

Shirley as a Mirror of Its Author
Reflecting the Essence of Charlotte Brontë

SUGIMURA Ai

地域学論集（鳥取大学地域学部紀要）第20巻 第3号 抜刷

REGIONAL STUDIES (TOTTORI UNIVERSITY JOURNAL OF THE FACULTY OF REGIONAL SCIENCES) Vol. 20 / No. 3

令和6年3月27日発行 March 27, 2024

Shirley as a Mirror of Its Author

Reflecting the Essence of Charlotte Brontë

SUGIMURA Ai*

Keywords: *Shirley*, Charlotte Brontë, feminism, third-person omniscient narrator

I. Introduction

Inga-Stina Ewbank describes *Shirley* (1849) as “in many ways the odd one out among Charlotte Brontë’s novels” (22). As asserted by Ewbank, Brontë’s (1816–55) second published novel is her only social novel that deals with the Luddite movement. Moreover, the characterization of the protagonists is also conspicuous: Brontë’s other main characters are usually plain, obscure, and poor, whereas Caroline Helston is remarkably beautiful and compared to Raphael’s Madonna, and Shirley Keeldar is a self-assured, financially independent woman of rank. Brontë employs first-person narrators in her other works, but an omniscient narrator in *Shirley*. Thus, this novel is an exception in her body of works.

Despite its particularities, *Shirley* is equally concerned about the issues discussed in the other novels by the author. In fact, its distinctiveness reveals the essence and true nature of the writer Charlotte Brontë. This study rereads *Shirley* as a mirror reflecting the essence of Brontë as a novelist by focusing on feminism and the third-person omniscient narration: the former being an issue discussed in all Brontë novels, and the latter being a feature unique to *Shirley*.

II. Feminism

Brontë was deeply invested in feminism, reflected in her engagement with women’s issues in all her novels through the female characters. In May 1848, seven months after the publication of her previous novel *Jane Eyre* (1847), Brontë wrote in her letter, “I often wish to say something about the ‘condition of women’ question” (*Letters 2*: 66), as a response to an inquiry about her next novel from William Smith Williams, the literary reader of her publisher. This letter suggests that Brontë intended to write about the problems of women from the outset of her preparations for writing *Shirley*, which examines the difficulties in the lives of women including those who are unmarried. This is achieved through the detailed portrayal of Miss Mann and Miss Ainley, two struggling old unmarried women, and Caroline, one of the central characters who grapples to define her identity and existence.

As mentioned above, the protagonists in *Shirley* are different from those in Brontë’s other works: contrary to Frances Henri, Jane Eyre, and Lucy Snowe, who are obliged to earn their living, have no social status, and are not considered attractive by social standards, Caroline and Shirley

*Faculty of Regional Sciences, Tottori University

are both beautiful young women who need not support themselves. The eponymous protagonist owns the family mansion and has an annual income of £1,000. However, seemingly safe and satisfied, they face the challenges that come with being a woman. Thus, Brontë intended to explore the challenges of women from various backgrounds. This study examines the characters of Caroline and Shirley to understand how the author approaches the “condition of women” question in *Shirley*.

1. Independence as a Secondary Choice —Caroline Helstone

The gentle and sensitive Caroline is the primary character in the first half of the novel. Through conversations with Miss Mann and Miss Ainley, she learns what it is like to lead the life of an “old maid.” Though she respects their goodness and patience, performing charitable activities such as they have is not sufficient for her to feel content with her life. Despite her declaration of wanting to be a governess, Caroline exemplifies the idea that profession and independence are choices that come secondary to women. Instead, love is the most important aspect of a woman’s life. Thus, her intention to be engaged in charitable work and become a governess does not derive from a genuine drive toward social contribution or financial independence.

“Caroline,” demanded Miss Keeldar, abruptly, “don’t you wish you had a profession—a trade?”

“I wish it fifty times a day. As it is, I often wonder what I came into the world for. I long to have something absorbing and compulsory to fill my head and hands, and to occupy my thoughts.”

“Can labour alone make a human being happy?”

“No; but it can give varieties of pain, and prevent us from breaking our hearts with a single tyrant master-torture. Besides, successful labour has its recompense; a vacant, weary, lonely, hopeless life has none.” (256–57)

The expression “single tyrant master-torture” refers to her agony caused by Robert Moore, who

initially seems to reciprocate her feelings, but later withdraws himself to concentrate on his business. Caroline longs to have a profession to escape from this anguish, which she believes would keep her occupied and distracted from the hopelessness in her life. When she insists on leaving her house to be a governess, she confesses, “I should be well if I went from home” (212). This indicates that by changing the environment, she wants to remove herself from the cause of her agony, and the bitterness of her agony proves her intense love for Robert.

