

The period between 1811 and 1812 marked the height of the Luddites uprising, with workers protesting against the introduction of new machines that actually put them out of work. Charlotte Brontë's novel, *Shirley*, written in 1849, is set against this troubled background and deals with the practical economic and social realities of that time. In this excerpt, Caroline, a rector's niece who is alone in her room, nurses her broken heart and remembers a romanticized vision of the happy moments she spent with her love interest Robert Moore – moments that are now gone since Robert wishes to marry a rich woman. The failure of her love story leads her to question her place in the world as well as her purpose and she ends up reflecting on the fate of unmarried women in a patriarchal society, where the upper classes seek to maintain their influence on others through manipulation and rigid ideas.

This excerpt allows to question the status of women in a rigid social and religious hierarchy through a female character whose romantic vision of love is crushed, which leads her to reflect on happiness and fulfillment.

First, we will focus on a vision of love that is squelched by social and economic realities, in order to analyze the prospects of women in a society where marriage is the only path worth considering, and finally we will ponder Caroline's vision of happiness as she timidly challenges a social hierarchy based on manipulation and servitude.

I- A vision of love that proves inadequate in view of the social and economic realities

1) A Romantic description of love that already seems to splinter...

- memories of moments spent with Robert Moore, growing affection and sentimentalism (from Moore to Robert (1.11, 1.19))
- use of Romantic tropes: story that spans the seasons, based on natural rhythm; Nature is depicted as a nurturing presence that nourishes the two lovers both physically and spiritually (1.13 + 1.15-17)
- synecdochical description of Robert (features, form, caresses) that stresses perception and senses
- painting-like description of the romance which draws on the Romantic tradition of painting (pastoral simplicity, countryside entertainment and focus on landscapes): 'vignettes, 'landscapes', 'sketches' = emphasizes the vividness of Caroline's feelings but also seems to point out the idealized treatment of the relationship through the prism of her imagination.
- Indeed, harbingers of doom seem to creep in this idealistic vision: 'Hollow's Copse', 'Nunnely Woods'

2) And appears to be crushed by a bleak economic and social reality

- 1.20: 'hollow joys': these pictures are figments of her imagination which cannot resist to a confrontation with reality ('Robert does not love me' 1.33 and apparently wants to marry 'some rich lady' 1.38): practical financial considerations that influence one's choice of spouse.
- enumeration of oppositions between world of fantasies and reality (1.20-26) which stresses the failure of a romantic vision of love and slowly debunks Caroline's hopes
- Caroline appears to be deprived of sustenance and spark; she is a 'dim shadow' (1.26), a 'pale phantom' whose colours have leached ('colourless tresses') = consequences of heart break and failure of love story = failure of Romantic ideals that leads Caroline to wonder about her place in the world, and mull over the conventional vision of marriage and women in the society she lives in.

II- A patriarchal society in which women are cast in the role of selfless caregivers

1) Caroline's predicament mirrors the condition of women in a society in which marriage is the ultimate goal

- 1.25-26: 'for Moore's manly companionship, she had the thin illusion of her own dim shadow' = in the absence of a husband, she is a shadow, almost invisible, without substance / echoes the beginning of the text, when Caroline seems to be obligated to go to her room because the rector is entertaining a male friend = women excluded from male conversations
- marriage described as the 'ordinary destiny' (1.36) and giving a husband and children is apparently the only occupation available to women (1.34-35: 'I had reckoned on the duties and affections of wife and mother to occupy my existence.' = summarizes what society expects women to desire and shows that they need not look for other options (1.36-37 'never troubled myself to seek any other')
- Use of TO + infinitive ('a husband to love', 'little children to take care of' = emphasizes that the goal of women is to bestow care on people in their family / recalls Caroline's 'delight' when giving food to Moore 'like a bird feeding its fledging.'

2) Self-abnegation as a duty for women

- place of 'old maids', a category in which Caroline places herself : existential question as to where they fit in (1.30-31 + 1.38-39) : without the prospect of marriage, women's existence seems to be empty and devoid of purpose
- Even outside of marriage, women are expected to be caregivers to others, without the status and personal satisfaction that a married woman can have (1.41-42 : 'Your place is to do good to others, to be helpful whenever help is wanted')
- women have to be 'devoted and virtuous'(1.46) and they are expected to practice 'abnegation of the self'(1.48) + mirrors the fact that they are stifled and voiceless (Caroline is 'closeted there, silent and solitary' (1.3)
- Silence that permeates the text reflects the fact that women are not given a voice in society, yet, paradoxically, silence allows Caroline to puzzle over the condition of women, and this leads to a deeper reflection about the social hierarchy as a whole.

III- A character that seems to challenge the social order and conventions, yet fails to see her own

1) A wider reflection about happiness and fulfillment through Caroline's rebellious thoughts...

- seems to refuse the idea of a loveless marriage + sensual undertones in the description of the moments spent with Moore which seem to underline the importance of desire (cf. homographic paronomasia on 'want' 1.49, importance of fulfilling one's desires)
- refuses the idea that virtue is enough to live a fulfilling life ('Is there not a terrible hollowness, mockery... ?' = paratactical enumeration) +
- she considers another path than the traditional one : 'I may have been mistaken'(1.36-37) + questions the manipulation operated to keep women in a state of servitude to others (1.44-45 + 1.48 'I do not believe it') = thinking leads her to consider a deviation from the norm and reflect on what happiness is about / act of thinking is already rebellious in itself and seems to be unusual ('what could she do but think ?' 1.3)

2) ..which allows a deeper criticism of social and religious framework

- Caroline sheds light on the social inequalities and the ideological manipulation that upper classes use to maintain the lower classes happy with their subservient positions (1.44-45 'But I perceive that certain sets of human beings are very apt to maintain that other sets should give up their lives to them and their service, and then they requite them by praise')
- Criticism of the 'Romish religion' : Catholicism presented as a tyranny in disguise which uses religious ideology and creed to create subservience and prevent people from calling into question the hierarchy + religion presented as having a tremendous influence on people ('as tenaciously as a martyr to his creed'1.53) + Caroline seems to reject religious influence (1.8-10) : doesn't read theology books because she doesn't want 'to listen to the language of another mind' = refuses to be moulded by theological precepts

3) However, she seems unable to escape her own internalization of social conventions

- Caroline herself participates in reinforcing this rigid hierarchy since she gives specific books to read to the servants, 'fit for Sunday reading'(1.8) and which makes them 'quiet' : upper classes choosing what type of information the lower classes can have access to
- Seems to be apologizing for her thinking process (1.3 : 'what could she do but think ?') as if it was something inappropriate for a woman.
- Quickly checks herself because she is aware that her thoughts are in opposition to social conventions : 'Queer thoughts these, that surge in my mind : are they right thoughts ? I am not certain.' (1.53-54) = actually muzzles herself, as if her thoughts were happenin without any volition on her part.

Possible opening for the conclusion : reflection on the main character who has a male name, thus already signifying a transgression of social conventions and a deeper questioning on gender roles throughout the novel OR impact of the novel, who widely contributed to making Shirley a exclusively female name, thus showing how literature can impact the way of thinking of a society