. On her own, Alex has faced poverty, complications from the welfare and legal system, and even homelessness for a short period of time. Returning to live with her boyfriend provides her with financial support, shelter, and comfort, until the abuse starts again. Alex feels trapped in the place she calls home, blaming herself for her own decision to come back yet unable to leave. Leaving means returning to poverty, homelessness, and solitude. This trapped feeling is masterfully illustrated in a scene that takes place in Alex's imagination. In this scene, she is stuck at the bottom of a tree trunk, looking up at the escape at the top of the tree, impossibly out of reach. She lies down and accepts her fate, representing a decision to stay with her abusive boyfriend.

In both texts, home represents a complicated dichotomy between security and entrapment. Doreen Massey states,

Such understanding of the identity of places requires

them to be enclosures, to have boundaries and therefore and most importantly to establish [one's] identity through negative counter position with the Other beyond the boundaries. (169)

In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Wildfell Hall is an enclosure due to its aspects that put it in contradiction with dominant society. This is represented by its isolation from society and how it allows Helen to go against societal norms by leaving her husband. In *Maid*, Alex's home with her boyfriend is an enclosure because it leaves her trapped in an abusive relationship but still provides shelter and resources that she was fighting to get when trying to make it on her own. Both texts show that it is not simply a matter of leaving a harmful space or staying in a safe space, but rather, a physical space is complicated by emotions and how that space serves the person in some ways but harms them in another.

However, while space can act as confinement in some situations, it can act as liberation in others. Wildfell Hall offers Helen an escape from societal norms while encasing her in solitude, until someone goes against societal norms and enters that space with her. Gilbert comes

to Wildfell Hall to meet Helen; Helen rarely leaves Wildfell Hall to meet Gilbert. This seemingly small detail suggests that Gilbert is willing to enter into a space with Helen instead of expecting her to fit into the dominant space. The idea that women must make themselves fit into specific spaces is an important and problematic principle of the "Angel in the House" ideology, which prevailed during the Victorian era and was based on a poem by Coventry Patmore. The Angel in the House expressed the prevailing Victorian view that a woman should marry and act as the moral compass of the home, protecting her husband from sin. The ideology created separate gendered spaces—public and private. Public spaces referred to larger societal spaces, physical and theoretical, such as politics, economics, business, and so on, that were only associated with men. Women, meanwhile, were meant to remain in the private space of the home.

While living at Wildfell Hall, Helen separates herself from societal norms. She has no husband; she lives alone; she provides for herself; she raises her son alone and with non-traditional parenting methods. Gilbert is even advised

multiple times not to get involved with her because this separation from societal norms gives rise to a lot of scandalous gossip; it is even suggested that Helen has a sexual relationship outside of marriage. Gilbert ignores the gossip, and instead of expecting Helen to align herself with societal norms, to enter the dominant space, Gilbert enters into her isolation with her. This is a stark contrast from Helen's marriage to Arthur, who reinforced the lines between public and private spaces. Arthur expected Helen to be there for him while never being there for her. This difference between Gilbert and Arthur is an impetus for Helen to develop trust and eventually love for Gilbert. Therefore, Wildfell Hall may be both a prison and a means of freedom, but it is ultimately a gateway for Helen to overcome the trauma associated with domestic abuse and move towards a better, more hopeful future.

Maid also narrates the possibility of a better future after domestic abuse through transitional spaces and the reclamation of domestic spaces. First, *Maid* includes a transitional space that helps Alex find her footing after leaving her abusive boyfriend. In a domestic violence shelter, Alex is

able to find safety and community, as well as stability in a very tumultuous time. After appearing in court when she is accused of kidnapping Maddy, Alex begins to regret leaving her abusive boyfriend and questions whether what she experienced was abuse. She lies on the floor, a visual representation of how defeated she feels by all the previous events, and her new friend finds her there. When Alex expresses her regrets and doubts about leaving her boyfriend, her new friend at the shelter says, "Before they hit you, they hit near you. Next time, it was going to be your face, and you knew that" ("Ponies" 00.25.43). This line gets through to Alex and gets her to physically get up off the floor. Without this transitional space, and without the growth that comes with her experiences in this space, Alex likely would've returned to her boyfriend almost immediately after leaving.

However, because the domestic violence shelter is a transitional space, Alex eventually has to leave and make it on her own. Leaving the shelter feels like starting over, but Alex has grown tremendously since she left her boyfriend the first time. This time, the hope for a better future is stronger. After

leaving her boyfriend the second time, Alex returns to her job as a maid. However, this time, she is introduced to a new clientele—hoarders who are ready to fight their hoarding addiction. Through hard work and determination, Alex tackles the jobs no maid would ever dare take on, and in doing so, she is able to support herself and her daughter and save up money to move to Montana.