Though Caroline wishes to follow Miss Mann and Miss Ainley as her role models, her opinion of unmarried women that she shares with others is harsh and cruel: “Old maids, like the houseless and unemployed poor, should not ask for a place and an occupation in the world” (441). Through this remark, Brontë captures the plight of contemporary women and shows how their marital status has a serious impact on the quality of their lives.

Similar to *Jane Eyre*, the novel ends with Caroline marrying Robert and finding satisfaction in her devotion to her husband. Despite Jane passionately declaring the necessity of opportunities for women to exercise their faculties, at the end the novel, she dedicates herself to her disabled and blind husband in a deep forest secluded from the outside world. In *Villette* (1853), Lucy Snowe, the protagonist, aims to be financially independent. However, she laments, “But afterwards, is there nothing more for me in life . . . ?” and yearns for a “true home” in which to live with someone she loves (522–23). Thus, Caroline, Jane, and Lucy express similar thoughts about finding fulfilment through a partner.

Similarly, despite her acute consciousness of the “condition of women” question and career as a novelist, Brontë longs for a conventional life, marrying her beloved and building a happy family. Her desires are expressed and captured in her writings, and *Shirley* is no exception: the author’s longings are reflected in Caroline’s way of living. Though Brontë’s female protagonists often express the distress of being a woman, their problems are resolved and they are

relieved from their sufferings only when they choose a conventional way of life as a woman.

Caroline's marriage with Robert takes place due to pure luck. Because of the repeal of the orders in the Council, Robert and his business are saved. With financial stability, he finally proposes to her.² This indicates that without the repeal, she would not have been able to marry Robert. Caroline depends entirely on Robert and is swayed by him throughout the course of the novel, without showing any signs of growth as a woman and an individual.

2. Recession as a Conventionalist—Shirley Keeldar

Shirley Keeldar has been drawn in stark contrast to the meek Caroline. She is given a masculine name as her parents wished to have a son. The strong-minded heiress calls herself an "esquire" and acknowledges that she holds a man's position because "it is enough to inspire me [Shirley] with a touch of manhood" (224). Moreover, her prompt response after the attack on Robert Moore's mill indicates her ability to take action with masculine vigor during an emergency. Thus, her characterization appears to promise a new type of woman.

However, the conventional aspects of Shirley are occasionally eluded to the novel. For example, the foreman at the mill, Joe Scott, shrewdly perceives what is in Shirley's mind.

. . . Miss Shirley, there, reckons to hearken to t'master when he's talking ower trade, so attentive like, as if she followed him word for word, and all war as clear as a lady's looking-glass to her een; and all t'while she's peeping and peeping out o't'window to see if t'mare stands quiet; and then looking at a bit of a splash on her riding-skirt; and then glancing glegly round at wer counting-house cobwebs and dust, and thinking what mucky folk we are, and what a grand ride she'll have just i'now over Nunnely-common. She hears no more o'Mr. Moore's talk nor if he spake Hebrew." (372)

Joe points out what Shirley herself is not conscious of: her interest in business is nothing but a feint,

and she is more concerned with her appearance.³ Thus, the revolutionary aspect of her character becomes questionable despite her brave remarks such as "women read men more truly than men read women" (396). Additionally, her inconsistency is revealed more clearly in the latter half of the novel, after she meets her ex-tutor Louis Moore again.

Though Shirley and Louis are attracted to each other, their relationship assumes the quality of a power struggle based on their disparate positions: they are former student and tutor, they belong to different social classes, and they are a woman and a man. Separated by these differences, they repeat the struggle for power.

Sally Shuttleworth states that in *Shirley*, Brontë brings to the fore the parallels between women and workers (183).⁴ Both women and men with no social standing, such as laborers, are driven to the edge of the patriarchal society. Their gender or lack of social status and economic resources do not allow them to live at the center of society. Thus, neither Shirley nor Louis can hold a high position in the hierarchy of the patriarchal society. Despite the similarities, they do not attempt to better understand each other or join hands to survive the difficult situation.

In fact, *Shirley* held the possibility of realizing a new type of female protagonist and partnership between a woman and a man. Shirley's social standing, financial strength, and independence could provide a new paradigm for these equations. However, her relationship with Louis results in the contrary. Louis clings to patriarchal conventions and has no interest in the idea of equality between man and woman. In the following quote, his competitive tendencies are expressed along with his love for Shirley.

