

An Analysis of Three Victorian Novels within the Context of Cultural Theory

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DEDICATION

To my Mother, Leentie de Lange

28 May 1958-05 July 2011

In Memoriam

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Abstract

An Analysis of Three Victorian Novels within the Context of Cultural Theory

Key Words: Victorian literature, Victorian period, analysis, culture, cultural theory, Anne Brontë, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), *Shirley* (1849), *Romola* (1863)

This study offers an in-depth analysis of four socio-cultural themes in three Victorian novels using cultural theory as a reading matrix in order to provide a clearer understanding of the fictional representation of dominant socio-cultural changes that occurred during the mid-nineteenth century. The analysis will primarily comprise detailed discussions of themes related to cultural issues portrayed in these three Victorian texts, and will compare the novels' presentations of these themes. The three novels are Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849), and George Eliot's *Romola* (1863). These three particular texts are similar primarily because they were written by women who strove to make their voices heard in a predominating patriarchal society. The themes to be discussed are society, history, religion and gender. Contemporary reviews and reactions are also taken into consideration.

Opsomming

'n Analise van Drie Victoriaanse Romans binne die Konteks van Kulturele Teorie

Sleutelwoorde: Victoriaanse letterkunde, Victoriaanse tydperk, analise, kultuur, kulturele teorie, Anne Brontë, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), *Shirley* (1849), *Romola* (1863)

Hierdie studie behels om 'n in-diepte analise van vier sosio-kulturele temas in drie Victoriaanse romans met kulturele teorie as lesingsraamwerk. Die oogmerk van die analise is om 'n meer duideliker begrip te kry van die fiktiewe aanbieding van dominante sosio-kulturele veranderinge gedurende die

negetiende eeu. Die analise bestaan hoofsaaklik uit in-diepte besprekings van temas verwant aan kulturele kwessies wat in hierdie drie Victoriaanse tekste uitgebeeld word, en 'n vergelyking van die motiewe verwant aan 'n kulturele konteks. Die drie romans wat ontleed word is Anne Brontë se *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), Charlotte Brontë se *Shirley* (1849), en George Eliot se *Romola* (1863). Hierdie drie spesifieke tekste is soortgelyk hoofsaaklik omdat hulle deur vrouens geskryf is wat daarna gestreef het om hulle stemme in 'n dominante patriargale samelewing gehoor te laat word. Die temas wat bespreek word is die samelewing, geskiedenis, godsdiens en geslag. Kontemporêre resensies en besprekings word ook in ag geneem.

Introduction

This dissertation sets out to answer the following research question:

“How do the novels *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* by Anne Brontë, *Shirley* by Charlotte Brontë, and *Romola* by George Eliot, as works by women authors, interrogate changing Victorian socio-cultural values and phenomena?”

Thus, the aim of the dissertation is to investigate pivotal Victorian cultural issues as experienced by these three women authors through exploring their representations in fiction. Each of the three novels discussed addresses comparable cultural themes: society, history, religion and gender. As all three works were written by women, they serve as significant evidence of the strive of intelligent female authors of the nineteenth century who struggled to prove to the predominantly patriarchal and misogynistic Victorian world that women had other and greater needs than merely those of domestic importance. Contemporary reviews and reactions to these novels, considered in a fifth chapter to the dissertation, provide a corroborative perspective on how reading functions as a medium of cultural evaluation, assessment and critique.

This study comprises five chapters. The titles of the chapters indicate the subsequent socio-cultural themes which are analysed in detail in each chapter. A brief overview of how one could approach socio-cultural themes in the three novels is also given, as well an indication of matters relating to cultural theory and Victorian literature in general. Chapter one focuses on society; chapter two on history; chapter three on religion and chapter four on gender. The final chapter comprises a survey of contemporary reviews and reactions, providing an overall reflection on the novels, which underlines their socio-cultural themes.

Each chapter first introduces the cultural theme, followed by analyses of each novel's engagement with the theme. Each sequence begins with *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, followed by *Shirley* and *Romola* respectively, to coincide with the chronological order of the novels' publication dates. Each chapter concludes with an overview of how the socio-cultural issue present was a part of

general Victorian concerns.

There is no single definition for culture within the Victorian context. The nineteenth century saw so many socio-cultural changes that it created entire new forms of identity. As discussed in this dissertation, the biggest changes occurred in matters concerning society, history, religion and gender. Literary culture also reached a significantly high level in the Victorian period, as is revealed by the publication of large numbers of novels and the critical responses which they triggered.

Culture can also have different associations if it were to be examined within a personal context. The general cultural concerns of the time are reflected in the personal lives of the authors, indicating their participation in the cultural forces at work. But the authors were not at the mercy of these forces: they engaged with them. For example, the reception of their novels, as well as their reactions to the critics' responses, show them as being actively engaged in Victorian reading culture. This variety of "culture", and their impact on it, has been extended into the present, as the majority of their works are still widely read and studied today, which is evident of them continuing to be part of English literary culture for future generations.

It is important to have a general concept of culture, because one can then determine what aspects of society can fit the definition. "Culture" as a term stems from the Latin word *colere*, which is translated in several ways: "cultivating"; "inhabiting"; or "worshipping and protecting" (Eagleton, 2000:2). It refers to a "tension between making and being made, rationality and spontaneity" because it encompasses a "division within ourselves, between that part of us which cultivates and refines, and whatever within us constitutes the raw material for such refinement" (ibid., 5). The Victorians were also intensely occupied with finding a stable identity, achieved by breaking free from the tension caused by various socio-cultural differences, an example being the way in which they spent their time trying to recover the life which they had known since childhood, despite being in the midst of profound changes which continued to take place until the end of the century.

An attempt to cultivate must strive to stimulate in people "the proper sorts of spiritual disposition", and so culture distils aspects from "common humanity" in such a way that it redeems the

“spirit from the senses, wrestling the changeless from the temporal”, separating “unity from diversity” (ibid., 6-7). Culture becomes more than a cultivation of contrasting social and demographic topics such as history, religion and gender. It functions as a personal and psychological process in which “human consciousness” can be placed in order to be “authentic” because culture is not confined to single bodies, which cease to exist at death (ibid., 102). For this reason since the 1960s culture has come to be identified as the “affirmation of a specific identity” (ibid., 38). Victorian culture, despite its various facets and attendant complexities, seems to corroborate this view. This is especially reflected in our various prejudices concerning “prudish” and “repressed” Victorian society.

Based on these definitions, an important question comes to mind: *what* cultural topics belong to the Victorian canon? In literary studies, texts that were published during Queen Victoria’s reign are considered to be Victorian literature. But when one undertakes a more comprehensive study one soon discovers that this is actually an artificially restricted list, as Levine suggests (2013[2]:650):

If the claim that birth organizes our understanding of literary texts is familiar, it is perhaps more surprising to notice that the temporal frame of the period offers a similarly restrictive model of belonging.

Levine notes that writers such as Homer, Shakespeare, Milton, and Bunyan are not regarded as “Victorian authors or texts”, even though nearly every educated Briton in the Victorian period knew them by heart (ibid.). Just as pre-Victorian events influenced the period’s culture, so too did pre-Victorian literature influence the literary context.

Literary theory as part of cultural theory has developed considerably over the last few decades. Social and cultural events of the past have been investigated in order to understand the present. Understanding the past is “among the commonest of strategies” used to try to understand the present and the future better, although it is not always easy to ascertain whether or not the past is truly over, or whether it “continues, albeit in different forms” (Said, 1994:1). Some of the issues which confronted the Victorians continue to be matters of concern today. For example, science and technology in the nineteenth century led to a clash between faith and scepticism; today scientific growth has taken place

on such an enormous scale that the gulf between believers and atheists has been widened more than ever before.

Cultural theory attempts to do more than merely discuss or catalogue cultural subjects that occur in literature (Edgar & Sedgwick, 2006:2). It provides an “elucidation and explanation” of cultural forms according to differing criteria (ibid.). For the purposes of this dissertation, the criteria emerge through an examination of the different cultural topics as they are treated in the three novels. Each novel engages differently with these topics, in different degrees, indicating that the authors were concerned to provide an accurate, though personal, picture about the cultural issues of their times.

Many of the cultural concerns which troubled the Victorians existed before Queen Victoria ascended the throne. The three novels selected are each set in pre-Victorian times, yet they focus on central Victorian issues. An attempt is made with this dissertation to show that these texts can be read as a single whole, illuminating the larger cultural context through their unique perspectives.

The term “Victorian” has numerous meanings from different social, literary and cultural viewpoints, so a single definition is impossible. Historical accounts sometimes appear incommensurate. For example, the literature of the Victorians has been situated within a period encompassing “the profound transformations of the Romantic era and the emergence of Modernism”, but also the “long eighteenth century and the twentieth century world” (Hewitt, 2006:396). The latter seems a pertinent placement, as some of the social and political problems that started in the late eighteenth century remained unsolved at the end of Queen Victoria’s reign. The three authors in question were well aware of the issues of contemporary society, but also brooded on problems with their roots deep in the past.

It is worth noting that the idea that the past’s culture influences the present was already current in 1831, six years before Queen Victoria’s reign began. John Stuart Mill, one of the century’s most influential philosophers, explored this concept in a seminal essay titled “The Spirit of the Age”, where he developed the theme about the past influencing the present and future (quoted in McGowan, 2000:3):

The “Spirit of the Age” is in some measure a novel expression. I do not believe that it is to be met with in any work exceeding fifty years in antiquity. The idea of comparing one’s own age with former ages, or with our notion of those which are yet to come, had occurred to philosophers; but it never before was itself the dominant idea of any age.

Mill’s essay suggests that generations “inherit” the ability to “characterize eras, to read the events and fashions of a particular historical moment” because history is separated in “ages” and that the “spirit” of any age cannot be described unless one organizes the “plurality of actions, motives, and beliefs of human beings” (ibid., 3-4). It is fitting to describe culture in this way since it is a phenomenon that takes place on both a social and personal level.

Mill is an important figure in the history of Victorian culture because he wrote on the theme of “society’s power over the individual” which in turn is a presentation of the battle “between individual liberty and political authority” (Sedgwick, 2002:161). This is a similarity shared by all of the female protagonists (Helen Huntingdon, Shirley Keeldar, Caroline Helstone, and Romola de’Bardi) in the three novels discussed here and is one of the best illustrations that supports the thesis of the novels under discussion being excellent examples of Victorian cultural novels.

In cultural terms, “Victorian” carries “an unmistakable national” and “nationalistic, overtone”, since it has to be kept in mind that from a British viewpoint, the Victorian age ranks as one of the greatest, most prestigious, and most influential (Flint, 2005:230). Victorian culture frequently attempted to stress its “difference” from the rest of Europe, as the Victorians subordinated diplomatic relations to a “wider imperial version” (Hewitt, 2006:404). To be Victorian was to be different both as a nation and a culture.

Through colonialism a “cultural traffic” was “spawned around the globe” developing “Victorian ideology and policies” and creating a definition of Victorian identity both in and outside of Britain (Joshi, 2011:20). In this context “Victorian” is almost synonymous with “Empire”.

As such, it consists of three important aspects: “history” (until 2015, Victoria was the longest reigning monarch in British history), “geography” (represented by Britain and the colonies under its control); and “culture” (ibid., 23). Victorianism thus offers a complex and contrasting picture of

“transnational” and “transhistorical reach” because it “captures the unevenness intrinsic in transnational economic and cultural encounters”, as Joshi explains (ibid., 38-39):

A term with a specific origin in nineteenth-century England, “Victorian” refers today not only to historical boundaries, but more cogently to a set of interrelated cultural, intellectual, and social preoccupations that far outlived the originary moment. “Victorian” persists as a contact zone: a space of encounter, (mis)recognition, and...refusal.

Major social difficulties that concerned the Victorians include poverty, alcoholism, political instability, and the role of children and women in society. Each of the three novels deals with these issues, including biographical ones: while they are not explicitly examples of the *Bildungsroman* (since the reader receives very little information about the protagonists’ childhoods), the progress from adolescence to adulthood still forms part of the question of when one “stopped” being a child before becoming an adult (Bossche, 1999:82). Despite their being set in earlier times, each of the novels discussed provides an in-depth perspective onto Victorian society, as the concerns expressed in them were still current. My first chapter, which follows, centres on Victorian society.

Chapter 1: Society

A famous quotation characterising nineteenth century society is found in a passage from Benjamin Disraeli's 1845 novel, *Sybil; or the Two Nations*. In this passage, one of the characters states that Queen Victoria governed two nations, "between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy" (quoted in Wilson, 2003:67):

"...who are as ignorant of each other's habits, thoughts and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones or inhabitants of different planets; who are formed by a different breeding, are fed by a different food, are ordered by different manners, and are not governed by the same laws."

"You speak of—"said Egremont, hesitatingly.

"THE RICH AND THE POOR."

Much that is important in the understanding of Victorian society has been summarized in that capitalized sentence. It is an accurate statement of the biggest cause of social separation and unrest: the unbridgeable gulf between what was known as the middle class or "gentry", just below the aristocracy, and "the poor" (Altick, 1973:25,34). As the quotation suggests, the differences between these two groups were of such a magnitude as to reveal not only two different sides of society, but two different worlds.

Gilbert Markham's desire to be "an honest and industrious farmer", voiced in the first chapter of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, is commendable but slightly ridiculous as it presents little of the suffering to which agricultural labourers were exposed in the nineteenth century (Brontë, 1998:9):

["If] I devote my talents to the cultivation of my farm, and the improvement of agriculture in general, I shall thereby benefit, not only my own immediate connections and dependants, but in some degree, mankind at large:—hence I shall not have lived in vain."

Gilbert's albeit laudable goals reveal the naïve ideals of what Victorian farmers aimed for. Some farm labourers earned as little as "seven or eight shillings" per week, and many were forced to become "tenant farmers" who were dependent on the gentry whose lands they lived on and cultivated (Altick, 1973:36). It is small wonder that poverty was one of the major social problems of Queen Victoria's

day, since the rich looked on the poor as socially inferior.

Although a farmer, Gilbert does not seem to be the sort of employer who ruthlessly abuses his employees. He embodies an ideal of the Victorian age known as “economic individualism”, an ideal that emphasised the opportunity of individuals to govern themselves; and in certain cases the opportunity was extended to those around them (Williams, 1987:9).

Williams further explains that the “progress of man” is dependent “not only on the historical community in an abstract sense”, but also on “the nature of the particular community into which [a man] has been born” (ibid.). This concept is illustrated by the majority of the principal characters in all three of the novels, such as the example of Gilbert’s relationship with his farm workers.

Gilbert hopes to “benefit” from the “cultivation of his farm” and from “agriculture in general” (Brontë, 1998:9). Evidence of his independency is revealed by remarks which indicate that he assists in the running of the farm: he has been “breaking in the grey colt...directing the ploughing of the last wheat stubble...and carrying out a plan for the extensive and efficient draining of the low meadow-lands” (ibid.). He is in the hayfield

catching up armfuls of moist, reeking grass, and shaking it...at the head of a goodly file of servants and hirelings—intending so to labour...with as much zeal and assiduity as I could look for from them, as well as to prosper the work by my own exertion as to animate the workers by my example (10-11, 66).

He actually works with the labourers to demonstrate independence and maintain the efficient running of the farm because he commits himself to the economic individualism of the age.

The middle-class characters in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* are ordinary but slightly unpleasant. This is revealed by the gossip the villagers engage in behind Helen’s back. In the first chapter Anne Brontë paints a picture of nineteenth century English society using “ritual images of Victorian order”, with examples such as “afternoon-tea”, a visit from the clergyman, charity projects, and the practice of household economy (Gordon, 1984:721). It is also in the first chapter that the subject of the gossip is mentioned: namely, a “single lady”, dressed in “slightish mourning”, who has moved into the half-ruined Wildfell Hall, with a son, Arthur, and a servant (Brontë, 1998:12).

The gossip about Helen is first presented in a humorous light. Rose says that the vicar, Revd Millward, intends to call upon Helen to give her spiritual advice, “which he fears she needs” because she did not “make her appearance at church”, never mind the fact that she moved to the Hall barely a week ago (ibid.). But the gossip quickly turns ugly. Characters soon suspect that Helen is involved with Frederick Lawrence, who is actually her brother, although they do not realise this at first. They notice the similarity in appearances between Frederick and little Arthur, speculating that Frederick fathered him, although Gilbert strongly doubts it. His personal feelings aside, his disgust at the gossip is an indication that it can also be a social evil like poverty, summarised by his remark that “if we can only speak to slander our betters, let us hold our tongues” (ibid., 75-76).

Gossip in the novel plays a cultural role, as Jan B. Gordon and Priti Joshi suggest in their respective articles. The former claims that gossip functions as “*Geschwätz*, a kind of metalanguage” making itself “a speculative language thrown out at that which is only incompletely understood” (Gordon, 1984:722). Characters who gossip serve as “mediators” because they are simply passing on what they have heard from someone else, and gossip is thus untrustworthy because it “always attempts to be what it is not by incorporating the patterns of relatedness”; it is thus “creating plots where none exist”, making it “forever enlarging and expanding the field of its domain” (ibid., 722-724):

As the volume of gossip in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* increases, it begins to affect almost everyone; people seem to live as if they were always being talked about. To fear gossip is to fear that one is becoming a character, an “other” in someone else’s fiction...

Joshi suggests that Anne ponders on the role of gossip in relation to gender, as it has “long been identified with women and danger” (Joshi, 2009:910). But with Gilbert, Anne shows that it is not “exclusively feminine” (ibid.). Gilbert, who claimed that he would never believe the rumours about Helen and Frederick, sees them one evening walking together and having an intimate conversation, causing him to believe the gossip he so firmly opposed: he goes so far as to assault Frederick. He accuses Helen of having “done me an injury which you can never repair....You have blighted the promise of youth, and made my life a wilderness...” (Brontë, 1998:120-121).

Ironically, Gilbert also gossips, about Jane Wilson, a beautiful but snobbish young woman who delights in the lies being spread about Helen. Jane wants to marry Frederick, but Gilbert warns him that she is “selfish, cold-hearted, ambitious, artful, shallow-minded” (Brontë, 1998:401). Frederick is reluctant to listen, but Gilbert insists that Frederick’s life will be “rayless and comfortless” if he were to unite himself to a woman “so wholly incapable of sharing your tastes, feelings and ideas” (ibid.).

The contrast between Frederick’s “refusal” to gossip about Jane and Gilbert’s “eagerness” indicates that Gilbert has a “self-satisfied nature” because he displays “callous indifference” towards Jane Wilson’s happiness (O’Toole, 1999:722). Jane becomes disappointed and embittered when Frederick loses interest in her as a consequence of his conversation with Gilbert, but Gilbert feels no remorse, as his conscience “has never accused” him of having blighted her happiness (Brontë, 1998:402). This is another example of gossip functioning as a negative social tool, and of showing that it is enjoyed by men as much as by women.

The use of alcohol was another major social concern for the Victorians. It is examined in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* in greater depth than in the other novels. But the term “alcoholism” did not come into Victorian usage until 1860; the terms “drinking” and “drunkenness” were more commonly known (Harrison, 1994:23). This concern with drunkenness led to the Temperance Movement, which became part of a “larger” movement to reform “manners and culture” in England, and began in the 1820s (Shiman, 1988:9). Anyone who assumed this movement was solely confined to the poor was in for a shock: the Temperance Movement aimed at reformation in drinking among “all classes” (ibid.).

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall shows through Arthur Huntingdon and his friends that drinking was common among all the classes, including the gentry. From a cultural perspective, alcoholism was as much a social curse then as it is today. It was particularly widespread in the 1820s due to the wide circle of acquaintances those who sold drink had access to (Harrison, 1994:38).

To a twenty-first century reader the scene where Mrs Graham offers little Arthur alcohol seems shocking. Yet alcohol was used by nineteenth century doctors and parents as a stimulant and “as medicine with dietary properties”: for example, brandy was used to treat cholera and influenza

(Shiman, 1988:35). It was also effective to calm “crying babies” and for some time relieved “psychological as well as physiological pain” (Harrison, 1994:42). So there is nothing unusual in the fact that nineteenth century adults gave children very small amounts of alcohol as medicine.

The shock comes during the scenes where Helen’s alcoholic husband, Arthur Huntingdon, gives little Arthur alcohol with a very different intention. Determined to “make a man of him”, he allows his own son to indulge in appalling behaviour, as Helen records in her diary in chapter thirty-nine. Little Arthur learns, “in spite of his cross mamma,” to “tipple wine like papa” and to “swear Like Mr. Hattersley” (Brontë, 1998:335-336). Whenever Helen tries to intervene, Arthur insists that their son should “have his own way like a man” (ibid.). Helen’s despair is reminiscent of those who are forced to see their loved ones destroy themselves with drink (ibid.):

To see such things done with the roguish naïveté of that pretty little child...was as peculiarly piquant and irresistibly droll to them as it was inexpressibly distressing and painful to me...But this should not continue; my child must not be abandoned to this corruption: better far that he should live in poverty and obscurity with a fugitive mother, than in luxury and affluence with such a father.

Helen eventually begins doctoring little Arthur’s drink in his father’s absence with a “small quantity of tartar-emetic”, causing “nausea and depression” that ultimately succeeds in instilling in him a “perfect abhorrence” for all drink (ibid., 354-355). Drinking as a theme shows that it was a “serious preoccupation” in nineteenth-century England, proving that Anne wants to do more than just tell a story intended to “scare drinkers straight”: she wants it to be seen as “emblematic of the increasingly untenable role of the landed gentleman in Victorian culture”, showing him to be ignorant and negligent in matters of health and upbringing (Hyman, 2008:451).

Most of the regulations which the Temperance Movement promoted, including a “move from a belief in moderation” to “an ardent advocacy of abstinence” and “behaviour modification”, are supported by Helen (ibid., 462). She displays the religious motivation of the Temperance Movement in her dealings with her alcoholic husband at his deathbed, because she insists that “reform and forgiveness are always within the grasp of those who truly repent” (ibid.). Helen’s teetotal philosophy is also reminiscent of anti-drinking campaigns of the 1830s and 1840s which insisted on “absolute

abstinence” for both drunkards and those who were in danger of becoming so (ibid., 461).

At its beginning, the Temperance Movement was founded upon strong Christian principles. Drunkenness was not caused by the “distilled spirit” or “fermented liquors”, but by the drinkers themselves (ibid., 10-11). Since Christianity teaches love for the sinner but hate for the sin, the attempt at reforming alcohol consumption was therefore a mission driven by love and charity. People, it was said, who suffered true woe and sorrow, were those who indulged in excessive drinking.¹ And those who supported teetotalism out of a sense of religious duty were eager to get this message broadcast to as many people as possible.

Sadly, the Anglican Church in particular did not always succeed in preventing bouts of excessive drinking. Drinking was “as much a part of religious as secular life”, and indeed a popular form of gift given to clergymen by their parish members was “bottles of wine and brandy” (ibid., 43).

Certainly not all clergymen were sympathetic to the Temperance Movement (ibid., 51). This is illustrated by Anne in chapter four of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, “A Party”. Reverend Millward is a pompous clergyman “with a preference for strong meats and malt liquors” (Alexander & Smith, 2003:324). When Helen’s disapproval of alcoholic consumption is mentioned, he dismisses her opinions as “criminal”, since she is “despising the gifts of Providence” (Brontë, 1998:38):

“But don’t you think, Mr. Millward,...that when a child may be naturally prone to intemperance—by the fault of its parents or ancestors, for instance—some precautions may be advisable?”...

“Some precautions, it may be; but temperance, sir, is one thing, and abstinence another.”

This conversation between Revd Millward and Frederick Lawrence highlights perfectly the social concern with alcoholism which imbued much of Victorian culture. It is also another example of the way in which children were regarded. Like adults, children were believed to be “prone to hanker after forbidden things” (ibid.). Religious parents regarded it as a sacred duty to teach children to “use aright” the blessings of Providence, and look upon sinful things “with contempt and disgust” (ibid., 39). But many people discovered to their cost that alcoholism is a demon which can take decades to conquer.

¹ Proverbs 23:29-30. All Biblical references will be given in footnotes.

Another dilemma regarding drinking concerned Holy Communion. Since the wine presents the blood of Christ, it was unclear if it would do struggling drinkers more harm than good to participate (Shiman, 1988:68-69). Some people believed that *all* intoxicating beverages should be abandoned, and therefore drinkers should not partake in Communion (ibid.,69).

Others believed that participation in Holy Communion was just the proper remedy for sinful drinkers who truly repented and longed for a fresh start. After all, the first miracle performed by Christ was the turning of water into wine at the wedding-feast in Cana, recalled in the second chapter of the gospel of St John (ibid.). St Paul himself recommended the use of wine as medicine.² But he also warned against getting drunk with wine, since it led to excess.³ When the Temperance Movement attained prominence in Victorian society, some branches of the Anglican Church chose to ignore these new principles instead of trying to work with them (ibid.,45). Like poverty, alcoholism was a difficult problem to get rid of.

The social issues in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* are also of a personal nature. From her own experiences as both a woman and a governess, Anne developed a deep understanding of and concern for children's education. She had also witnessed the tragic consequences of excessive drinking in her reckless brother, Branwell, which led him to his grave at the age of thirty-one. She was fully exposed to the dark side of society, causing her to comment in her copy of the Prayer Book that she was "Sick of mankind and their disgusting ways" (Smith, 1998:xiv). Being deeply unsatisfied with society, she saw it as a duty to expose what she saw as its core evils in her novel.

Unlike her sister Charlotte in *Shirley*, Anne does not explicitly explore the conflict between the rich and the poor, but she is alive to the discomfort caused by the city. In chapter sixteen, Helen Huntingdon, the heroine of the novel, reflects that she is "quite ashamed" of her "new-sprung distaste for country life" (Brontë, 1998:123). This is because she appears to have been attracted by the gaieties and allurements of London, as all her former occupations now appear to be "so tedious and dull" (ibid.):

²1 Timothy 5:23.

³ Ephesians 5:18.

I cannot enjoy my music, because there is no one to hear it. I cannot enjoy my walks, because there is no one to meet. I cannot enjoy my books, because they have not power to arrest my attention: my head is so haunted with the recollections of the last few weeks that I cannot attend to them.

Remarks on Helen's sensibilities as affected by London are an indication that the city in the 1840s was a place filled with "specific entertainments", not all of them of the acceptable or moral kind (Briggs, 2011:645). Trafalgar Square in central London was especially popular in the day for its public houses, pleasure grounds, and places such as Laurent's Casino (ibid.). Although Helen does not go to any of these places, there are hints that her husband, Arthur Huntingdon, frequents them in search of forbidden pleasures.

Anne does not appear to attack the city itself. Rather, she presents in almost symbolic terms the negative characteristics of society, as it is these that she is criticising. Arthur is used to reveal the corruption that society can bring about in individuals once they fall for the seductions it offers them. He is an "unsentimental depiction of individual excess", whose "contagion for family, friends, and society" becomes clear as the novel progresses (Alexander & Smith, 2003:495).

Education is one of the most important themes in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. The Brontë sisters were fortunate to have a father who gave them a more liberal education than that typically set for girls, but they were still fully conditioned by the limited opportunities available to women due to the lack of a solid education. Women's education also strove to protect them from the seductions of the world, and Charlotte expressed her annoyance over this idea in a letter to her former teacher, Miss Wooler, in 1846. She regarded the manner in which men were brought up as "strange" (Brontë, 2010:71):

[Men] are not half sufficiently guarded from temptation—Girls are protected as if they were something very frail and silly indeed while boys are turned loose on the world as if they—of all beings of existence—were the wisest and the least liable to be led astray.

Anne openly questions in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* whether or not men are not just as easily subjected to temptation as women, if not more so.

When Helen Huntingdon is first introduced, the people of the community are shocked by the manner in which she brings up her five-year-old son. In chapter three Helen tells Gilbert's mother that she "never" leaves her son by himself, and that she considers either bringing him along with her to church, or else staying at home with him (Brontë, 1998:25). The conversation between the women reveals contemporary attitudes to motherhood and the raising of children (ibid., 25-26):

"Is he so mischievous?" asked my mother, considerably shocked.

