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**The Author and her Work:
Charlotte Bronte's Shirley as a
Therapeutic Experience**

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**The Author and her Work:
Charlotte Brontë's Shirley as a Therapeutic Experience**

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Abstract

While it is popular to analyse a literary work against the background of reader-centred methodology, I would like to offer a viewpoint which places the author of the text on the pedestal. While it is the reader who responds to the text emotionally, the author is similarly guided by the purpose of establishing its meaning. Consequently, this meaning can be related to the author's personal experience. While this thesis is generally dismissed, there are still works which straightforwardly draw on the author's experience. Thus, in their analysis, the role of the author cannot be omitted. In this sense, I will strive to present writing as an artistic and aesthetic endeavour aiming not only to please the potential reader, but also to order the writer's reality. A self-explanatory mode of writing can be detected in Charlotte Brontë's works. One of these, *Shirley*, strikes the reader as a profound psychological insight into the young woman's mind. Caroline Helstone, introduced from the perspective of a figural narration, contemplates the trials of existence. By allowing a glance into Caroline's emotional life, Brontë lays bare her own restless feelings, while entering the confessional mode of writing. What is more, the plot of *Shirley* is closely related to Brontë's life, rendering it possible to unveil the author's identity. As Brontë's biographer, Winifred Gérin, aptly observes, "Charlotte's wish to preserve her incognito, and, above all, to prevent any reference to her personal sorrows (...) could not entirely be achieved" (402). In my paper, I will endeavour to illustrate the close relation between the authoress of *Shirley* and the novel itself. Moreover, I will discuss the process in which the work *redeems* the author, while it remains obvious that it is the author who influences the work, endowing it with a wilful shape and intended meaning. In order to develop my thesis, I will cite numerous biographies of Charlotte Brontë written by such authors as Elizabeth Gaskell, Winifred Gérin and Rebecca Fraser.

Keywords:

Introduction

'I wish generously that every woman in England had also a hope and motive.'
Charlotte Brontë (Gérin 394).

26 October 1849 marked the publication of *Shirley*. This appeared to many as Charlotte Brontë's success, was, in fact, obtained at a very high price. The creation of the novel, treated as an attempt to follow *Jane Eyre's* success, gradually acquired the status of a semi-religious ritual. Unlike for the usual Victorian author, Charlotte Brontë endowed her characters with a striking self-awareness and the right to commit mistakes. In this sense, she proved to be untypical not only as a writer, but as a woman who investigated the depths of human nature. In my paper, I would like to follow an argument based on the inseparability of the authoress from her work. This paper argues that the ultimate link between the author and the work remains intact. It also discusses the importance of the writing process in the authoress' life and presents writing as an artistic and aesthetic endeavour which orders the author's own reality.

Firstly, this paper depicts the origins of *Shirley*. Secondly, it discusses the similarities between the literary character – Shirley Keeldar and Charlotte Brontë's sister – Emily. Finally, it concentrates on the issue of women's incapacity as presented in the novel, with a view to showing Charlotte Brontë's opinion on women's life in the Victorian England. The main concern of the paper relates to the issues of alienation and purpose in one's life.

In order to develop my thesis, I begin with a brief presentation of the plot of the novel. The action of *Shirley* takes place at the beginning of the 19th century. The British political scene presented in the novel faces instability, which substantially afflicts society. The time is notable for the appearance of the Luddite movement¹. In the thick of these events, the reader is acquainted with Caroline Helstone, a middle-class, orphaned girl sustained by her uncle, a clergyman, Mr Helstone. Caroline's restrained world of 'a certain favoured district in the West Riding of Yorkshire' (*Shirley*, 4) forms a unique space governed by local concerns rather than global issues. The territory of Mr Helstone's house and the mill (Hollow's Cottage) inhabited by Robert Moore and his sister – Hortense, make up the entire space of Caroline's life. Placed within such limited boundaries, the girl strives to lead an undemanding but useful life. However, absorbed by her daily duties, Caroline experiences an unyielding emotional starvation intensified by the unhappy infatuation with Robert Moore. Directing the feelings towards Moore proves a miserable choice, as he rejects Caroline's love in the name of business dealings. Miss Helstone, bewildered and desperate, vows solemnly to become an old maid and commences charity work. Despite encouraging results, Caroline's spirits are diminishing due to the company of resigned old maids. The situation assumes a dramatic apogee when Mr Helstone forbids Caroline to visit the Moores on the grounds of political discordance. The heroine's world unexpectedly shrinks, as

