Shirley Short Guide

Shirley by Charlotte Brontë

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Characters

Once more, as in Jane Eyre, Bronte creates several sets of paired characters.

The wealthy, animated, bold Shirley Keeldar contrasts with the shy, retiring, timid Caroline Helstone—both are worthy, honorable, attractive young ladies; but their situations are at odds: Shirley is an independent heiress; Caroline is under the thumb of her self-righteous uncle, the rector of Briarfield. The opposing ways in which these ladies deal with love is equally striking: Shirley refuses proposals and argues vigorously with her husband-to-be; Caroline (based, to some degree, on Anne Bronte) falls into a decline for the want of love.

The two principal male characters, the brothers Moore, are also very different.

Robert is outspoken, unyielding, adamant; Louis is quietly proud, intellectual, and sensitive. While Robert is facing down the workers and even fighting against their attack, Louis gives French lessons and remains outside the main action of the plot. All these characters have positive qualities: Robert and Shirley are very courageous (Robert enters combat bravely; Shirley cauterizes her own wounded arm with a hot iron.) Louis and Caroline possess intense powers of resilience, overcoming both illness and apparent initial rejection.

There is also a cast of colorful minor characters, including the Yorkshire workmen (whose speech accent is sometimes hard to interpret), the stuffy Sympsons (Shirley's uncle and aunt), and Sir Philip Nunnely, the rich and unappealing suitor whom the Sympsons attempt to persuade Shirley to marry.

Social Concerns

The unhappy situation of women in Victorian society always concerned Charlotte Bronte, as is seen in her earlier novel Jane Eyre. Shirley, however, sets this circumstance against a historical and social background of wide scope. The plot events take place in 1812, a troubled time when the Napoleonic Wars and the attendant Orders in Council have brought on a chaotic economic and social disruption. Bronte had wanted to write a "condition of England" novel and, even before penning Shirley, had declared that she wished to deal with the "condition of women" in her time and place. In Shirley, Bronte combines and interrelates these concerns.

While the owners and workers are in grim opposition, so society itself is crushing the spirit of most women. The basis of both conflicts is primarily economic: The workers are losing their jobs because of a poor market condition and because of the technical advances of the Industrial Revolution (in the present era of speedily expanding technology and the dislocations that it causes, this phenomenon should seem relevant to modern readers); women are caught in a system arranged by men and are expected to live by its rules.

Thus, when Shirley confronts the foreman Joe Scott, a disaffected but intelligent worker, he refuses serious discussion because women should not be involved in such serious matters: "Joe, do you seriously think all the wisdom in the world is lodged in male skulls? Let the woman learn in silence, with all subjection." This last word is a key to Bronte's (and Shirley Keeldar's) refusal to accept the social and economic condition of women, one in which a well-brought up young lady without a fortune, had but two choices of vocation, teaching and being a governess (both of which Bronte experienced, with no delight in either).

So, the unsettled and often corrupt society that is involved in what often becomes violent opposition (shown well in this novel) also is corrupt in its treatment of women. Since the heroine, Miss Keeldar, is an heiress, she only perceives the problems of women through observation; however, she possesses a lively awareness of the injustice done to her sisters. As Bronte once remarked, Shirley is what her own sister Emily might have been with money and good health.

Techniques

The central differences between this novel and Bronte's other works are the point of view and the fact that Shirley treats real historical events instead of being confined to intimate personal life.

Some readers believe that Bronte was unsuccessful in blending the external historical plot with the several internal, subjective story lines. Others believe that she has accomplished this difficult task as well as most historical novels do (it is likely that Bronte chose such a general topic because of her reading of the historical romances of Sir Walter Scott).

The first person point of view, which so well unites Jane Eyre and Villette (see separate entries) would not serve for this book; however, the third person omniscient point of view tends to aggravate the problem of structural unity of the text. Shirley herself does not enter the story until well after page 100; also, the lively action of the local people seems something of a distraction from the activities of the central characters. Bronte's sketchy grasp of the national crisis of 1811-1812 may have contributed to the "scattered" effect that many readers sense.

There are effective scenes, though— some contain the confrontations between workers and owners (and their allies); others reveal, as in the passages between Louis Moore and Shirley, a fine power of dramatic dialogue. Another device clearly intended to increase the sense of immediacy is the occasional switching to the present tense. Near the close of the plot, as the weddings and the victory over Napoleon are about to be announced, the paragraph begins, "It is August: the bells clash out again, not only through Yorkshire but through England . . . ." Many dramatic moments are heightened this way.

Finally, in Shirley, there is more emphasis on setting than in Bronte's other novels. Yorkshire stands for all of England in the large historical context. The people, their language and attitudes, however, are local. Here, Bronte is on safer ground. She knew such people well; and, her presentations of the landscapes are impressive and often quite detailed: She notes the weather and its effect on greenery; the seasons are accurately reflected in the Yorkshire countryside (the crocus of spring, peeping "green as emerald, from the earth"), and the somber mood of the events is accompanied by moody descriptions of surrounding details: "Discord, broken loose in the night from control, had beaten the ground with his stamping hoofs, and left it waste and pulverized. The mill yawned all ruinous with unglazed frames . . . ." The passage (after the workers' riot the night before) continues, showing further ruination, blood, and wounded and dead men. Since this is considered one of the very first regional novels in English, this feature is significant.

Themes

Some readers have found it remarkable that they could read all the novels of Jane Austen and find no clue to the fact that the author had lived through three of the most momentous events in English history: the Industrial Revolution, the French Revolution, and the Napoleonic Wars. Austen deals only with private life.