"No," replied the lady..."but he is my only treasure, and I am his only friend, so we don't like to be separated."

"But my dear, I call that doting," said my plain-spoken parent. "You should try to suppress such foolish fondness, as well to save your son from ruin as yourself from ridicule."

"*Ruin*, Mrs. Markham?"

"Yes; it is spoiling the child. Even at *his* age, he ought not to be always tied to his mother's apron string; he should learn to be ashamed of it."

"Mrs. Markham, I beg you will not say such things in *his* presence, at least. I trust my son will *never* be ashamed to love his mother!" said Mrs. Graham, with a serious energy that startled the company.

Mrs Graham fears that little Arthur will become "the veriest milksop that ever was sopped", but Helen remains adamant, insisting that she hopes "to save him from one degrading vice at least" (ibid., 28). Gilbert's opinion on education suits the moral tone of the time because he asks Helen if the "circumstance of being able and willing to resist temptation" is the one virtue most necessary for children's education (ibid.):

Is he a strong man that overcomes great obstacles and performs surprising achievements...or he that sits in his chair all day, with nothing to do more laborious than stirring the fire, and carrying his food to his mouth? If you would have your son to walk honourably through the world, you must not attempt to clear the stones from his path, but teach him to walk firmly over them—not insist upon leading him by the hand, but let him learn to go alone.

Although Gilbert has a point, especially in urging that little Arthur must make his own choices in life, Helen's view justifies Anne's "trenchant critique of male education and of the whole Victorian

patriarchal system” (Langland, 1989:138). Like her creator, Helen is “committed to a truly moral life and not merely a socially proper or correct life”, believing that one’s behaviour must be “regulated by the expectation of a heavenly reward rather than by society’s more narrow conventions” (ibid., 126). It is a “radical critique” of “the mud of Victorian society”, especially the “conventional manly ideal” associated with “drinking, swearing and carousing” (ibid., 126; 136-137).

The equally liberal critique of women’s education runs parallel with that of men’s (ibid., 140). During her conversation with Helen Mrs Graham remarks that, if Helen were to have a daughter of her own, she would “have her to be tenderly and delicately nurtured, like a hot-house plant—taught to cling to others for direction and support” (Brontë, 1998:30). Her remarks paint an accurate portrait of how women were regarded, especially in the context where women cannot be “too little exposed to temptation” (ibid., 30-31):

“It *must* be, either, that you think she is essentially so vicious, or so feeble-minded that she *cannot* withstand temptation,—and though she may be pure and innocent as long as she is kept in ignorance and restraint, yet, being destitute of *real* virtue, to teach her how to sin, is at once to make her a sinner, and the greater her knowledge, the wider her liberty, the deeper will be her depravity...

Reading Mrs Graham’s remarks, one can better appreciate Charlotte Brontë’s irritation at women having constantly to be protected from every bit of evil, whereas men are encouraged to be as frequently exposed to it as possible to improve their manhood. Whether or not Anne had read Charlotte’s letter to Miss Wooler, she would have agreed with Charlotte, as she states in the same chapter that society encourages boys “to prove all things by their own experience”, while girls “must not even profit by the experience of others” (ibid., 31).

Of the three novels discussed in this dissertation *Shirley* has the greatest focus on the economy and working-class people. It can be regarded as a Condition-of-England novel, and more specifically a profound “Condition-of-Yorkshire” novel since it superbly portrays the “romance and conflict” left in the wake of the Industrial Revolution in northern Yorkshire (Gilmour, 1986:61). Because of this fact Charlotte Brontë might be considered as representative of certain authors (including Anne and George

Eliot) who had an awareness of contemporary working-class conditions and the struggles of the poor. It is not surprising that Charlotte produced a novel with significant historical and social themes during the political chaos of the 1840s. She was concerned about issues of her day, and despite her Romantic temperament which yearned for the past, she presented *Shirley* as a Victorian novel which *is* a reflection of the past, albeit a troubled one.

Robert Gérard Moore in *Shirley* embodies aspects of economic individualism (like Gilbert Markham), but he illustrates more clearly what became known in the 1840s as “getting on”, with its emphasis on “making a success of one’s life, building a career,” and “finding a place in the mainstream of society” (Rylance, 2002:148). As an “established motif” the phrase signified “personal ambition”, which characterised the class whose members were economically powerful but domineering (ibid., 149). “Character” was the other important phrase of the period, signifying the “moral and psychological condition” to which individuals should aspire since it is the “motor of industry and civilization” (ibid., 150). Hence society was seen as a type of progress and would be enriched by those people of character who wanted to get on in life and initiate successful industrialisation (ibid.). But as is shown by Robert in *Shirley*, these two ideals often caused social and psychological conflict.

By contrast with Gilbert, Robert seems at first to be harsh towards his labourers and indifferent to their sufferings. He only cares about being a successful businessman, making use of others to improve the production of cloth in his mill. His determination to succeed is an example of the traits associated with the process of getting on. When confronted by the labourers who destroyed his equipment, he firmly declares that he is committed to progress and wants to succeed as a cloth-manufacturer, so no one can stop him from installing the “best machinery inventors can furnish” in his mill (Brontë, 2008:116-117):

“Suppose that this building was a ruin and I was a corpse, what then?...would that stop invention or exhaust science?—Not for the fraction of a second of time! Another and better gig-mill would rise on the ruins of this, and perhaps a more enterprising owner come into my place. Hear me!—I’ll make my cloth as I please, and according to the best lights I have. In its manufacture I will employ what means I choose. Whoever...shall dare to interfere with me, may just take the consequences.

These words seem cruel, but they reveal a truth about society which Victorians could not ignore: times were changing, and no one could prevent science or society from developing.

Charlotte also shows that there is a side of Robert which is in contrast to that of the hard-hearted milliner, revealed in his dealings with one of his workers, William Farren. William pleads with Robert about his circumstances, stating that it is wrong to stand by and watch people suffer from poverty and hunger, and while he initially causes Robert to repeat his determination to succeed as a milliner, Robert later assists William to find a new occupation. This example shows that within Robert there is the battle between the “character” who wants to “get on” and the “man of feeling” (Rylance, 2002:151).

William Farren and his family are used to present the conditions of the poor. They live in a little cottage, which, although clean, is “very dreary, because so poor” (Brontë, 2008:119). Their dinner of porridge is barely enough to satisfy their hunger: as soon as the children have eaten their share, they ask if they can have more. Their pleading disturbs William deeply: trying to lighten the atmosphere, he begins whistling a cheerful tune, but a “broad drop or two” soon begins gathering in his eyes and fall to the ground (ibid.). He does not hide his resentment against Robert, and dismisses him as a “selfish, an unfeeling, and...a foolish man” (ibid.).

The so-called Luddites, a group named after Ned Lud, a “semi-mythical Leicestershire man” who led a number of riots against the mill-owners of the district in order to destroy the machinery which replaced manual labour, were active in 1812 (Barker, 1995:45). During the spring of 1812 they attacked several mills in the Huddersfield area, near Reverend Brontë’s parish, including the notorious attack on Rawfolds Mill, owned by William Cartwright, on the night of 11 April 1812 (ibid., 45-46). It is believed that Charlotte fictionalised the attack on Rawfolds Mill in her novel as the one on Hollow’s Mill, owned by Robert Gérard Moore (Alexander & Smith, 2003:419-420). When writing about the Luddites she may have been influenced by the Chartists of the 1840s and those Victorians, such as Thomas Carlyle, who rebelled early on against the social, religious and scientific changes of their age.

Those who suffered most in the factories and mills were the women and children. The reason the Factory Acts existed in the first place was to try and make conditions more bearable for those who were physically weaker. Children especially had a hard time of it, due to having to work the same number of hours as adults, often in all kinds of weather, with very little portions of food served daily. The lack of proper clothing only worsened the situation.

Above all, once fast-moving machinery was installed to replace what had once been done by human labour, the need for workers declined considerably. In short, people were losing their jobs. As sources for the suffering of the workers Charlotte made use of the contemporary Yorkshire society where she had grown up, and the acquaintances within her own circle who informed her about the district's social upheavals which occurred at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Her father, Reverend Patrick Brontë, was a helpful informant because he had witnessed a series of economic upheavals that affected the West Riding of Yorkshire where he was perpetual curate between 1811 and 1812. Major consequences caused by the war with France included widespread poverty, unemployment, insufficient wages, and the collapse of several market stocks (Barker, 1995:45). Things worsened due to the harsh treatment of employers, especially those who installed machine equipment in their mills and factories to replace manual labour.

Charlotte explores the hardships which the people of Yorkshire suffered in clear detail. In chapter two, "The Waggons", she describes the failing economic conditions of 1811 and 1812, stating that the history of the "northern provinces" during this period was an "overshadowed one" (Brontë, 2008:26-27):

As to the sufferers, whose sole inheritance was labour, and who had lost that inheritance—who could not get work, and consequently could not get bread—they were left to suffer on, perhaps inevitably left; it would not do to stop the progress of invention, to damage science by discouraging its improvements; the war could not be terminated, efficient relief could not be raised; there was no help then, so the unemployed underwent their destiny—ate their bread, and drank the waters of affliction.

The bitterness of those labourers who were left to "suffer on" after losing their factory jobs due to the instalment of machinery is also clearly stated (*ibid.*, 27):

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.

The fictional workers in Charlotte's novel gave a voice to all the oppressed Victorian workers who "hated" those who exposed them to such hardships (ibid.).

Charlotte may have been influenced by Thomas Carlyle's 1838 book, *Chartism*, whose first chapter opens with the Condition-of-England question (Smith, 2013:257). The topic in *Chartism* relevant to *Shirley* is the questioning of "individuals trying to understand the meaning of their discontent, to articulate the sense that their fate is not God-given and to change their destinies" (ibid.). This coincides with the concept of the individual's relationship with the rest of society, which is one of the most important themes in Victorian fiction.

Child labour as a social ill is covered only briefly in *Shirley*. It partly coincides with the question of when a child should start to work, since the idea of childhood as a time of "play and education" did not exist for the Victorians (Heaton, 2013:294). The law of 1833 forbade children under the age of nine to work; those who were between nine and thirteen were expected to work at least forty-eight hours per week, and those between thirteen and eighteen sixty-eight hours (ibid., 293-294). The reality of child labour as given in *Shirley* is a social issue because it was the traditionally accepted custom to employ children in factories and to chastise them if they were late for work or produced dissatisfying results (ibid., 294).

The "normal working day" for children in the mills and factories commenced at dawn, ending as late as eight o'clock at night (ibid.). In volume one, chapter five, "Hollow's Mill", Charlotte accurately describes these working conditions: it is "in the middle of February", when "dawn begins to steal on night", when the children come running to the mill (Brontë, 2008:52). The morning which she describes is "rather favourable" to these children since they are only "nipped by the inclement air"; on previous days they had to go through "snow-storms", "heavy rain" and "hard frost" just to reach the mill (ibid., 52-53):

Rules, no doubt, are necessary in such cases, and coarse and cruel masters will make coarse and cruel rules, which, at the time we treat of at least, they used sometimes to enforce tyrannically;...[T]he children, released for half an hour from toil, betook themselves to the little tin cans which held their coffee, and to the small baskets which contained their allowance of bread. Let us hope they have enough to eat; it would be a pity were it otherwise.

A possible explanation for the reason why children were exposed to horrors at an early age is the stereotyped view Victorians had about childhood. For most of them, childhood was, like the rest of life, “nasty, brutish and short” (Wilson, 2003:260). Mortality was higher among children than adults, and from an early age children were expected to think and work in a “grown-up world” with the same attitude as the adults (ibid.). Children’s education also caused serious problems: educational reformers saw many schools as “greenhouses” where teachers forced children to “develop at a faster rate than they would in nature” (Bossche, 1999:85).

Victorian domesticity is another significant socio-cultural theme in the works of the Brontës. In both *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and *Shirley* there are portraits of middle-class domesticity. Indeed, it can be argued that *Shirley*, more than the other Brontë novels, shows how familiar its author was with the district where she had grown up, and with the people she had known all her life (Wilks, 1986:185). As a clergyman’s daughter, Charlotte was actively occupied with church affairs, becoming acquainted with her father’s curates, although she found most of them a great nuisance. In the novel, Caroline is assigned to similar tasks, which she often finds wearisome.

Charlotte uses working-class characters with the intention of inspiring sympathy, but the middle-class characters are often used satirically. The message that Brontë seems to be conveying is that Yorkshire in 1812 was no different in 1849. The working-class suffered appallingly, whilst the middle-class was too much engaged with trivial matters, which includes the tea-party described in volume one, chapter seven, “The Curates at Tea”. The narrator comments drily how, in 1812, Yorkshire people took tea “round the table; sitting well into it, with their knees duly introduced under the mahogany” (Brontë, 2008:97):

It was essential to have a multitude of bread and butter...it was thought proper, too, that on the centre-plate should stand a glass dish of marmalade; among the viands was expected to be found a small assortment of cheesecakes and tarts; if there was also a plate of thin slices of pink ham garnished with green parsley, so much the better.

This is in stark contrast with the picture of the starving children. Ironically, the curates, whose parochial duties should include reaching out to the poor, gorge themselves on this luscious meal more than the other characters. It is even more ironic that these particular men have such a high opinion of themselves, because curates were often seen as the least significant of ecclesiastical personages (Alexander & Smith, 2003:151).

Society in *Shirley* is presented as a contrast between the poor and the rich and also a portrait of how their lives are interwoven with each other's. The concerns of the present, which were manifested in the lack of stability and security of the Victorian period, are transformed into the Luddite riots, while the frivolities and snobbery of the middle-class are shown in a more comical light. Although Charlotte was anxious about the present, her study of the past made her take a more courageous view of the future because it taught her that there can always be hope, both for society and for her personal life.

City life in *Romola*, although dazzling and colourful, also seems shallow. This is illustrated in chapter ten, "Under the Plane-tree". Tito Melema, the main antagonist, is strolling through the streets during the festival of San Giovanni. The "stir" of festivities is felt "even in the narrowest side streets": regular "intervals of a Festa are precisely the moments when the vaguely active animal spirits of a crowd are likely to be the most petulant and most ready to sacrifice a stray individual to the greater happiness of the greater number" (Eliot, 1994:98). Here society in the city seems to be lewd and cruel, using individual people for sordid entertainment. At this particular festival, the crowd focuses on Tessa, the peasant girl with whom Tito engages in a relationship behind Romola's back, as an object of amusement.

George Eliot had an ambivalent attitude to city life because she was “more at home” in the country (Rignall, 2013:190). At thirty she had settled in London, seen as the “greatest metropolis in the world” in the nineteenth century (ibid.). As a metropolitan Eliot can be viewed as being part of the “larger social movement” of growing industrialization; it also shows her being engaged with culture in the narrow sense, as her favourite activities in London included attending concerts, the theatre, and visiting art galleries and museums (ibid.). How much she was involved with social issues in the city is uncertain, yet the festival scene in chapter 10 of *Romola* is of social and moral, and not cultural concern. This is indicated through the attention paid to the crowd’s lewd behaviour.

Furthermore, Helen Small observes that a great deal of Eliot’s work displays “comparable doubts” about “cosmopolitanism”: that is, a “wider experience of the world” that can “foster a more egalitarian allegiance to humanity” (Small, 2012:88). For Eliot, the city could function as a place of education, culture and intellectual entertainment, but as the festival scene shows, the majority of the Florentines are only familiar with the more shallow entertainments their city offers them.

Eliot’s interpretation of Italian society is a significant part of Victorian culture because Italy provided the Victorians with feelings of “sunniness”, “optimism”, and “belief in a liberal future” (Wilson, 2003:84). Yet to some extent the Italians had more to worry about than the British. In the 1840s Italy suffered from revolutionary conflict which focused especially on unification and independence. What the Victorians treasured the most about Italy was its Romantic tranquillity, which, in the 1840s, was not yet completely “destroyed by neglect, by war, and by modern industry” (ibid.).

Given the fact that Eliot had made only “three short visits” to Italy before *Romola* was published, it is all the more astonishing that she was able to be so accurate in the “elaborate and minutely detailed” descriptions of Florence (Huzzard, 1957:158). Her remarkable amount of research for *Romola* (she had apparently read over two hundred books before writing) is a reminder of the vigorous effort she had put into her own private studies, as well as an indication of the Victorians’ interest in and fascination with Italy (Brown, 1994:viii).

Warwickshire, her native county, also underwent social uncertainty during George Eliot's youth. It was common among the gentry (of which Eliot's family was part) to be "tradition-directed", where one's behaviour was "governed" by traditional values based on "lineage, birth, educational achievement, and family status", all of which were governed by God and state (Karl, 1995:6). From an early age Eliot lived her life as an individual who needed to "find ways in which expression can take on a social role" if she were to survive in a community where "individual need presses for expression against social sanctions" (ibid., 7). Although she set *Romola* in Renaissance Florence, she had also woven social aspects of contemporary society into the narrative.

As can be expected, factories are absent in *Romola* because it "imagines" pre-industrial life (Menke, 2013:154). Other than that, most critics still regard the novel to be a "Victorian drama in Florentine dress" because of issues such as social unrest and political chaos (Poston, 1966:355). It is thus important to look at meanings associated with the Renaissance in order to understand why it would interest a Victorian audience.

The first definition of "Renaissance" appeared as late as 1855, and ascribed the term to the period between 1400 and 1600, which saw one of the most "enormous" cultural movements in history (Black *et al.*, 1993:14). It became famous for the concept of "rebirth" due to a rediscovery of classical civilization and culture (ibid.,14-15). The growth of science and new religious ideas, particularly the Reformation, were also significant features of the age. Thus the Victorians could identify with Renaissance culture, as they too saw dramatic changes in art, society and religion that expanded on a global scale.

The description of the plague and social unrest in chapter forty-two of *Romola* is similar in tone to the despair of the workers in *Shirley* because the focus is on the suffering poor of Florence. Eliot writes that Florence was, at the end of 1496, in "the direst need, first of food, and secondly of fighting men" (Eliot, 1994:349-351):

Pale famine was in her streets, and her territory was threatened on all its borders....Every day the distress became sharper....Pestilence was hovering in the track of famine. Not only the hospitals were full, but

the courtyards of private houses had been turned into refuges and infirmaries; and still there was unsheltered want.

The focus in this passage is on the sufferers. Adjectives such as “direst”, “pale”, and “sharper” highlight the bitterness and despair of those who felt these hardships (ibid.).

The education of Romola de’Bardi contrasts with that of Helen Huntingdon and exceeds that of most young women from either the Renaissance or Victorian eras (Bonaparte, 1979:42). Her intellectual ability and secular character provide her with a sense of freedom, despite her being dependent on her blind father, Bardo de’Bardi. Bardo is comforted that she is “endowed” with academic taste which exceeds the “measure of women”, even if her brain is caught in “the woman’s delicate frame, which ever craves repose and variety, and so begets a wandering imagination” (Eliot, 1994:67).

Romola’s talent lies in her knowledge of the classics. Renaissance Italians believed that classical literature “provided a guide” for humanists to the understanding of “human action” and the ways in which man could “improve himself as a person” (Black *et al.*, 1993:17). For Eliot, the “highest gift” of classical literature was its “critical intelligence”, and it has been given a high place in *Romola* (Bonaparte, 1979:42)

Romola’s education is part of the Renaissance *humanista* (humanities) because Bardo values the importance of knowledge based on the *studia humanitatis*, with subjects including “literature, poetry and history” (Black *et al.*, 1993:17). He is strongly prejudiced against “studying metaphysics and theology”, and has channelled his religious bias into his children through education (ibid.). This explains his horror and disgust at his son, Dino, who abandoned his studies of the classics to become a Dominican monk, which Bardo interprets as a “betrayal” of his own “anti-clerical” views (Hartnoll, 1977:6).

Furthermore, the fact that Romola should have received significant tutoring is strong proof of the value placed on education in the Renaissance. Latin still remained the most important subject as it was used in numerous businesses and establishments, including the “government, business and the

Church” (Black *et al.*, 1993:40). In 1339, one hundred and fifty years before the events in *Romola* took place, there were “between 8,000 and 10,000 boys and girls” being educated in Florence (ibid.).

The inclusion of girls in Renaissance schools indicates that education was regarded to be important enough to be granted to everyone. And while *Romola* is a fictional character, there is mention in the novel of a real female scholar: Cassandra Fedele (1465-1558), a Venetian woman who was “renowned” for her knowledge of the classics (Brown, 1994:569). That *Romola* has strong ambitions to become “as learned as Cassandra Fedele” is mentioned in her conversation with her father in chapter five, “The Blind Scholar and his Daughter” (Eliot, 1994:52):

“But I will study diligently,” said *Romola*, her eyes dilating with anxiety. “I will try and be as useful to you as if I had been a boy, and then perhaps some great scholar will want to marry me...and he will like to come and live with you, and he will be to you in place of my brother...and you will not be sorry that I was a daughter.”

Romola’s anxiety in this speech reveals that her intellect has not been taken seriously because of her sex. When her marriage to Tito begins to deteriorate, she desires to go to Cassandra Fedele, whom she regards to be “the most learned woman in the world”, because Cassandra can teach her how “an instructed woman” can “support herself in a lonely life...” (ibid., 307). Up to now her education has only enabled her to act as “selfless amanuensis” to Bardo (Gargano, 2013:120). Her “short-lived fantasy” to become a “self-supporting scholar” suggests that she no longer gets intellectual instruction or support from men, but must rely on herself, as well as fellow women (ibid.).

I now consider in more general historical terms the plight of the poor in Britain, well-known to the two Brontës and Eliot, and including class distinction, factory work, the establishment of workhouses, education, and social Reform. The discussion helps suggest the social climate that informed the works discussed in this dissertation.

Rich and poor had certainly lived together “since the very beginning of society”, so that a community based on “inequality” did not suddenly spring out of nowhere during Queen Victoria’s reign (Dolin, 2009:57-58). The “idea of ‘class’” was still relatively new to the Victorians, as the whole

phenomenon developed in the late eighteenth century; the term “working class” was first coined by Robert Owen in 1813 (ibid., 57).

As soon it became clear that society was dividing explicitly into different classes, this led to conflict and chaos. The middle and aristocratic classes had the upper hand over those who belonged to the working class. The latter were believed to be also “made in God’s image and likeness”, but that didn’t prevent their being treated with appalling “severity” and cruelty by those who were better off (Wilson, 2003:152).

The attitude of treating the poorer classes as inferior persuaded better-off people to hypocritically mix religious feelings with the contemporary emphasis on class separation, resulting in their “banner of the poor”: “Know Thy Place” (Altick, 1973:174). Adding insult to injury, a popular hymn maintained the following (ibid.):

The rich man in his castle,
The poor man at his gate,
God made them, high or lowly,
And ordered their estate.

Many of the unsolved problems in Victorian society and economy began in the eighteenth century. Britain had been the world’s most “powerful” and influential nation at least since 1763; it occupied colonies as far away as the East Indies, large parts of the North American continent, and would come to occupy Australia and several countries in Africa (Hilton, 2008:3). But the unrest which followed in the wake of colonialism was so great that by 1850 the British, despite controlling a quarter of the planet, seemed to be like the “Ancient Romans before the fall”, ready to “revolt” (ibid.). As the disruption signalled by class distinction led to an increase of poverty and social unrest, Victorian society was seemingly headed on a course for disaster.

The effects of some of the biggest transformations which occurred at the end of the eighteenth century continued to be felt into Queen Victoria’s reign, and were caused by upheavals in Britain’s economy: output of products such as coal and wheat increased as much as three-and-a-half times between 1775 and 1830 (ibid.,4). In fact, the economy was so robust that Britain’s output exceeded

those of France, Germany, and Italy “combined” (James, 2006:18). Yet when Queen Victoria gained the crown, she also inherited a host of problems needing to be urgently solved: in 1819, the year in which she was born (along with George Eliot), the rise in poverty increased “sharply”, spells of crop failures caused “chronic food shortages”, and severe depressions, followed by violent clashes between the classes in the 1830s and 1840s, leading to several riots (Dolin, 2009:41,42).

The rest of society could not but be horrified at the conditions of the poor when they read about how, for example, over a million paupers starved to death between 1837 and 1844, culminating in the Irish famine of 1845 (Wilson, 2003:28). The three authors would also have been infuriated if they had heard Lord Melbourne quoting Sir Walter Scott (one of their favourite writers) with regards to the poor: “Why bother the poor? Leave them alone!” (ibid.). One wonders whether the Victorians ever took to heart the Scriptural proverb that claims that those who oppress the poor oppress the Maker.⁴

It was due to attitudes like those of Lord Melbourne that riots and revolts erupted during the early years of Queen Victoria’s reign. Undoubtedly the poor suffered atrociously at the hands of the upper classes. Many of them lived in houses of the most sordid and filthy kind: homes made of “mud, lath, and plaster, with floors of dirt or stone”, with virtually no sanitation (Altick, 1973:35). Those living on farms were usually worse off than others. This was due to the “spread of the enclosure system”, which limited the farmers’ lands by enclosing them with fences and hedges, leading to “scanty and monotonous” diets (ibid., 20, 36).

To prevent the poor from getting out of control (and, as a lesser concern, to try to make their conditions more bearable), the government issued the Poor Laws and Factory Acts. The Poor Laws insisted that a greater emphasis should be placed on building “a chain of workhouses” rather than on providing charity to the poor “in their own homes” (Wilson, 2003:12). However, the workhouses were generally considered to be institutions of social disgrace, and their conditions were almost as bad as those of the poor’s living conditions, if not actually worse. A clergyman named the Reverend H.H. Milman voiced his opinion that workhouses should be places of “hardship, of coarse fare, of

⁴Proverbs 14:31.

degradation and humility”, and must be “as repulsive as is consistent with humanity” (quoted *ibid.*).

Nonetheless, the Poor Laws were not altogether bad. Because they extended across the whole of Britain, they “did much to open up local government to new social groups” and at the same time provided the “local instruments of a system of devolved and permissive social legislation” that lasted until the end of Victoria’s reign (Hewitt, 2006:401). But despite these advancements, the workhouses, better known as the poorhouses, did more harm than good. Their inhabitants were still exposed to squalor and cruelty, with limited food and sanitation.

The Factory Acts were one of many concerns brought about by the growing Industrial Movement. Both the factory and machinery became “dominant” images of the Victorian age, as they presented change and the “development” of “new” social positions (*ibid.*, 398). Since millions of men, women and children worked in the factory, it is easy to see why it was such a dominant feature of nineteenth century society, albeit not a positive one. In fact, few people during the Victorian age regarded the factory as a creation to be proud of.

Factory workers were exposed to health hazards due to poor sanitation for as long as sixteen hours per day, labouring in hot air riddled with dust and germs (Altick, 1973:43). As machinery eventually began to replace the slowness of working-hands, more problems set in. The machinery often consisted of dangerous equipment that could, if not handled properly, permanently injure the workers, or kill them.

In addition to becoming starving farm or factory workers, the poor were also forced to labour under even harsher conditions in the factories. Among the most frequently used employees were “imported wagonloads” of orphans from major cities like London, Edinburgh, and Liverpool, disposed at factories with the intention to simply get rid of them (*ibid.*, 39). There was no question of getting these children to school. Being of the poorer classes, they were not given a decent education.

However, charity schools were in abundance, thus allowing some of the poorer children to receive a basic level of literacy, but a “state system” of education did not come into existence until the Education Act of 1870 (Ingham, 2008:48). Despite the lack of formal educational establishments, there

was an increasing growth of Sunday schools, especially for factory workers, where Bible study was the main subject (ibid.). Thus religious instruction, however limited, was the most important item on the curriculum for the poor.

The atrocious conditions to which the poor were exposed in the factories were among the biggest social problems the Victorians attempted to solve. These conditions were all unintended consequences of the Industrial Revolution. Although the revolution caused an impressive “*structural transformation*” (which had started in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries), it also caused an increase in population (Hilton, 2008:4). Unfortunately, it was especially among the poorer classes that the population boom manifested itself: as people grew in numbers, so did poverty (ibid., 7). Due to these issues, the First Reform Bill came to existence in 1832.