¹A movement which originated as an attempt to protest against the development of labour-saving machinery in 19th century in England.

even Mr Helstone reveals himself as a hard-hearted, unsympathetic man who has “but an indifferent opinion of women” (130). At this stage, Shirley Keeldar enters the fictional world in order to fully engage Caroline’s attention. The eponymous heroine, gifted with a male name, reveals herself as the heiress of Fieldhead. Instantly, the two women tie the knot of friendship and become each other’s confidantes. Their mutual attraction stems from the divergence of characters and opinions. Shortly, Caroline discovers the significance of Shirley’s presence in her life. At the same time, she is haunted by the oppressive fear of Robert proposing to her friend. Being in a quandary, Caroline decides to terminate her friendship if Shirley becomes Robert’s wife. In the meantime, the heroines witness an attack on Hollow’s Cottage and Caroline senses her inner inability to help Moore.

After a while, life in the village takes its ordinary course, as previously. Moore seems greatly involved in business matters, while Shirley is obliged to attend to her family. As a result, Caroline is left to herself again. Oppressed by inner grief, she falls prey to an unknown but dangerous ailment. “(...) a fever of mental excitement, and a languor of long conflict and habitual sadness, had fanned the spark to flame (...)” (312) which could not be extinguished even by short visits paid by Shirley. It is only thanks to the careful attendance of Mrs Pryor that Miss Helstone still clings to life. Mrs Pryor – Shirley’s previous governess – becomes a silent auditor of Caroline’s delirious monologues. She aptly unfolds the truth and realizes that Caroline is in love with Robert. At this point, Mrs Pryor collects all her strength in order to make a critical confession that she is Caroline’s mother. As a result, Caroline immediately regains her health, discovering the purpose to live again.

In the meantime, Fieldhead hosts Shirley’s relations. The guests are accompanied by the heiress’ old tutor – Louis Moore. Surprisingly, Louis turns out to be Robert’s brother who longs for Shirley’s love. The action takes a dramatic turn afresh, as Shirley is bitten by a dog presumably infected with rabies. On the other hand, Robert Moore is badly shot in revenge for depriving the local people of work. Nursed back to health by the neighbouring family, Moore has the chance to experience solitude and helplessness himself. In effect, he finally improves his behavior towards Miss Helstone. Caroline visits Moore secretly, as the family prohibits anyone to disturb the patient. Repenting in pain, Robert swears to improve his indecent conduct. A satisfactory dénouement awaits the reader: Robert Moore regains health and marries Caroline, while Shirley is wedded to Louis. The ending offers a hope that Caroline’s life will gain the longed-for meaning and that it will be devoid of mental suffering.

The Origins of the Novel

It can be argued that all the main characters in the novel undergo their moments of suffering before they attain the happiness they desire. In Chapter 24 one reads:

(...) the human heart can suffer ! It can hold more tears than the ocean holds water. We never know how deep, how wide it is, till misery begins to unbind her clouds, and fill it with rushing blackness (323).

The sentence faithfully renders the tone in which the book is written. While *Jane Eyre* originated among the Brontë sisters' commentaries, Charlotte wrote *Shirley* in solitude. After the tragic death of Branwell Brontë (24 September 1848), new trials awaited Charlotte. Soon after the death, in December, Emily Brontë followed her brother. 'Stronger than a man, simpler than a child (...) she made haste to leave us (...),' wrote Charlotte in the biographical note upon Emily (Gaskell, 354). The year 1849 brought more distress: Anne became gravely ill. However, the first chapter of *Shirley* still verges on a comic tone: the authoress depicts the local curates humorously and good-naturedly ridicules Yorkshire society. As the grievances in Haworth accumulate, the gloom invades the pages of *Shirley*. This is commented upon by Gérin:

Up to the period of Anne's death Charlotte had, in effect, written two-thirds of her book; even such an achievement is remarkable when the background against which she worked is remembered. Abandoned in October, it had only very tentatively been taken out from time to time during the spring. Each volume of the finished "Shirley" (...) had been subjected to the same ruinous break in continuity; the first, 'laid aside' on 18 October; the second, resumed during the spring as Anne's condition allowed; the third, written entirely after her death. Thus the book was begun in high spirits on the wave of confidence inspired by the success of Jane Eyre (...). Then the tale took on a graver, more reflective tone (...) (389).

