

# Voicing Women in Charlotte Brontë's Shirley and Elizabeth Gaskell's North and South

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UNIVERSITY OF RIJEKA  
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES  
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**Voicing women in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* and Elizabeth Gaskell's**

***North and South***

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the B.A. in English Language and  
Literature and Pedagogy at the University of Rijeka

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## **Abstract**

This thesis brings forth an analysis of the position of women in Victorian England during the increase of industrial production. More specifically, the position of women depicted in Charlotte Brontë's novel *Shirley* (1849) and in Elizabeth Gaskell's novel *North and South* (1854). By giving an overview of representation of the status women had in the society delineated in these novels, a broader angle on gender dynamics as well as the dynamics between classes is provided. Similarly, by comparing the two novels, the thesis creates a more accurate and comprehensive analysis. Moreover, the thesis also entails an analysis of the feminist perspective of the novels and the efforts authors made to try and change women's inferior position in the society, as well as a comparison of how the goal of voicing women in their true light is achieved in each novel.

**KEY WORDS:** *North and South*, *Shirley*, status of women, industrial novel, emancipation of women, education of women, marriage, family

## **Table of contents**

Introduction.....	4
1. Authors and friends.....	5
2. Industrial novel – the Victorian novel sub-genre.....	6
2.1. Focus on women in industrial novels.....	8
3. The roles of women in a family .....	9
4. Societal view on women and heroines’ responses to standards set by society .....	13
5. Authors advocating education.....	16
7. Characters’ congruences and distinctions – the path to (in)dependence and the marriage plots .....	20
Conclusion .....	23
References.....	24

## Introduction

When reflecting on the presentation of women in literature throughout history, one feature is all pervading – stereotypes, and women were often seen as either pure and innocent or impure, with a tarnished reputation. Although it cannot be said that women appearing in literature is infrequent, it can be argued that they appear as a device to resolve masculine problems, thus diminishing the seriousness of problems women face (Wolff, 2007). Literature also shows that it took some time for women to find their voice and to be able to express themselves more openly. When a certain behaviour is praised by the society and that behaviour is depicted in novels, such as stereotyped behaviour of women, one tends to conform to these ideals and form their image in accordance with them (Wolff, 2007). However, when novels depict opposite behaviours, where women are independent, strong, determined, and brave, society finds value in these virtues and thus a positive influence on society is created.

Victorian society is nowadays commonly seen as closed, restricted and morally prejudiced but it was, nevertheless, the society in which women began seeking freedom of thought and including themselves in the public sphere which was until then dominated by men and was considered “not to be women’s business”. The onset of these changes is best described in two novels – *Shirley* (1849) by Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South* (1854). The novels are seen as industrial novels in which we follow the interaction between classes (masters and workers) and between genders. While the industrialisation brought wealth to the middle class, the working class was impoverished and underprivileged (Alhaj, 7). This gap in wealth and social standing made a direct impact on the increase of rebellions, and mentioned novels provide an insight into the happenings before, during and after rebellions and the role the women played in them. The women we follow in the novels are Margaret Hale (*North and South*), Caroline Helstone and Shirley Keeldar (*Shirley*). This paper provides an insight into the portrayal of these characters, their significance in the period in which they were written as well as an insight into the strength of character they had to demonstrate while not conforming to the norms and expectations the society had of them because they were women. Similarly, this paper also aims to depict the differences of these characters and analyse their reactions to events in which they participated. Finally, it is important to note that the authors of the novels that are being analysed were friends therefore this paper will begin with a brief overview of their biographies and connection.

## 1. Authors and friends

Charlotte Brontë was born in 1816 to Maria and Patrick Brontë; she was the third of six children (Buchmann, 160). She published novels under a pen name “Currer Bell”, and *Shirley* was her second book, published after *Jane Eyre* and before *Villette*. She placed the timeline of *Shirley* within the period in which the Luddite rebellions took place creating a distinction from her other novels. Similarly, addressing the readers, Brontë introduces the novel with a line: “Something real, cool, and solid, lies before you; something unromantic as Monday morning” (Brontë, 1). Stating her goal right at the beginning, she creates an expectation that the novel is not merely to be read for the purpose of taking one’s mind off problems but to motivate people to be critical, to reflect on problems in the society and to learn from history and its mistakes. Recognising that history is a powerful influence, Brontë uses it in *Shirley* and puts it forward from a female perspective (Zlotnick, 284). Besides the depiction of industrialised society, the female perspective is also what connects this novel to Gaskell’s novel, *North and South*. However, not only the novels are connected, but also the authors. Their friendship started in 1850 when they met in a house on Lake Windermere (Lane, 261). Although the friendship did not last long due to Brontë’s death in 1855, through letters they shared a lot with each other and were very close. After Charlotte Brontë’s death, her father asked Gaskell to write her biography. Gaskell accepted the task and in 1857 she published *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* where she revealed many things both about Charlotte Brontë and her family as well as about her novels. In addition, she also brought to light that a lot of Brontë’s characters in books are based on people in real life. Gaskell stated that one of her most memorable heroines, Shirley, is “Charlotte’s representation of Emily” (*The Life*). She also revealed that Brontë based her other heroine, Caroline, in the same novel on her friend, Ellen Nussey, whom Gaskell only names as E. (*The Life*).