It is her [Shirley's] faults, or at least her foibles, that bring her near to me—that nestle her to my heart—that fold her about with my love—and that for a most selfish, but deeply-natural reason: these faults are the steps by which I mount to ascendancy over her. (593)

Admitting his selfishness, he intends to make the

best of Shirley's faults so that he can prove his superiority over her. Even when they confirm mutual feelings for each other, Louis responds to Shirley's question "And are we equal then, sir? Are we equal at last?" by saying "You are younger, frailer, feebler, more ignorant than I" (711). He denies their equality and emphasizes his dominance. His obsession with superiority to Shirley reveals that Louis struggles with a feeling of inferiority.

When they decide to get married, it is Shirley who exhibits inexplicable changes: she starts to abandon her responsibilities as a mistress as if abdicating her position to her husband-to-be. Though Shirley is bestowed with enough advantages to be a new type of heroine, their partnership ends in a mediocre conclusion. Shirley and Louis, both in a disadvantageous position in the patriarchal society, do not seek to build an equal relationship. Despite her position and power, Shirley cannot realize an equal partnership with her husband. Their union depicts the traditional conclusion that man is superior to woman. Louis, a subaltern man, ultimately surpasses Shirley despite her wealth and rank, and ultimately becomes her master. Louis's masculinity overpowers Shirley's advantages in their relationship.

As already mentioned, Brontë was devoted to the "condition of women" question. Her concern is reflected in descriptions such as the reality of old unmarried women, the stagnant state of women whose only aim is to ensnare husbands, and male biases against women. On the one hand, she discusses the predicaments of women sharply and passionately. On the other hand, she also suggests that women themselves cannot understand the problems they confront and lack the ability to solve the issues. In dealing with women's affliction, Brontë does not develop a system of thoughts, nor does she offer solutions. Though she criticizes the conventions, she does not realize that to some extent, she herself is fettered by traditional views.

Thus, Brontë's intention "to say something about the 'condition of women' question" is limited. She does not offer possibilities of solutions to various problems in the novel. Though Shirley's unique characterization is

a new attempt to tackle the problem of inequality, the storyline ultimately recedes by highlighting the fact that being a man is more crucial than financial power and social position in the patriarchal society. Similar recession is found in her other works. Thus, in *Shirley*, Brontë's perception of feminism is clearly portrayed.

III. Third-Person Omniscient Narrator

Though Brontë discusses feminism in all four of her novels, she chooses the third-person omniscient narrator only for *Shirley*. The difference in narration sets this novel apart from the others. In general, an omniscient narrator does not have any limitations on knowledge. Omniscience does not provide a filter for a story in the way the limited knowledge of an internal narrator does (Morreall 432).

To examine the omniscient narration in *Shirley*, the four main characters, that is, Caroline, Shirley, Robert, and Louis, will be focused on. Based on the way they are narrated, these four can be divided into two groups: Caroline and Louis, and Robert and Shirley. The former group is described in terms of their internal aspects directly by the narrator, whereas the latter is rarely depicted in such a way.

1. The Omniscient Point of View—Caroline and Louis

Though Caroline and Louis have seldom contact with each other in the story, Louis feels sympathy for Caroline and calls her "my equal" (596). They are similar in the sense that the omniscient narrator reveals their thoughts directly. For example, when she observes Shirley and Robert discussing a newspaper article, Caroline is narrated as follows:

Miss Keeldar looked happy in conversing with him [Robert Moore], and her joy seemed twofold, —a joy of the past and present, of memory and of hope.

What I [omniscient narrator] have just said are Caroline's ideas of the pair; she felt what has just been described. In thus feeling, she tried not to suffer; but suffered sharply, nevertheless. (282)

The narrator insists that she⁵ repeats Caroline's ideas just as they are. Through the narrator, her feelings are conveyed to the readers. This enables the readers to empathize with her, reading the story as if they are unified with her.

Caroline's heart is opened and expressed in detail to the readers more often than any other character in the novel. In the vivid description of her unrequited love for Robert, the author's own experience might be reflected. Due to the quality of the description, Carol Bock argues that Caroline's views are allied with those of the narrator and author (173). Among the four main characters, Caroline alone is close to the narrator.

Caroline's thoughts are narrated from the omniscient point of view, whereas those of Louis are revealed in his journal.

It is pleasant to write about what is near and dear as the core of my heart: none can deprive me of this little book, and, through this pencil, I can say to it what I will—say what I dare utter to nothing living—say what I dare not *think* aloud. (592)

The last part of the quote assures that this journal reflects the bare truth of Louis's heart. As he appears much later in the story, almost in the last third of the novel, he does not have enough chances to express himself. Moreover, "a quiet man" (589) that he is, his remarks are limited and reticent. The journal serves as an effective tool to understand him. The omniscient point of view allows readers to peruse his journal, without which there is no means to approach this private document.