Anne Brontë died on 28 May 1849. Charlotte's grief was inconsolable, as she believed until the last moment that the change of climate might save her sister's fragile life. After her sister's death, Charlotte wrote in her letter: 'I do not know how life will pass, but I certainly do feel confidence in Him who upheld me hitherto. Solitude may be cheered, and made endurable beyond what I can believe' (Gaskell, 376). However, on 14 July 1849 Charlotte assumed a graver tone while writing to her friend:

My life is what I expected it to be. Sometimes when I wake up in the morning, and know the Solitude, Remembrance, and Longing are to be almost my sole companions all day through – that at night I shall go to bed with them, that they will long keep me sleepless – that next morning I shall wake up to them again, – sometimes, Nell, I have a heavy heart of it (Gaskell, 377).

Similar words echo from the pages of *Shirley*. In Chapter 11 Caroline's desire to attain inner peace is reported in the following words: 'She wished she could be happy; she wished she could know inward peace, she wondered Providence had no pity on her, and would not help or console her' (143). Hence, *Shirley* ceased to exist merely as a social tale with a neat commentary on the community of Yorkshire, but offered a confessional mode with which the reader could identify as well. By introducing a profound insight into Caroline's emotional life, Charlotte revealed an ability to construct one's own feelings and to present their impact on the overall functioning in the social context. By the same token, Brontë's writing gained traces of a discerning psychological approach. Moreover, the lonely heroine, like Miss Brontë, undergoes suffering that cannot be appeased: 'Men and women never struggle so hard as when they struggle alone, without witness, counselor, or confidant, unencouraged, unadvised, and unpitied,' emphasizes the narrator. (141) The link with the authoress' real life is striking – Charlotte knew how it felt to struggle alone, living in a desolate house, endlessly waiting for a letter as a substitute for conversation. Thus, communicating by means of the written word was of the greatest importance to Charlotte. A letter carried a life in itself. A portion of thoughts, remarks and related events provided a daily food to sustain the starved reader. Charlotte Brontë wrote on 23 March 1852: 'You say, dear E-, that you often wish I would chat on paper, as you do. How can I? Where are my materials? Is my life fertile in subjects of chat?'. (Gaskell, 470)

The authoress of *Shirley* struggled desperately with solitude and the feeling of purposelessness. Similarly, in Chapter 9, Miss Helstone wonders:

I have to live, perhaps, till seventy years. As far as I know I have good health; half a century of existence may lie before me. How am I to occupy it? What am I to do to fill the interval of time which spreads between me and the grave? (...) Well, life is short at the best. Seventy years, they say, pass like a vapour, like a dream when one awaketh; and every path trod by human feet terminates in one bourne – the grave (...). The soul meantime wings its long flight upward (...). (133)

It is possible to notice parallels between the style of Charlotte's letter and the style in which Chapter 9 was written. Both these texts include questions that cannot be directly answered. Moreover, the questions are strikingly similar – while Charlotte wonders in the letter whether her life is 'fertile in subjects of chat', she constructs Caroline as a heroine who does not know how to occupy her life at all. The stylistic similarities between the texts can be detected in connection with such issues as: solitude, purposelessness or emotional starvation. While analyzing Charlotte's letters against the background of her novel, it is visible that the authoress of *Shirley* was as emotionally starved as her precisely constructed heroine. It seems that for Caroline life on earth is entirely deprived of a deeper sense but for its spiritual value. Caroline Helstone, a girl of mere eighteen, treats temporality as an anguish for her to

overcome in order to gain eternity. Such a mournful vision strikes the reader as untypical for a young woman. However, having for a friend ‘Solitude, Remembrance and Longing’, Charlotte felt incapable of producing an amusing picture (Gaskell, 377). In effect, the construction of the heroine is based on the authoress’ mournful thoughts influenced by the events from the real life. The style with which Brontë depicts mental torment is unusually truthful and accurate. However, a cheering thought follows the gloomy reflections:

The soul (...) gazing down through burning clearness, finds there mirrored the vision of the Christian’s triple Godhead – the sovereign Father, the mediating Son, the Creator Spirit. (133)

