

Extracts from *Shirley*, by Charlotte Brontë, published 1849 (shortened)

Relevant pdf presentations:

- Religion (particularly the pages about the Church of England)
- Luddism
- Charlotte Brontë

The story takes place in Yorkshire in 1811-1812.

1. Read lines 1 to 5.

- **ejaculate**: exclaim.

What is the setting? Who are the characters? How do the characters seem to be related to the place and to each other?

2. Read the text down to line 14.

- In the Church of England, a **churchwarden** (Fr.: *marguillier*) is a lay person who helps run a parish (Fr.: *paroisse*). The priest who is at the head of a parish is that parish's **vicar**; if there are other priests in the parish under the vicar, they are **curates**. A member of the Church of England is called a **Churchman**; a member of another Protestant church is called a **Dissenter**.
- **cane** (v.): beat with a cane
- **settle** (here): régler son/leur compte à

- a. What happens in this passage?
- b. What type of place is the story set in? Who are the characters?
- c. The vicar's name is Matthew Helstone. Describe his attitude.

3. Read lines 15 to 26.

- **in the thick of**: in the middle of.
- **a revival** (here): a religious meeting typical of a Dissenting church.
- **bog**: marécage.

- a. What French word looks like 'apostle'? Based on the context and the meaning of the prefix 'co-', who is meant by the noun phrase 'his co-apostles'?
- b. Based on the context, what is Connaught?
- c. What French words look like 'appendage'? Based on the context, what is meant by 'the sacred institution of which they are merely the humble appendages'?
- d. What happens in this passage?
- e. Why does Helstone mention Methodists?
- f. Why does Helstone single out Malone among the curates?
- g. What meanings of the word 'disgrace' do you know? What meaning does Helstone use it with?

4. Read lines 27 to 34.

- a. Based on the context, who is Moore?
- b. Why has Helstone come to the inn?

4. Based on the whole extract, analyse Helstone as a character:

- a. What people does he speak to? What does he tell them and how does he speak to them?
- b. What people does he speak about? What does he say about them and how does he speak about them?
- c. What are his beliefs and values?
What are the common points between these ideas?
What does he think is the Church of England's place and role in society?

5. What was the writer's intention in writing this text?

Do you think she shares Helstone's convictions? Justify your answer.

What are her own ideas? How does she get them across to the reader?

6. Translate lines 1 to 14.

With these words a person entered—a middle-aged man, in black. He walked straight across the kitchen to an inner door, opened it, inclined his head forward, and stood listening. There was something to listen to, for the noise above was just then louder than ever.

“Hey!” he ejaculated to himself; then turning to Mr. Gale—“Have you often this sort of work?”

Mr. Gale had been a churchwarden, and was indulgent to the clergy.

“They’re young, you know, sir—they’re young,” said he deprecatingly.

“Young! They want caning. Bad boys—bad boys! And if you were a Dissenter, John Gale, instead of being a good Churchman, they’d do the like—they’d expose themselves; but I’ll—”

By way of finish to this sentence, he passed through the inner door, drew it after him, and mounted the stair. Again he listened a few minutes when he arrived at the upper room. Making entrance without warning, he stood before the curates.

[...]

“I assure you, sir, we were only having a little chat together over a glass of wine after a friendly dinner—settling the Dissenters!”

“Oh! settling the Dissenters, were you? Was Malone settling the Dissenters? It sounded to me much more like settling his co-apostles. You were quarrelling together, making almost as much noise—you three alone—as Moses Barraclough, the preaching tailor, and all his hearers are making in the Methodist chapel, where they are in the thick of a revival. I know whose fault it is.—It is yours, Malone.”

“Mine, sir?”

“Yours, sir. Donne and Sweeting were quiet before you came, and would be quiet if you were gone. I wish, when you crossed the Channel, you had left your Irish habits behind you. Dublin student ways won’t do here. The proceedings which might pass unnoticed in a wild bog and mountain district in Connaught will, in a decent English parish, bring disgrace on those who indulge in them, and, what is far worse, on the sacred institution of which they are merely the humble appendages.”

“What is it?” inquired Malone discontentedly.

“Have you any arms about you?”

“I have the pistols you gave me yourself. I never part with them. I lay them ready cocked on a chair by my bedside at night.”

“Very good. Will you go to Hollow’s Mill? Moore is alone there. He has sent all the workmen he can trust to Stilbro’; there are only two women left about the place. You know Moore has resolved to have new machinery, and he expects two wagon-loads of frames and shears from Stilbro’ this evening. Scott, the overlooker, and a few picked men are gone to fetch them.”

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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.