Mrs Humphrey Ward, by reason of the fact that she was niece of Matthew and daughter of Thomas Arnold, found herself, in many ways, in a peculiarly privileged position in the world of letters of the late Victorian period. Nonetheless, it was precisely as a result of a crisis in that family that she established herself as a writer of note.

The conversion of Thomas Arnold to Roman Catholicism, although it caused much heartbreak within his family, nevertheless provided his daughter (who, along with her sisters continued in her mother’s faith as was the custom in mixed marriages of the period) with rich material for what is generally considered her best novel Helbeck of Bannisdale published in 1898. The theme of religious controversy between Protestantism and Catholicism and between the Church of England and the Evangelical sects which was dealt with to a greater or lesser extent by many Victorian novelists including Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Anthony Trollope and Benjamin Disraeli, is treated by Mrs Ward in Helbeck of Bannisdale with a remarkable inwardsness with the subject which carries a weight of conviction that is not always to be found in other novels dealing with the same theme. The penetrating analysis of the conflict between the two protagonists, Alan Helbeck, Catholic squire of Bannisdale and the non-Catholic Laura Fountain, represents a masterly psychological achievement which makes the novel, in certain respects, a peculiarly modern one.

Part of the success of Helbeck of Bannisdale is due to the fact that, although Mrs Ward implicitly endorses Laura Fountain’s ultimate refusal to submit to the authoritarian aspects of Catholicism, she manages, nonetheless,
to present a singularly unprejudiced analysis of the religious conflict between
the two protagonists which leads inevitably to the tragic conclusion. That it
was Mrs Ward’s intention to remain as unbiased as possible is clear from
what she wrote in A Writer’s Recollections with regard to the novel:

My first anxiety was as to my father, and after we had left England for abroad, I was
seized with misgivings lest certain passages in the talk of Dr. Friedland who, it will
be remembered, is made the spokesman in the book of certain points in the intellectu-
tal case against Catholicism, should wound or distress him. I therefore no sooner
reached Italy than I sent for the proofs again, and worked at them as much as fatigue
would let me, softening them, and, I think, improving them too.

It is hardly surprising that Thomas Arnold approved of his daughter’s
novel if we consider the penetrating, but humane and balanced comments of
Dr Friedland in Book V. Friedland shrewdly recognises that part of the tra-
gedy of Laura’s situation as an orphan is the result of a certain slackness in
her father’s education of her which has left her ill-equipped to come to terms
with her conflict in loyalty towards her dead father and Alan Helbeck:

Fountain took Laura out of her generation and gave her nothing in return. Did he
read with her — share his mind with her? Never! He was indolent; she was willful;
so the thing slid. But all the time he made a partisan of her — he expected her to echo
his hates and prejudices — he stamped himself and his cause deep into her affec-
tions.

The modernity of the language here is particularly striking in this
analysis of a theme which is recurrent in the Victorian novel — although it
is also to be found in Jane Austen, in the case of Mr and Mrs Bennet in Pride
and Prejudice — namely that of parents or parental figures who, in some
fundamental way, fail their children. Ironically, Alan Helbeck too, thanks to
his innate, aristocratic dislike of proselytizing, fails — as Father Leadham
recognises — to make Laura an active participant in the processes of his
inner life, thus condemning her to feel herself irrevocably an outsider in his
world. Dr Friedland also recognises that the tragedy of Laura’s situation vis-
à-vis Helbeck is due to the character of Helbeck himself:
And then, my dear, she must needs fall in love with this Catholic! Catholicism at its best — worse luck! No mean or puerile type, with all its fetishisms and unreasons on its head — no! — a type sprung from the best English blood, disciplined by heroic memories, by the persecution and hardships of the Penal Laws. What happens? Why, of course the girl’s imagination goes over.

These lines are curiously reminiscent of Mrs Ward’s own description of the genesis of Helbeck of Bannisdale as she relates it in A Writer’s Recollections:

It was in 1896 ... that a conversation in a house on the outskirts of the Lakes suggested to me the main plot of ‘Helbeck of Bannisdale’. The talk turned on the fortunes of that interesting old place Sizergh Castle, near Kendal, and of the Catholic family to whom it then still belonged, though mortgages and lack of pence were threatening imminently to submerge an ancient stock that had held it unbrokenly, from father to son, through many generations.

The relation between such a family, pinched and obscure, yet with its own proud record, and inherited consciousness of an unbroken loyalty to a once persecuted faith — and this modern world of ours, struck me as an admirable subject for a novel.