After her marriage, Gaskell moved to Manchester, an industrial city in the North of England, and her life there made a significant impact on her as an author; it was what made her a novelist (Nord 137-138). As well as Brontë, she also wrote under pseudonyms and *Mary Barton*, her first full-length fiction, was published anonymously (Foster, 3). Furthermore, through her association with Charles Dickens and contributing to his journal *Household Words*, she wrote *North and South* (Hopkins, 366). Her novels *North and South* and *Mary Barton* are both set in the same place. More precisely, the storyline of *Mary Barton* is set in Manchester, a city which also inspired her to invent Milton, where the majority of *North and South* takes place.

Both Gaskell and Brontë were bringing the problems of class, gender, education, and conservative social norms into light in their novels. By continuously seeking and advocating change, it can be said that they created a positive influence with their novels. Their novels not only aimed to inspire the society to challenge the status quo but also to inspire to view things from a perspective different from your own.

## **2. Industrial novel – the Victorian novel sub-genre**

The industrial revolution did not only prompt economic, political, and social alterations but also a shift in literature. Authors, often inspired by historical events, began putting industrialisation, class conflicts and urbanisation in the centre of their novels and as a result creating a sub-genre we now call “the industrial novel” (Balkaya, 2).

With industry becoming increasingly developed, the difference between the poorest and the wealthiest grew, and so did the dissatisfaction of the underprivileged. Some of the characteristics that are frequently present in industrial novels are portrayal of negative effects of industrialisation, examples and detailed descriptions of the adversities of the poor, the presence of working-class dialect and attempting to solve problems the society had (Ameera, 2).

General social unrest, rebellions and rioting also inspired writers of industrial novels. Elbir argues that writers believed that the masters and the workers should empathise with one another which can be initiated through improving the communication between them, the goal they tried to achieve with the novels was to create an incentive towards peaceful discussions (qtd. in Balkaya, 2). Among these writers were Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell. In Gaskell’s *North and South*, we can observe that goal through depictions of struggles both the upper class and the lower class had to face. More specifically, the perspective of the upper class is given through the character of John Thornton by describing the hardship and continuous problems he encountered as a self-made mill-owner, while the perspective of the lower-class is put forward through the Higgins family and the Boucher family. Charlotte Brontë takes a similar approach in her novel *Shirley*; she depicts the lack of communication between classes through Robert Moore’s refusal to make a compromise, proceeding to buy new machinery and continuing to lay off his workers. However, the characters that represent the upper-class in these two novels, although obstinate and resolute, are not evil nor do they intentionally disparage their workers.

In contrast, Charles Dickens in his industrial novel *Hard Times* (1854) depicts a representation of a different antagonist. The character of Josiah Bounderby is an example of “aggressive money-making and power-seeking ideal”; he was a “braggart and a liar”, and through him Dickens communicated that there was a feeling of aversion towards trade in the society (Williams, 100). In this example, it is evident that not all industrial novelists believed that the struggles of the poor were merely a result of lack of communication between classes but that some masters truly were greedy, and their only goal was to make more money, regardless of the effects it has on others.

Additionally, *North and South* was not the only novel Gaskell wrote as a response to industrialisation. Her first industrial novel, *Mary Barton* is seen as one of the most affecting reactions to industrial suffering in literature (Williams, 94). As previously said, the city of Manchester made an effect on Gaskell as an author. While living in Manchester and walking through the “busy streets”, she observed the working people walking past her and noticed their faces are “careworn” and in them she read “stories of loss, hunger, and rage” (Nord, 143). The stories that were most often untold, Gaskell uncovered in her novels. While she was an observer of these stories, she, as a woman, was not an invisible onlooker a man would be (Nord, 143). Her experience as an author was extended to the characters of her novels, and the heroines she depicted were not invisible and impartial in the stories she brought to light just as she as an author was not. Indeed, *North and South* and *Mary Barton* portray the hardships of the working class in an original manner. Nonetheless, by attributing these hardships to the increase in production, the novels take an approach that is similar to the approach other industrial novels take. Longmuir states that in *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, Gaskell fails to recognise how the suffering of the poor is also connected to the increase in consumption that was brought upon by industrialisation (237). In *North and South*, consumerism is frequently displayed by the society and even by Margaret Hale who when standing as a “lay figure” to display shawls for her aunt “took a pleasure in their soft feel and their brilliant colours, and rather liked to be dressed in such splendour”, which shows that consumerism is recognised in the novel, but not necessarily treated as something negative (Gaskell, 9). Dickens takes a similar attitude towards production in *Hard Times*. Set in Coketown, a fictitious town similar to Manchester in terms of industrial developments, Dickens in the novel indirectly criticises production that was attained by factory systems, while by naming sections of the novel “Sowing”, “Reaping”, and “Garnering” he advocated “natural method of production” (Johnson, 131). Evidently, both Gaskell and Dickens saw the causes of industrial suffering one-sidedly.



Besides mentioned novels, other novels which also have elements of the industrial novel are George Eliot's *Felix Holt* (1866), Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil* (1845), and Charles Kingsley's *Alton Locke* (1850). According to Hobson, the importance of *Felix Holt* as an industrial novel lies in its possession of radical elements among which is author's attention to a new social pattern that was developing and in recognising the beginning of formation of the working-class as an independent social class (21). Although these novels are distinct, similar elements can be found in all of them, and even in *Felix Holt*, that was published the latest, the author uses elements that clearly classify the novel as industrial.