Although the First Reform Bill was issued five years prior to Queen Victoria’s accession, it remained a complex and controversial cause that lasted until the issue of the Second Reform Bill in the mid-1860s. One of the core aims of the Bill was to “exercise control” over the people under Queen Victoria’s reign (Wilson, 2003:10). As the British Empire claimed Scotland, parts of Ireland, the West and East Indies, and so forth, the government aimed to control these countries as effectively as they did Britain, even if they were initially regarded as a threat to the commonwealth (ibid., 10-11).

Out of this obsessive desire to control every aspect of society the government initiated several laws and other Acts. While the First Reform Bill was the most significant of these Acts, there were also “a series of alterations” throughout the years prior to and during Queen Victoria’s early reign, including the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829, the New Poor Law Act of 1834, and the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835, but they were noticed mostly for their “emotional and intellectual legacies” instead of their “modest immediate impact” on society (Hewitt, 2006:399).

The Bill itself had an unsuccessful start: it was initially “dissolved” and rejected by the House of Lords (Altick, 1973:86). The reaction from the public to this decision was a stormy one: several riots broke out simultaneously, the most notorious of these being the Chartist riots (ibid.). Although the Chartist riots lasted primarily through the 1830s, the effects were felt throughout the period. In

fact, the Brontës and George Eliot would have been particularly aware of the country's social unrest, as it was especially dominant in Yorkshire and Warwickshire where these authors spent their youths and young adulthoods.

Elizabeth Gaskell, a contemporary of Charlotte Brontë, gives an interesting picture of Yorkshire society in her biography *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, which describes how the lives of the rich and poor classes are interwoven together in the Brontës' hometown, much as in *Shirley*. Commenting on how certain people in the Brontës' district belong to the class whose members are "dwellers in the lonely houses far away in the upland district", she proceeds to mention how their solitariness makes them cherish "mere fancies until they become manias" (Gaskell, 1985:67-68):

And the powerful Yorkshire character, which was scarcely tamed into subjection by all the contact it made with "busy town or crowded mart," has before now broken out into strange wilfulness in the remoter districts....The amusements of the lower classes could hardly be expected to be more humane than those of the wealthy and more educated.

To summarise, Victorian society was confronted by numerous social problems and dilemmas which took decades to solve, and in some cases, remained unsolved in the following centuries. These problems were not confined to one class or group of individuals, but had an impact on everyone, to differing degrees. The three authors discussed in this dissertation explored and criticised some of these social dilemmas, and through their works they attempted to help others become aware of these problems. Victorian society was also influenced by significant historical events, which will now be examined.

Chapter 2: History

The theme of history is covered in greater detail in *Shirley* and *Romola* than in the *Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Although all three novels are part of the Victorian canon because they were published during Queen Victoria's reign, they use pre-Victorian historical and social themes helpful in understanding their own period. This complicates the important question that seems at first absurdly simple, namely: "When did the Victorian age begin" (Poston, 1993:3)?

Anne Brontë, while sharing in the Romantic sensibilities of Charlotte and Emily, makes little use of history in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, although the 1840s saw some of the most significant communal and cultural upheavals of Victorian England. It can still be argued that certain of the novel's themes show traces of having been influenced by these historical events.

Anne, like her brother Branwell and sister Emily, died at the end of the 1840s (Charlotte lived until 1855). Her writing career lasted through a "time of ferment, a time of revolution, a rebellion at home" (Drewery, 2013:339). Important historical events of this time included "slave emancipation, Chartism, Owenism, Millenarianism, the Great Electoral Reform, Corn Law Debates" and Industrialisation (ibid.). But it is evident in the novel that Anne distanced herself from these events. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, written in the epistolary form, ends in the year 1847, but the greater part of the narrative occurs twenty years earlier. Anne, in setting her novel in the past, is following the tradition of many Victorian novelists, though not for reasons of escaping the present, as in their case; quite the reverse.

Helen's favourite hobby, painting, reveals something of the cultural history of Victorian England. It was highly recommended as an accomplishment for women, and it plays an important role in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Anne uses Helen to present a "wonderful useful paradigm of the female artist": one who deliberately uses a "supposedly modest young lady's 'accomplishments' for unladylike self-expressions", creating "essential ambiguity" in her artistic career (Gilbert & Gubar, 2000:81):

Thus she produces a public art which she herself rejects as inadequate but which she secretly uses to discover a new aesthetic space for herself. In addition, she subverts her genteelly “feminine” works with personal representations which endure only in tracings, since her guilt about the impropriety of self-expression has caused her to efface her private drawings just as it has led her to efface herself.

Gilbert and Gubar suggest that Helen’s art is an escape for her from the oppressive society which forces her to suppress her female desires for true love and freedom. The fact that she “rarely refers to herself as an artist” in her diary after her marriage to Arthur proves that, as a wife, she has less time for her own pleasures than for her husband’s (Diederich, 2003:26).

It can be argued that art in the nineteenth century gave women a sense of freedom which they never had before. Victorian art history will provide “excellent” examples of the female artist in her “atelier”, even if it is only her boudoir or breakfast-room (Casteras, 2012:407). In rare cases some women artists even had studios of their own. Helen has one, which is “highly unusual”, thus testifying to her “professional status” (ibid., 409).

An example of Helen’s art being used to express her desire for both romance and freedom is found in chapter eighteen, which is a manifestation of both male and female desire (Poole, 1993:869). The scene shows a painting of an “amorous pair of turtle doves”, with a young girl kneeling underneath the tree, “gazing upward in pleased, yet earnest contemplation of those feathered lovers—too deeply absorbed in each other to notice her” (Brontë, 1998:150). For a girl, art was only one of the many accomplishments she should have mastered in order to impress a man sufficiently to marry her. But because Helen has her own studio, and regards this particular painting as her “master-piece”, it proves that she sees art as a profession and not as a tool to entrap a man with (ibid.).

Helen’s painting, which shows the girl’s “head thrown back and masses of fair hair falling on her shoulders”, brings to mind the style of Pre-Raphaelitism, which was founded in 1848, although there is no evidence that Anne knew anything about the movement, or saw any works by Pre-Raphaelite artists. (ibid.). But she appears to have shared their liking for free expressions of “strong emotions of love, hate, and remorse” which were transformed into “sensational narratives” in literature and visual art (Ingham, 2008:72). She incorporates, anachronistically, this tendency into Helen’s

artwork.

Helen's sketches of Arthur portray him in terms of the iconic Romantic image: the Byronic hero. He was a "brooding" and "sensual" individual, whom women saw as the "energy and freedom" that could help them escape from their circumstances (Gilbert & Gubar, 2000:81). But the Byronic hero also had a sinister side. He may have been handsome, rich, and mysterious, but he was often cruel. It was popular for authors of the day to give him a disability, often a "club foot" (like Byron himself), which in turn suggested a "satanic cloven hoof" (Ingham, 2008:74). He delighted in seduction, promiscuity and degradation. Helen discovers this to her cost when Arthur has affairs during their marriage, indulges in swearing, in drunkenness, and then destroys himself both physically and spiritually.

Gilbert's description of the different trademarks of Helen's portrait of Arthur, showing "a gentleman in the full prime of manhood", presents him as the brooding and dangerous Byronic hero (Brontë, 1998:44-45):

There was a certain individuality in the features and expression....The bright, blue eyes regarded the spectator with a kind of lurking drollery—you almost expected to see them wink; the lips...seemed ready to break into a smile...while the bright, chestnut hair...trespassed too much upon the forehead, and seemed to intimate that the owner thereof was prouder of his beauty than his intellect...and yet he looked no fool.

Helen's abrupt reaction to Gilbert's examination of the painting, denouncing it as "an act of very great impertinence", and being "seriously annoyed", indicates her sense of guilt and despair at having been seduced into matrimony with a Byronic villain (ibid., 45). Her annoyance is a possible indication that there is a strain in herself regarding their relationship.

It is interesting to note that although Anne's novel was published in 1848, the year saw a lack of historical paintings dealing specifically with the politics and social unrest of the 1840s (Briggs, 2011:639). Historical art is an indication of "engagement with class and radical politics" which is generally viewed as a "prerequisite for formal innovation and avant-gardism" (ibid.). Since Helen's paintings express her desire for a pure romantic relationship, as well as being the fruits of her

profession, this fact suggests to an extent that Anne is not concerned with historical issues. She simply wants to portray the troubled life of a woman who uses her art to escape from her restricted circumstances.

Despite not being a historical novel like *Shirley* or *Romola*, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* shows distinct traces of being influenced by nineteenth-century historical events. This is revealed particularly by Helen's artwork, which provides her with a sense of freedom, and it also proves that Romantic sensibilities (another pre-Victorian influence) not only impacted on nineteenth-century literature, but visual art as well.

If there is one concept which perfectly characterises British history in the nineteenth century it is that of change. No other period in English history before that of the Victorians saw so much "change and crisis" (Gilmour, 1986:4). One of the most significant examples of change was the development of the railways. They played a "crucial role" in industrialisation by "promoting partial integration of national culture" (Hewitt, 2006:406). Rise in use of the railway began in 1830; by 1846 more than three thousand miles of permanent tracks had been laid out, with an annual utilisation of twenty million passengers (Hilton, 2008:14-15). The growth of railway usage during the 1830s and 1840s became part of what was known as the "high noon of Victorian optimism", or the "Age of Equipoise", since all people felt they were living in a society that was constantly "in transition", which is rather ironic (Gilmour, 1986:4).

Railway growth was part of the Industrial Revolution and had a slow start, but within a few short years took over the whole country and age. Like everything else that was happening in Queen Victoria's England, the rise of industries led to an acute perception of "contrasts" (Williams, 1987:3). People were constantly aware of the contrast between rural, peaceful England, situated in the countryside, and the dark, foreboding, bustling cities which stank from filth and were darkened by the soot and smoke from the factories.

Most importantly, the contrasts reflected a permanent rift between the past and present (Altick, 1973:75). One of the most popular Victorian novelists, William Makepeace Thackeray, summarised

this rift in a striking manner, when he pointed out how the railroad started a “new era” for those “of a certain age” who belonged to both the “new time and the old one” (quoted in Altick, 1973:75):

We elderly people have lived in that prae-railroad, which has passed into limbo and vanished from under us. I tell you it was firm under our feet once, and not long ago. They have raised those railroad embankments up, and shut up the world that was behind them. Climb up that bank on which the irons are laid, and look to the other side—it is gone.

The uneasiness caused by the upheavals of Victorian history is effectively portrayed by Thackeray’s comment on how people of his generation felt themselves caught between the old and the new. It seems small wonder that many prominent novelists allowed their readers who were only familiar with railways, factories and social chaos, to revisit a “pastoral time”, an age in which an “originary decade” had taken on the mysterious air of a myth (Poston, 1999:13). Underlying everything was a feeling of nostalgia for what once was familiar, but was now part of history itself.

Furthermore, people sensed that something was missing. All the things which were once “firm” started to collapse (ibid.). As Victorian history continued on its course, people experienced a loss of emotion (most likely reflected in the religious doubt of the age), which was so highly valued by eighteenth century philosophers and historians, since it was “central” to “many definitions of civil society” (Ablow, 2013:194). If people could no longer respond emotionally to each other and to all the upheavals they were experiencing, then what other alternatives did they have? After all, to feel is “to know that one exists” (ibid., 193).

Something of this ambivalent attitude towards emotion is present in the opening chapter of *Shirley*, titled “Levitical”. Charlotte Brontë makes it clear in her opening paragraph that she is not going to speak of “late years—present years”, since these are “dusty, sun-burnt, hot, arid” (Brontë, 2008:5). The early years of Victorian history seemed to offer a promising sense of growth and development, but the social problems that came along with them resulted in a sense of dryness and sterility. People were unsure if society was really developing the way it should.

Deliberately playing on this loss of feeling, Charlotte presents the sentences of *Shirley*'s opening paragraph in a poetic style. She begins by making it clear that she is taking her readers to the "beginning of this century", and that she shall "evade the noon, forget it in siesta, pass the mid-day in slumber, and dream of dawn", but then immediately breaks off by reminding her Victorian readers that they must not give in to emotions through the reading of her novel (ibid.):

If you think, from this prelude, that anything like a romance is preparing for you, reader, you never were more mistaken. Do you anticipate sentiment, and poetry, and reverie? Do you expect passion, and stimulus, and melodrama? Calm your expectations, reduce them to a lowly standard. Something real, cool, and solid, lies before you; something unromantic as Monday morning....

Charlotte's strategic use of the catchphrases of popular sensibility, undermined through her addressing the audience in a teasing manner with her questions, as if at a public gathering, ironically undermines the contemporary emphasis on "solid" reality void of emotion. Even though based on "something real" and seemingly "unromantic", the novel contains a high degree of human passion. Her intentional focus on emotional reaction through these opening paragraphs stands out as something new in the history of the novel, primarily because fiction in the nineteenth century identified with both the "domestic sphere" and with the "cultivation and regulation of the emotions" (Ablow, 2013:198). The "training of the emotions" was one reason why novel writing and reading were so popular in the nineteenth century (ibid.). It forms part of the dramatic shift from the sensibility of the Romantics to that of the Victorians, since the Victorians were merely the heirs to the Romantic generation, adjusting it to their own contemporary culture (Altick, 1973:8).

A favourite critical practice among Victorians was "comparing the past and the present" (Reilly, 2013:635). Perhaps this explains why they always wanted to relate their period with that of the Romantics. Attributes from the Romantics were "absorbed" while others were completely rejected (ibid., 2). An example of what was popular was the impact made by the writings of William Wordsworth (1770-1850), who served as Poet Laureate during the early years of Queen Victoria's reign. His masterpiece, *The Prelude*, was published posthumously in 1850, and with it he had the "greatest" influence on Victorian authors than any writer before him (ibid.).

With *The Prelude* Wordsworth proved that he “understood the ‘vital connection’ of any human society with its past” (Horsman, 1990:297). Wordsworth was especially read and admired by George Eliot; she was in fact so well-read in British, French and German Romantic writers that some critics have considered her to be a “late Romantic” (Dolin, 2009:88).

Other reasons the Romantics were valued by the Victorians, besides their giving “primacy to the emotions and the freedom to express them”, were because they belonged to different times and held different views on society (Ingham, 2008:71). The times in which the Romantics lived made as big an impact on Victorian society as their literature.

In *Shirley* the past has been examined to gain deeper understanding of the present, and to foster hope for the future. It is as if Charlotte is attempting to convey the message to her readers that history has had many tumultuous events before, and despite these, the world has always managed to strive forward. Some Victorians could identify with the social unrest that occurred between 1811 and 1812 despite the thirty years’ difference, since they were either growing up during that time, or were themselves employed in the mills and factories.

Charlotte also makes use of historical accounts to convey the message regarding the human condition in the second chapter of *Shirley*. She mentions that the period in which her novel is placed was an “overshadowed one in British history”, which might equally suit as a description for the Victorian period, regardless of the period’s advantageous character (Brontë, 2008:26-27):

England, if not weary, was worn with long resistance; yes, and half her people were weary too, and cried out for peace on any terms. National honour was become a mere empty name of no value in the eyes of many, because their sight was dim with famine, and for a morsel of meat they would have sold their birthright.

Charlotte had good reason to use phrases such as “overshadowed” and “weary” to summarize the start of the period. It should be kept in mind that she wrote about the Luddite years *from* the perspective of the late 1840s, and could therefore see that the majority of crises at the start of the century had not completely disappeared.

In 1848, the year Charlotte had begun *Shirley*, revolutions erupted throughout most of Europe, shattering the relative calm (Harrison, 1999:19). Fortunately, England was spared from revolution, but the economy suffered such a great disruption that the phrase “the Hungry Forties” was coined, and the influential “Condition of England” novels, in which authors “expressed their apprehensions iconoclastically”, were published (ibid., 20). Therefore, it is appropriate for Charlotte to write a novel about the hungry Luddites from the perspective of the Hungry Forties.

The concept of the progress of history in the face of chaos would have been especially appealing to a Victorian public due to the troubling times they lived in. In this respect it can be argued that she could have chosen any period of history, as it would have suited her purpose. Therefore, one must have a detailed understanding as to why she specifically set the background of her novel in the years 1811 and 1812.

Personally, these years were important in her family’s history. As mentioned, her father was established in a Yorkshire parish in the county where the Luddite attacks occurred. The year 1812 was significant for his personal history, as he married Maria Branwell, and took on the happy but serious roles of husband and father.

The Reverend Brontë became interested in the social chaos of the West Riding, and in Haworth he participated in some political events, but did not overexert himself. Most of his opinions were voiced in articles he wrote for local newspapers. Some of his comments show him being, like Charlotte, actively engaged with the situation of the time, and he would eventually prove to be a valuable source during the writing of *Shirley*, not just because of his own witnessing of the riots, but because he also encouraged (and sometimes insisted) upon his children socialising with his curates, and becoming involved in the lives of the parishioners, from which interactions Brontë created her characters.

Charlotte did extensive research during the writing of *Shirley*. Elizabeth Gaskell recalls in her biography that Charlotte had consulted issues of the *Leeds Mercury* published between 1812 and 1814 “in order to understand the spirit of those eventful times” (Gaskell, 1985:378). The passages read like the writing of a historian because they contain significant details of which Charlotte could have known

of only through consulting sources. This is a reminder of her aim to understand the present better within the context of the past.

An example is found in the final chapter, amply titled “The Winding-up”. In this chapter Brontë gives a summary of the events of the summer of 1812. The narrator mentions that the nineteenth century “wantons in its giant adolescence”, and after listing the actions of Napoleon and Wellington respectively, which she labels “bloody battles and butchering generals”, she mentions the repealing of the Order of Council in June 1812 which re-opened the ports in Britain to trade again with North America and the rest of Europe (Brontë, 2008:532-534). Harbours like the one at Liverpool are once again stirring and snorting “like a river-horse roused amongst his reeds by thunder” due to economic prosperity (ibid.):

You know very well—such of you as are old enough to remember—you made Yorkshire and Lancashire shake with your shout on that occasion...it is dissonant to this day.... Some of the American merchants felt threatenings of apoplexy...all, like wise men, at this first moment of prosperity, prepared to rush into the bowels of speculation, and to delve new difficulties, in whose depths they might lose themselves at some future day.... At that epoch, in that single month of June, many a solid fortune was realised.

The remainder of the passage further states that social progress is an important part of history. Charlotte comments how, in the wake of the summer of 1812, “warehouses” become “lightened”, “ships” are “laden”, “work” abounds, “wages” increase, and for the moment the “good times seemed come” (ibid.). “These prospects”, according to the narrator, may be “delusive, but they were brilliant—to some they were even true” (ibid.).

In the context of social history as a process of upheavals followed by successes the Luddites can be viewed, in a limited way, as social “heroes”, a concept taken from Carlyle’s work *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* in which he states that the “great man” has “the power to articulate a particular perception of the world”, and “charismatically embodies a system of values” with which he “interpellates subjects who willingly identify with the evaluative perception of the world that the hero images” (Morris, 1999:288).

Shirley's remark that the actions of the labourers are not "a tilt of a tournament", but "a struggle about money, and food, and life" makes it clear that they are social heroes because they all share the same vision of justice (Brontë, 2008:288). Through their actions they have become an important part of the history of Yorkshire and the nineteenth century industrial struggles, despite appearing, on the surface, as "hardened Luddite machine breakers" (Capuano, 2013:232).

A sense of nostalgic longing for the past is neatly captured in the opening Prologue of George Eliot's *Romola*. Having visited Florence in 1860, she begins the novel *from* the perspective of the 1860s to recall how, "three centuries and a half ago, in the mid-springtime of 1492", the domes and church spires of Florence rose "where they rise today" (Eliot, 1994:3). In other words, Eliot is suggesting that in some respects few things have changed.

People from different classes and backgrounds, whether they be "nestling children", the "hard-handed labourer" or the "night-student, who has been questioning the stars or the sages, or his own soul", have been as much a part of other phases of history as that of the Victorians, and despite the contrasting cultural and social upheavals of the nineteenth century, the "great river-courses which have shaped the lives of men have hardly changed" (ibid.):

...those other streams, the life-currents that ebb and flow in human hearts, pulsate to the same great needs, the same great loves and terrors. As our thought follows close in the slow wake of the dawn, we are impressed with the broad sameness of the human lot, which never alters in the main headings of its history—hunger and labour, seed-time and harvest, love and death.

This paragraph, with its mention of the "main headings" in history, suggests that Eliot was trying to convince her Victorian audience that perhaps they focused so much on the chaotic, strange and sudden changes of their culture that they lost focus on what was really important: between the "flux of human things", they actually resembled the "men of the past" in their emotions and feelings (ibid.). This is a direct stab at the Victorian tendency to try and repress emotions.

As can be expected, *Romola* contains many references to Renaissance historical events. Historical fiction was quite popular in the nineteenth century, beginning with the bestselling works of

Sir Walter Scott (Brown, 1994:xi). The “mass-market appeal of costumed adventures set in times of old” had grown at a large rate between Scott’s death and *Romola*’s publication (ibid.). Victorian historical novels differed culturally from those of the Romantics due to the “specifically historical” detail Victorian novelists inserted into these novels, with a strong focus on “derivation of the individuality of characters from the historical peculiarity of their age” (Lukács, 1998:290).

Unfortunately, Eliot focused on presenting historical events in *Romola* on such a large scale that she began suffering from what appears to be psychosomatic ailments. Symptoms included “a depressing succession of headaches, nausea, and nervous debility”, and at certain times she was so ill that she nearly abandoned *Romola* (Brown, 1994:ix). Eliot’s partner, George Henry Lewes, concerned about her health and the outcome of the novel, asked her publisher to “discountenance the idea of a Romance being the product of an Encyclopaedia” in order to try and calm her down (quoted in Bonaparte, 1979:12). Perhaps the reason why *Romola* is such a complex novel was because Eliot utilized both literary works and historical figures to “generate a subtext” (Henry, 2011:328).

Many critics have tried to find out why Eliot suffered so much during the writing of what Victorians saw as “her greatest work” but which has since almost sunk without trace (Dolin, 2009:221). *Romola* has a unique place in the history of Eliot’s writing career. It has been described as the “first” of her “late novels” in which the “moral and intellectual tone is more emphatic” than in her previous works, and is an indication of her beginning to break “new fictional ground” in Victorian fiction because there is greater emphasis on the individual’s relationship with the rest of society (Sanders, 1980:9).

Eliot was aware that she was writing a complex novel that would appeal to a selected audience. She confessed to a friend that *Romola* would be “addressed to fewer readers than my previous works, and I myself have never expected—I might rather say *intended*—that the book should be as ‘popular’ in the same sense as the others” (quoted in Haight, 1985:360). *Romola* would eventually play an important role in her professional life because nearly two decades later she wrote that she was surprised that “anyone should think I had written anything better...I could swear by every sentence as having

been written with my best blood” (quoted in Brown, 1994:vii).

The novel was close to Eliot’s own personal history, which could explain her bout of psychosomatic illness. The concept for *Romola* came during Eliot’s visit to Italy in the spring of 1860. While in Florence, Lewes suggested that a novel about the life of Girolamo Savonarola (1452-98), the controversial Dominican priest, would make a good subject for historical fiction; Eliot “at once caught at the idea with enthusiasm” (quoted in Haight, 1985:326). As a historical character Savonarola was seminal to the novel’s concept of how history has an impact on future generations. At the same time he also came to have an influence on Eliot’s conscience. If she examined her life’s history thus far in the context of the values he presented, then it could have produced to a certain extent nervousness within her, which manifested itself in headaches and nausea.

As Eliot consulted various sources on and by Savonarola (including his sermons and his annotated Bibles) she realised that in him she had found someone “who helped her test out her own moral attitudes” through which she could “confront what she had been and what she had become” (Karl, 1995:337). In other words, *Romola* caused her anxiety “because for the first time fictionally she hoped to heal the divisions between public and private in herself by defining what she was through Romola and the figure of Savonarola” (ibid.).

As Charlotte Brontë did in *Shirley*, Eliot reveals that the time in which *Romola* is set is one of uncertainty, like the nineteenth century. In chapter twenty-one she comments on Italy at the end of 1492: the country was “enjoying a peace and prosperity unthreatened by any near and definite danger” (Eliot, 1994:198). But there is something in the atmosphere which is troublesome. “Altogether”, the Renaissance world which Eliot summarises does not seem respectable at all (ibid., 198-199):

... this world, with its partitioned empire and its roomy universal Church, seemed to be a handsome establishment for the few who were lucky or wise enough to reap the advantages of human folly: a world in which lust and obscenity, lying and treachery, oppression and murder, were pleasant, useful, and, when properly managed, not dangerous. And as a sort of fringe or adornment to the substantial delights of tyranny, avarice, and lasciviousness, there was the patronage of polite learning and the fine arts...

The previously quoted paragraph could describe the world of today quite accurately. It may also have been a proper description of the Victorian world Eliot knew and therefore functioned, to a certain degree, as a shocking reminder that throughout history the world has been filled with corruption, shallowness and evil.

Savonarola was an important social and historical commentator and this role is clearly portrayed in *Romola*. He was shocked by the hypocrisy and corruption of the Church of his day as well as by the low moral standards of Florence. He voiced his concerns in several sermons. In one delivered at the end of 1492 (the year in which *Romola* opens) Savonarola preached sternly against Florence's vices. The city had, he accused, become "infamous throughout Italy" for the "accursed vice of sodomy" and perpetrators of this act should be "stoned and burned" (quoted in Henry, 2011:327). He also demanded Florentines to "remove from among yourselves these poems and games and taverns and the evil fashion of women's clothes" (quoted *ibid.*).

Savonarola attempted to reform Florentines' moral behaviour, especially the youth's. But the majority of these boys were infamous for their "unruly, vicious behaviour", and would often persuade others to join them to indulge in their "same mischievous and malicious tendencies under a façade of Christian purity" (*ibid.*, 330). This could be a reason why the youth may not have been the best people to help Savonarola carry out his Bonfire of Vanities (this will be discussed in the next chapter).

Savonarola's role as social commentator during this unsettling time in Florence is highlighted in his sermon in chapter twenty-four. Before that, in chapter twenty-one, titled "Florence Expects a Guest", Eliot describes the visit of the French King Charles VIII to Florence, which occurred at the end of 1494. In Eliot's presentation of this historical event it becomes evident that her extensive research for *Romola* was not in vain. She captures the atmosphere in a powerful way, which is quite remarkable considering that this is her first historical novel. According to Eliot, "A great change had come over the prospects of Florence" during this time (Eliot, 1994:195):

...as in the tree that bears a myriad of blossoms, each single bud with its fruit is dependent on the primary circulation of the sap, so the fortunes of Tito and Romola were dependent on certain grand political and

social conditions which made an epoch in the history of Italy. In this very November...the spirit of the old centuries seemed to have re-entered the breasts of the Florentines.

It is this spirit of the old centuries that inspires Savonarola to preach reformation within the Church. Remarks by Eliot regarding the turbulent state of the Church at this time include the following (ibid., 199):

From the midst of those smiling heavens [Savonarola] had seen a sword hanging—the sword of God’s justice—which was speedily to descend with purifying punishment on the Church and the world...He believed that God had committed to the Church the sacred lamp of truth for the guidance and salvation of men, and he saw that the Church, in its corruption, had become a sepulchre to hide the lamp...Had the world then ceased to find a righteous Ruler? Was the Church finally forsaken?

In his sermon in chapter twenty-four Savonarola does not hide his concerns regarding the troubled times he and his fellow Florentines are experiencing. In the novel, he confronts corrupted priests, who maliciously scoff that they “may sin behind the veil, and who shall punish us?” (ibid., 215):

“To you, I said, the presence of God shall be revealed in his temple as a consuming fire, and your sacred garments shall become a winding-sheet of flame, and for sweet music there shall be shrieks and hissing...and for the breath of wantons shall come pestilence...For God will no longer endure the pollution of his sanctuary: he will thoroughly purge his Church....And for four years I have preached in obedience to the Divine will: in the face of scoffing I have preached three things, which the Lord has delivered to me: that in these times *God will regenerate His Church*, and that *before the regeneration must come the scourge over all Italy*, and that *these things will come quickly*.”

