

The story takes place in Yorkshire in 1811-1812.

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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 ejaculated¹ to himself; then turning to Mr. Gale – “Have you often this sort of work?”

5 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
10 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!”

15 “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 thick² of a revival³. I know whose fault it is. – It is yours, Malone.”

20 “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 bog⁴ and mountain district in Connaught will, in a decent English parish, bring disgrace on those who indulge
25 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. “There can be no funeral to take at this time of day.”

30 “Have you any arms about you?”

“Arms, sir? – yes, and legs.” And he advanced the mighty members.

“Bah! weapons I mean.”

“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.”

35 “Very good. Will you go to Hollow’s Mill?”

“What is stirring at Hollow’s Mill?”

“Nothing as yet, nor perhaps will be; but Moore is alone there. He has sent all the workmen he can trust to Stilbro’; there are only two women left about the place. It would be a nice opportunity for any of his well-wishers to pay him a visit.”

40 “I am none of his well-wishers, sir. I don’t care for him.”

“Soh! Malone, you are afraid.”

“You know me better than that. If I really thought there was a chance of a row⁵ I would go: but Moore is a strange, shy man, whom I never pretend to understand; and for the sake of his sweet

1 ejaculate: exclaim

2 in the thick of: in the middle of

3 revival (here): a certain type of religious meeting

4 bog: *marécage*

5 a row (here, rhymes with ‘cow’): a quarrel, a fight

Extracts from *Shirley*, by Charlotte Brontë, published 1849 2/3

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company only I would not stir a step.”

45 “But there *is* a chance of a row; if a positive riot does not take place – of which, indeed, I see no signs – yet it is unlikely this night will pass quite tranquilly. 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.”

“They will bring them in safely and quietly enough, sir.”

50 “Moore says so, and affirms he wants nobody. Some one, however, he must have, if it were only to bear evidence in case anything should happen. I call him very careless. He sits in the counting-house with the shutters unclosed; he goes out here and there after dark, just as if he were the darling of the neighbourhood, or – being, as he is, its detestation – bore a ‘charmed life,’⁶ as they say in tale-books. He takes no warning from the fate of Pearson, nor from that of Armitage—shot, one in
55 his own house and the other on the moor.”

“But he should take warning, sir, and use precautions too,” interposed Mr. Sweeting; “and I think he would if he heard what I heard the other day.”

“What did you hear, Davy?”

“You know Mike Hartley, sir?”

60 “The Antinomian weaver? Yes.”

“Besides being an Antinomian, he is a violent Jacobin and leveller⁷, sir.”

“I know. When he is very drunk, his mind is always running on regicide. The fellow exults strangely in murder done on crowned heads or on any head for political reasons. I have already heard it hinted that he seems to have a queer hankering⁸ after Moore. Is that what you allude to,
65 Sweeting?”

“You use the proper term, sir. Mr. Hall thinks Mike has no personal hatred of Moore. Mike says he even likes to talk to him and run after him, but he has a *hankering* that Moore should be made an example of. He was extolling⁹ him to Mr. Hall the other day as the mill-owner with the most brains in Yorkshire, and for that reason he affirms Moore should be chosen as a sacrifice, an oblation of a
70 sweet savour.”

1. Read lines 1 to 26.

- What is the situation? Where does the scene take place? Who are the characters? What happens?
- Analyse the values represented by Reverend Helstone: according to him what is right and wrong? What examples of right and wrong does he use? In what other ways does the author use him to represent values?
- Do you think the author shares Helstone’s values? What makes you think so? How does the author make you tell her values from Helstone’s? (tell ... from ... : *distinguer ... de ...*). What is the author’s aim?

2. Read the rest of the text.

What does Reverend Helstone want?:

- What (explicit and implicit) information about the situation is exposed?
- What dimensions are interwoven in the conflict?
- What side does Reverend Helstone take and expect the curates to take in the conflict?

3. Translate lines 1 to 14.

6 In Shakespeare’s eponymous play, Macbeth, believing three witches have told him he cannot be killed, says “I bear a charmed life” minutes before being killed.

7 Levellers: radical dissenters who wanted political and economic equality (hence their name).

8 hankering: desire

9 extol: praise, compliment

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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.