Alex becoming a maid is a literal reclamation of domestic space. Where once Alex was trapped in the home, kept there by threat of violence and deterred from leaving by the difficulties of making it on her own, now, she makes a living by cleaning the clutter and mess from domestic spaces. By making spaces livable and functioning again for others, Alex secures her own means of escape from the prison of domestic abuse.

Both Alex from *Maid* and Helen from *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* go on a journey of discovery in which they redefine home in the aftermath of domestic abuse. Both Alex and Helen have lost sight of the meaning of home in the midst of abusive relationships and dislocation. When no home feels safe, happy, or permanent how can home be recognized, much less

found? Both Helen and Alex need to discover that in the aftermath of domestic abuse.

In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, physical places mirror the experiences of the characters within. Grassdale, the home Helen shares with Arthur, becomes “infected with sin and sorrow,” just as her relationship becomes infected with pain and mistreatment (Bronte 300). Wildfell Hall bears the appearance of a place “long since neglected” and “gloomy,” symbolizing Helen’s experience as she is secluded, heartbroken by the turn of her marriage, and shrouded in mystery and anonymity (18). Both Grassdale and Wildfell Hall act as different kinds of imprisonment. Helen says, “For if I could only keep retreat unmolested... [I] should be quite content to live my life in security” (302). She has given up on finding a true home and settles for what she can get: security and safety, even if it means giving up connection. That is, until she meets Gilbert. Helen and Gilbert fall in love, and Helen is eventually able to trust him with her story. When Helen returns to Arthur to care for him in his time of need, driven by her perceived responsibilities as a wife, she believes Gilbert will forget her.

She tells Gilbert to wait six months before contacting her, almost as a test to see if he will remember her in six months' time. However, to Helen's surprise, Gilbert does come to find her after the end of her proposed deadline.

At the end of the novel, Helen and Gilbert marry, and after Helen's experiences with her marriage to Arthur, the fact she would trust her heart to another is a testament to how far she has come since leaving Arthur. The once reclusive, guarded, isolated Helen Graham allows herself to trust Gilbert, to reclaim, not only her right to love and be loved, but also the meaning of home

Grassdale and Wildfell Hall were not home because, for all intents and purposes, Helen was alone, unloved and trapped by Arthur and then isolated at Wildfell Hall. As Helen learns, love without security does not make for a happy home, and neither does security without love. Only when she finds love and connection with Gilbert does she find home because home is much more than just a physical space. It is a web of connections and all the needs that space fulfils. If any need is not fulfilled by the space, home will cease to be a home. With Gilbert, Helen finds the

requirements of home met. Even as physical environment changes, their relationship carries the love, security, and connection that turns a physical space into a home.

Maid also presents home as a complex intersection of factors. Physical space certainly matters, as shown when Alex is temporarily homeless, shuttled between interim homes including the domestic violence shelter, and lacking the security that comes with having a stable home. However, physical space is not all that matters, and that is displayed when Alex has shelter and basic needs with her abusive boyfriend but lacks love, security, and safety. Alex struggles to strike a balance between having the physical space of home to survive and having the emotional space of home to thrive. She goes on a journey to find the meaning of home and how to achieve it for both survival and happiness.

The show ends with a slightly ambiguous but hopeful ending. Alex is granted full custody of Maddy when her boyfriend signs over his rights, and Alex and Maddy move to Montana. It is a little uncertain what happens then because the television show does not depict how Alex and Maddy fare in Montana. The viewer gets

the distinct feeling that while this is the end of one journey for Alex and Maddy, it is also the start of the next. That being said, the ending of the show is hopeful as Alex and Maddy are given the blessing of a fresh start, a new beginning away from the space that trapped them. Alex says,

The trail up there is long and zigzaggy. The hike will be hard. But we're going to make it to the top, and when we do, I'm going to tell her that the M stands for Maddy. That this whole new world is for her down on the other side. ("Snaps" 00.50.00)

This concludes Alex's journey to create a stable and loving home for Maddy and to break the barriers of the abusive home that kept both Alex and Maddy trapped. Alex has figuratively knocked down the walls and opened the world for both Maddy and herself. She has created a new home that is open, free and loving, and even as physical space changes, that feeling of home remains cemented and permanent. Alex says it best when she says, "Our space is a home because we love each other in it" ("Cashmere" 00.43.01).

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall and *Maid* are texts from two different

time periods, telling two different stories, and yet the similarities between *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and *Maid* are striking. In their similarities, these two texts show how even as surface level appearances have changed, the deeper roots of these issues linger. Domestic abuse, entrapment in domestic spaces, and the struggle to find home when home has lost its meaning are all topics still relevant today.

These issues of domestic abuse and societal barriers to escaping it persist. Both *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and *Maid* bring these issues into the light and open the eyes of audiences to the truth of domestic abuse. These stories matter and are not just limited to the page or the TV screen. These stories are all around us and always have been. Fictional or not, these stories need and deserve to be told.

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