To a certain extent Savonarola’s sermon anticipates the Reformation, which is one of the most important events in both Christian and Western history. It did come “quickly”, within twenty-five years after this sermon. Like Martin Luther, Savonarola attacked the Church for its corruption and for offering salvation in a shallow manner. The whole of Italy, Savonarola claims, has “polluted” God’s sanctuary and Florence, God’s “chosen city”, is mercifully given a chance to repent (ibid., 216-217):

“For the sword is hanging from the sky; it is quivering, it is about to fall! *The Sword of God upon the earth, swift and sudden!*....But thou, O Florence, take the offered mercy. See! the Cross is held out to you: come and be healed....And now put away every other abomination from among you, and you shall

be strong in the strength of the living God. Wash yourselves from the black pitch of your vices...put away the envy and hatred that have made your city as a nest of wolves.”

Savonarola’s preaching came at a terrible price. The state and Church of the day despised him for his lashing out against them and their false accusations and torturing of him led to his subsequent execution. Eliot’s remarks on his death indicate that, as a historical figure, she admired him for his outspokenness against vice and corruption, even if she was uncomfortable with him as a religious figure. In summary of the research she has done on his life Eliot explains that there is “no jot of worthy evidence that from the time of his imprisonment to the supreme moment, Savonarola thought or spoke of himself as a martyr” (ibid., 541):

The idea of martyrdom had been to him a passion dividing the dream of the future with the triumph of beholding his work achieved. And now, in place of both, had come a resignation which he called by no glorifying name. *But therefore he may be the more fully be called a martyr by his fellow-men to all time.* For power rose against him not because of his sins, but because of his greatness—not because he sought to deceive the world, but because he sought to make it noble....

This portrait of the course of Savonarola’s life, and it’s becoming part of history, indicates a life of hardship succeeded by glory. Since the Fall of Man history has been made through suffering, yet out of that suffering came numerous victories. The centuries leading up to the nineteenth, and the two centuries which have thus succeeded it, have seen figures like Savonarola: ordinary human beings who stood up for the truth. Although their actions cost them their lives, they gained greatness in the wake of their death and it is this greatness which has caused them to become admired historical figures.

As mentioned in the first chapter, many of the issues which the Victorians eagerly tried to solve began in the eighteenth century well before Queen Victoria’s reign. As far back as the 1780s there was a “moral reaction” in contemporary British manners, which functioned as a foreshadowing of the Evangelicalism which dominated the early part of Victorian culture (ibid.).

The first decade of the Victorian age (1837 to 1847) is noted for the suddenness in which so many of these changes occurred. From a social perspective there came an abrupt change in focus from

the hierarchal to the “class-based” system, bringing the middle-class to power, ruled by a “proto-modern bureaucratized state” (Hewitt, 2006:397-398). Despite all of these advantageous changes, the settlement of the 1830s was, in general, “tightly restricted” in both intent and scope (ibid., 398).

From a historical viewpoint the First Reform Bill of 1832 can be regarded as a culmination of the “various reforming clusters” of the decades preceding Queen Victoria’s accession to the throne, since it gave a “striking contrast between the richness” of the categories of “political history”, including “the growth of political and labour unions”, “Chartism”, and the “beginning of systematic government intervention in prison conditions, education, welfare, working hours, and public order” (Poston, 1999:5).

When one explores the cultural themes found in these three Victorian novels one finds them presenting a “striking contrast”: the rich versus the poor, the different upheavals in history, the conflict between religion and scepticism, the discord between the sexes, and the opinion of the critics and reading public clashing with the original aims of the author (ibid.). It is important to look at certain contrasting upheavals in history to understand why they made such a significant impact on Victorian culture.

The burgeoning of Britain’s economic growth began during the late eighteenth century, and continued to grow during Queen Victoria’s reign. Despite the farmers’ suffering, they were successful enough to ensure that an “extension of arable farming” existed in England, leaving a “benign legacy” which lasted until the end of the nineteenth century (Hilton, 2008:5). Yet the examples of poverty mentioned in the first chapter directly contrast with these economic boons, as the growing industries did not prove advantageous to all counties in England.

For example, Warwickshire, with Birmingham as the centre of growth, underwent structural changes “*before* 1760 and *after* 1850, but not between” (ibid., 12). It is small wonder, then, that the early years of Queen Victoria’s reign saw so much unhappiness among the working classes, as development was unevenly spread across the counties.

The Victorians began to regard religion, gender and culture in a new light, which proves that they were affected by historical changes, but the conditions of being human; the yearning for a place of longing and love, have always remained the same and will continue to do so until the end of history.

Taking the above into account, one might say that the main purpose of history in these three novels, particularly *Romola*, is to indicate, as Felicia Bonaparte explains, that mankind has been on a “universal quest” which began at “the dawn of time and continues still” (Bonaparte, 1979:26). As a novelist Eliot could also have wished to use her work to create a “distinctly modern epic” because the novel was seen as the “characteristic voice of the modern age” (ibid., 27).

Victorian history provides us with striking contrasts. The stable past was at war with the changing present in order to try and gain some control over the uncertain future. One of the areas which saw some of the most controversial changes was religion, which will now be discussed.

Chapter 3: Religion

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the Victorian age experienced stark contrasts, but religion perhaps produced more conflict than any other aspect of culture. “No subject”, according to John Maynard, “occupied the Victorians, certainly not identity politics, or sexuality, or the empire, or even politics”, as much as religion did (Maynard, 2002:192). On a personal level, many Victorians, including the three authors discussed in this dissertation, experienced periods of piety as well as bouts of religious crises and doubts, the latter haunting George Eliot until her death. This suggests the importance of religion as an autobiographical source in an author’s works.

Like her sisters, Anne Brontë examined in an acute way the behaviour of hypocritical clergymen. Reverend Millward, in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, is pompous and snobbish. Gilbert mentions that Reverend Millward is a “man of fixed principles, strong prejudices, and regular habits—intolerant of dissent in any shape, acting under a firm conviction that *his* opinions were always right, and whoever differed from them, must be, either most deplorably ignorant, or wilfully blind” (Brontë, 1998:17). The abuse of dissenting denominations will be discussed below.

Gilbert also hints that Revd Millward’s religious views are of a strict Evangelical nature, forbidding the slightest form of merriment or innocent pleasure. He confesses that he had regarded Reverend Millward “with a feeling of reverential awe”, but lately this attitude has changed, as Reverend Millward has always been a “strict disciplinarian” (ibid.). His account shows a satirical intent on Anne’s part:

... and had often sternly reproved our juvenile failings and peccadillos; and moreover, in those days whenever he called upon our parents, we had to stand before him, and say our catechism, or repeat ‘How doth the little busy bee’, or some other hymn, or—worse than all—be questioned about his latest text and the heads of the discourse, which we could never remember.

Anne Brontë shows that religion is one of the most important social and personal concerns in life and literature. She discusses it in both theological and spiritual terms, ranging from the comforting to the controversial, revealing that it was a matter of great concern for her and that she wanted to share this

message with her readers. Theological aspects include dogmas and creeds as given in the Bible and the established Church; yet an individual's spiritual interpretation of religious concerns may differ considerably. In the case of Anne, although she was a devout Anglican who knew the Bible well, she questioned some of the dogmas of her day, especially that of eternal damnation.

While Anne shows that for her religion was not without problems, she does not criticise Christ. Indeed, she wanted to emphasise her belief in what a Moravian minister, Reverend James la Trobe, described as the "sweet views of salvation, pardon, and peace in the blood of Christ", accepting "His welcome to the weary and heavy laden sinner"; although la Trobe thought that she regarded them "more through the law than the gospel, more as a requirement from God than His gift in His Son" (quoted in Barker, 1995:281). This may be because of her negative attitude towards Calvinism, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Anne felt that problems with religion came about when it was presented by clergymen who preached the gospel according to their own views, something seen in Reverend Millward. All "theological treatises" and "handbooks on sermon style" were produced by men, so women felt excluded from voicing their own opinions on biblical and Christian doctrine, since at this time the Anglican Church and other denominations forbade females to preach (Stolpa, 2003:225). Virtually all men believed, in the words of John Ruskin, that theology was the "one dangerous science for women" (quoted in Stolpa, 2003:225). Anne's ambitious attempt to present her work as an "exemplary sermon" is evidence of her intention to insert a female voice into an overtly "male genre" and thus show the clergymen that women could also be used in God's ministry (ibid.).

Reverend Millward's hypocrisy reaches its climax in his treatment of Helen. He participates in the gossip and judges her as "hardened" when he informs her about the rumours (ibid., 92). When he feels that she finds his advice offensive, he becomes determined that his daughters must have no contact with such a sinful woman. He is the sort of clergyman who looks down on others from his pedestal, ignoring his own sins and faults and always criticizing them for theirs. Ironically, he believes that one's behaviour in life is influenced by society's "narrow conventions" whereas Helen believes that

the “expectation of a heavenly reward” should regulate one’s character (Langland, 1989:126).

Not all churchmen were against Dissenters. With an Anglican clergyman for a father, the Brontë children were well grounded in Christianity and church dogmas, and were naturally aware of the Dissenters and Methodists in their village, Haworth. Following the Catholic Emancipation Act in 1829, members of the Roman and Dissenting churches were granted access to “civil liberty” and “public office” (Barker, 1995:216). Reverend Patrick Brontë was one member of the Church of England who had tried to keep the relationship between Anglicans and Dissenters “open and mutually beneficial” (ibid.). Nevertheless, the relationship in question was, on the whole, a stormy one, since the Dissenters attempted to disestablish the English Church (ibid., 240-241).

Mrs Brontë died in 1821 when the children were still very young. Shortly before her death her unmarried sister, known as Aunt Branwell, moved into the house to take care of them. A “strict aunt”, her religious background was that of a fundamental Methodist, although she became an Anglican after moving in with her sister’s family (Craik, 1988:146). Since her nieces and nephew satirised Methodism in their juvenilia, it suggests that they were not very keen about it: they viewed it more negatively than the other Dissenting denominations in Haworth, such as the Baptists. For them, Methodism was “equated with hypocrisy”: its followers served as figures of “either contempt or fun” (Barker, 1995:251).

There has been much speculation whether or not Aunt Branwell was “the source” that brought Calvinism into her nieces’ and nephew’s lives (Winniffrith, 1977:29). To say that it upset Anne and Charlotte would be an understatement. These two in particular were haunted and at times terrified by the question of whether they were “saved or not saved” (Ingham, 2008:185).

Aunt Branwell probably exhibited characteristics of stern Methodism in her sister’s household, which could have made the Brontë children worried about Calvinism. Methodists aimed to “secure” a place for their children in heaven and the practice of frequent beatings, used to remove sin from “juvenile” hearts, was not uncommon (Harrison, 1948:33). How often the Brontë children were beaten, if at all, is not known, but they were probably well grounded in the Methodist teaching of suffering:

God sometimes had to deal harshly with His children, so as to save the soul from being “lost for ever in torment” (ibid., 50). But if children struggled to grow spiritually through their hardships, this might explain their fear of being among the reprobates of Calvinistic doctrine.

Calvinism had a major impact on Victorian Christianity and its impact was common in both Anglican and Dissenting churches (Winnifrith, 1977:29). The Calvinistic dogma that was the most “openly” talked about was eternal damnation (ibid., 32-33). Given the high mortality rate of the Victorian age, there was an urge to warn people about the threat of hell from as early an age as possible.

Calvinism claims that souls have been predestined or “chosen” by God to be either saved or damned; God is “omnipotent” and “unalterable” in His decrees, and “sufficient grace and perseverance” are given to those elected to eternal life (Alexander & Smith, 2003:116)⁵. Anne believed that it was right for a just God to punish sinners, but she could not accept that an all-loving God would allow this punishment to last for eternity. Her brother Branwell, also terrified by Calvinism, described himself as the “*dead alive*”, and spoke rather contemptuously about the Calvinistic Deity, remarking that “though [God] loves our race so well...[He] hurls our spirits into Hell!” (quoted in Alexander & Smith, 2003:116.).

Anne tried to lessen her fears by adopting an Armenian approach. She was “calmly confident” about man’s “ability” to “choose and earn salvation” (Ingham, 2008:186). But Calvinism troubled her conscience to such an extent that she nearly suffered a nervous breakdown in her teenage years. Juliet Barker claims that Brontë had struggled with religious doubts while at school and that Aunt Branwell may not be the true cause of Brontë’s Calvinistic fears (Barker, 1995:282).

Furthermore, the Moravian minister who visited Anne, Reverend James la Trobe, described the school as an institution “where a Christian influence pervaded the establishment and its decided discipline” (quoted in Barker, 1995:282). The school was located at Dewsbury, where a number of clergymen created a religious atmosphere of a “hard-line” kind, as well as being “unduly censorious in

⁵John Calvin (1509-1564) took his doctrine of pre-election from Romans 9, and wrote extensively about it in his famous work, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book Third, chapters 21-24. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Translated by Henry Beveridge. Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers Inc. 2008, 606-651.

its attitudes” (ibid.). The fact that Brontë sought spiritual advice from a Moravian minister proves that she “rejected” the doctrines of the Dewsbury clergymen, since they increased her Calvinistic fears (ibid., 283).

The Moravian minister whom Brontë contacted encouraged her to adopt a controversial and, for many Christians, heretical doctrine: Universal Salvation, which states that hell is “purgative and therefore temporary”, and that ultimately every being shall obtain salvation (Alexander & Smith, 2003:516). This doctrine was not new to Anne: shortly before her death she confessed that she had “cherished” since childhood the belief that everyone will be saved, “with a trembling hope at first, and afterwards with a firm and glad conviction of its truth” (quoted in Alexander & Smith, 2003:516).

By her mid-twenties Anne was cured of her fear of Calvinism and even denounced it as “uncharitable and irreligious” (Barker, 1995:433). During this time she wrote a daring poem titled “A Word to the Elect”.⁶ Anne scornfully addresses the elect in the first stanza, who can “rejoice to think *yourselves* secure” in the “grace unsought”, and who are grateful that their “black hearts” are made pure, destining their “earth-born souls” to “shine” in heaven (Brontë, 1912:369). In stanzas two to four she lashes out against what she interpreted as spiritual elitism (ibid., 370):

But is it sweet to look around, and view
Thousands excluded from that happiness
Which they deserved, at least, as much as you,—
Their faults not greater, nor their virtue less?

And wherefore should you love your God the more,
Because to you alone His smiles are given;
Because He chose to pass the *many* o’er,
And only bring the favoured *few* to heaven?

⁶The other title for this poem is “A Word to the Calvinists”.

And, wherefore should your hearts more grateful prove,
Because for ALL the Saviour did not die?
Is yours the God of justice and of love?
And are your bosoms warm with charity?

Anne's criticism of Calvinism seems extreme since some Christians are comforted by it. Remarks about how others are "excluded" from the Calvinists' "happiness" and how God passed over "*many*" to let only a "*few*" into heaven show that she thought Calvinists presented Christianity as exclusive and limited in membership. Her most ferocious attack occurs in stanza six (ibid.):

And when you, looking on your fellow-men,
Behold them doomed to endless misery,
How can you talk of joy and rapture then?—
May God withhold such cruel joy from me!

Anne's hope in Universalism is expressed in the remainder of the poem. She claims in stanza seven that she is aware that "none deserve eternal bliss", but the grace of God's mercy is unlimited because "none shall sink to everlasting woe,/That have not well deserved the wrath of Heaven" (ibid.). If "all have died in Adam", all shall "live" in Christ and shall "ever round His throne abide,/Eternal praise to give", and her greatest hope is that

[Even] the wicked shall at last
Be fitted for the skies;
And when their dreadful doom is past,
To life and light arise.

In chapter seventeen Helen tells her aunt, Mrs Maxwell, that she likes Arthur and that if he had her "always at his side he should never do or say a wicked thing, and that a little daily talk with [her] would make him quite a saint" (Brontë, 1998:141). Aunt Maxwell warns that "unprincipled mothers *may* be anxious to catch a young man of fortune" for their daughters, and that these girls "*maybe* glad to win the smiles of so handsome a gentleman", but to dismiss his sins as "venial errors" is naïve (ibid., 142). Helen then gives the first hint that she has liberal religious views, claiming that she would do "much"

for the “salvation” of Arthur, and that she “will save him” from vices and friends that lead him on the wrong path (ibid.). This unsettles her aunt, because it implies that, in order to save a sinful husband, the pious Helen must unite herself to him and his sinful nature, which can cause emotional turmoil.

The big confrontation on religion between Helen and her aunt occurs in chapter twenty, when they are again discussing Arthur’s faults. Aunt Maxwell threatens that “thoughtlessness” will not be ignored by God (ibid., 166-167):

“And, remember, Helen... ‘The wicked shall be turned into hell, and they that *forget* God!’⁷ ...how will it be in the end, when you see yourselves parted for ever; you, perhaps, taken into eternal bliss, and he cast into the lake that burneth with unquenchable fire—there for ever to—”

“Not for ever,” [Helen] exclaimed, “‘only till he has paid the uttermost farthing,’ for ‘If any man’s work abide not the fire, he shall suffer loss, yet himself shall be saved, but so as by fire,’ and He that ‘is able to subdue all things to Himself, will have all men to be saved,’ and ‘will in the fulness of time, gather together in one all things in Christ Jesus, who tasted death for every man, and in whom God will reconcile all things to Himself, whether they be things in earth or things in Heaven’”⁸.... I have searched [the Bible] through, and found nearly thirty passages, all tending to support the same theory....I would not publish [the theory] abroad, if I thought any poor wretch would be likely to presume upon it to his own destruction, but it is a glorious thought to cherish in one’s own heart, and I would not part with it for all the world can give!”

On the basis of the above passage, critics have accused Anne of “*misinterpreting the Bible*”, but any interpretation is never completely “definitive” (Langland, 1989:127). Interpretation is to “read with as full a contextual knowledge as possible” (ibid.). This is what Anne does with the biblical passages Helen is quoting, and to understand Brontë’s doctrines of Universalism, one has to look at the attitude with which it was interpreted to reveal that the debate was part of Victorian religious culture.

Some nineteenth-century theologians found the interpretation of the Greek word αἰώνιος (‘aionios’) troublesome. It can be translated as “eternal”; although Helen claims that she does not know

⁷Psalm 9:17.

⁸The editor of the edition of *Tenant* used for this dissertation, Herbert Rosengarten, states in his annotation that Helen “adapts and conflates” the following verses: Matthew 5:26; 1 Corinthians 3:14-15; Philippians 3:21; 1 Timothy 2:4; Ephesians 1:10; Hebrews 2:9 and Colossians 1:20 (Rosengarten, 1998:478).

the original Greek⁹, her mentioning of it reveals that Anne was “aware” of the eschatological debate with regard to eternal damnation (Thormählen, 1993:838-839). It is part of the Victorian obsession with the religious question of “who shall be saved”, which was discussed in all major denominations: the orthodox belief that all of the wicked were “destined for everlasting torment” haunted thousands of people (ibid., 839).

Anne never denied the existence of hell. In chapter thirty-nine, little Arthur bewails the fact that his “papa’s wicked”, as he does not “want him to go to hell” (Brontë, 1998:348). Helen comforts him by reminding him that God alone will “judge us by our own thoughts and deeds, not by what others say about us” and that there is “hope that perhaps his papa would alter and become good before he died” (ibid.). If Anne entirely rejected hell she would not have shown Helen teaching Arthur about it. The difference is that she believed that hell’s punishment would not last forever: she saw it more as a type of “temporary clearing house” that would purify sinners for heaven (Ingham, 2008:186).

In addition to the Biblical passages quoted by Helen it is possible that Anne was also influenced by the words of St Peter. He wrote that faith must be “tried with fire” so that it “might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ”¹⁰. While he is referring to the believer’s test of faith in this life, Anne could have interpreted it as a trial also assigned to those who had to undergo temporary punishment in hell so that they could be fit for heaven, making it similar to the Catholic doctrine of Purgatory. She may also have interpreted St Peter’s words about how God is “not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance”¹¹ within the framework of Universalism.

Arthur Huntingdon’s situation is a reflection of Anne’s hope that no soul shall be utterly condemned. Yet his faults cannot go unpunished: he drinks, swears, commits adultery and casts Helen out of his life, leaving her no choice but to flee with their son. Near the end of the novel she receives news that Arthur is dying. Hastening to his sickbed, she hopes that she can convince him to repent:

⁹Brontë, 1998:167.

¹⁰ 1 Peter 1:7.

¹¹2 Peter 3:9.

she still wants to spare him from the punishment in hell, even though she believes it is only temporary.

Arthur's stubbornness is evident in his sarcastic remark that she commits "an act of Christian charity, whereby you hope to gain a higher seat in Heaven for yourself, and scoop a deeper pit in hell for me" (Brontë, 1998:409). Helen warns him that there is "always a chance of death" and one must always "live with such a chance in view", but he still remains adamant (ibid., 413). When the physician confirms that there is no hope for Arthur, he breaks down in spiritual despair.

One reason why religion is an important theme in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is that, since women were forbidden to become ministers, some of them used novels as "an opportune 'pulpit'" with which they could "preach" moral sermons (Stolpa, 2003:227). Helen is portrayed as a type of Universalist clergyman during Arthur's last days. Her conversation with him comes across as that between a Christian and an atheist. Arthur scoffs that heaven is "all a fable" and that since he cannot see or hear God, he regards Him as "only an idea" (Brontë, 1998:425, 429). His remarks are indicators of the religious doubt of the period.

Helen's argument, on the other hand, is Anne's way of confronting the concept of theology being the "last bastion of the male intellect" (Poole, 1993:869). When Arthur cries out that Helen will cease to care about him after she has "secured your reward, and find yourself safe in Heaven, and me howling in hell-fire", she tells him that if she "*could* look complacently on in such a case, it would be only from the assurance that you were being purified from your sins....But are you *determined*, Arthur, that I shall not meet you in Heaven?" (Brontë, 1998:425). The emphasis on "determined" is evidence of Anne's Armenian belief since Helen is implying that Arthur must chose salvation for himself.

Despite some Christians' criticism of Anne's apparent heterodoxy, comments of an orthodox nature are also made during Arthur's illness. He treats Helen like a priest, pleading with her to give him absolution, but she makes it clear that no man "can deliver his brother" because it "cost the blood of an incarnate God, perfect and sinless in Himself, to redeem us from the bondage of the evil one;—let Him plead for you" (ibid., 430).

When Arthur bewails that he is too sinful for heaven, Helen pleads that he must think about God's goodness, and be "grieved to have offended Him", and if he could "*sincerely* repent", then he shall receive forgiveness (ibid., 429). Her summary about God in reply to Arthur's disbelief is one of the most moving statements made in a novel written during a period of religious doubt (ibid.):

"God is Infinite Wisdom, and Power, and Goodness—and LOVE; but if this idea is too vast for your human faculties—if your mind loses itself in its overwhelming infinitude, fix it on Him who condescended to take our nature upon Him, who was raised to Heaven even in His glorified human body, in whom the fulness of the godhead shines."

It is at Arthur's death that Anne makes her final and most poignant plea for Universal Salvation. Helen exclaims that it "would drive [her] mad" to think that Arthur's "poor trembling soul was hurried away to everlasting torment", but she holds fast to the hope that "penitence and pardon" might have reached Arthur in his last moments, and, "through whatever purging fires the erring spirit may be doomed to pass", God hates "nothing that He hath made" and "will bless it in the end!" (ibid.)

Helen's belief in universalism, as illustrated by the previous paragraph, is of "*personal* comfort" because she must "do her utmost" to the end to persuade others to "seek God's help and forgiveness" (Thormählen, 1993:840). Her focus is on the "powerful but limited issue" of religion being a "moral framework for life", though her message "does not have much of a doctrinal" nature other than that "moral conduct married to religious belief saves in this life and the next" (Maynard, 2002:197-198). She reminds herself of her belief in heaven when she discovers Arthur's infidelity and tries to come to terms with her situation. The "natural" setting in which she finds herself "suddenly becomes transfused with supernatural meaning", signifying the pantheistic belief of the Romantics that nature consists of "harmony and a divine order" (Duthie, 1986:110-111).

However, when Helen preaches of her hope in heaven to male characters, they find little joy in it. Shortly before Arthur's death, she feels that she has spoken "in vain" because he "cannot trust, or will not comprehend" such a comfort (Brontë, 1998: 430). Walter Hargrave is a character in love with Helen who tries to persuade her to begin a relationship with him after she discovers Arthur's adultery. But as a true Christian she refuses to commit the same sin. When Walter dismisses her piousness as

“wild fanaticism” she tries to console him with her belief that if it be the will of God that one should “sow in tears” in this life, it is only so that one may “reap in joy” in the life to come, as it is God’s will that they “should not injure others by the gratification” of earthly pleasures (ibid., 321):

...and if I were alone in the world, I have still my God and my religion, and I would sooner die than disgrace my calling and break my faith with Heaven to obtain a few brief years of false feeling and fleeting happiness—happiness sure to end in misery, even here—for myself or any other!”

The men’s indifference to Helen’s trust in heaven also tells us something about nineteenth-century religious culture: it suggests that women were, on the whole, more pious. Given the many difficulties they faced in life it is understandable that they regarded heaven as a replacement for unfulfilled dreams and harsh earthly experiences. But the male characters in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* reveal that men did not always understand or sympathise with women’s piety, such as Arthur’s teasing of Helen about this consolation in chapter twenty-three indicates. Claiming that she is “too religious”, he reminds her that piety is a good thing for a woman, but it “may be carried too far”, especially if it causes her to “lessen her devotion to her earthly lord” (ibid., 193).

When Gilbert attempts to persuade Helen to begin an affair with him while Arthur is still alive, she again claims that she cannot do so and that they must console themselves by thinking about how they shall meet again in heaven, but this time she is unsettled: her eyes “glittered wildly, and her face was deadly pale” (ibid., 388). Gilbert cannot help replying that they will be different when they meet again, and that it gives him “little consolation” to be “so changed that I shall cease to adore you with my whole heart and soul”, because he “shall not be myself” (ibid., 388-389).

Gilbert’s observations make it clear that he has given religion a “merely conventional place in his life”, since he clearly thinks of Helen’s plan about meeting in heaven as a “very poor alternative”, and regardless of his protestation, his earthly love for her exceeds his spiritual love (Maynard, 2002:198-199). Arthur, too, enjoys the sexual dimension of marriage more than the spiritual, and when Helen fails to satisfy him he blames her for her “excessive puritanism” (ibid., 199). It is small wonder that faith clashed with sexual desire in the nineteenth century, since most Victorians were prudish to a

ridiculous extent, at least on the surface.

Anne's religious views are both comforting and controversial. The majority of readers are likely to reject them: most Christians do not approve of Universalism at all, and most atheists will regard the topic of life after death as *passé*. But the quality of literature cannot be judged solely on the religious and moral views of either the author or reader.

In *Shirley* Christian men are satirised. The novel's three curates are mercilessly exploited, especially in the first chapter. The chapter's title, "Levitical", is a reference to the Levites, the priests whom Moses appointed in the service of the tabernacle.¹² But as the reader discovers, these curates in question are unworthy of receiving any title as they lack the pious and generous nature one would expect from those working in religious institutions.

The narrator drily comments that the curates, who are "in the bloom of youth", should be "doing a great deal of good" (Brontë, 2008:5-6). Yet clerical activities, such as keeping an eye on the local school and visiting sick members of the parish, are regarded by these three "Levites" as "dull work" (ibid., 6). The sarcastic sketch made by the narrator to illustrate their characters makes them appear shallow and ridiculous (ibid., 6-7):

Season and weather make no difference; with unintelligible zeal they dare snow and hail, wind and rain, mire and dust, to go and dine, or drink tea, or sup with each other. What attracts them, it would be difficult to say. It is not friendship; for whenever they meet they quarrel. It is not religion; the thing is never named amongst them: theology they may discuss occasionally, but piety—never. It is not the love of eating and drinking...

Like certain Victorian clergymen, the three curates are snobbish towards Dissenters and lower class members of their church. One woman complains that the curates are "so high and so scornful, they set everybody beneath their 'fit'", and they are "always speaking against Yorkshire ways and Yorkshire folk" (ibid., 7).