### **2.1. Focus on women in industrial novels**

Working conditions after the industrial revolution were harsh and factory workers often worked long hours. In addition, ailments caused by hard labour or breathing in cotton dust from working in cotton factories were not infrequent. As only one income was not enough to support a family, especially a larger one, women and children also started working. The struggles of women and children became more evident therefore efforts to bring these struggles into light started appearing. After the factory reformers started to centre their concern around working women and children, writers of industrial fiction also started to depict the suffering they endured in their stories (Gallagher, 127). The theme often analysed in such stories were mothers who worked and had to leave their children at home not taken care of; Gaskell embraced the issues of women's labour that were controversial and used them as a one of the topics of her fiction (Nord, 142). Moreover, in *North and South* through Nicholas Higgins and his two daughters, Gaskell reveals the working and living conditions of cotton-mill workers. Bessy Higgins, whom Margaret befriended during her walk, was the oldest daughter and was seriously ill because she had worked at the cotton mill from a young age which affected her lungs. The lung condition resulted in her death which was the fate of many others enduring similar working conditions. With Bessy being Margaret's age, the reader is introduced to the fact that lives of these two women are so different to the degree that Margaret's lifestyle seems almost luxurious comparing it to Bessy's. Having in mind that Margaret is considered middle class, the difference in what for them is their everyday life additionally accentuates the gap in incomes and circumstances between the lower-class and the upper-class.

In contrast, other authors who also concerned themselves with women's labour focused on different subjects. Nord argues that among these authors were Disraeli and Engels who focused

on how women's labour affects their family life, the impact it had on their femininity, and what that labour means for masculinity (140). In other words, the interest of these authors was not in what working meant for women and their position in the society, but what it meant for men, the possible negative effects of men not being the sole provider for the family, and how it could threaten what was stereotypically considered as "feminine" and "masculine". Gaskell and Brontë differ from Disraeli and Engels by raising awareness of problems and difficulties women who worked had to face without referring to masculinity or femininity, and by not advocating that women should not work but advocating improvement in their working conditions.

### **3. The roles of women in a family**

*North and South* and *Shirley* deal attentively with describing the position of women in their families (the roles they play as daughters, nieces, or sisters) as well as the positions they would obtain when they become wives. Whether they would consider their potential husband's wealth before choosing to marry him or whether it played no part in their decision. Industrial novelists recognised the power of family and saw it both as a model and a way to teach and implement social changes (Gallagher, 115).

The central character that was first mentioned in *Shirley* is Caroline Helstone, 18-year-old niece of a clergyman Mr Helstone, who raised her because her mother abandoned her when she was a child and her father died. Her recollections of her father were very negative and dark, and she did not remember ever seeing her mother, but she knew she was alive (Brontë, 104). Consequently, Caroline grew up without ever feeling loved:

"Sometimes I wish somebody in the world loved me; but I cannot say that I particularly wish him to have more affection for me than he has. As a child, I should perhaps have felt the want of attention, only the servants were very kind to me; but when the people are long indifferent to us, we grow indifferent to their indifference." (Brontë, 384)

It can be said that Caroline Helstone represents a woman with difficult family relations where growing up without parents and parental love had a significant impact on her character. Similarly, this impact was often accentuated and even tackled directly when Hortense Moore spoke about her with her brother Robert saying that Caroline "is defective; but, with my forming hand and almost motherly care, she may improve", and describing Caroline as "not sufficiently

girlish and submissive” which also puts toward an opinion that submissiveness was a much-desired quality for a woman to have in that period (Brontë, 67). On the other hand, Caroline was in love with Robert Moore, and she believed that her love for him was unrequited. His indifference affected her greatly and stirred emotional turmoil in her: “Now, what was she to do? – to give way to her feeling, or to vanquish them? To pursue him, or to turn upon herself?” (Brontë, 108).

As she faces the possibility of her being unloved and alone, her life becomes static and dull, and her health starts to decline. Her illness symbolises a crisis women fall into when they fail to satisfy cultural expectations of them to become wives and mothers (Torgerson, 7). Bearing in mind that Caroline is one of the main characters of the novel, Brontë’s display of such crisis through her protagonist creates an interesting perspective for the readers. The illness aims to convey Caroline’s position as a woman that is leading a monotonous and boring life, forced to repress the feelings she has towards Robert (Gilead, 317).

Even though Caroline is taken care of by her uncle, she is still quite dependant and her not marrying and becoming a “spinster” would mean a much lower standard of life for her and she even considered becoming a governess. Evidently, marriage represented a certain degree of safety and stability for young women. Due to this, they were under pressure to get married and society considered marrying as one of the most important tasks for young women. Brontë tackled this issue and described the pressure women were under without portraying it negatively, bringing to light that if women do not marry and have a family, there is no place for them in the world. However, Caroline’s situation changed when Miss Pryor (Shirley’s governess) revealed to Caroline that she is her mother. With this confession, Caroline is introduced to a new sense of stability, and she finally receives love: “I esteem and approve my child as highly as I do most fondly love her” (Brontë, 440). Stability and love were what Caroline was searching in a future husband, and when she found it in her mother, she was no longer dependant. This transformation was also followed by Caroline recovering from her illness, which can be seen as a symbol of the impact of the pressure women were under and as an emphasis of importance of mothers to their children, especially daughters.