Caroline resorts to religion as the means of convincing herself that a solitary life and death are just the beginnings of eternity. The heroine’s reasoning is, in fact, Charlotte’s attempt to discuss the significance of life and death. Miss Helstone’s monologue exemplifies Charlotte’s uncertainty as to whether eternal life truly exists. Therefore, Caroline concludes her stream of thought with a thoughtful question: ‘The soul’s real hereafter, who shall guess?’ (134). In one of her letters to Mr Williams, the publisher, Miss Brontë states:

Faith whispers they [Anne and Emily] are not in those graves to which imagination turns – the feeling, thinking, the inspired natures are beyond earth, in a region more glorious, I believe them blessed. (Gérin, 399)

Charlotte Brontë increasingly strived to become a true believer. When deprived of everything but the possibility to write, she found consolation in religion. The confidence in God enabled her to see a purpose in both living and dying. Such patience allowed Miss Brontë to reconcile herself to the turbulent events of her life. Otherwise, Emily and Anne’s deaths would have appeared entirely pointless and cruel. Thus, it is remarkable that in Miss Brontë’s novels the characters unjustly treated by fate usually turn to God as to a last resort of hope. Essentially, religion provides the sole rationale for the pitiless fate persecuting them.

Apart from religion, writing provided Charlotte with a golden opportunity to survive while knowing that her beloved sisters are dead. The publishers of *Jane Eyre* unwearingly encouraged their favourite authoress to continue the undertaken work. ‘Labour is the only radical cure for rooted sorrow (...),’ confirmed Charlotte while writing to Mr Williams (Gérin, 387). Several months later, she addressed Mr Williams in the following terms:

The loss of what we possess nearest and dearest to us in this world, produces an effect upon the character: we search out what we have yet left (...). The faculty of imagination lifted me when I was sinking

(...); its active exercise has kept my head above water since (...).
(Gaskell, 383)

At this stage of her sorrowful existence, writing enabled Charlotte to remain occupied and repel the suicidal thoughts oppressing her mind. Although 'the pen, laid down (...) was taken up when one alone remained,' the effects of Charlotte's untiring work were fast to emerge (Gaskell, 379-380). The new creation offered thinking that was more mature and ripped off illusions. Unavoidably, the writing of *Shirley* exhibited features of emotional therapy.

Shirley – A Tale of Romance or a Quest for Affection?

At this point, I would like to refer to my thesis concerning the inseparability of author and his work. The reading of *Shirley* would be incomplete to a person unacquainted with the drama of the Haworth household. For such a reader the novel seems to be a romantic tale. Thus, the story of Caroline's illness stemming from the unfortunate infatuation may seem far-fetched to the reader who perceives the novel as a romance. However, it is essential to notice that the persona of Robert Moore stands for the gap in Caroline's life. What is more, Moore does not necessarily have to be a man. In fact, Caroline places her feelings on Robert in order to feel loved and accepted. Her problem lies in her badly-made choice: Moore is simply unworthy of her affection. Ultimately, Mrs Pryor's motherly love comes to the rescue and Caroline gains her long-desired purpose in life.

On the whole, Charlotte Brontë reveals the bitter truth that life without purpose and human affection resembles death. At thirty-three, she suddenly found herself in her heroine's place – living purposelessly at the cross-roads of life. 'I knew in part what the unknown author of *Shirley* must have suffered, when I read those pathetic words which occur at the end of this and the beginning of the succeeding chapter,' wrote Mrs Gaskell, having in mind the ending of Chapter 23 and the beginning of Chapter 24 – *The Valley of the Shadow of Death* (380). In chapter 23, entitled *An Evening Out*, Caroline visits the Hollow's Cottage, where she gets a chance to converse with Robert Moore. However, she abruptly discovers that the hour is late. 'Home she would go; not even Robert could detain her now' (311). Chapter 24 opens with a grim revelation: 'Caroline Helstone went home from Hollow's Cottage in good health, as she imagined. On waking the next morning she felt oppressed with unwonted languor' (311). Charlotte inserts here a gloomy, personal reflection as well:

The future sometimes seems to sob a low warning of the events it is bringing us, like some gathering though yet remote storm (...). At other times this future bursts suddenly, as if a rock had rent, and in it a grave had opened, whence issues the body of one that slept. (311)

While including this anxious thought, the authoress embarked on a new, solitary trip through life – Chapter 24 marked Anne’s death. As Winifred Gérin aptly observes, ‘Charlotte’s wish to preserve her incognito, and, above all, to prevent any reference to her personal sorrows (...) could not entirely be achieved’. (402)