¹²Numbers 3:8.

The snobbish attitude of Anglicans towards Dissenters was hateful to Charlotte Brontë, despite her being a confirmed member of the Church of England. She attacked this attitude in a letter of 18 June 1845, written to her friend Ellen Nussey. Charlotte complained about the curates who were at that time assisting her father in his parochial duties. According to her, they were part of a “self-seeking, vain empty race”, and “God knows there is not one to mend another” (Brontë, 2010:61).

She gives an amusing account of how they infuriated her with their snobbish attitudes, when they “rushed in unexpectedly to tea” (ibid.):

It was Monday & I was hot and tired—still if they behaved quietly and decently—I would have served them out their tea in peace—but they began glorifying themselves and abusing Dissenters in such a manner—that my temper lost its balance and I pronounced a few sentences sharply & rapidly which struck them all dumb. Papa was greatly horrified also—I don’t regret it.

Charlotte’s daring comment that she was not ashamed of shocking her father reveals how strongly she felt about Anglican clergymen who did not do their job properly (ibid.).

A similar scene occurs in chapter fifteen of *Shirley*, “Mr Donne’s Exodus”. In this scene Mr Donne (one of the curates) does not directly abuse Dissenters, but he displays something of the snobbery of certain Anglicans toward Dissenters. He ridicules members of his parish, of which the rich, as he states in his strong cockney accent, do not have “a propa carriage or a reg’la butla”, and the poor annoy him with their “clattering in clogs”, wearing nothing but “shirt-sleeves and wool-combers’ aprons” (Brontë, 2008:243).

His cruel joke that one should release “a mad cow in amongst them” sparks Shirley Keeldar’s fury, and Mr Donne’s startled reaction is reminiscent of the confrontation which took place between Brontë and the curates: she jumps out of her seat and flings her garden-gates “wide” open, ordering him to “set foot on this pavement no more” (ibid., 243-244):

Donne was astounded.....Had he not expressed disdain of everything in Yorkshire? What more conclusive proof could be given that he was better than anything there? And yet here was he about to be turned like a dog out of a Yorkshire garden!...

“Rid me of you instantly—instantly!” reiterated Shirley, as he lingered.

“Madam—a clergyman! Turn out a clergyman?”

“Off! Were you an archbishop: you have proved yourself no gentleman, and must go. Quick!”...Donne made his Exodus....

“How dare the pompous priest abuse his flock? How dare the lisping cockney revile Yorkshire?”....

The reference to Exodus is an ironic play on the second book of the Old Testament, which tells the history of how Moses led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt to freedom in Canaan. But as Mr Donne proves with his pompous snobbery, he is unworthy of being a leader like Moses, as he is utterly indifferent to his parish’s needs and suffering. The passage is a direct reflection on Charlotte’s negative attitude towards curates. Double irony might be at play here, if one takes into consideration that Donne was the surname of one of the greatest preachers in the English language: John Donne.

Caroline’s uncle, Reverend Helstone, is another churchman who is not portrayed in a positive light. The narrator comments that Reverend Helstone has “missed his vocation”, for his character is that of a “soldier” rather than a priest (ibid., 32). It is a “dreadful thing” for a clergyman to be “warlike”, since he “ought to be a man of peace”, with a special “mission” among his fellow-men (ibid.):

...I remember distinctly whose servant he is, whose message he delivers, whose example he should follow; yet, with all this, if you are a parson-hater, you need not expect me to go along with you every step of your dismal, downward-tending, unchristian road; you need not expect me to join in your deep anathemas, at once so narrow and so sweeping—in your poisonous rancour, so intense and so absurd, against “the cloth”...

Like Reverend Millward in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Reverend Helstone questions his parishioners to test their piety. In chapter eleven, when Shirley is first introduced into the narrative, he seems a bit unsettled by her character. Calling her a “little Jacobin” and a “little free-thinker”, he orders her to recite the Apostles’ Creed, which she does “like a child” (ibid., 169). But when asked if she believes in the creed of St Athanasius, she claims that she “can’t remember it quite all” (ibid., 170).

The Athanasian Creed was one of the topics of “doctrinal authority” which captured the Victorian obsession with salvation (Perkin, 2008:394). It was a controversial creed due to its “condemning to eternal damnation” those who did not keep the Christian faith “whole and undefiled”

(ibid.). Unlike the other two creeds, the Athanasian Creed fell “into almost total disuse” in the Church of England (ibid.).

Charlotte was uncomfortable with the Athanasian Creed. She was attached to the Anglican Church, with all its faults, but “*excluded*” this “profane” creed (quoted in Alexander & Smith, 2003:124). This was because of negative experiences with Calvinism. These started in 1824, when she, her two elder sisters and Emily were sent to Cowan Bridge School, run by the Reverend Carus Wilson. Devoted to the Calvinistic doctrine of pre-election, Wilson was convinced that the majority of mankind was “condemned to eternal damnation” before birth, and in sermons he emphasised far more the “certainty” of sin and judgement than “conversion or the hope of salvation” (Barker, 1995:136).

At her second school Charlotte suffered a religious crisis, fearing that “ghastly Calvinistic doctrines are true”, making her case similar to Anne’s (quoted in Fraser, 1989:109). Several letters written to Ellen during 1836 reveal Charlotte’s religious despair occasioned by fear that she was a reprobate. She confessed that she struggled with sinful thoughts, causing her to become “blasphemous, atheistical in my sentiments”, and that Calvinism made her aware of how unchristian she sometimes was (quoted ibid., 106-107):

I feel my own utter worthlessness....I am a very coarse, commonplace wretch...if I made the slightest profession I should sink into Phariseeism, merge wholly into the ranks of the self-righteous. In writing at this moment I feel an irksome disgust at the idea of using a single phrase that sounds like religious cant—I abhor myself—I despise myself.

Caroline suffers from religious anxiety in *Shirley*. Of all the characters in the novel, she is the most spiritual, far more so than the men. But her religious melancholy is a reflection on Victorian religious views of women, who were often seen as “especially sinful, deceptive, and dangerous” (Lawson, 1989:732). Earlier, in chapter thirteen, Shirley compares women with the mermaid, who was notorious for her seduction of sailors, a comparison which startles Caroline. “Were we men”, Shirley states, “we should spring at the sign, the cold billow would be dared for the sake of the colder enchantress...being women, we stand safe...she cannot charm, but she will appal us” (Brontë, 2008:207):

“...Temptress-terror! monstrous likeness of ourselves! Are you not glad, Caroline, when at last, and with a wild shriek, she dives?”

“But, Shirley, she is not like us: we are neither temptresses, nor terrors, nor monsters.”

“Some of our kind, it is said, are all three. There are men who ascribe to ‘woman,’ in general, such attributes.”

Shirley is “parodying stereotypical male images of woman as unnatural (but seductive) monsters”, and “describing the effect such images have on women themselves” (Gilbert & Gubar, 2000:387). The mermaid is the “revisionary avatar of Sin, Eve’s precursor...who exacts the revenge of nature against culture” (ibid.). This latter concept implies an attack on contemporary views that women’s natural good looks gave “no sure guide to inner righteousness” (Lawson, 1989:732). Women may have been viewed as “beautiful and clean on the outside”, but this served as a disguise to hide “inner wickedness” (Ibid., 731).

Methodism to some extent contributed to the focus on women’s so-called sinful nature. Charles Wesley, perhaps the most important figure in Methodism, was “positively revolutionary” in writing hymns for children with the intention of reminding them of their fallen state (Harrison, 1948:60). One such hymn written for girls spoke of the “dire effect of female pride” and of how “deep our mother’s sin, and wide,/Through all her daughters spread!” (quoted ibid., 60-61):

Since first she plucked the mortal tree,
Each woman would a goddess be
In her Creator’s stead.

This fatal vanity of mind,
A curse entail’d on all the kind
Her legacy we feel;
We neither can deny nor tame
Our inbred eagerness for fame
And stubbornness of will.

The poison spreads throughout our veins,
In all our sex the evil reigns,
The arrogant offence;
In vain we strive the plague to hide
Our fig leaves but betray our pride,
And loss of innocence.

If such were the rigid religious sentiments of the day, then it is small wonder that girls like Caroline should suffer from depression and be appalled by being compared to the seductive and sinful mermaid.

Caroline has “framed many a prayer after the Christian creed”, yet her constant reminder of sin embitters her with doubt (Brontë, 2008:295):

Caroline was a Christian; therefore...[she] begged for patience, strength, relief. This world, however, we all know, is the scene of trial and probation; and, for any favourable result her petitions had yet wrought, it seemed to her that they were unheard and unaccepted. She believed, sometimes, that God had turned his face from her. At moments she was a Calvinist, and sinking into the gulf of religious despair, she saw darkening over her the doom of reprobation.

Shirley's religious tone, contrasted with *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*'s, is not very optimistic. This is certainly due to the tragic circumstances that occurred during the novel's composition. Between September 1848 and May 1849 Branwell, Emily and Anne died, leaving Charlotte alone with their father. Several letters written during this terrible time contain passages where Charlotte rejoices in her hope in God and heaven, and also pours out her bitterness and despair. She became “so numb” with grief that it rendered her “almost incapable of revolt” (Fraser, 1989:326).

Charlotte's “sorrow” and “anger” surfaced in *Shirley*, not just in reaction to her sisters' deaths, but also in response to the strained conditions of nineteenth-century women (ibid., 330). The chapter written immediately after Anne's death (chapter twenty-four) is not called “The Valley of the Shadow of Death” without reason. The chapter's opening is sombre and foreboding, as the narrator reflects that the future “bursts suddenly, as if a rock had rent, and in it a grave had opened, whence issues the body of one that slept”, because it “sometimes seems to sob a low warning of the events it is bringing us”

(Brontë, 2008:351):

...like some gathering though yet remote storm, which, in tones of the wind, in flushings of the firmament, in clouds strangely torn, announces a blast strong to strew the sea with wrecks; or commissioned to bring in fog the yellow taint of pestilence, covering white Western isles with the poisoned exhalations of the East, dimming the lattices of English homes with the breath of Indian plague.

During Caroline's near-fatal illness in chapters twenty-four to twenty-six one finds very personal reflections on the relationship between God and the individual. Shirley's former governess, Mrs Pryor, visits Caroline, and makes the startling revelation that she is her mother, who fled from her husband due to his drinking and violence, and entrusted the young Caroline to the care of her brother-in-law, Reverend Helstone. Her recollections of her sufferings are some of the most poignant and moving passages Brontë ever wrote. The remark on how Mrs Pryor's suffering has now ended reveals a wish-fulfilment of Charlotte's that her own suffering should bear fruits of strength (ibid., 363):

"I *have* suffered! None saw,—none knew: there was no sympathy—no redemption—no redress!...I tried to keep the word of His patience: He kept me in the days of my anguish. I was afraid with terror—I was troubled: through great tribulation He brought me through to a salvation revealed in this last time. My fear had torment—He has cast it out: He has given me in its stead perfect love...."

When Caroline struggles with religious doubt, other reflections on spiritual growth succeeding torment are given. One passage advises those who grieve to continue to cling "to love and faith in God", as God "will never deceive, never finally desert" those who suffer (ibid., 295):

Most people have had a period or periods in their lives when they have felt thus forsaken; when, having long hoped against hope, and still seen the day of fruition deferred, their hearts have truly sickened within them. This is a terrible hour, but it is often that darkest point which precedes the rise of day; that turn of the year when the icy January wind carries over the waste at once the dirge of departing winter, and the prophecy of coming spring.

Mrs Pryor's emotional recollections during Caroline's illness could constitute the most autobiographical passages in *Shirley*. They present and re-work the heartbreak that Brontë felt at her sisters' last illnesses. The final sentence in chapter twenty-four, before the reader is given an insight

into Mrs Pryor's feelings of her daughter's affliction in chapter twenty-five, reveals that Mrs Pryor feels like Jacob¹³, as she "wrestled with God in earnest prayer" until morning (ibid., 369):

Not always do those who dare such divine conflict prevail. Night after night the sweat of agony may burst dark on the forehead; the supplicant may cry for mercy with that soundless voice the soul utters when its appeal is to the Invisible. "Spare my beloved", it may implore. "Heal my life's life. Rend not from me what long affection entwines with my whole nature. God of heaven—bend—hear—be clement!"....Then the watcher approaches the patient's pillow...[and] knows that it is God's will his idol shall be broken, and bends his head, and subdues his soul to the sentence he cannot avert, and scarce can bear.

Charlotte would live for six more years after Anne's death. These were six years of loneliness and mourning, rendering her life almost unbearable, as her letters and final novel, *Villette* (1853), disclose in explicit detail. The only comforts she had were her religious faith in heaven, the critical acclaim of *Villette*, and her husband, Reverend Arthur Bell Nicholls, whom she married nine months prior to her death.

Religion in *Romola* is presented in a more complex light than in the two Brontë novels. Eliot's agnosticism eclipsed her view of religion, but she never lost her respect for it, and used it as a source for social and historical themes. In her novels there are no "dogmatic atheists", but many Christians of a "middle-of-the-road Anglican kind", and also "devout evangelical Protestants" (Dolin, 2009:165). *Romola* is the first of Eliot's novels that features characters that are anti-Christian, like Romola's father and Tito: the latter confesses that he is "no religious enthusiast" (Eliot, 1994:498). As *Romola* takes place over twenty years before the Reformation, Catholicism is the main branch of Christianity represented in the novel.

Eliot did not appear to be enthusiastic about Catholicism. She displayed something of the Victorian anti-Catholic attitude (which will be analysed later) during her first visit to Rome in the

¹³Genesis 32.

spring of 1860. George Eliot and George Henry Lewes arrived during Holy Week, with the city overflowing with pilgrims. At one point the Pope passed the crowd, and Eliot knelt with the rest of the people to “receive the Pope’s blessing”, but she lamented nonetheless to a friend that “these ceremonies are a melancholy, hollow business” (Haight, 1985:323):

“...we regret bitterly that the Holy Week has taken up our time from better things. I have a cold and headache this morning, and in other ways am not conscious of improvement from the Pope’s blessing.”

Lewes himself was to refer to the whole experience of Holy Week as “hateful shams” (quoted in Haight, 1985:324).

The use of adjectives such as “melancholy”, “hollow” and “hateful” indicates “disrespect” for the teachings of Roman Catholicism, a system of belief which “coexisted” with the teachings of the Dominican Monk, Girolamo Savonarola, and may even have inspired his own reform movement (Henry, 2012:144). While both Eliot and Lewes were unbelievers (which may have triggered their negative comments on religious activities), their attitude forms part of Victorian anti-Catholic bias.

In chapters forty-nine to fifty-one of *Romola* Eliot presents comical scenes to highlight some of the seeming absurdity of Catholic superstition. These chapters describe the annual Carnival, with its “dear old masks and practical jokes, well spiced with indecency”, and how Savonarola believed that such things ought “not to be in a city where Christ had been declared King” (Eliot, 1994:395). This is a direct historical reference to one of Savonarola’s last Advent sermons, preached in 1494, in which he declared that it was God’s will that Florence should have a “new ruler”, and that ruler was Christ Himself (Brown, 1994:611).

To encourage the Florentines to repent of their lusts, Savonarola had arranged for them to “burn their vanities” and confess their sins before Florence was “destroyed by God” (Purkis, 1985:109). In accurate but humorous detail, Eliot describes this act in the three chapters.

Instead of using adult priests to collect the possessions, Savonarola makes use of “young inquisitors” going from house to house for the vanities; at one house they suspect that the lady “had still certain little reddened balls brought from the Levant, intended to produce...a sudden bloom of the

most ingenuous falsity?" (ibid., 397):

...Or, perhaps, she had ringlets and coils of "dead hair"?—if so, let her bring them to the streetdoor...and publicly renounce the *Anathema* which hid the respectable signs of age under a ghastly mockery of youth. And, in reward, she would hear fresh young voices pronounce a blessing on her and her house (ibid., 397).

In view of the humorous light in which Eliot presents the above scene, one realizes that such absurd superstition cannot be taken seriously. As mentioned in the previous chapter, it would probably have been better for Savonarola not to make use of such sinister children for Christian duties.

Romola's elder cousin, Monna Brigida, is also approached by the young apprentices, who scold her for wearing rouge and a false hair-piece, claiming that they make her look "very ugly", and that it is "only Satan who can see to like you" (ibid., 412). When she reluctantly surrenders her make-up and headgear, the boys praise her for having delivered herself from "ugly lies", and claim she now looks like Saint Anne, the mother of the Virgin Mary (ibid.). But it is clear that she is deeply unsettled by the whole experience (ibid., 412-413):

Thoughts of going into a convent forthwith, and never showing herself in the world again, were rushing through Monna Brigida's mind. There was nothing possible for her but to take care of her soul....it would, perhaps, be better to be forced to think more of paradise. But at the thought that the dear accustomed world was no longer in her choice, there gathered some of those hard tears which just moisten elderly eyes...

Monna Brigida's unhappiness at the thought of discarding earthly things is indicative of Eliot's belief that religion "was not a requisite to moral excellence", and that secularism functioned as "a powerful agent of social happiness" (Dolin, 2009:165). The scene of the bonfire of vanities also reveals that Eliot was "highly critical" of the manner in which religion had become "corrupted by zealotry, chicanery, and arid institutional habits and formulas" (ibid., 166).

Earlier in the novel, Catholic belief is also negatively presented in two contrasting chapters: chapters forty-three and forty-four, titled "The Unseen Madonna" and "The Visible Madonna" respectively. The first relates how Florentines made use of a "miraculous" painting of the Virgin Mary,

dug up in the nearby town of L'Impruneta, which was frequently carried through Florence when a crisis struck (Brown, 1994:608).

According to the narrator, this portrait apparently screamed when the spade which was digging it up struck it, and from then Florentines had frequently “borne” rich gifts to the Virgin, such as a gorgeous golden brocade, “embroidered” with the prayers of nuns (Eliot, 1994:359). But during this crisis (the famine), no gifts are offered to the Virgin. The narrator sounds taunting in the mentioning of how “not even a torch” was being carried before the portrait, for surely

the hidden Mother cared less for torches and brocade than for the wail of the hungry people. Florence was in extremity: she had done her utmost, and could only wait for something divine that was not in her power (ibid., 360).

That people could line up to welcome the priestly procession carrying the tabernacle in which a painting of the so-called Pitying Mother is hidden, praying that she will plead with God to have mercy on the city, seems slightly preposterous.

By contrast, Romola embodies a visible Madonna. Unlike the hidden painting, Romola is able to go out among the suffering, providing “emotional survival” for herself and for the needy (Thurin, 1985:229). Like a virginal saint, she has “submitted her mind” to the high priest, Savonarola, and to the Church, since they give her an “immediate satisfaction for moral needs which all the previous culture and experience of her life had left hungering” (Eliot, 1994:367). At this stage in the novel, she is a Christian, gaining strength to “keep alive that flame of unselfish emotion by which a life of sadness might still be a life of active love” (ibid.). Before this, her life had been decidedly “nurtured” with “hostility” towards Christian doctrines due to her father’s scepticism, which he passed on to his children (Huzzard, 1957:161).

George Eliot was one of the earliest supporters of German Higher Criticism of the Bible. This was due to her acquaintance with Coventry friends, Charles and Cara Bray. Cara’s brother, Charles Hennell, published *An Inquiry Concerning the Origin of Christianity* in 1839, which was itself influenced by German Biblical criticism. It proved to be “profoundly influential” for Eliot’s own

secularism, as Hennell was one of the earliest English thinkers to “question” the historical and divine accuracy of the Bible, stating his opinion that the life of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels was a combination “of myth and topical Jewish political history” (Dolin, 2009:169). He concluded that Christianity could “not be accepted as stemming from Divine Revelation”, but that it was still “the purest form yet existing of natural religion” (quoted in Laski, 1973:23). For Eliot, this concept was to be “seminal” (ibid.).

Eliot’s biggest contribution to Victorian doubt was her translation of a major work of Biblical criticism: David Friedrich Strauss’ *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet*, translated as *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined*. It was considered to be “an extremely dangerous book in England”: as Archdeacon Hare declared in 1839, it was “a book which a person can hardly read without being more or less hurt by it” (Dolin, 2009:170).

German Biblical critics like Strauss implied that the “abiding value and authority” of the Bible resided “not on its ‘facts’” but on its “character as a body of symbol and myth” (Altick, 1973:221). These were the exact points argued by Strauss. He could not support orthodox theologians, who believed the Bible was a collection of “divine histories”, nor could he agree with extreme rationalists who believed that divine events should be “reconciled” with natural explanations (Dolin, 2009:170). He implied that Christian deism should be “replaced” with a metaphysical system in which God and humanity were “united”, not in Christ, but in humanity itself (ibid.).

Romola had been raised in a household where her father taught his children to “despise” religion (Purkis, 1985:108). He denounces Christians as “besotted fanatics” and “howling hypocrites” caught in “an eternal frost” (Eliot, 1994:64). He raised Romola and Dino “with a silent ignoring of any claims the Church could have to regulate the belief and action of beings with a cultivated reason” (ibid., 147). Prior to the novel’s opening, Dino has converted to Christianity, abandoning his classical studies to become a Dominican monk.

Under the influence of her father’s “proud misanthropy”, it is unsurprising that Romola is at first antagonistic towards her brother’s faith (Bullen, 1975:430). Asking Dino contemptuously about

“this religion of yours, which places visions before natural duties”, she aggressively defends their father, stating that he has sought “no worldly honours; he has been fruitful; he has denied himself all luxuries; he has lived like one of the ancient sages” (Eliot, 1994:148-149). Bardo’s character shows him to have religious ideals that are not linked to faith, such as striving in the name of “higher duties” (Dolin, 2009:188). Nietzsche would later denounce this notion as secularists getting “rid” of the Christian God but still clinging to Christian morals (quoted *ibid.*).

The signs that Romola herself has an awareness of God’s existence are shown during her conversation with Dino at his deathbed. In a reversal of the death scene in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, it is the Christian who lies dying, comforted by faith in heaven, while the scoffer stands by and reluctantly listens. It is at Dino’s death that Romola meets Savonarola for the first time, the man whom she has regarded as “more offensive” than other priests due to his incessant preaching (Eliot, 1994:152). Yet it is evident that he has a powerful effect on her emotions: his tone is not that of “imperious command, but of quiet self-possession, and assurance of the right, blended with benignity”, which causes a vibration in Romola (*ibid.*, 151). While she listens to Dino relating his prophetic dream to her (which is a melodramatic forewarning of her marriage to Tito), she cannot but listen “in awe” (*ibid.*, 153):

Her mind was not apt to be assailed by sickly fancies; she had the vivid intellect and the healthy human passion, which are too keenly alive to the constant relations of things to have any morbid craving after the exceptional. Still...she had known nothing of the utmost human needs; no acute suffering—no heart-cutting sorrow; and this brother, come back to her in his hour of supreme agony, was like a sudden awful apparition from an invisible world.

A letter Eliot wrote in 1860, in which she admitted that she had not “returned to dogmatic Christianity”, but sees it as “the highest expression of the religious sentiment that has yet found its place in the history of mankind”, is suggestive of her still being “in awe” of the supernatural, just like Romola when she hears the words of Savonarola (quoted in Haight, 1985:331):

...I have no longer any antagonism towards any faith in which human sorrow and human longing for purity have expressed themselves; on the contrary, I have a sympathy with it that predominates over all argumentative tendencies....I have the profoundest interest in the inward life of sincere Christians in all ages. Many things that I should have argued against...I now feel myself too ignorant and too limited in moral sensibility to speak of with confident disapprobation ...

Romola's conversion can be compared to Eliot's state of mind as given in this letter, for she too eventually feels that the "pressing problem...was not to settle questions of controversy, but to keep alive that flame of unselfish emotion by which a life of sadness might still be a life of active love" (Eliot, 1994:367).

The historical Savonarola played a complex but significant role in the history of the Church. Like Martin Luther two decades after him, Savonarola was deeply unsettled by the chaos and corruption of the Catholic Church, and saw it as a divine duty to call the Church back to God. The Republicans and Pope Alexander VI were infuriated and "embarrassed" by his "vehement political and moral criticisms", and eventually had him excommunicated, tortured, and burned as a heretic (Black *et al.*, 1993:79-80). But as the plot unfolds, it is this over-ambitious religious spirit of his that ultimately causes his downfall.

The second meeting between Romola and Savonarola occurs in chapter forty, "The Arresting Voice". When her marriage to Tito deteriorates, Romola disguises herself and flees Florence, determined to never return. While resting outside the city she is approached by Savonarola, imploring her to return to her husband and to Florence, causing a mixture of awe and irritation within her, as if she had been approached and grasped "by that destiny which men thought of as a sceptred deity" (Eliot, 1994:338). She turns on him in disgust, claiming that she acknowledges "no right of priests and monks to interfere with my actions. You have no power over me" (*ibid.*). This statement is ironic, because Romola does fall under Savonarola's spell, albeit temporarily.

The religious lesson that Romola learns from Savonarola is that of "civic virtue", with a strong emphasis on moral value (Malachuk, 2008:49). It is he who reminds her that she cannot renounce her positions as wife and citizen of Florence (*ibid.*). Marriage is an important part of Christianity, as

Savonarola points out when he addresses her “as a pagan, if the holy mystery of matrimony is not sacred to you—you are breaking a pledge” (Eliot, 1994:340, 344):

“ Of what wrongs will you complain...when you yourself are committing one of the greatest wrongs a woman and a citizen can be guilty of—withdrawing in secrecy and disguise from a pledge which you have given in the face of God and your fellow-men? Of what wrongs will you complain, when you yourself are breaking the simplest law that lies at the foundation of the trust which binds man to man...? This, then, is the wisdom you have gained by scorning the mysteries of the Church?—not to see the bare duty of integrity, where the Church would have taught you to see, not integrity only, but religion....My daughter, there is a bond of higher love. Marriage is not carnal only, made for selfish delight. See what that thought leads you to!”

After listening in earnest, Romola finally suppresses her “pagan individualism”, and returns to Florence as a “Madonna” who becomes “identified” with the Church (Bullen, 1975:431). The scene is “appropriate” as it takes place on the day of Advent in 1494; Advent being the eve of Christianity’s beginning (Bonaparte, 1979:177). It also marks the “birth” of Romola’s soul into the Christian phase of her life (ibid.).

That a tremendous change has taken place in Romola’s personal history is revealed when Savonarola asks her to take out Dino’s crucifix, pointing to it, and remarking that the cross is an image “of a Supreme Offering, made by Supreme Love, because the need of man was great” (Eliot, 1994:342):

He paused, and she held the crucifix trembling—trembling under a sudden impression of the wide distance between her present and her past self....Had life as many secrets before her still as it had for her then, in her young blindness? It was a thought that helped all other subduing influences...

On this night she returns home to do “what was painful rather than what was easy”, but still feels the “need of direction even in small things”, and regards the day as the “most memorable Christmas-eve” she has ever had (ibid., 346-348).

But as Savonarola gets involved with Florence’s political chaos to a dangerous extent, Romola starts to suffer from being personally involved with him. In his strife as leader of the anti-Medicean party, his promotion of his ambition to reform the Florentine Church eventually causes him to be “led

astray by personal ambition” (Hartnoll, 1977:136). This causes Romola to suffer from her first religious crisis, having at this point in the novel been a Christian for only about two years.

Being aware that she is “marching with a great army” does not lessen Romola’s doubt. The law and religion are “sacred”, but “rebellion might be sacred too”, and at some point the “sacredness of obedience” ends, and the “sacredness of rebellion” begins (Eliot, 1994:442). Here one finds another example of Eliot’s view that unbelief can be a force of greater freedom than religion. Romola’s opinion that she needs to be inspired by the “belief in a heroism struggling for sublime ends” and not just religious pity, because pity can “only tend feebly” towards this heroism, is also a statement which supports Eliot’s view (ibid., 416).