Thus, Caroline's inner world is explored by the narrator, whereas Louis's thoughts are represented by his journal.

2. What Secrecy and Omission Mean—Robert and Shirley

Contrary to the former group, the psychological depictions of Robert and Shirley are limited despite the novel's omniscient viewpoint. Robert Moore, for instance, is an important persona as an object of romantic interest for Caroline, as well as the master of Hollow's Mill.

His struggles in a difficult economic situation and the Luddite attack on his mill are essential elements in *Shirley* as a socio-political novel.

Although Robert confesses his polarity as "I find in myself, Lina, two natures; one for the world and business, and one for home and leisure" (287), the dilemma caused by his contradictory nature is not further delineated. Due to the lack of psychological explanation, it is difficult to understand him. He is gentle to Caroline on one occasion, but in the next scene, his behavior is cold. After his unsuccessful proposal of marriage to Shirley on behalf of his business, he again approaches Caroline. Without a detailed account, it is difficult for the readers to understand the changes he undergoes, and the struggles in his mind. As Caroline accepts him unconditionally when he says ". . . will she [Caroline] pardon all I have made her suffer—all that long pain I have wickedly caused her—all that sickness of body and mind she owed to me? Will she forget what she knows of my poor ambition—my sordid schemes?" (733), Robert's inconsistency is never questioned in the novel. His remorse and sense of guilt are never explained by the omniscient narrator.

By contrast, the free-spirited Shirley speaks out frankly. However, this does not mean she always speaks her mind.

"It seems odd. I cannot account for it. You talk a great deal, —you talk freely. How was that circumstance never touched on?"

"Because it never was," and Shirley laughed.

"You are a singular being!" observed her friend: "I thought I knew you quite well: I begin to find myself mistaken. You were silent as the grave about Mrs. Pryor; and now, again, here is another secret. But why you made it a secret is the mystery to me." (515)

Above is a conversation between Caroline and Shirley. The "circumstance" mentioned by Caroline indicates the fact that Louis is a tutor of the Simpsons, Shirley's relatives. Caroline finds it odd that Shirley does not touch upon this fact, since Louis is her cousin, and there is no need to

keep it a secret. In addition, this is not the only occasion during which Shirley remains silent. Even though she detects that her former governess and now companion, Mrs. Pryor, is Caroline's long-lost mother, she never reveals the fact to her close friend Caroline. Shirley's secrecy might derive from Emily Brontë (1818–48), Shirley's model and the author's sister, who had a fierce sense of privacy, and died while Brontë was writing this novel. Nevertheless, her silence is incompatible with her characterization as a candid and articulate character.

Why do Robert and Shirley not speak with clarity and keep silent? One of the possible answers is that this is a strategy for the development of the story. As the omniscient narrator is mainly unified with Caroline, what Caroline does not know cannot be revealed to the readers. Due to this mechanism, readers interpret the novel from Caroline's viewpoint, alternating between hope and despair, unaware of Robert's true intention. Shirley's silence works in the same way. Even if she realizes Mrs. Pryor's identity, as long as she keeps it a secret, not only Caroline but also readers cannot be cognizant of the truth. Shirley's secrecy allows the unexpected plot developments in the novel.

Brontë utilizes Shirley's silence when she delineates her relationship with Robert. Shirley makes no attempt to tell her best friend, who desperately loves Robert, that she is not her competitor. Charles Burkhart and Helen Moglen regard this silence on Shirley's part as the author's failure, accusing it of unbelievability (Burkhart 81; Moglen 182). However, Shirley's secretiveness here should be interpreted as a device to make the story more dramatic.⁶ Caroline's unrequited love for Robert gives her a chance to think about the position of women. The anguish caused by Robert's cold behavior leads Caroline to a serious illness, which enables her to discover that Mrs. Pryor is her mother. As a plot device, it is necessary that Robert and Shirley maintain their silence. Consequently, despite the omniscient narrator, secrecy or omission in the narration function effectively in this novel to heighten the audience's interest.

IV. Charlotte Brontë as a Novelist—Conclusion

In this study, *Shirley* has been examined as a story that mirrors the characteristics of Charlotte Brontë as a novelist, with a focus on feminism and the third-person omniscient narrator. Brontë expresses her awareness of the struggles of women in those days but does not offer solutions to better their position. She seems unaware of the ambivalence in her treatment of the female characters and issue of feminism. It cannot be denied that Brontë's views on this matter include several contradictions. Nonetheless, her attempts are meaningful in that they reveal the reality of the position of women in the society of early 19th century Britain.