Certainly, there can be no doubt that Mrs Wards handling of the subject resulted in a truly admirable novel. The delicate balance between the author’s instinctive rejection of Catholicism and her desire to be fair-minded in presenting some of its attractive qualities is maintained throughout the novel. Her presentation of Catholic types such as the sternly virtuous Helbeck himself, his vacillating sister Augustina, the bigotted housekeeper Mrs Denton and the various ecclesiastics is masterly indeed. Particularly in the presentation of the latter does Mrs Ward show herself at her best. Father Bowles, “a priest of an old-fashioned type, with no pretensions to knowledge or to manners” seems to Laura “a character in his own small way” and indeed the humour with which Mrs Ward describes his various little foibles makes of him a relatively innocuous type of the priesthood — in some ways he recalls Don Abbandio in Manzoni’s I promessi sposi — and a perfect foil to the polished, refined Jesuit, Father Leadham “who was a convert and had been a distinguished Cambridge man”. The other prominent clerical figure is Teddy Williams who is about to be ordained a Jesuit. The ambiguity of Williams’s character is convincingly captured by the author by means of
Laura’s instinctive sense of repulsion from the young man and her intuitive feeling that his is “une imagination fausse et troublée” — a feeling which is later borne out to be true when she meets him after his defection from the Catholic Church — and her passionate rebellion against his “evident cold shrinking from the company of women” which the girl, “surrounded as she was by priests”, feels as an insult. Ultimately Laura’s attitude to all the Catholic figures surrounding her is one of rejection:

the nuns, with their unintelligible virtues, and their very obvious bigotries and littlenesses; the slyness and absurdities of Father Bowles; the priestly claims of Father Leadham; the various superstitions and peculiarities of the many priests and religious who had passed through the house since she knew it — alas! she hated them all.

This reaction is shown to be justified on the part of Laura who knows herself to be viewed with suspicion and dislike by “these Catholic figures” and who is, moreover, tormented by her rejection, inherited from her father, of “those stifling notions of sin, penance, absolution, direction as they were conventionalized in Catholic practice.” And yet Laura, after her reconciliation with Helbeck just prior to her stepmother’s death, is able to do justice to the good qualities of Father Leadham and to recognize that there is a degree of sincerity and nobility in his character which appeals to her desperate need to be understood. In general, Leadham represents much the same kind of sophisticated type of the priesthood — based on the figures of Cardinal Newman and Cardinal Manning — as we find in Disraeli’s novel *Lothair*, and in underlining the much more subtle appeal of Leadham’s intellectual Catholicism, Mrs Ward, like Disraeli, manages to capture the insidious quality of the fascination which the Catholic faith exercises over the protagonist. It is interesting to note that both Lothair and Laura are most vulnerable to that fascination at moments in which their own reserves of energy are at a low pitch, but whereas Lothair will ultimately be saved by the love of the staunchly Protestant Corisande, Laura resolves her dilemma in suicide.

Mrs Ward’s treatment of the Protestant characters in the novel is also striking for the note of objectivity and, in the case of Dafflady, the Mason’s ‘Methody’ farm-labourer, of humour which characterises her presentation. The bigotry of Laura’s Cousin Elizabeth’s Protestantism and her bitter, viru-
lently anti-Catholic discussions with the aggressively Evangelical parson, Mr Bayley, are no less a source of torment to Laura — "she was pelted and harried from supper-time till bed" — when she is once again a guest at the Mason’s farm after her flight from Bannisdale than were the Catholic pieties there. Nevertheless, as in the case of Father Leadham, Cousin Elizabeth too is shown as capable of human feeling and, in the touching scene in which she asks Laura’s pardon for having wounded her feelings, the reader is left with the feeling that much can be forgiven her.

Apart from the characters mentioned above who represent quite clearly the Protestant-versus-Catholic interest in the novel, there is another character who has his own importance independently of the theme of religious controversy. Laura’s cousin and would-be lover, Hubert Mason, apart from acting as a foil to Alan Helbeck, exists in his own right thanks to the subtlety of the portrait Mrs Ward paints of him. If Helbeck is seen as the prototype of the aristocratic gentleman of the past, Hubert is the prototype of a kind of ‘modern’ man the vulgarity of whose aims and motives (apart from his musical gift) render the more poignant the latent element of tragedy in Helbeck’s eventual retirement from the world of natural affections. There is much in the portrayal of Hubert which makes one inevitably think of certain types to be found in the work of D. H. Lawrence. Laura’s first impression of him is of a “rather magnificent young fellow, marred by a general expression that was half clumsy, half insolent” but as soon as he is touched on the sensitive chord of his nature — his love of music — “the handsome points of the face came out; its coarseness and loutishness receded. And his manner became suddenly quiet and manly. “It is this saving grace which justifies Laura’s interest in her cousin and her defence of him against the scathing comments of Helbeck. It also makes credible the fact that Laura is, on several occasions, to be found in apparently compromising situations with her cousin, the outcome of which will add to her sense of anguish when it comes to her ears that local gossip has it that Helbeck has decided to marry her to save her good name. The situations in which Laura finds herself with Hubert are reminiscent of those occasions in Jane Austen’s Northanger Abbey or in Fanny Burney’s Evelina in which the female protagonist, by reason of her very innocence, seems to be guilty of improper conduct. It is on the occasion of
Laura’s nightmare flight from her cousin across the sands — a flight which is reminiscent of that of the protagonist of *Jane Eyre* — that she first realises that she does not want to sacrifice Helbeck’s good opinion of her and, in recognising her burning desire to reach Bannisdale which she instinctively thinks of as home, she comes to the awareness of her love for its master.

