

Robert Moore Versus His Workers: Expression of Extreme Violence in *Shirley* by Charlotte Brontë.

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Résumé:

Les relations entre les employeurs et leurs employés sont généralement tumultueuses en raison des intérêts divergents des deux parties. Les premiers sont en quête d'une productivité élevée, tandis que les seconds exigent de meilleures conditions de vie. Un tel antagonisme entre les classes (supérieure, moyenne et inférieure) est un sujet très souvent évoqué dans les œuvres romanesques la romancière anglaise du XIXe siècle Charlotte Brontë, principalement dans *Shirley* (1849), son deuxième roman. L'avènement de la révolution industrielle en Grande-Bretagne a donné naissance à des affrontements de toutes sortes entre les différentes couches sociales. Dans le roman, le principal conflit oppose le propriétaire d'usine Robert Moore et ses travailleurs licenciés. Son envie irrésistible de remplacer ses ouvriers (qu'il considère comme moins rentables), par des machines (qu'il considère comme hautement productives) a conduit à cette tension. Par conséquent, cet article vise à montrer comment l'idéologie capitaliste favorise oppression, aliénation, discrimination, injustices et conflits (idéologiques ou physiques) entre les individus d'une même société. Un accent particulier sera mis sur les effets du capitalisme sur les individus, le fléau des travailleurs et leurs réponses face à leur condition, ainsi que la solidarité exprimée par les institutions étatiques à l'endroit des individus de la classe supérieure.

Mots clés :

Employeurs-Employés-Ideologie Capitaliste-Conflits-Violence.

Abstract:

The relationships between employers and employees have usually been stormy due to the divergent interests of both parties. The former seek high productivity, whereas the latter demand better living conditions. Such an antagonism among the classes (upper, middle, and lower), is a topic that is mostly evoked by the Nineteenth Century English novelist, Charlotte Brontë in her second novel, Shirley (1849). The advent of the Industrial Revolution in Britain gave birth to clashes of all sorts among class layers. In the book, the conflict mainly opposes the mill owner, Robert Moore, and his dismissed workers. His irresistible urge to replace the workers (that he considers as less profitable), by machines (that he sees as highly productive) led to that tension. Thus, this article aims at showing how the capitalistic ideology favours oppression, alienation, discrimination, injustices, and conflicts (be them ideological or physical) among people from the same society. A particular stress will be laid on the effects of capitalism (on the poor and capitalist themselves), the plagues of the workers and their responses to their condition, as well as the solidarity expressed by institutions towards people from the upper class.

Keywords:

Employers-Employees- Capitalistic Ideology-Conflicts-Violence.

Introduction

Born at Thornton, in Yorkshire-England, Charlotte Brontë (April 21, 1816-March 31,1855), was the third child of Maria Branwell and Patrick Brontë. The tragedy of the family commenced with the mother's death in 1821 from a cancer. Then followed the two eldest daughters Maria and Elizabeth in 1825 from tuberculosis. The remaining children, Charlotte, Emily, Branwell (the brother and unique son), and Ann, were raised by their mother's sister, Elizabeth Branwell. As the now eldest of the family, Charlotte endeavoured to foster a perfect harmony with her sisters Emily and Ann to the extent that they went from women doomed to governessing to famous writers. However, because of the Victorian restrictions imposed on women's writings, they adopted pseudonyms such as Currer (for Charlotte), Ellis (for Emily), and Acton (for Ann) Bell. Two of the three Bell brothers (Brontë sisters), Emily and Ann, found

publishers for their respective *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* in 1847. Charlotte did not. Her novel, *The Professor*, was rejected by six publishers. That rejection did not discourage the authoress though. Some months later that year, she composed another novel entitled *Jane Eyre*. The latter found a publisher and became an immediate success, outdistancing her sisters' productions. Save for telling the ill-treatments from her aunt, cousins and some other characters, the book recounts the romance of governess Jane Eyre, the protagonist, who marries her lover and former employer Edward Fairfax Rochester.

Remarkably, after the publication of *Jane Eyre* in 1847 and its tremendous success, Charlotte Brontë decided to put again her energy at writing and published *Shirley* in 1849. The peculiarity of the novel lays on the fact that, unlike the romantic *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley* was mostly qualified as social. Though the novelist presents a double wedding at the end of the book, it remains that the book predominantly has social characteristics. The narrator presents an industrialized vision of Yorkshire at the winding up of the novel to emphasize change and modernity.

