

# JOINT RUNNER UP

## MOLLY ELLIOTT, HALL CROSS ACADEMY

*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is an epistolary novel; the disclosure and the framing of Helen Graham's accounts are under the control of Gilbert Markham. Thus, the narrator is an essential component in this novel, his temperament established clearly in this initial passage to indicate his coloured perspective upon the events related.

Brontë presents Markham as incredibly defensive, even hostile, to remove any neutrality from his storytelling. His voice is strikingly resentful and accusatory towards Halford (the recipient); the pronouns 'you' or 'your' appear eighteen times in comparison to just twelve personal pronouns. This creates an immediate, relentless sense of self-righteousness within Markham, reinforced through his noting Halford's 'comparative closeness and taciturnity'. The specification of 'comparative' here is important; Markham is quick to blame, and must address Halford's faults before atoning for his own. He is also somewhat melodramatic, shown in his hyperbolic use of 'so mighty a favour' and the challenge of 'charge me with ingratitude and unfriendly reserve if you can'. Markham feels contempt strongly, and this will influence his narration greatly throughout the novel.

Further to this sense of injustice, Brontë exposes Markham's volatile nature to heighten Helen's powerlessness in this narrative. He attributes his refraining from telling his story to 'not being in a story-telling mood at the time', implying that our narrator's humours are highly changeable and manifest strongly in his actions. This also implies Markham's power; his telling of this story, made up mostly by that of his wife, is subject entirely to his prerogative, and his selectiveness in choosing when to reveal it is a considerable expression of this power. This volatility also affects the composure of this narrative, Markham's 'own patience and leisure [being] his only limits'. Once again, Markham exercises power; he will choose exactly what to include or omit based upon his own 'leisure'. This word in itself implies that this relation is merely a source of amusement for him; he is not the one affected by its contents.

Evident in this passage is also a sense of instability within Markham. He notes a certain 'air' surrounding Halford, describing his face as being 'overshadowed with a cloud' when he last saw him. These attributes, including 'shadow' and 'cloud', are intangible; Markham works heavily on interpretation and appears paranoid in doing so. He is also anxious to validate himself, noting his old journal 'by way of assurance that I have not my memory alone'. This is both indicative of his generally resentful nature but also a need to assert himself, borne of that same paranoia which flavours his perception of others so strongly.

Brontë shapes this character such that he is unlikely to relate any account in a neutral, unbiased manner. Markham is the embodiment of an unreliable narrator, controlling a sensitive tale which sometimes colours Helen negatively. Her story, already plagued by controlling, malignant male characters, is about to be told by an equally controlling and flawed voice, perpetuating a bleak patriarchal stereotype of this society.

### Professor Peter Barry comments

**Good opening, and strong point that the male narrator recounts the experience of a female protagonist. Paragraph two is also very good on the evidently combative nature of the writer, and paragraph three emphasises the anxiety and subjectivities behind this self-assertion. Neat summary that the effect is to create a narrator to whom we should not give unquestioning trust.**