It is typical of Mrs Ward’s capacity for objectivity in her portrayal of character that, although Laura finally sees the true nature of Hubert as “vulgar, self-complacent” and is able to deduce with a fine irony “Here indeed, was a successful man in the making”, she is also able to regret the coarsening of the nobler aspects of his character. In words which are extraordinarily similar to the kind of language which D. H. Lawrence would later use, we are told:

... at her first glance she saw the signs of that strong and silent process perpetually going on amongst us that tames the countryman to the life and habits of the town. It was only a couple of months since the young athlete from the Fells had been brought within its sway, and already the marks of it were evident in dress, speech, and manner. The dialect was almost gone: the black Sunday coat was of the most fashionable cut that Froswick could provide; and as they walked along, Laura detected more than once in the downcast eyes of her companion a stealthy anxiety as to the knees of his new grey trousers. So far the change was not an embellishment. The first loss of freedom and rough strength is never that. But it roused the girl’s notice, and a sort of secret sympathy. She too had felt the curb of an alien life! — she could almost have held out her hand to him, as to a comrade in captivity.

It is thanks to the linguistic poise and psychological insight of passages such as this that Mrs Ward makes so convincing the inexorable movement towards tragedy that is characteristic of the novel as a whole. Indeed it is the author’s use of language in general — with a few exceptions — which contributes so tellingly to the success of the novel. The poetic tone of the descriptive passages and the sureness of touch in her use of certain symbols in order to exteriorize the sense of inner conflict in the protagonists are reminiscent of the style which made Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* such a remarkable achievement. If we take, for example, the passage describing Laura’s nightmare flight (the difference, of course, between this and *Jane Eyre*’s being that Laura at this stage is fleeing towards Helbeck whereas Jane was fleeing.
from Rochester) we can appreciate the force of the language:

She ran and stumbled — ran again — tore her light dress — gulped down the sob in her throat — fearing at every step to faint, and so be taken by the pursuer, or to slip into some dark hole — the ground seemed full of them — and be lost there — still worse, found there! — wounded defenceless .... . Further on, a dark gulf .... . a patch of blackest shadow .... . Then her nerve gave way .... . All her self-command, her cool clearness was gone. The shock of disappointment, the terrors of this sudden loneliness, the nightmare of her stumbling flight coming upon a nature already shaken, and powers already lowered, had worked with miserable effect .... . In all ages the woman falls before the ascetic — before the man who can do without her. The intellect may rebel; but beneath its revolt the heart yields .... . Strange passion of it! — it rushes through the girl’s nature in one blinding storm of longing and despair.

Here we have the crux of Laura’s personal tragedy which is, in the last analysis, a conflict between intellect and heart — between an intellect that yearns back towards loyalty to her father’s ideas and a heart that is wholly given up to Helbeck. In this connection the symbolic quality of the Romney portrait at Bannisdale — as indeed the symbol of the house itself “which stands between the garden and the sun” — has a fundamental importance. Although Laura realises that her inner conflict is tearing her — ‘Ah! but the bird’s wings are broken and its breast pierced’ - and causing her to tear Helbeck — “she knew well that she had torn the heart that loved her — that she had set free a hundred dark and morbid forces in Helbeck’s life” — yet her sure instinct in understanding that the Romney portrait “stood for all the natural things that creeds and bigots were always trampling under foot” and her refusal to submit to a marriage with Helbeck which she intuits will be in the long run submission to the tyranny of an alien creed, are the ultimate vindication of her suicide.

As has already been observed, only rarely does Mrs Ward fall short of her high level of linguistic achievement. The drop in tone is most evident in certain of the dialogues between Laura and Hubert Mason on the one hand and between Laura and Alan Helbeck on the other and even, on occasions, in the language in which Laura’s own thoughts are expressed. Take for example her reflections on her situation when she first arrives at Bannisdale:
"... what we’ve got to do, is just to get Augustina well — and stand over her with a broomstick and pour the tonics down her throat. Then Frika, we’ll go our way and have some fun", or later — when by this stage she should already have known better — ‘Well, but change and excitement of some sort one must have! — who is to blame if you get it where you can? A day in Froswick with Hubert Mason? Yes — why not?’ Of course one might explain away the drop in linguistic tone here by saying that it reflects Laura’s immaturity at this stage of the novel but it still leaves one with the uneasy feeling that Mrs Ward may also have had a decided influence on the Mills and Boone type writer of this century. Fortunately, however, as said before, such instances of questionable linguistic choices are rare and certainly not enough in themselves to detract from the remarkable achievement that Helbeck of Bannisdale assuredly is.

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Opere Citate, Works Cited

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