Unlike the issue of feminism, the omniscient narrator is a unique attribute found only in *Shirley* among Brontë's novels. While the first-person narrator cannot reveal what they do not know, the narrator in the third-person has no such limitations. As Morreall says, "This narrator knows about events occurring at any time or place, in complete detail" (430). However, in *Shirley*, as the narrator is deeply connected to Caroline, the story often assumes an aspect of the first-person novel. This is why Robert and Shirley's private thoughts and feelings are rarely portrayed. As a whole, *Shirley* is narrated from the third-person point of view; occasionally the viewpoint is concentrated on a specific character, which causes variation in the depiction of characters.

In this study, the variation is attributed to the author's strategy for the development of the story. The strategy helps to make the story dramatic in some scenes, but renders the narrative unbelievable in others. In addition, Louis's journal leaves an impression on readers that it is a clumsy device to reveal his inner world.⁷

Though Brontë adopts the third-person omniscient narrator in this work, she seems to lean toward the first-person narrative that she used in her previous works. She is inclined to express her thoughts through a protagonist, as if she were the first-person narrator. The omniscient viewpoint does not work in its fullest capacity in this novel. This proves that for Charlotte Brontë, the

first-person narrative is the most appropriate narrative style. Her next novel, *Villette*, confirms this by adopting the first-person narrative once again.

Shirley, with its focus on social issues and technique of the omniscient narrator, is often regarded as a heterogeneous work among Brontë's novels. However, it adheres to the author's concern with the "condition of women" question, which she also explores in her other works. The problems in narratology indicate the author's experimentation with narrative styles. Thus, *Shirley* is not merely "the odd one out," but a work that mirrors the essence of Charlotte Brontë.

This paper is rooted in the presentation from the 38th Annual Conference of the Brontë Society of Japan, which was held on October 21, 2023.

Notes

- 1 Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar describe *Shirley* as "far more consciously than either of her earlier works a novel about the 'woman question'" (374).
- 2 The sudden change resembles the ending of *Jane Eyre*, where Jane gets married to Rochester due to the convenient death of his former wife. The development is often criticized as an abuse of *deus ex machina*.
- 3 Gisela Argyle argues that regardless of their personalities, the appearance of Caroline and Shirley resembles the conventional young lady. Despite their discussions on the position of women, they at least accept the conventions of contemporary fashion.
- 4 Helen Moglen holds a view similar to Shuttleworth, focusing on the connections between women and unemployed laborers. Moglen further includes the poor and socially dispossessed, and children as powerless victims. (158)
- 5 In *Shirley*, the narrator is not specified as male or female. In this study, as in the case of most others, the narrator is referred to as female.
- 6 Bock describes the author's strategy in this episode as, "Leading readers astray might be justified as a means of heightening mystery and suspense" (118).
- 7 Rebecca A. McLaughlin highlights the lack of Shirley's voice in the last part of the novel and concludes that the subsequent privileging of Louis's voice in the narration implies a denial of her power and potential (220). Shirley is deprived of direct speech and her comments and behaviors are reported to the audience through Louis's journal.

Works Cited

- Argyle, Gisela. "Gender and Generic Mixing in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*." *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, vol. 35 no. 4, 1995, pp. 741-56.
- Bock, Carol. *Charlotte Brontë and the Storyteller's Audience*. U of Iowa P, 1992.
- Brontë, Charlotte. *Shirley*. 1849. Edited by Herbert Rosengarten and Margaret Smith, Clarendon, 1979.
- . *Villette*. 1853. Ed. Herbert Rosengarten and Margaret Smith Oxford: Clarendon, 1984.
- Burkhart, Charles. *Charlotte Brontë: A Psychosexual Study of her Novels*. Victor Gollancz, 1973.
- Ewbank, Inga-Stina. "Artistic Truth in the Novels of Charlotte Brontë." *The Brontës*. Edited by Harold Bloom, Chelsea House, 1987, pp. 13-35.
- Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Yale UP, 1979.
- McLaughlin, Rebecca A. "'I Prefer a Master': Female Power in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*." *Brontë Studies*, vol. 29 no. 3, 2004, pp. 217-222.
- Moglen, Helen. *Charlotte Brontë: The Self Conceived*. U of Wisconsin P, 1976.
- Morreall, John. "The Myth of the Omniscient Narrator." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 52 no. 4, 1994, pp. 429-35.
- Shuttleworth, Sally. *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology*. Cambridge UP, 1996.
- Smith, Margaret, editor. *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë*. Clarendon, 1995-2004. 3 vols.