Such a transformation bears underlying conflicts that should be examined closely. One is kindly invited to scrutinize the mill owner Robert Gérard Moore's relationship with his workers. Thus comes the question: How does Charlotte Brontë portray the conflict between Moore and his workers in *Shirley*? The following hypothesis is put forward: Charlotte Brontë shows that the conflict is mostly violent. Considering the above hypothesis, the researcher would like to demonstrate that considered as a period of *technological change, economic growth, organizational innovation, development of markets, demography, urban growth, class formation*" (Pat Hudson, 2014, p. 1), the Industrial Revolution was not exclusively positive. It used to cause clashes between employers and their employees. Hudson approves: "[*The Industrial Revolution was*] *marked by social and political unrest (rioting, local insurrections, machine wrecking...)*" (p. 4). In view of the preceding quotation, the social conflict perspective

according to Karl Marx is appropriate to the present research as it rests on social stratification and the emergence of capitalism.

Prior to this study were prominent research on the economic backdrop of the book. In “The Economic Background of *Shirley*”, Herbert Heaton (2013) examines the economic and social themes of the novel. The author seeks to understand the motivations of both Moore and the workers who oppose him. Next is Patrick Collier (2016) and his work “The Lawless by Force...The Peaceable by Kindness”: Strategies of Social Control in Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley* and the *Leeds Mercury*”. Here, the author mainly shows the difference between history and fiction, leaning on Edward Baines’s *Leeds Mercury* and Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley*. In addition, the author strives to show how both the middle class (through Cartwright/Moore and his allies) and the lower class (through the workers) make use of strategies to have social control. Last is Sophie Franklin’s (2019) “‘Ay, ay, devil, all’s right! We’ve smashed em!’: Translating Violence and ‘Yorkshire Roughness’ in Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley*”. The author seeks to “[...] identify and explore the presence and significance of politically motivated violence in the novel, emphasizing its centrality within the text and highlighting its connection with nineteenth century attitudes to issues of regional dialects, legitimacy of and ‘Yorkshire roughness’” (Franklin, 2018, p. 43). As far as the critical reception of *Shirley* is concerned, it should be noted that it was a deception to many critics. The latter complained about its construction. George Henry Lewes (1850/1997, p. 217) for example, stated:

Shirley is inferior to Jane Eyre in several important points. It is not quite so true; and it is not so fascinating. It does not rivet the reader’s attention, nor hurry him through all obstacles of improbability, with so keen a sympathy in its reality. It is even coarser in texture, too, and not frequently flippant; while the characters are almost all disagreeable, and exhibit intolerable rudeness of manner...the unity of Jane Eyre...was great and effective...But in Shirley all unity, in consequence of defective art, is wanting.

However, the Nineteenth-Century Scepticism on *Shirley* made room for a Twentieth-Century positive reception. Interpreting the book in a gender perspective, Susan Gubar (1976/1990, p. 233) argued: "*Shirley is worth studying, then, not only because, like Brontë's other works, it voices her sometimes overt and sometimes secret rejection of patriarchy, but because its very failure defines the contradictions experienced by women writing within male literary culture*". She added: "*Far from being merely feverish or hectic, Shirley justifies and embodies Brontë's feminist consciousness*". Thanks to similar analyses, *Shirley* has been restored among Charlotte Brontë's masterpieces.

This article is structured around three main sections. Firstly, is Moore's desire to introduce new machinery; second, Moore's warrant against the leader of the rioters; third the class armed conflict; fourth and last is Moore's shooting by his worker.

1. The Machinery of Dissension

The main social discord in *Shirley* takes place because of Moore's desire to introduce new machinery to replace his workers. The reader is straightforwardly informed at the beginning by Reverend Helstone, Briarfield's priest. He reveals: "*You know Moore has resolved to have the new machinery, and expects the waggon loads of frames and shears from Stilbro' this evening. Scott, the overlooker, and a few picked men, are gone to fetch them.*" (Brontë, *Shirley*, 2012, p. 11). The situation seems serious because Moore worries about what might happen to the machinery. The text reads: "*Only I wish the machines-the frames were safe here, and lodge within the walls of this mill. Once put up, I defy the framebreakers: let them only pay me a visit, and take the consequences: my mill is my castle*" (*Shirley*, p.21). The frame breakers Moore is threateningly alluding to are his own workers with whom he is in profound disagreement over the machinery arrival.