Shirley eventually acquired a highly personal dimension, rendering it possible to unveil the author’s identity. Consequently, Charlotte Brontë gradually ceased to exist on the literary scene as the mysterious Currer Bell. Elizabeth Gaskell confirms that the authoress of *Shirley* ‘took the idea of most characters from life, although the incidents and situations were, of course, fictitious. She thought that if these last were purely imaginary, she might draw from the real without detection, but in this she was mistaken (...)’. (378)

Thanks to the introduction of the historical events and the authentic characters and places, *Shirley* emerged as the novel which offers awareness about the real world. ‘Perhaps because it was so organically related to the circumstances of her life, *Shirley* achieved less artistic independence and wholeness (...)’, Winifred Gérin writes. (330) However, it must be acknowledged that Charlotte Brontë captured reality with remarkable mastery. The psychological aspect of her well-shaped characters is never as convincing as in the case of her heroines. Therefore, the portraits of women constitute the most absorbing part of the book.

The Woman with Emily’s Face

The leading characters – Caroline Helstone and Shirley Keeldar – originated as a tribute to Charlotte’s dead sisters. While Caroline’s inner life constitutes the major theme of the novel, it is Shirley who emerges as the leading heroine. Surprisingly, Shirley does not make her appearance until Chapter 11. She appears for the first time when Mr and Miss Helstone pay a visit to Fieldhead. What one immediately learns is that Shirley has ‘come of age, and will reside for a time on her property’ (147). The heroine awakens positive feelings in her visitors. Even the prejudiced Mr Helstone regards her as ‘rather a fine girl’ (148). Shortly, one learns about Miss Keeldar’s physical appearance:

Shirley Keeldar was no ugly heiress. She was agreeable to the eye. Her height and shape were not unlike Miss Helstone’s; perhaps in stature she might have the advantage by an inch or two. She was gracefully made, and her face, too, possessed a charm as well described by the word grace as by any other. It was pale naturally, but intelligent, and of varied expression. (...) Clear and dark were the characteristics of her aspect as to colour. Her face and brow were clear, her eyes of the darkest gray (...) and her hair of the darkest brown. Her features were distinguished (...), mobile they

were and speaking; but their changes were not to be understood nor their language interpreted all at once. (151)

The most unique feature of the heroine is her masculine name. ‘(...) she had no Christian name but Shirley (...)’ indicates the narrator (151).¹ Along with her name, the heroine displays various masculine features – she is strong, decisive, independent and active. Moreover, the specific name highlights Shirley’s autonomy and stresses the fact that she does not wholly belong to the feminine world. What is more, Miss Keeldar’s name can be perceived as an indicator of the changing status of women in the Victorian period. Thus, it can be an indicator that Charlotte Brontë, while carefully studying the hopeless situation of her female contemporaries, longed for the change in women’s rights.

Even Mr Helstone amusingly addresses Shirley as “Captain Keeldar” and treats her with a dignity ascribed to men. Moreover, Shirley is fully aware of her new masculine role in Fieldhead:

Business! Really the word makes me conscious I am indeed no longer a girl, but quite a woman and something more. I am an esquire. (...) I hold a man’s position. (153)

As if to confirm her status, Shirley converses with Mr Helstone in a manner which places her on a par with this dignified gentleman. On the other hand, she assumes a patronising attitude towards Caroline. Thus, Miss Keeldar does not resemble a conventional Victorian woman as conceived by the patriarchal expectations. She is endowed with a unique nature and displays peculiar habits:

In Shirley’s nature prevailed at times an easy indolence. There were periods when she took delight in perfect vacancy of hand and eye – moments when her thoughts, her simple existence, the fact of the world being around and heaven above her, seemed to wield her such fullness of happiness that she did not need to lift a finger to increase the joy. Often, after an active morning, she would spend a sunny afternoon in lying stirless on the turf (...). (173)

Shirley clings to nature as to the ultimate resort of happiness. She does not follow the Victorian canon of cultured behaviour and uncompromisingly defends her independence. The reader may be surprised to picture Miss Keeldar whistling carelessly, reading books on the carpet, tackling with Mr Donne in an off-hand manner or outrageously declining marriage proposals. In fact, Shirley is the only person in control of her life. This uncommon heroine stands in sharp contrast to the rest of her passive kin. At the same time, Shirley

¹‘(...) Shirley – not a man, but a woman christened with a man’s surname. This is, according to *The Oxford Dictionary of English Christian Names*, the earliest usage of “Shirley” as a first name, for man or woman. Its masculine associations derive from the fact that a family name is invariably passed on through the male line,’ states Sally Minogue in her introduction to the novel; (*Shirley*, xi).

preserves the dignity of her role as a housekeeper and a supporter of the local poor. Thus, she is closer to the contemporary image of a successful woman rather than to that ascribed to a sedate Victorian lady.