Romola’s doubt builds until it causes her to sink at the altar steps of a church, “enduring one of those sickening moments, when the enthusiasm which had come to her as the only energy strong enough to make life worthy, seemed to be inevitably bound up with vain dreams and wilful eye-shutting” (ibid., 419-421):

Where were the beings to whom she could cling, with whom she could work and endure, with the belief that she was working for the right? On the side from which moral energy came lay a fanaticism from which she was shrinking with startled repulsion; on the side to which she was drawn by affection and memory, there was the presentiment of some secret plotting, which her judgement told her would not be unfairly called crime.

One of the last scenes between Romola and Savonarola is the confrontation in chapter fifty-nine, “Pleading”. Romola visits Savonarola and begs him to rescue her godfather, Bernardo del Nero, who has been condemned to death after he attempted to restore the Medici to power in Florence (Hartnoll, 1977:136). But unlike their first meeting, there is a significant contrast here: his “expression of serene elevation and pure human fellowship” seems “no longer present” (Eliot, 1994:458). The tension increases as their concern for each other slowly turns to loathing.

The “weakness” of Catholicism becomes “present” through Savonarola’s political actions (Bullen, 1975:432). Though pure at the beginning, his ambitions ultimately end tragically because his purity turns “destructive”: in his attempt to bring the Church to the centre of Florentine life he has

focused more on the relationship between “individual and state” instead of private relationships (Poston, 1966:362). This ambition, which “ennobles and debases” him at the same time, revolts Romola, whose duty to her family has always been practiced with a religious enthusiasm (ibid.).

The final straw for Romola comes when Savonarola claims that the “cause of freedom” is most injured “by the enemies who carry within them the power of certain virtues” (Eliot, 1994:463). Turning on him in fury, she accuses him of wanting her godfather to die simply because he is the “better man”; in her anger she warns him not to give his enemies reason to believe that his visions “of what will further God’s Kingdom” consist only of that which will “strengthen your own party” (ibid., 464). Savonarola, angered in his turn, exclaims that the “cause” of his party “*is* the cause of God’s Kingdom” (ibid):

“I do not believe it!” said Romola, her whole frame shaken with passionate repugnance. “God’s Kingdom is something wider—else, let me stand outside it with the people I love.”

The two faces were lit up, each with an opposite emotion, each of an opposite certitude. Further words were impossible. Romola hastily covered her head and went out in silence.

Having discovered that the Christian values as given to her by Savonarola are “insufficient to ensure justice”, Romola loses her faith in Savonarola, religion, and ultimately in herself (Reilly, 2013:637). In chapter sixty-one, “Drifting Away”, she stands on the shore of the sea-side village, Viareggio, shedding bitter tears at the thought of having become “timid and sceptical towards the larger aims without which life cannot rise into religion” (Eliot, 1994:472-473):

No one who has ever known what it is thus to lose faith in a fellow man....will lightly say that the shock can leave the faith in the invisible goodness unshaken. With the sinking of high human trust, the dignity of life sinks too; we cease to believe in our own better self, since that also is part of the common nature which is degraded in our thought....Romola felt even the springs of her once active pity drying up.... Had not *she* had her sorrows too? And few had cared for her, while she had cared for many. She had done enough; she had striven after the impossible, and was weary of this stifling crowded life.

Stunned by the grief that “accompanies” her loss of faith, she climbs into a fishing-boat and goes out to sea, hoping that the waves will ultimately crush her (Reilly, 2013:638). The haunting imagery of

her sorrow is described in an almost pantheistic style: feeling “orphaned” by the sea and sky, her memories of sympathy leave a “thirst that even the Great Mother has no milk to still”, and “with a great sob” she waits to glide “into death” (Eliot, 1994:475):

She drew the cowl over her head again and covered her face, choosing darkness rather than the light of the stars, which seemed to her like the hard light of eyes that looked at her without seeing her. Presently she felt that she was in the grave, but not resting there: she was touching the hands of the beloved dead beside her, and trying to wake them.

Although Romola finds a new purpose for her life after her failed suicide attempt, it is connected to gender and not just religion, so it will be discussed more cogently in the following chapter.

Romola’s spiritual journey is similar to George Eliot’s. In childhood Eliot’s religion became deeply influenced by contemporary Evangelical tendencies. She was under the influence of a teacher, Miss Lewis, just as Romola is influenced by her father in terms of apostasy and by Savonarola in terms of devotion. Miss Lewis’s “pious yet gentle” doctrines made a significant impact on Eliot’s moral outlook (Laski, 1977:17).

Like the Brontës, Eliot also had negative experiences with Calvinism, with a strong focus on “self-denial” and the “preservation of one’s soul” (Karl, 1995:31-32). As her religious fanaticism increased through intense study of the Bible and other religious works, and through her denial of all earthly pleasures such as music and novels, she became an “impossible, intolerant prig” (ibid., 34).

After some time, a change came over Eliot’s devotional outlook, just as in Romola’s. What initially triggered it is unknown, but her Evangelicalism was undoubtedly “cooling” (Haight, 1985:28). Her friendship with the free-thinking Brays “crystallized” her break with orthodoxy; had she not met them, it “would have come in any case” (ibid., 39). Perhaps, like Romola, she felt that religion and religious pity, whilst honourable, did not satisfy her intellectually, and that she needed more.

That something *had* changed in her surfaces in a letter written to Miss Lewis in November 1841, a few weeks before she confessed her agnosticism. She felt that her soul “has been engrossed in the most interesting of all enquiries...to what result my thoughts may lead I know not—possibly to one that will startle you” (quoted in Haight, 1985:39). Thereafter, she told her father she would stop

attending church. It gained her intellectual freedom, but it cost her several relationships, including that with her family and Miss Lewis. Romola's religious devotion ultimately estranges her from Tito, just as her relationship with Savonarola is severed by her apostasy.

Yet Christianity would haunt Eliot until her death. As the 1860 letter quoted earlier explained, she could never break with the impact Christ's religion had made on her as a human being caught in history and morality. Aesthetically, too, it would prove valuable to her, as she connected the "spiritual value" of the Bible with poetry and art (Karl, 1995:78). An 1844 letter indicates this (quoted *ibid.*):

"But surely Christianity with its Hebrew retrospect¹⁴ and millennial hopes, the heroism and Divine sorrow of its founder and all its glorious army of martyrs might supply and has supplied a strong impulse not only to poetry but to all the fine arts."

Most religious conflicts in the nineteenth century concerned the tension between the established Church of England and Dissenting churches. There was also an ongoing debate within the Church itself between Anglo-Catholic rites and services of a more Protestant nature. A dangerous rival manifested itself in the form of science, resulting in a growth of unbelief. Class awareness played an important role in this conflict. As a member of the established Church, an Anglican ranked "far above" those belonging to the "Nonconformist" community, as the latter's breaking away from Anglican rites and doctrines in the seventeenth century made them targets of social prejudice (Altick, 1973:31).

Dissenting congregations consisted mostly of the lower and working classes as they had been "segregated" from English society: they were barred from entering university, rendering them unable to engage in learned or "gentlemanly" professions, and had therefore no choice but to enter working professions (*ibid.*, 32). Unsurprisingly, a snobbish attitude prevailed among certain members of the Church of England. Since Dissenters became prominent from the seventeenth century onwards, they were part of both pre-Victorian and Victorian society.

The controversial Oxford Movement caused concern among Victorian clergymen. The

¹⁴Karl adds a bracketed sentence which states that Eliot believed the Old Testament was valuable because it had *led* to the writing of the New Testament. Karl, 1995:78.

beginning of this movement can be traced back to 1833, with the first in a series of ninety position papers, titled *Tracts for the Times*, which were completed in 1841 (Altick, 1973:209). The founding of the Oxford Movement can also be seen as a pre-Victorian event which made a significant impact on the period itself. The main leaders of the Oxford Movement, all Oxford clerics, were Keble, Edward Pusey and John Henry Newman. They believed that the Church of England was “catholic” in its “adherence to the teaching of the early and undivided church” (Alexander & Smith, 2003:359). An attempt followed to adhere to the doctrines and practices of the early church. John Henry Newman especially held the view that the Church of England was actually the “Catholic Church in England”, the “true church, in direct line of descent from St Peter” (Altick, 1973:212).

The main reason the movement came into existence was due to the gulf that existed between Anglicans, Dissenters, Roman Catholics, Jews and non-religious communities. This problem was pointed out in a sermon by John Keble, delivered in 1833, under the title *National Apostasy*: “the Apostolical Church in this realm is henceforth only to stand, in the eye of the State, *as one sect among many*” (quoted in Hilton, 2008:468).

However, the movement’s cause was more “political” because it was a “fight” against the Test and Corporation Act (ibid.). The biggest fight was against what became known as “Erastianism”: a system of “subordination of Church to State”, leading the Prime Minister to appoint bishops in the same way he appointed leaders as political officers (Cockshut, 1988:28-29). A desperate struggle took place to ensure that the Anglican Church still remained the main religious institution in England.

Newman undertook an intensive study of early Church history in order to support his argument. According to his findings, the Protestant Reformation should have been nullified (ibid., 213). As Hurrell Froude remarked: the British were “Catholics without the Popery, and Church-of-England men without the Protestantism” (quoted ibid.).

Certainly, not everyone was supportive of Newman’s views. The political regime during the years before and during Queen Victoria’s reign held the belief that to be British was to be, “*ipso facto*”, Protestant as well (Wilson, 2003:64). It did not help Newman that Catholicism was “alien” to the

British Public (ibid.).

In addition to the rise of secular doubt in Victorian England, there was also an increasing rise of anti-Catholicism. One may imagine the shock when, in October 1845, Newman concluded that Roman Catholicism was right, and converted (Altick, 1973:213). Nearly the whole of Victorian England felt that this was a betrayal of both faith and reason (ibid., 214).

The rift between belief and doubt was perhaps the most notorious aspect of Victorian religion. By the end of the period, the “influence” of the Church had declined and continued to do so throughout the twentieth century (Krueger, 1999:151). Even before Darwin, trouble began in the 1830s in Germany, where Biblical criticism dominated theological and philosophical thought, and eventually spread to Britain. Many clergymen and believers were deeply “troubled” by scientific and historical critiques of the Bible, and of religious belief as a whole (ibid.).

The biggest blow that struck the Church was Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*. Published in 1859, it could arguably rank as the most controversial book ever written. Even before Darwin’s *magnum opus*, a book published in 1844 which was similar in its import had already ruffled the feathers of Victorian faith. This was Robert Chambers’ *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, in which he made allusions to some of the basic theories of Darwinian evolution. He suggested that humanity could be found to “connect with ‘lower’ species”; as an amateur scientist he frequently made observations on plant and animal species at various botanical gardens (Wilson, 2003:95-96). Although not an atheist, he published his book anonymously because he was aware of the religious backlash it would receive from the public (ibid., 96).

The idea that God had “set in place laws which it is the job of the scientist, not the theologian, to unearth” outraged countless people (ibid., 95, 97). The following comment can be viewed as a summary of the intellectual unease experienced by many in relation to the doubt engendered by the new biological science (quoted ibid., 95):

“If the book be true, the labours of sober induction are in vain; religion is a lie; human law a mass of folly and a base injustice; morality is moonshine; our labours for the black people of Africa were works of madmen; and men and women are only better beasts!”

Despite the shock caused by works such as *Vestiges* and *On The Origin of Species*, by the middle of the period a great transformation had taken place, “marked” by the “onset of the intellectual challenge of evolution” and the “establishment of ‘deep time’” (Hewitt, 2006:427). The Victorian belief that the world was created in 4004 B.C. crumbled as geology began to challenge and dispute ideas about the world’s age and origin on a greater scale than ever before (ibid.).

Ironically, one of the most popular hymns was composed during this religious crisis in England: H.F. Lyte’s “Abide with Me”. One could argue that it was the “cry of the whole human race”, especially during the chaos of the battle between faith and doubt, when people pondered on how to “survive” the bereavement if God was, according to science, dead (Wilson, 2003:104). Under the influence of the German Biblical criticism and Darwin, countless Victorians, including George Eliot, were “taking leave of God” with “such heavy hearts” (ibid.).

Interestingly, church attendance was still relatively strong during the religious crisis, particularly among the middle and upper classes (Krueger, 1999:148). Yet this may be an instance of religion being practiced more for the sake of social approval than for piety.

Methodism made an important contribution to Victorian religion, especially in a social context. As “moral regenerator”, Methodism formed part of the “spiritual revitalization” of nineteenth-century Britain (Luker, 1988:1). It focused on social issues such as the “erosion of popular culture and traditions”, the “forging of a pliable industrial workforce” and the “socialization of the labouring classes into Victorian consensual respectability” (ibid., 8). Methodism was especially popular in Cornwall, where Mrs Brontë and Aunt Branwell spent their childhood. John Wesley himself visited Cornwall dozens of times between 1743 and 1789 (ibid., 93). Anne Brontë would have admired John Wesley for preaching Universalism, although he also emphasised Justification by Faith, which is one of Calvinism’s core aspects (ibid.).

Another factor which was both positive and negative was the influential Evangelical movement, which had already been “in full swing” before Queen Victoria ascended to the throne (Cockshut, 1988:28). Evangelicals preached a faith of “personal commitment which began with a positive act of conversion”, initiated by “habitual self-examination” (Barker, 1995:5):

...a sense of one’s own sinfulness and an awareness of the imminence of the Day of Judgement, all combined to ensure that a life once dedicated to God remained positively and actively employed in His service. Because the Evangelicals placed great emphasis on the Bible, their ministers were particularly enthusiastic about the need for education and literacy among their congregations....This was a faith that demanded a missionary zeal...there was simply no place for the idle or the half-hearted.

In the above paragraph some of the more positive characteristics of Evangelicalism are mentioned, such as devotion to the Bible and the importance of education. Negative aspects included the notion that some Evangelical parents were “tyrannical killjoys”, despite meaning well to aid their children in spiritual guidance (Cockshut, 1988:31). Because many Victorian children viewed their fathers in the light of a God-figure, it caused some of them to transfer their resentment for their fathers to God (ibid.).

Another characteristic of Evangelicalism included a moral attitude which strove to tone society down, but as England became more secular by the end of the nineteenth century, moral restrictions were eventually abandoned for a more “extreme permissiveness” (Altick, 1973:168). Hence the generations after the Victorians became more tolerant toward moral aspects such as open marriages, illegitimate children and homosexuality.

In conclusion, Victorian religion is one of the most complex cultural issues of the nineteenth century. The balance between a “bereaved Christianity” and a “newly assertive scientific community” is perhaps the most famous aspect of nineteenth-century faith (Hewitt, 2006:420). Yet amid the religious crises one finds stories of strong faith in God. One of the most moving examples expressed in a letter by Charlotte Brontë should be taken into consideration, given her own religious crisis experienced as a teenager.

The letter in question was written to James Taylor on the eleventh of February 1851. Charlotte discusses an atheistic book written by Harriet Martineau and Henry George Atkinson, *Letters on the Laws of Man's Nature and Development*. Being the first book of “avowed Atheism and Materialism” Charlotte had ever read, she did not hide her revolt at the idea that people maliciously voiced their “disbelief in the existence of a God or a Future Life” (Brontë, 2010:185).

By the time this letter was written, Charlotte had outlived all her siblings and her greatest comfort was that she would one day meet them again in heaven (Fraser, 1989:392). Her attack on atheists' denial of heaven serves as a fitting argument which should have been pondered on by all Victorian unbelievers, and should also be taken into consideration by all people, regardless of their religious views (Brontë, 2010:185-186):

In judging of such exposition and declaration—one would wish entirely to put aside the sort of instinctive horror they awaken and to consider them in an impartial spirit and collected mood. This I find it difficult to do. The strangest thing is that we are called on to rejoice over this hopeless blank—to receive this bitter bereavement as a great gain—to welcome this unutterable desolation as a state of pleasant freedom. Who could do this if he would? Who would do it if he could?

Chapter 4: Gender

Like religion, gender was another socio-cultural issue in the Victorian era which has been widely discussed, and which caused concern in some circles. Since all three of the authors discussed in this dissertation were female, it is hardly surprising that the issue of gender is mentioned in their novels, which proves that it features as a biographical aspect in their work.

Victorian ideas of what a woman was and what she was supposed to do varied. Popular in the 1820s (and still read during the first decade of Queen Victoria's reign) was a series of "etiquette books for women", which advised, among other things, that the only "professional knowledge" a woman should require was that which belonged in the "domestic sphere" (Fraser, 1989:110).

One can imagine what the reaction of these three intellectual authors might have been were they to read the advice as given in Dr John Gregory's *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters*, published at the end of the eighteenth century: "if you happen to have any learning keep it a profound secret" (quoted *ibid.*). Fortunately for posterity, if the Brontës or Eliot ever read this line, they chose to ignore it.

An early summary of what makes the ideal lady was given in Mrs Barbauld's 1826 book, *A Legacy for Young Ladies consisting of Miscellaneous Pieces, in Prose and Verse*, with its insistence that women had "but one" role in life: namely, "to be a wife, a mother, a mistress of a family" (quoted *ibid.*):

Every woman should consider herself as sustaining the general character of a rational being, as well as the more confined one belonging to the female sex; and therefore the motives for acquiring general knowledge and cultivating the taste are nearly the same for both sexes. The line of separation between the duties of a young man or a young woman appears to me chiefly fixed by this—that a woman is excused from all professional knowledge....

Thus the limited education granted for women, as mentioned in the above passage, consisted of subjects which would enhance feminine character and abilities. "Conventional subjects" for girls included French, Italian, German, drawing, music, and needlework (Ingham, 2008:4). All the Brontës and George Eliot mastered these subjects, and they even learned some of the classical languages,

particularly Latin.

As might be expected, a limited education did not help women much to achieve a more secure place in society. They were regarded as “second-class” and were excluded from voting and obtaining professional jobs. Even when women accomplished the ideal Victorian female occupation (marriage), they did not move on to become “first-class persons”, but actually became “non-persons” (Ingham, 2008:50-51).

Marriage was viewed as a combined spiritual, personal and social union. Like religion, greater emphasis was placed on the social aspect of marriage than the other two categories. By law, women were not allowed to litigate except through a male, often her husband, father or brother (ibid.). Any money she owned or earned would go directly to the husband upon marriage.

Given the fact that the Victorians were mainly a sexist society, it is small wonder that they did everything in their power to limit the roles of women, especially in marriage, which was generally viewed from the husband’s perspective. William Blackstone summarised a wife’s legal status as far back as the 1760s, when he explained that, through marriage, the “husband and wife are one person in law” (quoted ibid):

...that is the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing, protection, and cover, she performs everything: and is therefore called in our law-french a *feme covert*.

It is small wonder that Helen Huntingdon’s aunt declares in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* that marriage “*is a serious thing*” (Brontë, 1998:125).

The cultural concept of the ideal woman engaging in domestic duties was partly due to the result of the popularity of Coventry Patmore’s famous poem, *The Angel in the House*. This work presented the ideal image of a woman as not just a “Victorian lady” but as an “angel on earth”, with her “unselfish grace, gentleness, simplicity, and nobility” (Gilbert & Gubar, 2000:22). But there was a cost to becoming this beloved angel. Victorian women possessed little freedom, and lost it completely once they were married. Since a woman could only become an angel in her household through

marriage, she had to “surrender” everything, including her “personal comfort, her personal desires”, and live a “life that has no story” (ibid., 25). In short, she had to doom herself to death and heaven, simply because she had striven to “master the arts” of pleasing her husband (ibid., 24-25).

Another popular cultural icon of Victorian women was the seamstress, as TJ Edelstein suggests in his 1980 article, “They Sang ‘The Song of the Shirt’: the Visual Iconology of the Seamstress”. Dressmaking was one of the few occupations available to women. By 1841 there were over 106,801 employees working in dressmaking and millinery, of which “only 563” were male (Edelstein, 1980:186). The “delicate-featured, long-suffering, lovely seamstress” fell into the same popular category in which women were often presented in literature and the visual arts: in a romantic light calculated to inspire the viewers’ “pity and sympathy” (ibid., 196,198).

The popularity of the seamstress continued throughout the Victorian period because of the fact that she stood as a “martyr for modern society” (ibid., 210). Apart from reflecting in general terms on the Victorian work ethic, where all pleasure was sacrificed for the sake of work, the notion might also be a reference to the martyrdom women submitted to once they married and entered a life of domestic slavery, like the seamstress working endlessly to produce goods for others, especially men.

Most critics assume that Anne Brontë used her brother Branwell as a model for Arthur Huntingdon. His drunkenness and supposed affair with his employer’s wife, Lydia Robinson, caused deep heartbreak to his family. Although there is no evidence, it is also possible that Anne had read about Caroline Norton, who was involved in one of the biggest scandals of the 1830s.

George Chapple Norton, a barrister and MP for Guildford, made his wife Caroline deeply unhappy due to his “considerable brutality” (Gordon, 1989:176). In 1836 he sued the Prime Minister, Lord Melbourne, for £10,000 on grounds of adultery (ibid.). Norton lost his case, but Caroline’s reputation was irretrievably ruined: separated from her husband, from 1839 she became an outspoken activist for child custody (ibid., 177). She was also a supporter of the Married Women’s Property Act, which in 1870 finally allowed wives to “control” their own property and earnings (ibid.).

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall's concern with "sexual and parental relations" is part of the nineteenth century's political and social activities intended to improve the "position" of women and children (Shaw, 2013:333). At this stage what became known as the Women's Movement saw its origin, and higher education for women became a major issue (ibid.). Anne especially explores the cultural norms of marriage and the position of women as independent beings.

According to Heather Glen, Anne offers the reader a "stark anatomy" of patriarchal society, showing that it leads to an "'unarmed' ignorance" that has "judged women's proper state" (Glen, 2002:8). This is most clearly relevant in Helen's attitude towards marriage. The education of girls aimed at preparing them to fulfil the important roles of matrimony and motherhood. Helen's remarks regarding wifhood tell the reader that she sees it in a romantic and rather naïve light. In chapter sixteen, aptly titled "The Warnings of Experience", her formidable aunt asks her if she ever thinks about becoming engaged "before the season is over" (Brontë, 1998:123-124):

"Sometimes; but I don't think it at all likely that I *ever* shall....I imagine there must be only a very, very few men in the world, that I should like to marry; and of those few, it is ten to one I may never be acquainted with one; or if I should, it is twenty to one, he may not happen to be single, or to take a fancy to me."

Aunt Maxwell's warning that Helen should not "suffer" her heart to be stolen by the "first foolish or unprincipled person" that crosses her path, and that "beauty" and "money" are the two aspects "most attractive to the worst kinds of men", indicates a general widespread attitude toward matrimony (ibid.). Unmarried women in the 1830s and 1840s were at risk of being in "jeopardy" because the lot of a poor single woman had "little to recommend it" (Wilks, 1986:133). The mention of wealth and family connections as recommendations is evidence that focus was placed on marriage's "domestic felicity" (O'Toole, 1999:716).

Anne seems to be drawing from personal experience here. She and her sisters were daughters of an "impoverished" clergyman who knew all too well that "without money behind them" they would remain single (Barker, 1995:116-117). Since Anne died unmarried at the young age of twenty-nine, it is significant to realise how fully aware she was of mundane social barriers to marriage.

Helen's education is typical of the time: it is "weak on academic instruction, strong on character formation" and aims at attaining what conduct books of the time described as "moral greatness" (Drewery, 2013:340). The Victorian woman was thought of as "physically, emotionally and intellectually" inferior to men, but she was far more "morally indomitable", and as such was "expected to assume responsibility for the upkeep of moral standards" (ibid.). Helen's aunt emphasises that moral principles are the most important aspect of a woman's virtue and education, and she must be cautious not to get betrayed by her own desires in "a moment of unwariness" (Brontë, 1998:125). She must "study" the man or situation first; then she must "approve", and only then can she "love" (ibid):

"Let your eyes be blind to all external attractions, your ears deaf to all the fascinations of flattery and light discourse....Principle is the first thing...and next to that, good sense, respectability, and moderate wealth. If you should marry the handsomest...you little know the misery that would overwhelm you, if, after all, you should find him to be a worthless reprobate, or even an impracticable fool."

Ironically, the warnings of Aunt Maxwell cause Arthur to be attractive to Helen because he is the embodiment of her aunt's worst fears. The stereotypical 1840s gentleman (or "gent") came from the "petit bourgeois class"; he frequented casinos (and many of them visited brothels) and was marked as a dandy due to "slightly long, curled hair, his ring, the large buttons on his double-breasted sac coat, and his short cane and cigar" which were "the gent's signature accessories in the 1840s" (Briggs, 2011:646). Hobbies included "showing off [his] loud clothes while trying to appear indifferent and aloof", usually at "shopping streets, metropolitan parks, and sporting events" (ibid., 647).

Arthur belongs to the category of the handsome and irresponsible gentleman because he is a "fine lad...but a bit wildish"; when Helen asks why, she is told that he is "destitute of principle, and prone to every vice that is common in youth" (Brontë, 1998:128). She claims that she will judge Arthur by the "cast of his countenance", since she is an "excellent physiognomist" who always judges "people's characters by their looks—not by whether they are handsome or ugly", but this is slightly hypocritical of her because Arthur's good looks are an important factor in her being attracted to him (ibid., 129).

Arthur's wild nature makes him one of the novel's "most consistently interesting" characters (Hyman, 2008:452). Not only is he "an enactor of excessive patriarchal authority, nor just an overplayed Regency rake"; he is also a "complex alimental embodiment of gender and class" (ibid.).

Arthur's complex nature is apparent in the discussions between Aunt Maxwell and Helen. Aunt Maxwell scolds Helen for considering Arthur as a potential husband after she promised that she would "never be *tempted* to marry a man who was deficient in sense or principle, however handsome or charming in other respects", that her affection "*must* be founded on approbation", and that she must "approve and honour and respect" so as to love (Brontë, 1998:140). When Aunt Maxwell asks if Arthur is a "good man", Helen replies that he is "much better" than they think, and while he is not exactly a man of "principle" she may be able to aid him in this due to the "good examples" of her aunt and others (ibid.). But her protestation only adds to the sense of Arthur's mysterious personality because neither woman can figure him out.

Helen becomes a victim of the notion of the woman as Angel in the House. When she embraces the "nineteenth-century ideal wherein the wife takes on the responsibilities for running a household and nurturing others", she also becomes more aware of her husband's degradation, which only emphasises her role as one of these "domestic guardians" (Diederich, 2003:27). There are hints that Helen is not prepared to be a domestic angel redeeming her spouse's sins. In chapter twenty-three, titled "First Weeks of Matrimony", she writes about her "eight weeks' experience of matrimony", claiming that, while not regretting the step she has taken, she cannot but admit that Arthur is not all she imagined him to be (Brontë, 1998:191):

...if I had known him in the beginning...I probably never should have loved him, and if I had loved him first, and then made the discovery, I fear I should have thought it my duty not to have married him. To be sure, I might have known him...but I was wilfully blind, and now, instead of regretting that I did not discern his full character before I was indissolubly bound to him, I am *glad*; for it has saved me a great deal of battling with my conscience, and a great deal of consequent trouble and pain; and, whatever I *ought* to have done, my duty, now, is plainly to love him and to cleave to him....

Helen also exemplifies the cultural belief that it is the “duty of women to save dissolute men from themselves”, thus neglecting the painting to which she is so attached (Matus, 2002:100). It can be argued that Anne did something unusual in Victorian literature: she “shattered the pretences of marital harmony so beloved of many Victorians” (Ward, 2007:151). She revealed that some marriages were little more than domestic dungeons for women. It is not entirely Helen’s fault that her marriage is disastrous: she is a victim of her time because she has been conditioned to view marriage in a certain light, although doubtless her romantic daydreams are also to blame. She feels like a victim while at the same time blaming herself (Brontë, 1998:197):

I have since endeavoured to suppress my feelings and receive his revelations in the silence of calm contempt....There are times when, with a momentary pang—a flash of wild dismay, I ask myself, ‘Helen, what have you done?’ But I rebuke the inward questioner, and repel the obtrusive thoughts that crowd upon me...I well know I have no right to complain. And I don’t and won’t complain. I do and will love him still and I do not and will not regret that I have linked my fate with his.