While Charlotte Bronte was not alive during the era of the Luddite Riots of 1811-1812, her father was; and, he had fought on the side of the factory owners.

Charlotte's knowledge of the period was something less than encyclopedic. But, she reveals a fine sense of the confusion, hard feelings, and disruption of the time.

One of her central themes in Shirley is the need to place one's private needs and desires in proper perspective with the "outside" events and conditions.

Robert Gerard Moore becomes so obsessed with his fabric mill and the destructive activities of his workers (or, former workers) that he does not notice the growing ardor of his distant cousin Caroline Helstone, although they are much thrown together. Robert is intent on external problems, indeed legitimate bases of worry (his income could be lost if he cannot deal successfully with the rebellious Yorkshiremen). It takes a near breakdown on Caroline's part and a slow convalescence from a gunshot wound to make Robert (who has misguidedly proposed to Shirley, partly because of her generosity to poor families and because of her eagerness to aid him in his difficulties) perceive Caroline's devotion and to respond to it.

Similarly, Shirley is so dedicated to her "good works" and the disturbances in her community that she only slowly gains a knowledge of the growing affection of her former tutor Louis Moore (Robert's brother). It requires a number of lively debates between these two proud and vigorous personalities—in addition to Moore's illness, Shirley's severe injury, and several marriage proposals, which Shirley refuses—to reveal to both of these leading characters that they should wed. Louis is, as he says, "a dependent: I know my place." To this, Shirley responds (thematically), "I am a woman: I know mine." Moore's reaction explains a great deal about his attitude: "I am poor: I must be proud." This pride helps to keep them apart for a long while (as do the distractions of Shirley's busy life); however, Louis's pride is satisfied (he has already told himself, "If I must be her slave, I will not lose my freedom for nothing.") Finally, in a well-written scene in the penultimate chapter, they in effect negotiate an agreement to marry. The key point of discussion is the question of true equality ("And are we equal then, sir? Are we equal at last?")—this concern for egalitarian status reflects the stratification of the society in which the novel is set.

As this and similar episodes indicate, another theme is the need for clear perception, not blurred by personal ambition or economic or private exigencies. The owners and the workers must manage to come to terms; this end is achieved only by the ending of the war, at the close of the plot. By this time, everyone has learned a lesson about seeing

things as they are. Even the lame plot strategy of having Caroline's mother, Mrs. Pryor, who had been Shirley's governess, reveal her identity after many years suggests the need for openness and clear-sightedness—the love of Mrs. Pryor for her daughter helps Caroline to recover from her emotional and physical breakdown.

All the themes in Shirley relate to the overwhelming need for order, both in personal lives (neatly arranged at the end of the book with the double marriage, Robert to Caroline and Louis to Shirley) and in national affairs—as Robert Moore points out to the rebellious workers, if he does not use the new machinery, he cannot make a profit and his business will close and no one will have a job. Fortunately, history made this outcome (which did occur elsewhere, in English factories) unnecessary.

Key Questions

Given the historical aspects of Shirley, one might find it instructive to return to the writer who was probably her primary inspiration in this genre: Sir Walter Scott.

One might, for example, read the early passage in Scott's The Heart of Midlothian (1818) dealing with the real-life Porteus Riot and compare it with the section in Shirley which narrates the attack on Robert Moore's mill. Does Scott do the job better? What are the similarities and differences in technique?

Also, gaining some background on the Luddite uprisings and on the effects of the Industrial Revolution (including, for example, the horrific working conditions of many poor people) and on the Orders in Council could aid the reader in evaluating Bronte's treatment of the period.

Further, the matter of how well the historical material is blended with the personal elements should be considered.

1. Which main female character, Caroline or Shirley, emerges as more fully developed?

2. Bronte says that "there are many Hiram Yorke's in the world." Does the chapter devoted to this peripheral but interesting character truly develop a rounded personage? Are the opposing traits presented in a psychologically believable manner?

3. Do the extended passages of dialogue on less than vital subjects become, as some readers feel, tedious? Could the lengthy novel be shortened with no loss of effect? What passages could be omitted?

4. As always, attention should be paid to Bronte's writing style. In this case, do the figures of speech (for instance, the references to Shirley as a "leopard") advance and deepen the plot and the characterization, or are they distractions?

5. As with Bronte's other works, the matter of coincidence, the occasionally excessive dependence on it, has been raised (as it has with Dickens and Hardy).

Is there any example of a coincidental event or circumstance (such as Mrs. Pryor's being Caroline's mother) that is too far-fetched to be accepted in a realistic novel?

6. Are the varying traits of Shirley Keeldar set forth in a credible manner?

Are her occasional vanity and frequent courage fairly portrayed? Is she a well-realized literary creation?

7. Does the reader gain a lively sense of the Yorkshire setting of Shirley? Are there enough localized details to inspire a sense of time and place? Does the accent of lower-class Yorkshire characters present a problem to the modern reader?

Literary Precedents

The historical novel has a long and lofty heritage in English literature, with Sir Walter Scott at its peak. Bronte is, thus, part of an old tradition. What might be called semi-historical novels, the genre known as "condition of England" works, were well represented in the nineteenth century (largely as a response to the increased industrialization of the nation).

Examples include Disraeli's Sybil (1845), Mrs. Gaskell's Mary Barton (1848) and North and South (1854-55), Dickens's Hard Times (]1854), and Charles Kingsley's Alton Locke ('1850). Charlotte Bronte had, perhaps beyond her intention, placed herself in distinguished company.

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