

The story takes place in Yorkshire in 1811-1812.

Peter Malone, Joseph Donne and Davy Sweeting are curates (= junior clergymen). The other character is Reverend Matthew Helstone.

Analyse the values expressed by Reverend Helstone: according to him what is right and wrong? What examples of right and wrong does he use?

Reverend Helstone believes in authority, and believes that he is in an authoritative position.

He wields authority over his subordinates within the institution he belongs to (the C of E), ordering them about and speaking to and about them as though they were children instead of highly-educated men in qualified positions.

He also wields the authority of that institution over society at large, as is shown by the authoritarian and infantilising way he speaks to the innkeeper and his intention to perform a law-enforcement job.

It should be remembered that until the twentieth century, the most numerous and widespread state employees in England and Wales were the clergy of the C of E, while the state as we know it today was tiny. Therefore, many of the functions today performed by state employees were concentrated by the state church: administration, education, care for the sick, disabled and elderly, social control... When entering the clergy, men like Helstone did not necessarily distinguish between the spiritual and social aspects of their jobs because they were combined.

Helstone appears as a conservative, or even reactionary, believer in order engaged in a fight against disorder:

- social order: he derides the "preaching tailor" and the "weaver" who participate in religion other than by passively listening to the clergyman
- legal order: he thinks it is his job to protect the lawful property of an industrialist
- economic order: he wants to prevent Luddites from challenging an industrialist's policy
- political order: he disciplines a colonial subject, an Irishman (although, as a member of the Anglican clergy with a native name, Malone is evidently a member of the minority among the Irish natives who have sided with the coloniser)
- ethnic order: he inferiorises an Irishman as under-civilised
- religious order: he resents the challenge to the state clergy's authority posed by nonconformists

Overall, he sees himself as a champion of civilisation whose duty it is to control savagery in its various forms: unruly nonconformists, unruly working-class people, unruly natives.

Helstone's crusade against disorder evinces obsessional and paranoid connotations: he mentions nonconformists as a point of comparison when there are none about (sign of obsession), he thinks the wild Irishman has the power to contaminate Englishmen (sign of paranoia).

Although a university-educated man (C of E clergymen are trained at universities), Helstone speaks in a coarse, rudimentary language (short, simplistic sentences, using interjections instead of proper words) and shows a rudimentary knowledge (his vague quotation of language).

All in all, Helstone is a conformist, as is shown by his use of the word 'disgrace', which he uses with the restrictive meaning of 'losing face in the eyes of society'. The absence of the original, theological, meaning is emphasised by the fact that the word is spoken by a clergyman: the only disgrace he seems to worry about is social disgrace.

The surname Brontë fashioned for him connotes hardness ('stone') and damnation ('hell'), while his given name is that of one of the four evangelists.

This satirical, rather heavy-handed, portrait of the social type of the clergyman as a mere instrument of mundane order who has entirely forgotten his spiritual mission, has a strong evangelical connotation: it may be read as a wholesale criticism of an established church. By contrast with Helstone, the author may be assumed to sympathise with nonconformists whose spirituality may seem more authentic. However, it should be remembered that Charlotte Brontë was the daughter of a C of E clergyman and married another. It is therefore probable that her intention was to warn the C of E against conformism and forgetfulness of spirituality.