Matrimony could be very negative and was often regarded as such in the nineteenth century. In an essay written in the middle of Queen Victoria’s reign, Mona Caird compared marriage to the Mongolian marketplace with its “‘iron cage, wherein women are held in bondage, suffering moral starvation, while the thoughtless gather round to taunt and to insult their lingering misery’” (quoted in Ward, 2007:152). Wives had virtually no legal status: they were “unable to sue, to contract, to bequeath property without consent, to enjoy autonomous control of property brought into a marriage, or subsequently earned or acquired, to enjoy custody of children, or to determine their education” (ibid., 153).

Motherhood is a major concern for Helen because she regards it as a “godly calling”, and fears that her duty may be “thwarted” by her husband (ibid.). She expresses the fear after little Arthur’s birth that he will either die in infancy, or else live a life which would cause turmoil to himself and to his family (Brontë, 1998:228-229):

In the first, I have this consolation: that the bud, thought plucked, would not be withered, only transplanted to a fitter soil to ripen and blow beneath a riper sun...if he should live to disappoint my hopes, and frustrate all my efforts—to be a slave of sin, the victim of vice and misery, a curse to others

and himself—Eternal Father, if Thou beholdest such a life before him, tear him from me now in spite of all my anguish, and take him from my bosom to Thine own, while he is yet a guileless, unpolluted lamb!

When Helen realises that Arthur is having an affair with Lady Lowborough, the wife of one of their friends, she confronts him. Disgusted at his intimacy with this equally lustful and selfish woman, Helen warns him that his “amusing” himself with rousing her jealousy could rouse her hatred instead (Brontë, 1998:223). Anne is attacking one of the most unfair cultural aspects of marriage: the demanding nature of men. The marriage vows on the husband’s side have given Arthur “a position of power”, providing him with the “right” to exercise “absolute control” (Ingham, 2008:151). Instead of using “reasoned consideration” to justify his actions, he acts out only on the desire to have his appetites “impulsively gratified” (ibid.).

When Helen asks if their wedding vows are “a jest”, and if she can love a man who “coolly” breaks them, acting as if it is “nothing” to him, Arthur counter-attacks, justifying the view of his own power over her as her husband (Brontë, 1998:224):

“You are breaking your marriage vows yourself....You promised to honour and obey me, and now you attempt to hector over me, and threaten and accuse me and call me worse than a highwayman. If it were not for your situation, Helen, I would not submit to it so tamely. I won’t be dictated to by a woman, though she be my wife.”

The remainder of his remarks indicate that he thinks love is a concern for women only, as it is part of a woman’s nature “to be constant—to love one and one only, blindly, tenderly, and for ever” (ibid.). His arrogant attitude clearly reveals that he believes men do not have to give their love to just one woman.

Arthur is demanding, but he never has “total dominance” over Helen, which frustrates him and causes him to find comfort in drink (Thormählen, 1993:837). He is “denied” his “conjugal rights” as husband, and is unable to possess both Helen’s body and soul (ibid.). The scene which caused the biggest uproar among the Victorian reading public was in chapter twenty-four, when Helen refused to grant Arthur access to her bedroom. Locking herself in, she tells him scornfully that he has “displeased” her and that she does not “want to see or hear your voice again till the morning” (Brontë,

1998:199). This scene is “remarkable” because it is one of the few “early Victorian” novels which insisted that women had as much right as their husbands to control their sexuality (Thormählen, 1993:837).

Helen has difficulty in escaping because she does not have money of her own. The law stated that a woman’s possessions became her husband’s after they were married. It was almost impossible for a woman to sue for divorce: before 1857 she could only do this if her husband was “physically cruel, incestuous, or bestial”, and by running away while still married Helen risks the possibility of losing all claims to property and her son (Matus, 2002:108). Before the Custody of Infants Act in 1839 a woman was forbidden sole custody over her children; obviously she would be denied custody if she were guilty of adultery, and she had to be rich enough to gain it in the first place (ibid., 109).

Since the plot of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is set at least eighteen years before the Custody of Infants Act, it explains why Helen goes under an *alias*: she has no custodial rights and must hide herself (ibid.). It also explains why she refuses Walter Hargrave’s and Gilbert’s advances: for religious reasons and for the risk of losing little Arthur if she is found guilty of adultery.

It is startling that the youngest and least admired of the Brontë sisters should have had sufficient knowledge of the “legal and practical inequities” of Victorian marriage laws (ibid.). At the same time, the style in which Anne used Helen to emphasise more equal marital rights to the wife was also controversial because it gave the impression that the wife should be granted opportunities to act out authority over her husband.

When Helen visits Arthur at his deathbed she demands that he leaves their son “entirely” under her care, and gives her permission to “take him away whenever and wherever” she wants to (Brontë, 1998:410). She even insists on Arthur signing a document confirming this arrangement. Using the “language and authority of the law”, she aims to “secure her maternal relationship and her son” (Matus, 2002:109). This can be seen as an example of Helen being, at least momentarily, the spouse who has control.

Shockingly, Arthur is not the only one at fault. There are signs that Helen also has a slightly malevolent nature which surfaces after Arthur “begins to ensnare her in his fall” (Langland, 1989:142). As Arthur’s health and sexual morality decline due to his drinking and adultery, Helen becomes embittered and cynical. The domestic hearth is no longer the “impregnable haven” she had hoped it would be, and her distancing herself from Arthur may lead to her independence, but it also causes her to become an “unwomanly woman” (Drewery, 2013:343). The biggest outburst against her husband is in chapter thirty-four, in which Helen records in her diary her fury at this man who has “trampled” on her love and support (Brontë, 1998:297):

Oh! when I think how fondly, how foolishly I have loved him, how madly I have trusted him, how constantly I have laboured, and studied, and prayed, and struggled for his advantage...it is not enough to say that I no longer love my husband—I HATE him! The word stares me in the face like a guilty confession, but it is true: I hate him—I hate him!—But God have mercy on his miserable soul!—and make him see and feel his guilt—I ask no other vengeance!

The passages in which Helen pours out such bitter and spiteful emotions are indicative of how “destructive interaction” can occur in marriage if the personalities of husband and wife are “incompatible” (Langland, 1989:143). Her “incessant lecturing aimed at his moral improvement” alienated him from her in the first place, and finds its way into her diary (ibid.). In chapter thirty-five, titled “Provocations”, she contemplates hurting Arthur in the same way he has hurt her by encouraging Walter Hargrave’s “advances” (Brontë, 1998:302). But she immediately rejects such sinful thoughts, and hates Arthur “tenfold more than ever” for having driven her to such a step (ibid.):

God pardon me for it—and for all my sinful thoughts! Instead of being humbled and purified by my afflictions, I feel that they are turning my nature into gall. This must be my fault as much as theirs that wrong me. No true Christian could cherish such bitter feelings as I do against him and [Lady Lowborough]—especially the latter: him, I still feel that I could pardon—freely, gladly—on the slightest token of repentance; but *she*—words cannot utter my abhorrence.

As she does with religion, Anne treats suffering in marriage in the context of personal comfort and hope. Helen’s release from an abusive husband at his death brings her to Gilbert, who marries her.

Her sufferings are summarised neatly in the novel's final chapter. Plucking a Christmas rose and dusting the snow off its petals, she brings it to her lips and says (ibid., 465):

“This rose is not so fragrant as a summer flower, but it has stood through hardships none of them could bear: the cold rain of winter has sufficed to nourish it, and its faint sun to warm it; the bleak winds have not blanched it, or broken its stem, and the keen frost has not blighted it. Look, Gilbert, it is still fresh and blooming as a flower can be, with the cold snow even now on its petals.—Will you have it?”

This passage calls to mind one of Anne's poems, “The Narrow Way”. It is a description of a Christian's journey through life; though “not smooth”, it is “the only road to heaven, and will be brightened by hope” (Alexander & Smith, 2003:30). The speaker warns about those who insist that the “upward path is smooth”, since it will cause true believers to “stumble in the way,/And faint before the truth” (Brontë, 1912:414). Those who wish to “seek that blest abode” must “employ” all strength since the “only road/Unto the realms of joy” is one filled with suffering and unease (ibid.). Stanzas three and four could be taken as Helen's philosophy (ibid.):

Bright hope and pure delight
Upon his course may beam,
And there, amid the sternest heights,
The sweetest flowerets gleam.

On all her breezes borne,
Earth yields no scents like those;
But he that dares not grasp the thorn
Should never crave the rose.

Gilbert and Helen are mirror images of each other at the novel's closing. Each has travelled on a difficult path, filled with hardships, but these have crafted their spiritual growth so as to make them suitable for each other. Each is, metaphorically speaking, the rose which the other has craved and at last obtained. The scene of the Christmas rose “gives rise to emotions of joy and fervent desire in both Helen and Gilbert” (Diederich, 2003:33).

Yet remarriage is a questionable solution to Helen's difficulties. Gilbert's assault on Frederick due to jealousy over Helen, brought about by the gossip about her, led some critics to claim that his violence "rivals any of Arthur's exploits" (ibid., 37). Remarriage can either "re-establish" the state of "domestic ideal" or else cause continuing emotional sorrow (ibid., 33). Gilbert is not without faults because he is similar to Arthur with his "vain, arrogant, hot-tempered, and domineering habits" (Ingham, 2008:153).

The only "benign relationship" Helen enjoys is with her brother, Frederick, who is "resolutely helpful and calm" in comparison to either of her two husbands (ibid.). But her marriages are significant portraits of how Victorian men related to women "with whom they are already, or hoping to be, in sexual partnerships" (ibid., 154).

Anne's examination of marriage as a gender issue is remarkable considering that she had personally known few men during her short and single life. It reveals that she was a keen observer of the inequality between the sexes and that she felt it her duty to develop her own views concerning this matter. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* deals effectively with this theme, and should be taken into serious consideration in a study of gender, culture and the literature of nineteenth-century Britain.

Gender, like other Victorian social issues, was rigorously debated before Queen Victoria's reign. In the eighteenth century it was mostly aristocratic women who "played an important role in high political fighting" (Hilton, 2008:355). Despite their efforts, and despite the fact that the eighteenth century saw the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's famous book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), women were not allowed the same political and social rights as men.

Women were not even allowed to "reinterpret Scripture", as God's way of dealing with the world was thought to be "beyond their capability" of understanding (ibid., 356-357). Based on this judgement, men in the nineteenth century seemed to have taken literally to heart St Paul's commandment in 1 Timothy that women must "learn in silence with all subjection", and that they are

forbidden “to teach” and “usurp authority over the man”.¹⁵

There is a comical scene in volume two, chapter seven of *Shirley* in which Shirley and Caroline debate this text and the question on how women are to interpret the Bible with Joe Scott, one of Gerard Moore’s workers. When the girls confront him about whether “all the wisdom in the world is lodged in male skulls”, he retorts by giving voice to his admiration of the passage in 1 Timothy 2 about women being subjected to silence in learning, as Adam was created before Eve (Brontë, 2008:277-278).

Shirley passionately exclaims that Adam had the greater fault since he sinned “with his eyes opened”, and when Joe asks what is Caroline’s opinion of the text, she goes on to defend her sex (ibid.):

“Hem! I...account for them in this way: he wrote that chapter for a particular congregation of Christians...if I could read the original Greek, I should find that many of the words have been wrongly translated....It would be possible...to give the passage quite a contrary turn; to make it say, ‘Let the woman speak out whenever she sees fit to make an objection;’—‘it is permitted to a woman to teach and to exercise authority as much as may be. Man, meantime, cannot do better than to hold his peace’, and so on.”

Even when Shirley earlier scolded Joe by claiming that she reads “just what gentlemen read” in the newspapers: “leading articles”, “foreign intelligence”, “market prices”, and politics (her “habitual study”), he still insists with a smirk that rather she reads about “the marriages”, “the murders, and the accidents” (ibid., 276). Joe is attempting to confine Shirley to the gender standards of the day, which held the view that women are only interested in marriage, gossip and hysterical events.

Hysteria was believed to be a typical feature of women’s health in the nineteenth century. There was a tendency to view women being “admonished” to “*be ill*”, as the illnesses suffered by Victorian women were the “goals” rather than the “byproducts” of their feminine training (Gilbert & Gubar, 2000:54). Gilbert and Gubar quote from Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English’s book ¹⁶ to support their argument that Victorian women, in particular those of the middle and upper classes, were often viewed as “‘sick’ [frail, ill]”, that working-class women were “‘sickening’ [infectious, diseased]”, and

¹⁵1 Timothy 2:11-12.

¹⁶*Complaints and Disorders: The Sexual Politics of Sickness* (Old Westbury: The Feminist Press, 1973).

that society agreed that a typical “lady” was “frail and sickly” (ibid.).

The theory that hysteria was a part of specifically female maladies becomes clearer when Gilbert and Gubar quote Dr Mary Putman Jacobi¹⁷, who claims that it was “considered natural and almost laudable” for women to “break down under all conceivable varieties of strain”, and this became such an obsession that they were soon “nothing but a bundle of nerves” (ibid., 55).

Caroline from *Shirley* is a character who embodies the idea of the sick Victorian woman. In volume three, chapters one to three, she suffers from a fever which almost kills her. But although her disease manifests itself physically, it is largely psychosomatic. Caroline suffers from mental anguish due to her unrequited feelings for her cousin, Robert Gérard Moore, and due to the empty, meaningless role she has to play in life, simply because she is a woman and is denied the activities preserved for men.

Already in volume two, chapter eleven, she cries out in a long monologue against her stifling, useless existence. Even the stock of reading materials in her uncle’s library is limited. Books in Greek and Latin are “of no use to her”, and she is confined to the reading of “venerable Lady’s Magazines...[and] some mad Methodist Magazines, full of miracles and apparitions, of preternatural warnings, ominous dreams, and frenzied fanaticism” (Brontë, 2008:327-328). In other words, it was the sort of hysterical reading which would perfectly suit the supposedly hysterical natures of women.

Caroline further comments on one of her acquaintances, Miss Ainley, a local spinster who is often made a figure of fun. Miss Ainley confided to Caroline her hope of Heaven, as there has been “little enjoyment in this world” for her (ibid., 328). Miss Ainley’s confession is not just a personal wish-fulfilment, or reserved for “nuns—with their closed cell, their iron lamp, their robe strait as a shroud, their bed narrow as a coffin”; it is on behalf of *all* Victorian women, married and single, longing for a better existence beyond the world of restriction and repression (ibid.).

Caroline cries out, as a young woman, that it cannot be God’s purpose to “create us, and cause us to live, with the sole end of always wishing to die”; humans have been “intended to prize life and

¹⁷Quoted ibid.

enjoy it”, yet it has now become meaningless to her, and for countless other women who “have no earthly employment” besides “household work and sewing” (ibid., 328-329):

...no earthly pleasure, but an unprofitable visiting; and no hope...of anything better....The great wish—the sole aim of every one of them is to be married, but the majority will never marry....They scheme, they plot, they dress to ensnare husbands. The gentlemen turn them into ridicule: they don’t want them....

Few women of Charlotte’s day reading this passage would not have applauded her for her courage in making it clear to the world that she had had enough of society confining women to a “useless, blank, pale, slow-trailing” life (ibid., 328).

Caroline’s monologue supports Charlotte’s use of “the language and diagnoses of Victorian medical accounts of the ‘female economy’” (Shuttleworth, 1996:186). The trauma Caroline suffers from reflects the insistence by the Victorians that women were expected to “exhibit strong self-control” despite being believed to possess psychologically a “lower capacity than men” to achieve this (ibid., 199). The obsession with self-control bordered on “mania”, and it was especially forced upon those who were thought to be part of the lower strata of society, such as women (ibid.). It is small wonder that Caroline (and even men on occasion) suffered from psychological illnesses if they had constantly to repress natural human feelings, such as sexual desire and a wish for a more active role in life.

While most professions of the day were reserved for men, it does not mean that there was no employment whatsoever for women. As discussed above, dress-making was a major occupation, although it simply emphasised the domestic role women were expected to fulfil. The only other alternatives available to an educated woman were to become either a teacher at a school or a governess in a private family. All three Brontës had been governesses, and Emily and Charlotte were employed as schoolteachers, albeit briefly. Even George Eliot considered teaching at one point.

The first decade of Queen Victoria’s reign saw the establishment of some early institutions which aimed at “serious attempts to provide secondary education for middle-class girls”, and tertiary education establishments came into existence in 1848, such as Queen’s College in London (Ingham, 2008:53). Nevertheless, the “idea of educating girls for their own sake” was a “seldom mentioned”

topic (ibid.). Subjects which girls were usually taught placed greater stress on their feminine qualities than their intellectual status. Mary Taylor, a friend of Charlotte's, perfectly "summed up" working opportunities for women in a letter written to Ellen Nussey in 1849 (ibid.):

There are no means for a woman to live in England but by teaching, sewing or washing. The last is the best. The best paid, the least unhealthy & the most free. But it is not paid well enough to live by.

Moreover it is impossible for anyone not born to this position to take it up. I don't know why but it is.

In *Shirley*, Caroline is at one point so desperate for more action in her life that she contemplates becoming a governess. This is revealed by her wishing for a profession "fifty times a day. As it is, I often wonder what I came into the world for" (Brontë, 2008:193). Shirley warns that "hard labour and learned professions...make women masculine, coarse, unwomanly", but Caroline retorts by asking bitterly if it matters "whether unmarried and never-to-be-married women are unattractive and inelegant, or not?—provided only they are decent, decorous, and neat, is enough" (ibid.).

Being a governess was an uncomfortable and often humiliating occupation, but was also one of the most subscribed to of its kind. The census of 1851 indicated that there were over 25,000 governesses, which suggests, if nothing else, the occupation's importance as a part of Victorian culture (ibid.). It also enabled a woman to go out into the world and make some use of her limited education, but it was emotionally a very unsatisfying occupation. Hence Shirley's horror when Caroline considers joining the governess profession: "Be a governess! Better be a slave at once" (ibid., 203).

Victorian women's stifled role in life is also illustrated in *Shirley* by the two spinster characters, Miss Ainley and Miss Mann. These two are not very popular figures in their district. Indeed, even Caroline admits that old maids are part of a "very unhappy race", though she also believes that one must not "neglect" them merely because they "are not pretty, and young, and merry!" (ibid., 151). Although Caroline pities these "solitary and afflicted" women, she also wonders how to mentally prepare herself were spinsterhood to be her fate (ibid., 154). Having "reckoned securely on the duties and affections of wife and mother to occupy [her] existence", she now begins to fear that she may end up unmarried after all (ibid., 149):

“I have to live, perhaps, till seventy years. As far as I know, I have good health: half a century of existence may lie before me. How am I to occupy it? What am I to do to fill the interval of time which spreads between me and the grave?...I shall never marry. What was I created for, I wonder? Where is my place in the world?...”

The question of existence is one which old maids “are puzzled to solve” (ibid.). In Caroline’s attempt to find the answer to this mystery, she observes that her life would be dreary if it were to be so limited in action, because, though those who try to “solve” women’s limited lives through telling them that their “place is to do good to others, to be helpful whenever help is wanted” are “right in some measure” (ibid.):

“...I perceive that certain sets of human beings are very apt to maintain that other sets should give up their lives to them and their service, and then they requite them by praise....Is this enough? Is it to live? Is there not a terrible hollowness, mockery, want, craving, in that existence...? Does virtue lie in abnegation of self?”

The state of Victorian single women became an important topic within the Woman Question. Women’s domestic duties stemmed from an intense religious atmosphere: taking a “self-giving” attitude as their cue, single women engaged in “charitable-work”, either as part of a social or a religious community (Perkin, 2008:397). During the 1840s, Anglican convents also began to see the light. These were highly controversial due to their Catholic roots, but to a certain extent they granted women the chance to “leave home and act independently” (ibid., 398). As mentioned in the previous chapter, Caroline is the most spiritual character in the novel. She would have admired the religious life of a convent, but it too would have been too quiet and uneventful for her.

Regardless of its social dimension, Charlotte believed that marriage was ultimately a matter of the heart. Writing to Ellen in 1841 about the time when it was considered appropriate for a woman to fall in love, Brontë claimed that the best would be “till the offer has been made, accepted—the marriage ceremony performed and the first half year of wedded life has passed away” (quoted in Fraser, 1989:141):

“...a woman may then begin to love, but with great precaution—very coolly—very moderately—very rationally—if she ever loves so much that a harsh word or a cold look from her husband cuts her to the heart—she is a fool....Moderate love at least will come after; as to intense *passion*, I am convinced that that is no desirable feeling....[Passion] never meets with a requital...the feeling would be only temporary: it would last the honeymoon, and then, perhaps, give place to disgust, or indifference, worse perhaps than disgust. Certainly this would be the case on the man’s part: and on the woman—God help her, if she is to love passionately and alone.”

Reverend Helstone illustrates Charlotte’s belief that men tire of conjugal love quicker than women. Prior to *Shirley*’s opening, Reverend Helstone had married a local beauty, Mary Cave, but came to regret his decision and neglected her. The narrator comments that just as Reverend Helstone is not a good clergyman by nature, he is also not a good husband: he believes that as long as women are “silent” they are “ailed” by nothing and need nothing (Brontë, 2008:45).

The remainder of the description regarding his behaviour towards women is very negative, but it is probably an accurate summary of Victorian sexism. If a woman “did not complain of solitude, solitude, however continued, could not be irksome to her” (ibid.):

If she did not talk and put herself forward, express a partiality for this, an aversion to that, she had no partialities or aversions, and it was useless to consult her tastes. He made no pretence of comprehending women, or comparing them with men: they were a different, probably a very inferior order of existence; a wife could not be her husband’s companion, much less his confidant, much less his stay.

Reverend Helstone’s misogyny is also highlighted in chapter seven during a conversation with Caroline. When Caroline asks him if it is best to remain single, he replies that it is a wise choice, “especially for women” (ibid., 86). Questioning him on whether all marriages are “unhappy”, he drily murmurs that “if everybody confessed the truth, perhaps all are more or less so” (ibid.):

“But why,” said [Caroline], “should [marriage] be pure folly? If two people like each other, why shouldn’t they consent to live together?”

“They tire of each other—they tire of each other in a month. A yokefellow is not a companion; he or she is a fellow-sufferer...”

“One would think you had never been married, uncle: one would think you were an old bachelor....But

you have been married. Why were you so inconsistent as to marry?"

"Every man is mad once or twice in his life."

Another scene that supports Charlotte's belief that men get over passion quickly includes a conversation between Robert Moore and Mr Yorke in volume one, chapter nine, "Briarmains". Robert has "settled it decidedly" that romantic love is a superfluity, "intended only for the rich, who live in ease" (ibid., 140). Mr Yorke, himself a married man, asks Robert if he would marry if he had the chance, but the latter feels disgusted when asked if he would marry an "old" or "ugly" woman for a wife (ibid., 141):

"Bah! I hate ugliness and I delight in beauty: my eyes and heart...take pleasure in a sweet, young, fair face, as they are all repelled by a grim, rugged, meagre one: soft delicate lines and hues please—harsh ones prejudice me. I won't have an ugly wife."

"Not if she were rich?"

"Not if she were dressed in gems. I could not love—I could not fancy—I could not endure her. My taste must have satisfaction, or disgust would break out in despotism—or worse—freeze to utter iciness."

Robert's preference for physically attractive young women makes him similar to Arthur Huntingdon, yet Robert is not a seducer. His character indicates that Charlotte thought that men cared more about sex than women did, and that men and women viewed passion from different perspectives: men associated it with the pleasure of copulation, but women took it to be part of the emotional and spiritual bond that should exist between husband and wife.

In contrast to Robert, Shirley embodies women's desire for a marriage of equality and emotional passion. Shirley is pestered by her haughty uncle, Mr Sympson, to secure for herself a high-born suitor, of which there are several in her district. But their snobbery and shallowness put her off; she dismisses one suitor as "the booby of Stilbro' grammar school" (ibid., 394). To her uncle's horror, she claims to be "resolved" to "esteem—to admire—to *love*...with my whole heart" before marriage, which he denounces as "Preposterous stuff!—indecorous!—unwomanly!" (ibid.).

The big confrontation between Shirley and Mr Simpson occurs in volume three, chapter eight, “Uncle and Niece”. Furious at her for rejecting another suitable proposal, he assumes male authority by insisting on “having my own way. My questions *must* be answered” (ibid., 458). Shirley answers, but in a manner which appears to him (and which must have been so to the Victorian public) shocking and unfeminine in the extreme, although his overreacted response adds a comical tone.

Sir Philip is, according to Shirley, “very amiable—very excellent—truly estimable, but *not my master*: not in one point” (ibid., 461-462):

“....And I know full well, any man who wishes to live in decent comfort with me as a husband must be able to control me....A tyrant would not hold me for a day—not for an hour. I would rebel—break from him—defy him....Did I not say I prefer a *master*? One whose control my impatient temper must acknowledge. A man whose approbation can reward—whose displeasure punish me. A man I shall feel it impossible not to love, and very possible to fear.”

After a long discussion with her uncle, Shirley finally puts her foot down. Claiming firmly that she is “sick at heart with all this weak trash”, she summarises their differences in religious terms: her thoughts “are not your thoughts”, her aims are “not your aims”, they do not “see things in the same light; we do not measure them by the same standard; we hardly speak the same tongue” (ibid., 466). She refuses to hold to “narrow rules”, “little prejudices, aversions” and dogmas”, because she walks “by another creed, light, faith, and hope than you” (ibid.):

“Another creed! I believe she is an infidel.”

“An infidel to *your* religion; an atheist to *your* god.”

“*An—atheist!!!*”

“Your god, sir, is the World....your god, your great Bel, your fish-tailed Dagon, rises before me as a demon....See him busied at the work he likes best—making marriages. He binds the young to the old, the strong to the imbecile...In his realm, there is hatred—secret hatred: there is disgust—unspoken disgust: there is treachery—family treachery: there is vice—deep, deadly, domestic vice....*Your* god is a masked Death.”

At the end of the novel, Shirley marries her former tutor, Robert's brother Louis Moore, and ejects her uncle from her house.

Shirley is an unconventional heroine for a Victorian novel. Prior to the novel's publication, the name "Shirley" was a common male name: the combination of "Miss" and "Shirley" creates an "uneasy mix of the masculine and feminine", making it "irreconcilably oxymoronic" (Vanskike, 1996:478). To support the suggestion of the combination of male and female in Shirley's character, an example from volume one, chapter eleven, can be used. This is the chapter when Shirley is first introduced and when she first meets Caroline. She says that she has had to settle business with Robert Moore, who is her tenant. She feels that the word business "makes me conscious I am indeed no longer a girl, but quite a woman, and something more" (Brontë, 2008:172):

"I am an esquire: Shirley Keeldar, Esquire, ought to be my style and title. They gave me a man's name; I hold a man's position: it is enough to inspire me with a touch of manhood; and when I see such people as that stately Anglo-Belgian—that Gérard Moore before me, gravely talking to me of business, really I feel quite gentleman-like. You must choose me for your churchwarden, Mr. Helstone, the next time you elect new ones: they ought to make me a magistrate and a captain of yeomanry..."

During this scene, Mr Helstone amusingly speaks of Shirley as if she were a man, and associates her with activities which Victorians would never have assigned to a woman, assigning to her different masculine occupations, such as "magistrate", "churchwarden", "captain", and "young squire" (ibid., 173).

Shirley's personality reveals different concepts of gender. Her interest in politics and business indicates that the Victorian public was becoming aware of the "increased presence of women" in male dominated areas of society, such as industrial growth and the marketplace (Vanskike, 1996:480). Brontë wanted to show that Shirley is "*both* masculine and feminine", and thus believed that women were equal to men (ibid., 482).

To a certain extent Shirley could also be seen as a true offspring of Eve. The second chapter of Genesis describes how God created Eve by taking one of Adam's ribs and moulding her flesh around it; hence Adam's claim that the woman was taken from the man, and is "bone of my bone, flesh of my

flesh....”¹⁸ This combination of masculine and feminine explains why Shirley regards Eve as her “mother”, and why she describes her as “a woman-Titan...undying, mighty being!...She is taking me to her bosom, and showing me her heart” (Brontë, 2008:271).