Shirley, the character the novel is named after, is introduced in the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter. She and Caroline quickly became friends; however, when analysing Shirley’s familial background, they have very few similarities. Shirley is a wealthy heiress whose parents always wanted a son, so they gave her a male name. Unlike Caroline, Shirley’s inheritance makes her independent

therefore she can allow herself to be more rebellious and spirited, more open to speak her mind and most importantly, she is not burdened with a need to marry. In addition, marriage is something she finds hard to imagine for herself and while expressing her thoughts to Caroline she revealed:

“I don’t know: I can’t clear up your doubts. I ponder over similar ones myself sometimes. But, to tell you a secret, if I were convinced that they are necessarily and universally different from us – fickle, soon petrifying, unsympathizing – I would never marry. I should not like to find out that what I loved did not love me, that it was weary of me, and that whatever effort I might make to please would hereafter be worse than useless, since it was in its nature to change and become indifferent.” (Brontë, 218)

In her confession, it is apparent that she fears, just as Caroline does, of unrequited love and loveless marriage. In the novel, descriptions of such outcomes in marriage were not infrequent. Both Caroline and Shirley have throughout their life witnessed unhappy marriages and noticed the misery of spouses who were in such marriages. As divorce was not an option, one had to live with their decision, regardless of their unhappiness.

Moreover, Shirley came to the Fieldhead estate without any family members and with only her governess Mrs. Pryor accompanying her. In consequence, she was free to make her own choices and act upon her wishes without the pressure of her family. However, when her aunt and uncle Sympson with their children came to visit her, her actions and choices were starting to be questioned by her uncle. He urges her to marry a wealthy upper-class man, which Shirley fiercely refuses. To Shirley, uncle Sympson represents authority and an oppression to fit into the patriarchal norms. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* Mary Wollstonecraft argues that “It is the irregular exercise of parental authority that first injures the mind, and to these irregularities girls are more subject than boys” (358). However, Shirley is headstrong and refuses to give in to her uncle’s demands. In this case, she represents the opposition to the authority her uncle poses upon her, the way she inexcusably refuses to give in shocks and angers her uncle who was described as “a man of spotless respectability, worrying temper, pious principles, and worldly views” (Brontë, 460). Through Shirley, Brontë addresses the problem of forcing parental authority, or in this case the authority a male relative tries to inflict and creates a heroine that does not let herself be manipulated by it. In contrast, Caroline does not display the same strength as Shirley, when her uncle forbids her to see Robert and Hortense, she complies although it makes her immensely unhappy.

In *North and South*, Margaret Hale is the character through whose perspective the story is told. She is a daughter of a country clergyman. Her mother, although she was from a wealthy family, decided to marry her father despite his humble living. It can be said that Margaret has not faced any turmoil in her upbringing as Caroline and Shirley had. She was not constrained by her parents and not expected to do something she would not want to or that would make her unhappy. She shows respect to her parents and cares for them deeply; however, she fears that due to her long stay with her aunt Shaw in London, her relationship with her mother is not as close as it used to be. Margaret also has a brother, Frederick, who was in the navy but due to a mutiny that he was a part of, he is in hiding in Spain. Even though Frederick did the right thing rebelling against his superior who was unjust and cruel, if he ever came back to England, he would most likely be executed for his crimes. Due to this peril, Margaret's family has accepted never to see Frederick again. Moreover, as Mr. Hale quit the church because it contradicted what he believed, he abruptly decided to move north to a manufacturing city, Milton, to take a position of a tutor. This created an upheaval for Mrs. Hale and Margaret. Despite this, they followed him, and Margaret stepped up to help with the moving arrangements and the finding of a house. Through this hardship, Margaret already showed her moral virtues and emotional strength she needed to display for her mother, who was quite distressed for leaving her home.

Another example where Margaret displayed strength of character was during her mother's terminal illness. When the doctor told Margaret about the seriousness of her mother's condition, Margaret broke down and started crying. However, she stayed strong in front of her father because she did not want him to alarm him and knew that he would feel guilty. In addition, Margaret is portrayed as honest and respectable; she holds what is morally right in great and despises injustice. Likewise, Gallagher claims that Margaret's morality, which was fostered in the spirit of her father's religious beliefs, is what shaped her to be an ideal woman (171). However, when the circumstances forced her to lie to protect her brother, she did not hesitate, despite her reputation and the good opinion of John Thornton (her father's pupil) being jeopardised. Knowing the circumstances of her religious and moral upbringing and her resolve to be honest, the fact that she was willing to lie to protect her family revealed the importance of family for her. This can be interpreted as author's effort to put emphasis on the importance of family values and maintaining a good connection between family members.

#### 4. Societal view on women and heroines' responses to standards set by society

To establish how women are voiced in novels, it is essential not only to analyse opinions, behaviours, and attitudes women display but also reflect on behaviours and attitudes society has towards them. While in *Shirley* the opinion people have about women can be seen without having to “read between the lines”, in *North and South*, it is more subtly delineated. Accordingly, the narrative in *Shirley* is particularly focused on depicting the patriarchal society in terms of male characters belittling women, insisting upon traditional gender roles, and debasing women by thinking they are superior to them in some issues (Balkaya 29-30). The belittling of women is visible immediately in the beginning of the novel:

“Mrs. Gale offered the loaf. ‘Cut it woman,’ said her guest; and the ‘woman’ cut it accordingly. Had she followed her inclinations, she would have cut the parson also; her Yorkshire soul revolted absolutely from his manner of command” (Brontë, 5)

In this example, Mrs. Gale is not someone important for the storyline, nor is she again mentioned after the first chapter. Nevertheless, this situation offers a glimpse into the society’s treatment of women and into the thoughts women have behind the obedience they force themselves to display. Throughout the novel, similar situations, where women are belittled both in a direct and in a more oblique manner, can be noticed.