In his relentless quest of high productivity, Sean Purchase sustains, Moore “[...] brings new machines to his mill. This machinery decreases the need for manpower, which causes unrest among the workers, who protest their unemployment and hunger due to the changes with the new machines” (2010, p. 69). In using the machines, Moore does not care that the workers will be left idle. Faced with what they consider as an unjust treatment, most of them usually attack their employers’ mills and destroy their competitors (the machines). In a note they write to Moore that they call “*the Devil of Hollow’s mill*” (Shirley, p. 30), he learns: “*Your hellish machinery is shivered to smash on Stilbro’ Moor, and your men are lying bound hand and foot in a ditch by the roadside. Take this as a warning from men that are starving, and have starving wives and children to go home when they have done this deed. If you get new machines, or if you otherwise go on as you have done, you shall hear from us again, Beware!*” (Shirley, p. 30). From these menacing words, one can easily understand that a hungry stomach has no ears, and the workers will defend their “*bread*” (Shirley, p. 28). The authoress depicts the workers’ frustration and hatred for the machines when she states: “*Misery generates hate. These sufferers hated the machines which they believed took their bread from them; they hated the buildings which contained those machines; they hated the manufacturers who owned those buildings.*” (Shirley, p. 28). The workers live miserably without their occupation at Moore’s mill.

Moore’s action is so selfish that the narrator tells the reader: *He never asked himself where those to whom he no longer paid weekly wages found daily bread; and in this negligence he only resembled thousands besides, on whom the starving poor of Yorkshire seemed to have a closer claim.* (Shirley, p. 27). Here, Moore’s inability to understand the workers’ misery intensifies their rage, leading them to demolish the machinery. Engels (2009) contextualizes the destruction when he asserts: “*As a class, they first manifested opposition to the bourgeoisie when they resisted the introduction of machinery at the beginning of the industrial period. The first inventors, Arkwright*

and others, were persecuted in this way and their machines destroyed” (p. 222). Ostensibly, supposed to bring progress, the reader shockingly learns another facet of the Industrial Revolution: it also exacerbated the misery of the working class to the extent that the relationship between the employer and the worker has become purely economic. Barry (2009, p. 156), endorses: “[...] *People, in a word, become things*”. Human-beings are now compared to an engine’s faulty spare parts, which the owner can replace whenever he so wishes.

2. Moore’s warrant against Moses Barraclough, the leader of the breakers

After the destruction of his machinery, Moore carefully investigates to have the identities of the destroyers, mainly, that of the ringleader. He learns from Murgatroyd, one of his loyal employees:

[...] as he and a friend took shelter in a barn from a shower, they heard and saw Moses [Barraclough] conferring with some associates within. From their discourse, it was plain he had been the leader, not only at stilbro’ Moor, but in the attack on Syke’s property: moreover, they planned a deputation to wait on me this morning, which [Moses] the tailor is to head, and which, in the most religious and peaceful spirit, is to entreat me to put the accursed thing out of my tent (Shirley, p. 131).

The situation gets complicated because prior to the encounter, Moore had recourse to the police and obtained a warrant against Moses. He tells Joe Scott: “*I [...] got a constable and a warrant, and I am now waiting to give my friend [Moses] the reception he deserves.*” (Shirley, p. 131). During the encounter, Moses takes the floor and tells his employer:

Mr Moore [...] it might, perhaps, justly be said that reason rather than peace is our purpose. We come, in the first place to request you to hear reason, and should you refuse, it is my duty to warn you, in very decided terms, that measures will be had resort [...], which will probably terminate in-in bringing you to a sense of the unwisdom, of the-the foolishness, which seems to guide and guard your proceedings as a tradesman in this-this manufacturing part of the country (Shirley, pp. 136-137).

To Moses's warnings and threats, Moore defyingly replies: *"I do refuse-point-blank [...] What will you do? The utmost you can do-and this you will never dare to do-is to burn down my mill, destroy its contents, and shoot me. (Shirley, p. 138).* Then, he tells Moses: *"You were at Stilbro' [...] I have proof of that. You were on the moor-you wore a mask, - you knocked down one of my men with your own hand, you preacher of the Gospel! Sugden, arrest him!" (Shirley, p. 139).* As the mob is crying and rushing to have their captive leader freed, Moore holds out a pistol and resolutely threatens: *"both barrels are loaded [...] I am quite determined! – keep off!" (139).* This scene undoubtedly stands as the second sign of an inevitable conflict opposing the two parties. More fundamentally, this episode highlights administrative institutions' systematic bias against the workers. Mr. Helstone's words reinforce that thought when he boastfully informs:

I've not been quite idle while you were busy. I've been helping you a little; I flatter myself not injudiciously. I thought it better not to lose time; so, while you were parleying with that down-looking gentleman--Farren I think his name is--I opened this back window, shouted to Murgatroyd, who is in the stable, to bring Mr. Sykes's gig round; then I smuggled Sugden and brother Moses--wooden leg and all--through the aperture, and saw them mount the gig (always with our good friend Sykes's permission, of course). Sugden took the reins--he drives like Jehu--and in another quarter of an hour Barraclough will be safe in Stilbro' jail. (Shirley, p. 145).