Charlotte Brontë devoted substantial space in the novel to descriptions of Shirley. In this heroine, she strived to recreate her dead sister, Emily. ‘The character of Shirley herself, is Charlotte’s representation of Emily,’ testifies Elizabeth Gaskell (379). In what follows, she mentions that it was an endeavour to present Miss Keeldar ‘as what Emily Brontë would have been, had she been placed in health and prosperity’ (379). While Emily appeared to strangers as a peculiar, inscrutable person, it was Charlotte’s aim to lay bare her sister’s true nature. In effect, the reader is left with an intriguing figure of Shirley as ‘careless and pensive, and musing and mirthful, and mocking and tender’ (174).

The novel vividly depicts the unrestrained temper of Charlotte’s sister who certainly did not belong wholly to the feminine world. Just like Emily, Shirley delights in nature and embodies the concept of freedom herself: ‘Not fearing the dew, she [Shirley] has not covered her head; her curls are free (...)’ wrote Charlotte Brontë in Chapter 13 (174). Another passage depicts Shirley as enchanted by violent weather phenomena: ‘Shirley sat at the window, watching the rack in heaven, the mist on earth, listening to certain notes of the gale that plained like restless spirits (...). Snatches of sweet ballads haunted her ear; now and then she sang a stanza’ (168). Thus, fearlessness and inner strength place Shirley Keeldar ahead of other Victorian women. Similarly, Emily possessed a daunting power of character: ‘Stronger than a man, simpler than a child, her nature stood alone,’ Charlotte reflected on her sister (Gaskell, 354). While Shirley cherished ‘the deep blue sky’ and ‘no sound but that of the bee’s hum, the leaf’s whisper’ (173), Emily worshiped liberty. ‘Liberty was the breath of Emily’s nostrils; without it she perished,’ Charlotte wrote (Gaskell, 158).

Importantly, Charlotte devoted several passages of *Shirley* to descriptions of Tartar, Miss Keeldar’s dog. This animal character emerged as the representation of Emily’s beloved dog – Keeper:

The same tawny bulldog (...) called ‘Tartar’ in Shirley, was ‘Keeper’ in Haworth parsonage; a gift to Emily. (...) Keeper was faithful to the depths of his nature as long as he was with friends; but he who struck him (...) roused relentless nature of the brute (...). (Gaskell, 268)

What is more, Mrs Gaskell indicates that ‘speaking about her dead sister, the former [Charlotte] told me that from her many traits in Shirley’s character were taken: her way of sitting on the rug reading, with her arm round her rough bull-dog’s neck (...)’ (268). Another incident that found its commemoration in the book concerned Emily ‘taking up (...) red-hot Italian irons to sear the bitten place, (...) telling no one (...)’ (Gaskell, 268). Such brave maintenance reminds the discerning reader of Shirley’s conduct when bitten by a dog. Still, Miss Keeldar depreciates the possibility of animals’ dangerous behaviour. She even

explains to her daunted guests that Tartar ‘won’t harm a cat’ (207). Certainly, Emily would have said the same.

The Issue of Incapacity

It is Caroline Helstone who constitutes a contrast to Miss Keeldar’s rebellious nature. One may say that Caroline, throughout the novel, stands in the shadow of Miss Keeldar. On the other hand, Caroline’s timid manners enhance Shirley’s vivacity. In *Shirley*, Caroline Helstone embodies incapacity, the issue strictly related to women. ‘Another (...) theme of *Shirley* is,’ S. N. Singh argues, ‘the predicament of women – women suffering from unrequited love, women who have never, and never will be, loved (...)’ (84). Charlotte Brontë seeks to present a Victorian woman entrapped in society that ignores her potential and skills. In Chapter 22 Brontë addresses the male audience in a meaningful speech: ‘Men of Yorkshire ! (...) look at your poor girls, many of them fading around you, dropping off in consumption or decline; or, what is worse, degenerating to sour old maids – envious, backbiting, wretched, because life is a desert to them (...)’ (294).