Moreover, it is noticeable that, in the novel, the depicted gender relations are stereotyped – the man should work and bring money to the household, while the woman should stay at home and take care of the children (Balkaya, 29). When Caroline tries to defy this expectation and thinks about finding a job for herself, she argues that because she is a woman it is difficult to find an occupation. She puts forward an outlook that women had very limited choices outside of married life. One profession that Caroline considered taking up is becoming a governess. Al-haj states that taking up a position of a governess as a way to earn a living was of particular interest to middle-class women who were not financially supported by their husband or a male relative (38). Although Caroline was financially supported, she still felt it was necessary for her to find work for herself. Her aim to find an occupation for herself was not accomplished, which can be partly ascribed to everyone discouraging and dissuading her.

Similarly, Shirley and Caroline, on numerous occasions, concern themselves with politics and business. They do not stand by and let men form an opinion for them, and they do not allow

ignorant men to impose their superiority on them. Through Shirley's conversation with Joe Scott, Robert Moore's foreman, we see an example of an uneducated man trying to diminish women's power and magnify his own importance on the grounds of his gender and the stereotyped expectations of women: "'Young ladies,' continued Joe, assuming a lordly air, 'ye'd better go into th' house.'" (Brontë, 335). However, with Shirley's responses to him and with statements that are supported by her continuous reading about politics and the economic situation she proves that men are not smarter, more capable nor more powerful than women just because they are men; namely, she defies Joe Scott's conservative attitude towards women. Furthermore, the opposition to stereotyped gender roles is also visible in the dialogue between Caroline and Shirley:

"I daresay he thinks he has outwitted me cleverly. And this is the way men deal with women; still concealing danger from them: thinking, I suppose, to spare them pain. They imagined we little knew where they were tonight: we know they little conjectured where we were. Men, I believe, fancy women's minds something like those of children. Now, that is a mistake'" (Brontë, 360)

In these lines Shirley is communicating that men see women as incapable of being troubled by the problems they encounter, believing them to be immature. The fact that the danger they were in was concealed from Shirley and Caroline proves that men did not even think women should know about the ongoings of the public life, let alone include themselves in one. This alone proves that it was still a long way to go for women to be able to freely participate in the public sphere. On the other hand, Caroline's response to Shirley also has strong meanings:

"If men could see us as we really are, they would be a little amazed; but the cleverest, the acutest of men are often under an illusion about women: they do not read them in true light: they misapprehend them, both for good and for evil: their good woman is a queer thing, half doll, half angel; their bad woman almost always a fiend." (Brontë, 360)

In this quote, Caroline accentuates that women are not seen for who they are by men, and, truly, women did not show themselves in real light. To an extent, Caroline believed that it cannot be the reality for women and even if that was the case, it would be hard to break how they are perceived by men and create a true image of themselves.

In *North and South*, society is described more through a perspective of class relations than through the perspective of gender, however, some examples concerning society's attitudes towards women are displayed. From various situations it is discernible that society is prejudiced

against women. The most salient instance of representing the opinion of the public is their reaction to Margaret standing between John Thornton and an angry mob to protect him. Margaret did that because she was the one who told him to “go down this instant, if you are not a coward” believing if he spoke to them “man to man” he would soothe them, but realised he is in danger when he already stood before them (Gaskell, 177). However, the public, as well as John Thornton and his mother, misunderstood her behaviour believing she reacted like that out of love (Brown, 350). This reaction conveys the need of a woman in that period to be mindful of her conduct while in public due to the possibility of it being misread.

Accordingly, Brown claims that Gaskell through Margaret connected the personal identity of a woman in her private sphere, where she acts in accordance with the accepted feminine morality, with her identity in public sphere, where the morality is included (355). In creating a situation where society misreads the actions of a woman that involves her in the public sphere, Gaskell gives both Margaret and society’s perspective. She describes Margaret’s thoughts and worries and the shame she felt after the occurrence but also the reasoning Margaret had of her behaviour. Margaret in her response to Thornton gives a justification of her actions:

“‘You mean, I suppose, that you believe you ought to thank me for what I did.’ In spite of herself – in defiance of her anger – the thick blushes came all over her face, and burnt into her eyes; which fell not nevertheless from their grave and steady look. ‘It was only a natural instinct; any woman would have done the same. We feel the sanctity of our sex as a high privilege when we see danger. I ought rather,’ said she, hastily, ‘to apologise to you, for having said thoughtless words which sent you down into the danger’” (Gaskell, 194)

Making it evident that Margaret truly did not do it because she is in love but because of her sense of moral obligation. Moreover, the quote also reveals that besides feeling ashamed of her actions, Margaret also felt angry. Her anger derived from her actions being misinterpreted by everyone as well as from having to explain herself to Thornton. She believed that everyone would have done the same in her place and that therefore Mr. Thornton has nothing to be thankful for.