Outstandingly, as does the clergy, the law sides with Moore. Mr. Helstone, the representative of the Church, Mr. Sykes, the Judge, and Sugden the Constable, are with

Moore in the detriment of the workers. To better understand this situation, E. P. Thompson (1991, p. 618) suggest that the reader should backdate it to Luddism, a violent social conflict that took place between 1811 and 1812, opposing workers and manufacturers in West Riding, Lancashire, Leicestershire, and Derbyshire. He says: “*Luddism not only brought magistrate and mill-owner together, it also made inevitable concessions by the administration to the manufacturing interest*”. Correspondingly, Engels (2009, p. 287) points out the government’s collusion with the bourgeoisie when he states:

The bourgeois may do what he will and the police remain ever polite, adhering strictly to the law, but the proletarian is roughly, brutally treated; his poverty both casts the suspicion of every sort of crime upon him and cuts him off from legal redress against any caprice of the administrators of the law; for him, therefore, the protecting forms of the law do not exist, the police force their way into his house without further ceremony, arrest and abuse him...”

Incontestably, the capitalistic system is established in such a way to promote “*the exploitation of the many by the few*” (Marx and Engels, 1848, p. 16). This means that the bourgeois own factories and means of production. As long as property is in their hands, the number of destitute people will increase, leading to an unbalanced society characterized by clashes among the classes.

3. Armed Conflict between Moore and His Operatives

Following Moses’s imprisonment, the workers decide to cross swords with Moore and his mill. The antagonism between Moore and his workers culminates to a violent confrontation. It is the dramatic climax of Charlotte Brontë’s novel. In the Chapter entitled “A Summer Night”, the narrator describes the chaotic scene as follows:

What was going on now? It seemed difficult, in the darkness, to distinguish, but something terrible, a still-renewed tumult, was obvious; fierce attacks, desperate repulses; the mill-yard, the mill itself, was full of battle-movement: there were scarcely any cessation now of the discharge of firearms; and there was struggling, rushing, trampling, and shouting between. The aim of the assailants seemed to be to enter the mill, that of the defendants to beat them. (Shirley, p. 350).

Unfortunately, Moore has anticipated their attack. He has thus prepared for the occasion. The text reveals: *“He had fortified and garrisoned his mill”* (Shirley, p. 351). Consequently, Moore’s mill/castle is impregnable. The rioters face a defiance that they have not expected, though triumphant over previous mill owners. Moore is giving them hard time. Seeing that they are losing ground, they retreat. The text reads:

When their leaders saw the steady fire kept up from the mill, witnessed the composure and determination of its owner, heard themselves coolly defied and invited on to death, and beheld their men falling wounded round them, they felt that nothing was to be done here. In haste, they mustered their forces, drew them away from the building: a roll was called over, in which men answered to figures instead of names: they dispersed wide over the fields, leaving silence and ruin behind them. (Shirley, p. 351).

The above citation states Moore’s victory over his frustrated workers. In a less than one hour fight, they have been defeated by their better equipped employer and have recorded a high number of wounded people. The latter will certainly end up scarred, crippled or will succumb to their wounds owing to their lack of money to be treated. Here, it is unequivocal that the workers are doubly burdened. They are both starved and wounded. Their situation is desperate. In contrast, Moore and his men benefit from treatment, refreshment, and shelter thanks to Shirley, the owner of the attacked mill they defended. She acknowledges: *“These soldiers have risked their lives in defence of my property-I suppose they have a right to my gratitude: the wounded are our*

fellow-creatures” (Shirley, p. 363). Authoritatively, she orders her servant Mrs Gill: “*send a man down to tell them that everything this house contains is at Mr Moore’s, Mr Helstone’s, and the soldiers’ service.*” (Shirley, p. 364). Through her action, Shirley openly expresses her solidarity towards her fellow middle-class citizens, rejecting the working class, who have no choice but commit the irreparable to be considered and heard.