Miss Helstone’s incapacity stands for the inability to form social relations. In contrast, Shirley Keeldar, the rich heiress of Fieldhead, mingles with society with ease and grace. Wealth seems to equate her with men. Paradoxically, Shirley’s society proves indispensable to Caroline’s security. For instance, Whitsuntide is no longer a ‘trying day’ (219) for Miss Helstone, because Shirley is her companion: ‘(...) it was almost an enjoyment. Miss Keeldar was better in her single self than a host of ordinary friends’ (219).

In the novel, incapacity afflicts one on an emotional level as well. The gender-division is most striking here: being a woman disables Caroline from openly addressing her suffering:

*A lover masculine so disappointed can speak and urge explanation,
a lover feminine can say nothing; if she did, the result would be
shame and anguish, inward remorse for self-treachery. Nature
would brand such demonstration as a rebellion against her instincts.
(79)*

It seems that the words: ‘you expected bread and you have got a stone’ (79) serve as a motto of an average Victorian woman. Caroline, despite her best intentions, remains unnoticed by Robert, simply because she does not suit in his business schema. She cannot offer a significant dowry or contribute to Robert’s career. On the other hand, Moore pays compliments to Shirley, suspiciously planning to increase his income by marriage. Through the construction of Robert Moore, Brontë addresses the gender issue and brings forward the hazardous position of Victorian women who, while desperately ensnared by egoistic men, strive to appear respectable in the public sphere. Rebecca Fraser believes that Caroline Helstone is introduced to ‘remonstrate

about the condition of women and stereotyped ideas of them (...)’ (330). ‘The sorrow and the anger showed in the book,’ emphasizes Fraser (330).

Shirley, as one may expect, has much to say on the gender issue: ‘If men could see us as we really are, they would be a little amazed (...)’, she decides (264). She expresses her views openly in an almost modern fashion:

‘And,’ continued Joe Scott, ‘Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression.’

‘More shame to Adam to sin with his eyes open !’ cried Miss Keeldar. ‘To confess the honest true, Joe, I never was easy in my mind concerning that chapter. It puzzles me’. (247)

Conclusion

Brontë creates Miss Keeldar as an exemplification of female independence in Victorian times. Shirley not only pays tribute to Emily Brontë, but also allows the authoress to inquire into the double-edged social standards of the day. In this sense, Shirley becomes the authoress’ mouthpiece doubting the validity of the current social discourse. As Rebecca Fraser points out in *Charlotte Brontë: A Writer’s Life*, ‘(...) one of the most striking and personally inspired themes of the book is the use Charlotte makes of the two chief female characters, Caroline Helstone and Shirley Keeldar, to attack the treatment of women by society’ (330). In her writings, Brontë’s major concern lies in psychological themes, and she is believed to be a supreme observer of inner reality. Principally, Brontë attaches the greatest importance to the depiction of women. In effect, the feminine perspective prevails as the dominant issue in all Charlotte’s novels, which include: *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Shirley* (1849), *Villette* (1853), the posthumously published *The Professor* (1857) and the never finished *Emma*. Writing enables the authoress not only to express the self, but also to enter a confessional, explanatory mode. Similarly, writing gains a function approximately like that of creating a diary which allows for the ordering of the world. As Winifred Gérin rightly states in the biography of Charlotte Brontë, for her ‘fulfillment was something more than literary achievement; it was creation of character’ (xv). Similarly, Elizabeth Gaskell often notices textual parallels between Brontë and her heroines, thus confirming the thesis that writing was to Charlotte a very personal task. The parallels between Charlotte’s and her heroine’s lives enable Gaskell to create a biography written in a style similar to that of the novel. Thus, for Gaskell, Charlotte Brontë turns into a literary heroine, depicted as a suffering woman who struggles against a pitiless faith. In this sense, Charlotte Brontë turns into a character similar to that of Caroline Helstone or Jane Eyre.

After she finished *Shirley* on 29 August 1848, Charlotte wrote that ‘whatever now becomes of the work, the occupation of writing it has been a boon to [her]. It took [her] out of dark and desolate reality into an unreal but happier region’ (Fraser, 341). Moreover, the attentive reader of *Shirley* should

remember the authoress' words when she indicates: 'When I write about women I am on sure ground' (Gérin, 392). Thus, in Brontë's novels, these are not only the heroines who suffer and struggle in order to find the purpose of life, but also the authoress herself.

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