Seeing that society does not even consider the possibility of her actions being a result of such thinking creates bespeaks a community that is not able to read women’s actions outside of the scope of the private, or domestic sphere. Similarly, even John Thornton falls under this picture of society, which is confirmed when he thinks that he saw Margaret with



her secret lover at the train station, while the man was, in fact, her brother. Furthermore, when she lied to a police-inspector that she was not there, John thought that she lied because of fear of being seen with her lover and revealing her unmaidenlike character. After he found out that she had lied about her whereabouts, he made sure the investigation would not proceed wanting to protect her regardless.

## 5. Authors advocating education

In the very introduction of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Mary Wollstonecraft argued that women are dispirited and in an overall inferior and unsatisfactory position in the society, she partly ascribed the situation to the poor education system (2). Seeing education as a means to achieving progress in society, she was a firm advocator of providing equal education for men and women, arguing that ignorant women have a “weakness of character” (Wollstonecraft, 425). However, changing the opinion of the multitude does not happen over-night and social norms, although they can be defied, are not easily reconstructed. Published in the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* evinces the degree of resistance to change and that the problem of women’s education is still argued in *Shirley* and *North and South* which were published more than half a century later.

Education in *Shirley* was frequently spoken about and having an education is described as a quality in Hortense’s description of herself: “...she sees that I have education, intelligence, manner, principles; all, in short, which belongs to a person well born and well bred” (Brontë, 66). In parallel, the lack of education is described as a sign of inferiority and Caroline felt like that about her education:

“...he had taken little trouble about her education; probably, he would have taken none if she, finding herself neglected, had not grown anxious on her own account...Still, she had a depressing feeling that she was inferior, that her attainments were fewer than were usually possessed by girls of her age and station” (Brontë, 76).

What is more, the importance and power of education is accentuated in the relationship between Shirley and Louis Moore. Louis Moore is inferior to Shirley in class. However, him being well-educated creates an advantage in power and autonomy he has in comparison to hers. This advantage is visible in Shirley asking him whether they are “equal at last”, and him responding

that she was “younger, frailer, feebler, more ignorant than him” (Brontë, 641). Truly, even though it was not regarded as such by all, it is shown that education provided a way to obtaining equality, and Brontë took every opportunity to extol the virtues of education or in some way emphasise the weaknesses of ignorance.

On the other hand, Gaskell employed a different technique and created distinctions in which North and South of England are contrasting each other. Education was welcomed and praised in the South and life was described as easy and simple (Balkaya, 75). In opposition, living in Milton, as a manufacturing town, meant a completely different lifestyle. Firstly, education was not as highly regarded and even if that was not the case, rarely has anyone had the luxury of educating oneself. Secondly, as “the new trade” developed, some men accumulated great power and wealth thus making people of the same education and station differ in position where some became masters and some workers (Gaskell, 83). The way education is seen in Milton also contrasts its descriptions in *Shirley*. In Milton, education plays no part in determining class, while in *Shirley*, it is what in some way determined people’s worth and it was even seen as a path to improvement of the position of women in the society. Moreover, the society of the industrialised North did not see the benefits of education as in *Shirley* where being educated had great advantages, as seen in Louis Moore’s portrayal. This was a consequence of being able to earn a greater living in becoming a manufacturer, a profession that requires no formal education, which lead to the decrease of people seeking education.

Although Gaskell did advocate education, it can be argued that she made a greater impact in advocating the inclusion of educated women in the public sphere, namely, in the field of social labour (Dredge, 85). Throughout the whole novel, Margaret participates in both the public as well as the domestic life; even while living in the parsonage in the South, she helped the poor with her father, and she continued in doing so in Milton. Gaskell’s tendency to depict women engaging themselves in the public life follows the argument Mary Wollstonecraft made that “woman was not created merely to gratify the appetite of man, or to be the upper servant, who provides his meals and takes care of his linen” (80). In other words, by portraying women who participate in the public life in her novels, Gaskell tried to encourage readers to form a different view of women’s purpose and the scope of their abilities once they are provided a better education.

## 6. History from a perspective of a woman

It has already been stated that the conditions that were a result of industrialisation caused great dissatisfaction of the working class. The working class, however, did not just wait peacefully for change to happen, but started to form into unions, protest against injustice and fight for better rights. Likewise, *North and South* and *Shirley* are both based around rebellions which gives them a powerful historic context and, as previously stated, a way to convey a certain message by providing both the perspective of the masters and the workers. In both novels, the rebellions that are being discussed are violent, however, in *North and South*, it started peacefully. The workers of cotton mills were members of a union, and the goal of the leaders was to convince the masters to increase the wages by labour strike. Organising such a strike was hard then because the strike itself can last for a long time, and exactly that happened in the novel. The workers did not receive any wages because of the strike, and many workers were struggling, they were hungry, afraid for their families and worried about how they would get on in the future. This alone caused the strike to start to give out. The breaking point, however, was when John Thornton, one of the mill owners, imported workers from Ireland to replace the protesters. Driven by hunger and despair, some of the protesters took the matter into their own hands and rushed to Thornton's house to threaten John and scare off Irish workers.