4. Moore Shot by his Workers

Following the conflict, Moore decides, like he did with his frame breakers, to prosecute his assaulters. He is helped in the effort by Mr Helstone who is “[...] *galloping backwards and forwards from Briarfield to Stilbro’ all day, rousing magistrates in the countinghouse, and the officers at the barracks*” (Shirley, p. 359). The leaders of the rioters are Moore’s privileged targets. He lets the followers alone. He certainly thinks that in silencing the leaders and in making them examples, the followers will be tamed. He has caught four (4) of them and intends to punish their insolence. He has been spending a month away from Briarfield because he “*ha[s] attended their trial, heard their conviction and sentence, and seen them safely shipped prior to transportation.*” (Shirley, 532). He “*like[s] [haunting the leaders] better than making cloth.*” (Shirley, p. 389). Through his bellicosity and the sadistic pleasure he is taking in having his adversaries humiliated, one can go so far as to assert that Moore is full of hatred and wishes the worst fate for his enemies. His haughtiness does not last long because as we all have sensed it, he is shot as a sign of punishment for his misdeeds. The narrator proverbially reveals:

When the wicked perisheth, there is shouting [...] As the whirlwind passeth, so is the wicked no more (with a deeper growl); terrors take hold of him as waters; hell is naked before him. He shall die without knowledge [...] A fierce and sharp crack violated the calm of night. Yorke, ere he turned, knew the four convicts of Birmingham were avenged (Shirley, p. 548).

Moore's shooting by his workers had already been whispered to the reader right from the beginning of the novel when Mr. Helstone prognosticated the conflictual ramifications of Moore's resolution to have new machinery. Moore got "[...] *the fate of Pearson [and] Armitage--shot, one in his own house and the other on the moor*" (*Shirley*, pp.11-12). Unlike his colleagues, however, he is not dead, but in a life-threatening condition. When Moore regains consciousness, he straightforwardly changes his attitude to the extent that this time, he decides not to sue his assailant. He knew the identity of the miscreant but resolved to drop the charges. The narrator tells the reader: "*Mr Moore knew who had shot him, and all Briarfield knew: it was no other than Michael Hartley [...] the poor soul died of delirium tremens a year after the attempt on Moore, and Robert gave his wretched widow a guinea to bury him.*" (*Shirley*, p. 643). Here, it is evident to everyone that the authoress has preferred divine justice to human one for the resolution of the conflict opposing Moore and his operatives. Had Moore initiated another lawsuit, Michael Hartley's colleagues would have vowed revenge. It would have become a retaliation circle. Nevertheless, the reader finally knows the winner of the battle when Charlotte Brontë presents an industrialized Briarfield. It supposes in a way, that Moore has been victorious over his workers: industrialization is effective, and capitalism grows in power.

Conclusion:

In a nutshell, let us be mindful that despite the gender perspective of Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (in which feminist researchers interrogate themes such as patriarchal oppression, unhappy marriages, and spinsterhood), one can notice that the book is mostly oriented towards social class conflict. It is perceptible through Robert Moore's tempestuous relationship with his workers. In selfishly deciding to use machines instead of his workers, Moore causes an open conflict with them, giving way to an extreme violence cycle. None of the belligerents is eager to give ground till Moore's recovery from his shooting.

Karl Marx (1964/2008) adroitly summarises the workers' anger in the following terms: "[...] they seek to restore by force the vanished status of the workman of the Middle Ages" (p. 83). Manifestly, the time when manual labour was respected is past. Everything points out that the move from manual labour to mechanical work, has given birth to a new economic model, that of factory work; a model of so-called change, tarnished by workers' overexploitation, dismissal, imprisonment, and commodification. To avoid its own destruction, the bourgeoisie constantly "*revolutioniz[es] the instruments of production, [...] the relations of production, and [...] the whole relations of society*" (Marx, p. 80). By comparison, Charlotte Brontë's industrialized Briarfield at the winding up of the treatise, reinforces the belief that the bourgeoisie can metamorphose to ensure its survival. It is helped in its cause by the Parliament, the Church, the Court, and the Police. Seen from this perspective, one cannot fail to see that the workers are the losers in any decision making, from the parliament to manufacturers. Their sealed fate is even observed on the narrative ground. Eagleton (2005) underlines with regret: "*[...] the major protagonist, the working class, is distinguished primarily by its absence*" (p. 47). Therefore, it would not be wrong to say that the working class cannot even tell its own story.

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