The rebellions described in *Shirley* have historical importance because they evoke the Luddite rebellions. The Luddite movement started occurring in 1811 during the Napoleonic wars, when textile workers started to destroy the new machinery that was introduced in the factories (Stöllinger, 7). The riots in the novel were inspired by a true story that was witnessed by Charlotte Brontë's father (Balkaya, 17). The first riot is described in the beginning of the novel, when the rioters destroyed the machinery while it was being delivered to Robert Moore's mill. Robert knew that there was a possibility of rioters attacking his mill to destroy the machines, and he was warned: "If you get new machines, or if you otherwise go on as you have done, you shall hear from us again. Beware!" (Brontë, 31). However, the threats did not dissuade him, he was persistent and stubborn claiming: "I will have my own way. I shall get new frames in tomorrow: – if you broke these, I would still get more. I'll never give in." (Brontë, 141). He continued to invest in machines, and so, his mill was attacked again. During the attack,

he was there, prepared with the support of soldiers. They managed to fend the rioters off and the rioters had no other choice but to retreat.

It can be argued that the riots described in *Shirley* and *North and South* would have the most reliable and well-grounded interpretation if they were described from the perspective of characters that took part in the events, such as the workers who were rebelling or the masters who for their own reasons did not give in to the requirements they were demanded to fulfil by the workers. Nevertheless, both Brontë and Gaskell chose to describe those events from the perspective of witnesses. Specifically, from the female perspective and through a feminine point of view.

It is important to emphasise that in history women were not included as participants nor as witnesses of happenings in the public sphere, but they did have a history nonetheless, a history that was concealed and not written about (Zlotnick, 286). The fact that so many of women's influences were not even mentioned when retelling history is confirmed with Shirley's remark to Caroline after they witnessed the attack on Robert's mill:

”Now dear Lina,’ she continued; ‘let us turn our faces to the cool morning breeze, and walk very quietly back to the Rectory. We will steal in as we stole out: none shall know where we have been, or what we have seen tonight: neither taunt nor misconception can consequently molest us. Tomorrow, we will see Robert, and be of good cheer; but I will say no more, lest I should begin to cry too. I seem hard towards you, but I am not so’” (Brontë, 357).

Through the situation Caroline and Shirley found themselves in and their need to conceal their knowledge of the attack, it is clear that women often had to hide their involvement in certain events.

Women were often invisible participants of historic events and because of that often excluded from the stories later told. Brontë and Gaskell defy this exclusion. They portrayed women not as bystanders living idle lives but as both witnesses and participants, taking action and reacting to situations they are facing whether they are hazardous or not.

Moreover, these women also displayed bravery; Shirley and Caroline chose to go and warn Robert of the rioters coming to his mill after they overheard their intentions despite the dangers and Margaret stood before a crowd of angry workers to protect John. Yet, their reactions to peril do differ. When Margaret saw that John was in danger, she rushed down to

him immediately. On the other hand, Caroline, feeling that Robert was threatened, also wanted to reach him but was stopped by Shirley. In Caroline's case, Shirley was there to reason with her which made them remain only witnesses to the story.

After the events of the rebellion, Margaret struggles emotionally because she caused a scene, and she wondered what people would think of her. The consequences of her actions are precisely the consequences Shirley warned Caroline about if she were to go down to Robert during the attack (Bodenheimer, 65). In essence, these consequences signify what it meant for a woman to react out of impulse and in it was brought to light that even in different situations and different time period, the heroine's reactions effected the same result.

It is crucial to mention that Shirley and Caroline did only stay witnesses of the attack, however, the role they played after the attack carries more importance. Shirley, upon being informed that people injured after the attack needed help, decided to aid them by donating supplies. Caroline also volunteered; neither of them making any distinctions between helping the ones who attacked the mill and the ones who were defending it. They treated both poor and wealthy people as equals.

## **7. Characters' congruences and distinctions – the path to (in)dependence and the marriage plots**

Margaret, Caroline, and Shirley have many similarities, but also differences. One of their noblest features is willingness to help. It has already been mentioned that Caroline and Shirley helped the injured after the attack on the mill with no hesitation and in any way possible. This behaviour matches Margaret's, who also helped the poor families that suffered from hunger during their strike. Similarly, Shirley also participated in donating money to charity, and she was determined to help the poor. She was distressed by the dismal situation of the poor and felt pity for them. However, when Robert's mill was under threat of being attacked by them, she claims she will "protect it like a tigress", she would "turn against" the poor and "forget pity for their wretchedness" (Brontë, 271-272). This contrasts Margaret, who understands the sufferings of the poor because she has been witnessing their hardships since she was a child. She knows that their actions are a result of despair and worrying for the future. Although she

condemns their violent behaviour, she believes they do not deserve punishment or to be subjected to police brutality.

On the other hand, Brontë, in certain aspects, contrasts Shirley and Caroline's behaviour and characteristics. While Caroline is not resolute, submits to the oppressive norms of society and is reluctant to speak her mind when in company of men, Shirley is no stranger to voicing her opinions and even arguing with men in multiple situations. Their readiness to express themselves in front of others is directly connected with their financial independence or in Caroline's case, dependence (Drack, 87-88). When considering the development of these characters from a broader perspective, Shirley's character traits towards the end of the novel seemingly do not match the ones she displayed previously. She, who always insisted on being involved in businesses and who refused to be limited to the domestic sphere, in her love interest, Louis Moore, found someone who can manage and control her, but also someone she can challenge. In light of this, despite Shirley's perceived loss of dependence due to marriage, her character did not change.

In contrast, Margaret Hale's behaviour is not explicitly connected to her financial status. Her family is not rich by any means and her goals are not set towards achieving wealth. However, when it comes to expressing her opinion, her financial status is not what stops her nor encourages her in doing so. While marriage was not an aspect that either of the authors put a main focus on, in both novels the heroines get married or engaged in the end. Additionally, when reflecting on the beginning of *Shirley* and Brontë's promise that the reader should not expect romance and passion, the double marriage in the end of the novel can be surprising. Comparing Caroline's and Shirley's outcomes in their marriages, it is visible that Shirley loses a part of her independence because her wealth now belongs to her husband, while Caroline's marriage to Robert did not change the "degree" of her independence. This shows that marriage is not an ideal goal for everyone – for Caroline it may mean future happiness and health, but that might not happen for Shirley (Torgerson, 17). Therefore, in the case of *Shirley*, even though it can be said that heroines married for love and not inheritance or financial stability, Brontë did not put an emphasis on the romantic side of marriage but on what marriage meant for individual characters in terms of their development. On the other hand, Gaskell describes the marriage plot in *North and South* in a more romantic manner. Having in mind that Margaret refused two marriage proposals, one made by Mr. Lennox and one by John Thornton, it was evident that she would not settle for anything less than a marriage for love. Having believed that Mr. Thornton, for the first time, only proposed to her due to his moral obligation to her as

a gentleman and not because he truly loved her, she refused his proposal. The marriage offer he made offended her, and while he did try to explain himself stating: “I know you despise me; allow me to say, it is because you do not understand me”, she was resolved in his refusal of him (Gaskell, 196). Moreover, even though Margaret refused him, Mr. Thornton never withdrew his confession of love towards her and told her the following:

“One word more. You look as if you thought it tainted you to be loved by me. You cannot avoid it. Nay, I, if I would, cannot cleanse you from it. But I would not, if I could. I have never loved any woman before: my life has been too busy, my thoughts too much absorbed with other things. Now I love, and will love. But do not be afraid of too much expression on my part.” (Gaskell, 196)

In this quote alone, it can be noticed that *North and South* has a more romantic tone than *Shirley*. While in *Shirley* there are no grand gestures and confessions of love displayed by characters, in *North and South*, Mr. Thornton professes it openly and without hesitation. In contrast, a marriage proposal described in *Shirley* was made by Robert Moore to Shirley. He had proposed to her unfeelingly and without much effort to convince her of honesty and proper motives behind his proposal. Like Margaret, Shirley also refused the proposal because she believed it was not done out of love. However, she was right about his motives and Robert did confess that the reason he wanted to marry Shirley was because of her wealth.

Moreover, the similarities between Margaret and Caroline regarding independence are that they do not use marriage to accomplish it. Following these characters’ developments throughout the novel, it can be noticed that they gain a form of personal independence prior to marrying. Specifically, Margaret gains financial independence due to inheritance she received from her godfather while Caroline’s independence is more psychological. Caroline’s independence is symbolised through her finding out that she has a mother who loves her. This meant that her behaviour was no longer determined by her need to feel loved by someone and she was not controlled by emotions. In some aspect, in terms of these characters’ developments the novels follow the same pattern that Brontë used in *Jane Eyre*, where Jane’s character also receives an inheritance that enables her to make her own choices and only then she decides to return to Rochester.

## Conclusion

The heroines portrayed in *Shirley* and *North and South* exert a powerful influence on young women by displaying strong-mindedness, good moral principles and praising knowledge and education. In a way, Gaskell and Brontë created role-models that show the right way to women but also open the eyes of society to the deficiencies of attitudes and practices toward women. By representing society's rejection or marginalisation of women, these authors evinced the unfair treatment of women aiming to bring the issue forward to the society. Similarly, Gaskell indirectly communicated to readers that biases are often untrue and unjust. When considering all the aspects of these novels that advocate women's emancipation, it can be said that they are ahead of their time. Margaret Hale, as well as Shirley Keeldar and Caroline Helstone broke the conventions of acceptable behaviour for women in the public sphere, however, it is also shown that thus they aimed to do good and managed to create improvements in society. Likewise, both authors accentuate the importance of independence for women in the financial sense and in the sense of being free to make choices for oneself.

Moreover, some of the more sensitive points Gaskell and Brontë wanted to make and the messages they wanted to get across are often indirectly conveyed through metaphors. As an objective correlative of Caroline's and Shirley's emotional struggles and spiritual turmoil, Brontë used illness which could then be read as an impact of society's pressure on women. Furthermore, describing unmarried women's homes as perfectly clean and spotless, Brontë in a way conveyed the overall lack of fulfilment in life of unmarried women and the society's view about being unmarried as a problem. Gaskell also almost never tackled the problems directly. To an extent, to make the point they wanted to make, they had to overcome certain obstacles because of the risk of it being deemed improper by society. However, despite the oppressive norms and social codes, Gaskell and Brontë managed to communicate the difficult situation women encountered and tried to make changes. Seeing that creating a change in society is hard and takes a lot of time, it is needless to say that gender equality could not be achieved by advocating it these two novels alone. Nonetheless, the impact *Shirley* and *North and South* made on society and position of women is not meaningless. Merely by giving society incentive to reflect on the oppression traditional gender roles create and on capabilities of women, these novels challenged what was considered normal and thus encouraged re-establishment of the entrenched social constructs.



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