Certain feminists admire Shirley’s insistence on freedom to make her own decisions, but they will probably find the novel’s ending disappointing. Caroline and Shirley marry the Moore brothers; to distinguish them they are respectively called Mrs Louis and Mrs Robert, a sign that they have been “reduced to a life lived in the shadows of men” (Lawson, 1989:741). Marriage may have brought an end to Victorian spinsters’ loneliness, but for those who were of an intellectual nature (like Charlotte and Shirley) it meant that their “knowledge and power” would be cast out by “male wisdom and omnipotence” (ibid.). But although Louis Moore is an intellectual man (a saving grace for Shirley), Brontë emphasises mutual affection, which is the most important factor in a happy marriage. Shirley confirms this notion when she asks Louis to “teach me and help me to be good” (Brontë, 2008:523):

“I do not ask you to take off my shoulders all the cares and duties of property; but I ask you to share the burden, and to show me how to sustain my part well. Your judgement is well-balanced; your heart is kind; your principles are sound. I know you are wise; I feel you are benevolent; I believe you are conscientious. Be my companion through life; be my guide where I am ignorant; be my master where I am faulty; be my friend always!”

When considering Charlotte’s attitude to matrimony and gender it must always be kept in mind that she was single until the age of thirty-eight, and her marriage lasted for a brief nine months before her death. In general, her attitude towards spinsterhood seemed to have been as positive as that of marriage. She wrote to Ellen in a letter of 1839 that she had known “ever since I was twelve years old” that she was “certainly doomed to be an old maid”, but it did not trouble her (Brontë, 2010:15). By 1846 she could write admirably to her former teacher, Miss Wooler, that single women could be just as happy as “cherished wives and proud mothers” (ibid., 71):

¹⁸Genesis 2:23.

I speculate much on the existence of unmarried and never-to-be married women nowadays and I have already got to the point of considering that there is no more respectable character on this earth than an unmarried woman who makes her own way through life quite perseveringly—without support of husband or brother and who having attained the age of 45 or upwards—retains in her possession a well-regulated mind—a disposition to enjoy simple pleasures....

As mentioned in the dissertation's first chapter, the eponymous heroine of *Romola* is an unusual Victorian one due to her liberal and secular education. The Florentines of the fifteenth century took female education, at least for the few, more seriously than the Victorians, although there were still “enormous difficulties” involved (Black *et al.*, 1993:104). Women could not attend university, and while many male scholars admired “the lofty concept of a learned virgin”, they would not tolerate a “competitive female” (*ibid.*). Convents were the best alternative for single and independent women, although as with marriage their secular studies would have had to be abandoned (*ibid.*). As Romola is seen to be an unbeliever at the novel's opening, she would never have given the convent a thought.

Savonarola is accurate when he accuses Romola of focusing more on the sexual aspect of marriage than the sacred. When Tito and Romola become engaged, Tito begins to prepare his wedding-gift, which is a triptych, the cover of which illustrates the love of Bacchus and Ariadne, portraying in minute detail the celebration of pagan sensuality (Eliot, 1994:177-178):

“The young Bacchus must be seated in a ship, his head bound with clusters of grapes, and a spear entwined with vine-leaves in his hand: dark-berried ivy must wind about the masts and sails...and flowers must weave themselves about the poop; leopards and tigers must be crouching before him, and dolphins must be sporting round. But I want to have the fair-haired Ariadne with him, made immortal with her golden crown...”

A young Bacchus, as is seen in Renaissance art, was sexually attractive, but was also one of the “dark and mysterious forces” who held the “secret” of life and death (Bonaparte, 1979:67). In Greek mythology, Bacchus was seen as the god who could “both nurture and destroy” (*ibid.*). As the plot of

Romola progresses, one learns that Tito does indeed nurture and destroy. He becomes the “giver of new life” to Romola and to his mistress, Tessa (ibid.).

Romola indicates that she feels reborn when she tells Tito that everything in her life thus far “was a preparation to love you” (Eliot, 1994:173-174):

“You would laugh at me, Tito, if you knew what sort of man I used to think I should marry—some scholar with deep lines in his face...and with rather grey hair....I used to think about the love I read of in the poets, but I never dreamed that anything like that could happen to me here in Florence in our old library. And then *you* came, Tito, and were so much to my father, and I began to believe that life could be happy for me too....I am very thirsty for a deep draught of joy—for a life all bright like you.”

The romance of Tito and Romola is in some ways similar to that of Helen and Arthur in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Romola’s godfather, Bernardo del Nero, is sceptical about the handsome youth who has captured Romola’s heart. Like Helen, Romola defends her lover, and a conversation between her and Bernardo echoes that of Aunt Maxwell and Helen. Bernardo claims that Bardo did everything in his power to erase “woman’s folly” in his daughter by “cramming” her with Latin and Greek, yet she is taken by the “first pair of bright eyes and the first soft words” that come within her presence (ibid., 184):

“Now, godfather...as if it were only bright eyes and soft words that made me love Tito! You know better. You know I love my father and you because you are both good; and I love Tito, too, because he is so good. I see it, I feel it, in everything he says and does. And if he is handsome, too, why should I not love him the better for that? It seems to me beauty is part of the finished language by which goodness speaks.”

Romola’s wedding-day is one of both joy and foreboding. At the back of her mind is the warning Dino gave her at his deathbed. He had seen her marrying a mysterious stranger, who had the face of the “Great Tempter”, interpreting it as a warning to abstain from matrimony, as it is a “temptation of the enemy” (ibid., 153). As mentioned in the previous chapter, the scene of Dino’s death had shaken Romola, but not enough as to hinder her from continuing with the marriage plans.

Yet already at this stage of the novel there are signs that her religious awakening is approaching. As Tito presents his wedding-gift, intending it to be a “tomb of joy” in which Dino’s crucifix is to be hidden, Romola feels a “slight quiver” as Tito takes the crucifix and locks it in the triptych, but she complies, as she wishes to “subdue certain importune memories and questionings which still flitted like unexplained shadows across her happier thought” (ibid., 191). She adds joyfully that Tito has indeed “crowned my poor life”, as Bacchus had crowned Ariadne (ibid.).

Ironically, Romola experiences a wedding and a baptism: the match with Tito will become a “baptism” in sorrow, which is associated with the crucifix (Bonaparte, 1979:104). The entire event “foreshadows” Romola’s mystical betrothal to Christ, Himself the ultimate figure of sorrow (ibid.). Although her conscience tries to suppress her religious awakening, it is still there, in the shape of the crucifix; it is “only hidden” in the triptych, as she tremblingly mutters to Tito, but he laughingly dismisses her fear and insists she must only look “at the images of our happiness now” (Eliot, 1994:194):

“I have locked all sadness away from you....You will forget this ghastly Mummery when we are in the light, and can see each other’s eyes. My Ariadne must never look backward now—only forward to Easter, when she will triumph with her Care-dispeller.”

Fifteenth months after the wedding Bardo dies, and three months later, one finds a troubled Romola pacing in her house. As in Helen Huntingdon’s case, marriage has not turned out the way Romola hoped it would. She is riddled with guilt because after her exclamation of sorrow at her father’s death, there had been the “irrepressible thought, ‘Perhaps my life with Tito will be more perfect now’”, as “the dream of a tripled life with an undivided sum of happiness had not been quite fulfilled” (ibid., 231):

The rainbow-tinted shower of sweets...should have had some invisible seeds of bitterness mingled with them; the crowned Ariadne, under the snowing roses, had felt more and more the presence of unexpected thorns. It was not Tito’s fault....But it was in the nature of things that no one but herself could go on month after month, and year after year, fulfilling patiently all her father’s monotonous exacting demands. Even she, whose sympathy with her father had made all the passion and religion of her young

years, had not always been patient, and had been inwardly very rebellious.

Something of the young Eliot is revealed in this passage: her own relationship with her father had been negatively affected by her apostasy. To complicate things, his health declined in the years following her growing interest in agnosticism and Biblical Criticism. Grieved and infuriated as he was by her rebellion, his sufferings were genuine and not a psychosomatic reaction to her behaviour.

As Bardo and Dino were the most important men in Romola's life before Tito, Eliot's father and brother were the two most important men in her life before Lewes. Like Romola, Eliot's relationship with her father was strained at times. In the last months of his life, she had exhausted herself with nursing and reading aloud to him. She admitted in a letter to the Brays that "these will be the happiest days of life to me," yet the anguish of losing her father burst forth in her poignant remark that the "one deep strong love I have ever known has now its highest exercise and fullest reward" (quoted in Karl, 1995:100):

...the worship of sorrow *is* the worship of morals....What shall I be without my father? It will seem as if a part of my moral nature were gone. I had a horrid vision of myself last night becoming earthly sensual and devilish for want of that purifying restraining influence.

It is unclear how much Bardo reflects Eliot's father, but he could be a combination of various men who were older than Eliot, and who made a significant impact on her life. In her youth, men like her father, brother and Charles Bray influenced her emotionally and intellectually; other men whose radicalism was influential included John Chapman (with whom she edited *The Westminster Review*), the sociologist Herbert Spencer (for whom she had an unrequited love) and of course Lewes (*ibid.*, 363). Like other Victorian women she had been motivated to engage in "self-abasement", thereby discovering in herself a "moral superiority" over the men she served and dealt with (Gilbert & Gubar, 2000:498).

As a woman, Romola has been brought up on the notion of duty towards the family as one of the most important virtues a woman should live up to. Unfortunately, this concept has also taught her to sacrifice her freedom and comfort for the sake of others, especially men. She admits to herself that she had "willingly" given up much "for her father's sake—she would have given up much more than

that” for Tito, but she would have appreciated “more gaiety, more admiration” in her life, despite the fact that “their natures differed widely” (Eliot, 1994:232):

...but perhaps it was no more than the inherent difference between man and woman, that made her affections more absorbing. If there were any other difference she tried to persuade herself that the inferiority was on her side....And Romola was urged to doubt herself the more by the necessity of interpreting her disappointment in her life with Tito so as to satisfy at once her love and her pride. Disappointment? Yes, there was no other milder word that would tell the truth. Perhaps all women had to suffer the disappointment of ignorant hopes, if she only knew their experience.

One of the ways in which the different natures of Romola and Tito are contrasted is through their respective attitudes toward duty. Romola claims that “faithfulness, and love, and sweet graceful memories” are qualities which should never be ignored, and asks if it is “no good” that the “silent promises on which others build” must be kept because others believe in “love and truth” (ibid., 271):

“Is it no good that a just life should be justly honoured? Or, is it good that we should harden our hearts against all the wants and hopes of those who have depended on us? What good can belong to men who have such souls? To talk cleverly, perhaps, and find soft couches for themselves, and live and die with their base selves as their best companions....I would give up anything else, Tito....But I will not give up that duty.”

Tito, on the other hand, has disregarded all duty: that to Baldassarre (his adoptive father), to his father-in-law and to Romola. He is a representation of a narcissistic, egotistical male, and the “compelling story” of his moral decline functions as a warning that, even if the divine quality of religion is abandoned, one is still not guaranteed protection against evil (Dolin, 2009:183).

Early in the story it becomes clear to the reader that Tito has engaged in wrong deeds, as the narrator reflects that the “unwholesome infecting life” of “every guilty secret” is “cherished by the darkness” (Eliot, 1994:97):

The contaminating effect of deeds often lies less in the commission than in the consequent adjustments of our desires—the enlistment of our self-interest on the side of falsity; as, on the other hand, the purifying influence of public confession springs from the fact, that by it the hope in lies is for ever swept

away, and the soul recovers the noble attitude of simplicity.

Like the typical narcissist, Tito defends his actions. With the attitude of a spoilt child, he insists that it is “*his turn now*” to enjoy the “draught of life”, as the “end of all life” is to “extract the utmost sum of pleasure” (ibid., 111). This attitude leads to his neglect of rescuing Baldassarre, and tricking Tessa, a young peasant girl, into a false marriage, turning her into a kept woman with whom he has two children.

As an egotistic male, Tito cannot bear the idea of Romola overpowering him. When she turns upon him with anger for the first time in their marriage, he feels that the time has come for “all the masculine predominance that was latent in him” to rise up against a woman who has up till now “belonged to that furniture of life which he shrank from parting with” (ibid., 263, 272). Later, as their estrangement from and dislike of each other increase, he becomes aggressive, feeling that a “crisis was come into his marriage life” (ibid., 389):

The husband’s determination to mastery, which lay deep below all blandness and beseechingness, had risen permanently to the surface now, and seemed to alter his face, as a face is altered by a hidden muscular tension with which a man is secretly throttling or stamping out the life from something feeble, yet dangerous.

But his attempt at mastery only increases Romola’s hatred of him. Accusing him of thinking her “too unreasonable to share in the knowledge of your affairs”, her penultimate conversation with him states that she too is a “human being” that “abhors your actions. Our union is a pretence—as if a perpetual lie could be a sacred marriage” (ibid., 390,455).

The sufferings in marriage, such as the quarrels mentioned in the previous paragraph, teach Romola new lessons about herself and society. Marriage has taught her the “risk of involvement” and the “social and moral necessity of keeping commitments whether or not personal affection is involved” (De Jong, 1984:77). In certain aspects she is the opposite of the frivolous Victorian heroine: she has “strong principles”, mixes little with society, does not care for “jewellery and fine clothing”, and desires independence (ibid., 79). What she does share with unconventional Victorian heroines (like those created by the Brontës and Eliot) are her sensitivity for others’ feelings, her desire for attachment and female subordination (ibid.).

Like Helen Huntingdon, Romola leaves her husband while still legally married. Before her conversion, her love for Tito had been her creed, but she has now “lost her belief in the happiness she had once thirsted for: it was a hateful, smiling, soft-handed thing, with a narrow, selfish heart” (ibid., 301). Resolved to find solace in the “company of the howling fanatics and weeping nuns who had been her contempt from childhood till now”, she disguises herself as a nun and flees Florence (ibid., 311). It is then that Savonarola gives her some purpose for her life, although he too eventually disappoints her.

After attempting suicide, Romola in her boat ends up on a different part of the Italian coast, where she finds a weeping Jewish baby in a cottage, who turns out to be one of the few survivors of a village struck by plague. Carrying the child, she enters the village, causing an astonished young monk to exclaim that the “Holy Mother” has come to heal the survivors (ibid., 522). In helping the sick villagers, Romola once again takes on the role of a visible Madonna, and the people come to see her that way too, as the “small flock of surviving villagers” pay their visit “to see the Blessed Lady, and to bring the best of their best as an offering” (ibid., 526-527):

....It was a sight they could none of them forget...how the sweet and sainted Lady with her fair face, her golden hair, and her brown eyes that had a blessing in them, lay weary with her labours after she had been sent over the sea to help them in their extremity....Many legends were afterwards told in that valley about the blessed Lady who came over the sea, but they were legends by which all who heard might know that in times gone by a woman had done beautiful loving deeds there, rescuing those who were ready to perish.

Romola experiences a “new baptism” which is the opposite of her “mere egotistic complaining that life could bring her no content; feeling a right to say, ‘I am tired of life; I want to die’” (ibid., 527). Like her creator, she has come to accept Christianity “not as a system of faith but as a symbolic articulation of the inarticulate” (Bonaparte, 1979:237). She asks herself if she “was something higher, that she should shake the dust off her feet, and say, ‘This world is not good enough for me’” (Eliot, 1994:527,529):

“It was mere baseness in me to desire death. If everything else is doubtful, this suffering that I can help is certain; if the glory of the cross is an illusion, the sorrow is only the truer. While the strength is in my arm I will stretch it out to the fainting; while the light visits my eyes they shall see the forsaken.”

At the novel’s end, Romola’s new role in life is that of “presiding matriarch”, carrying out a “thoughtful response” to Tito’s mistakes (Thurin, 1985:230). Returning to Florence, she learns that Tito is dead, leaving Tessa and their children destitute. She finds them, comforting a distraught Tessa with the message that “God has sent me to you again...I am come to take care of you always” (Eliot, 1994:534). The final important message in *Romola* is one that “exalts women as survivors who, in the wake of callous male treatment, of unreliable male assistance, of the undependability of male command, find in each other order, solace, and happiness” (Thurin, 1985:231). This is touchingly illustrated in the novel’s closing scenes, with Romola, Tessa, Monna Brigida and the two children living together in peace and happiness.

Drastic inequality existed between men and women in the Victorian age. The role of women in life was far too monotonous and limited in comparison to the busy lives of men. The struggle for equal gender rights was an issue in which all three of these authors were participants. To give an example of their struggles as women, a quotation by Anne Brontë from the preface to the second edition of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* will be given as conclusion to this chapter. At the time, she was attacked by critics for daring to write such a controversial and unfeminine novel. The remark she made is an indication of the importance of the equality that, in her view, should exist between the sexes (Brontë, 1998:5):

...I am satisfied that if a book is a good one, it is so whatever the sex of the author may be. All novels are or should be written for both men and women to read, and I am at a loss to conceive how a man should permit himself to write anything that would be really disgraceful to a woman, or why a woman should be censured for writing anything that would be proper and becoming for a man.

Chapter 5: Contemporary Reviews and Reactions

The final chapter of the dissertation comprises an overview of nineteenth-century reviews and reactions to the novels discussed. Since the cultural issues examined in these three novels were familiar to most educated Victorian readers, it may be helpful to look at some contemporary reviews and reactions, because they paint a picture of the reading culture of the nineteenth century.

One finds interesting contrasts in the reviewers' reactions: some enthusiastically praise the authors; others harshly condemn them. Some critics appear to misunderstand the author's original intention, causing them to find the novels disagreeable. This dissertation does not intend to critique these views: the chapter is offered as a means of enhancing a sense of the cultural ethos in which the authors were working. The responses of reviewers and readers constitute (in a reflexive fashion) a reaction to the Brontë sisters and George Eliot's own reactions to their age. As such, it ties in with the overall aims of the dissertation to investigate pivotal Victorian cultural issues.

The unparalleled popularity of the publication and reading of novels is a cultural aspect of Victorian history which will always be remembered. As Anthony Trollope (himself a popular novelist) declared in 1870, novels were "in the hands of all", available in libraries, drawing-rooms, bedrooms, kitchens and nurseries (quoted in David, 2013:1).

Trollope's mention of individuals from different classes possessing novels, from the Prime Minister to the scullery-maid, is an indication of the "sheer pleasure" offered by the reading of "exhilarating fiction" in the nineteenth century, even if everyone was not reading the "same" sort of novel (ibid.).

The novels by the Brontës and Eliot contain important lessons for their readers. Anne Brontë stated in the second edition of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* that she "wished to tell the truth, for truth always conveys its own moral to those who are able to receive it" (Brontë, 1998:3). She also believed that it is "better" to depict things as they "really are" (ibid., 4):

To represent a bad thing in its least offensive light, is doubtless the most agreeable course for a writer of fiction to pursue; but is it the most honest, or the safest? Is it better to reveal the snares and pitfalls of life to the young and thoughtless traveller, or to cover them with branches and flowers?...If I have warned one rash youth from following in [the characters'] steps, or prevented one thoughtless girl from falling into the very natural error of my heroine, the book has not been written in vain.

Anne's intention is the same as that of other Victorian realistic writers. The term realism derives from the French *réalisme*, which was used to describe the work of the French artist Gustave Courbet, who scandalised the public in the 1850s with "starkly unsettling paintings" of the common folk (Levine, 2013:89). The idea of capturing the "truths of prosaic, gritty, and hideous experience" spread from the visual arts to literature, enabling the reading public to become aware of certain types of people, such as "factory workers, drunks, prostitutes, and beggars" who were "poor, marginal, and hitherto neglected" figures in society (ibid.). Presenting such harsh realities in the "least offensive light" may have been the most pleasing to the critics and the reading public, but as Anne saw it, it was not the truth (Brontë, 1998:4).

For nearly two centuries Anne Brontë has had the misfortune to dwell "in the shadows" of her sisters, even though she is "no mere pale copy of either" (Craik, 1988:160). Critics and biographers have given far more attention to the lives and works of Charlotte and Emily than they have to Anne. Interestingly, of all three sisters Anne seems to be the one who uses her "own experiences" the most intensively because she has an artistic gaze which is both "steady and unsentimental" (Wilks, 1986:119). Her work is of interest because of her "original use of her common materials", causing her to become a "startling innovator" in "materials and morals" (Craik, 1986:160).

Despite her originality, Anne is still little read. *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* are "neither well known nor well loved" due to their being "cool: reasoned, ironic, cautionary, sceptical" (Matus, 2002:99). By comparison her sisters' sensational novels are passionate, making them "hot: angry, aggrieved, clamorous, exhilarated" (ibid.). Yet it is a shame that *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* are little regarded since both confirm Anne's status as a realistic novelist, who believed that fiction "should not shrink from telling the truth, however unpalatable it may be" (ibid., 101).

The negative tone of the reviews of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* proves that Anne's realism was ahead of its time. As was mentioned, most novels were acceptable so long as they did not bring a "blush" to the cheeks of their lady readers, especially if they were young and single (Ingham, 2008:84). But *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* made everyone's cheeks blush, whether male or female, married or single. This could explain why certain feminists have taken this novel seriously: it has given voice to the cause of women's concerns and rights, even though it was written at least fifty years before issues such as "female professionalism and autonomy, sexual degeneracy, social decay, and imperial weakness" were more "openly addressed" (Weber, 2006:547).

Anne and other Victorian novelists who make use of realism can "represent and perpetuate the codes of culture while they also challenge and shape its direction" (Beal, 2005:72). In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* Anne took socio-cultural themes such as society, religion and gender and presented them to the world from her perspective. One of the reasons why critics were offended by realism was because realism attempted to disrupt "traditional hierarchies" by scrutinising "all levels of society", thereby acting as a threat to "those in the highest ranks—those with the most to lose by social change" (ibid., 81). According to realism, society needed to reform itself for the sake of fairness and harmony, and this is precisely what Anne did in her writings: reformed social concern from her own perspective.

Charlotte Brontë's comments on *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* are unpleasant as they are the major cause of Anne's reputation not being on the same level as her sisters'. She disliked her publishers comparing Mr Rochester (of *Jane Eyre*) with Mr Huntingdon; she made it clear that there was no "likeness between the two", and that the "foundation of each character is different" (Brontë, 2010:116). It "rankled" her to be compared to her inferior sister and not the genius, Emily, causing her to "single out" *Tenant* for oblivion (Joshi, 2009:920). It was not included among the 1850 reprints of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey*; thus Anne sank into obscurity whilst her sisters' reputations grew (ibid.). In a certain way Charlotte not only "buried" Anne's corpse at Scarborough when she died in 1849, she also buried her literary reputation (Beal, 2005:1). It is upsetting to think that the eldest Brontë sister could act as the "most damaging detractor" of the youngest because it gives the impression that

Charlotte enjoyed, to a certain extent, dominating over Anne (ibid., 9).

It is startling that Charlotte, who pleaded in *Shirley* that women should be granted more opportunities in life, should criticize her sister's work using the same arguments as the male critics. The "choice of subject" was, for someone of Anne's disposition, "an entire mistake", the reasons for writing *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* were "pure, but, I think, slightly morbid" (quoted in Allott, 1974:274). To this day it remains undecided whether Charlotte's actions sprang from a "little competitive rivalry" or from "aesthetic reasons" (Joshi, 2009:920). In either case, she certainly resorted to the prejudices of the era in judging her sister, showing their insidious influence.

The review of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* which appeared in *Sharpe's London Magazine* in August 1848, warned its lady-readers "against being induced to peruse it, either by the powerful interest of the story, or the talent with which it was written" (quoted in Allott, 1974:263). The same critic also brought to light the issues associated with gender in his puzzlement as to the sex of the author. He assumed that only a man could be so "intimately" acquainted with "each vile, dark fold of the civilized brute's corrupted nature", but he could not be certain, because "no man...would have written a work in which all the women...are so far superior in every quality..." (quoted ibid., 265):

...no man would have made his sex appear at once coarse, brutal, and contemptibly weak, at once disgusting and ridiculous....It may be the production of an authoress assisted by her husband, or some other *male* friend: if this be not the case, we would rather decide on the whole, that it is a man's writing. The critic was also disgusted with Helen's doctrine of Universalism, especially with its claims that the "wicked are to pass through purifying penal fires, but all are to be saved at last"; this, the reviewer insists, is a doctrine with a "dangerous tendency" which is "alike repugnant to Scripture, and in direct opposition to the teaching of the Anglican Church" (quoted ibid., 264-265).

The question of gender is a crucial part of the cultural history of nineteenth-century literature. Victorian female authors "faced the risk" of being "excluded altogether from public debate" because of their sex (Carnell, 1998:8). The frequency at which critics guessed at the Brontës' sex and whether or not their works were suitable for female readers "underscores the Victorian obsession with judging

all behaviour through a rigid lens of gender” (ibid.).

A review which appeared in *Literary World* for 12 August 1848 also mentioned Anne’s gender and originality, but claimed that she overdid the coarse scenes. Referring to her under her male pseudonym, Acton Bell, the critic remarks how “his” pictures of nature are “unsurpassed, and his pictures of life being almost equally vivid, we take his delineations of the better classes of society in the north of England with the same confidence that we accord to his delineations of scenery” (quoted in Allott, 1974:258). But the brutal scenes are none the less offensive (quoted ibid.):

And yet what a set of boorish cubs, nauseating profligates, and diabolical ruffians, does he present us, as specimens of the social life, whether immediately around him, or among the gay and far-descended, with whose habits and peculiarities he claims to be more or less familiar!

The reviewer remarked that the staff at *Literary World* “shrewdly suspect these books to be written by some gifted and retired woman, whose principal notions of men are derived from other books; or who, taking some walking automaton of her native village for a model... throws in certain touches of rascality, of uncouthness or boisterousness, to make her lay figures animated and, as she thinks, masculine” (quoted ibid., 259). He cannot credit that Anne actually reveals present cultural ills, showing defensiveness in his resorting to relegating her to the status of a bookish spinster.

It is interesting that the reviewer’s uncertain view about Anne’s gender acknowledges an established practice, though not its cause: women authors adopted male names due to the “difficulty that women experienced in maintaining their separate identities as they introduced their texts into the public sphere” (Carnell, 1998:12).

Anne’s sister, Emily, was the Victorian writer who had the most significant impact on her work. It appears that the two were used to “sharing” their “story materials” with each other, which included their juvenilia and novels (Heywood, 2012:30). Critics have pointed out that there are similarities between *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. An article dealing with this issue is N.M. Jacobs’ “Gendered and Layered Narrative in *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*”, published in 1986.

According to Jacobs, both *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* incorporate a “horrible private reality” which is initiated by male narrators who represent “the public world that makes possible and tacitly approves the excesses behind the closed doors of these pre-Victorian homes” (Jacobs, 1986:204). This creates a contrast in gender in the narrative (ibid., 207):

In these novels, the outer reality is male and the inner reality is largely female; it is perhaps not entirely irrelevant to this conceptual structure that the laws of the Victorian age classified married women or underage unmarried women such as Helen Huntingdon, Catherine Earnshaw, and Catherine Linton as “femmes couvertes”; their legal identities were “covered” by and subsumed into that of the husband or father.

Reverend Patrick Brontë’s writing may have influenced his youngest daughter. Between 1815 and 1817 he published several religious works, one of which was a short piece titled *The Cottage in the Woods*. This told the story of a pious young woman who gains the attention of a rich but irreligious drunkard who, when confronted by two near-death experiences, reforms himself to become a suitable husband (Barker, 1995:68). Although there is no definitive proof that Reverend Brontë’s children read his works, Helen Huntingdon shares some characteristics with Mary, the heroine of *The Cottage in the Woods*. Mary refuses to either sleep with or marry the rich man due to his immorality and atheism, and Helen rejects the advances of Gilbert while still being married to Arthur, and is grieved by the latter’s drinking and lack of religion.

The critics of the time also saw similarities among all the Brontë novels. An unsigned review which was published in the *Athenaeum* on the 8th of July 1848 stated that the “resemblances” among the Brontë (“Bell”) novels were “curious”, though *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* should not “hope to gain the popularity of her elder sister, *Jane Eyre*” (quoted in Allott, 1974:251). According to the reviewer, the novel was also similar in coarseness, and so “the Bells must be warned against their fancy for dwelling upon what is disagreeable” (quoted ibid.).

Another reviewer who noticed similarities was the one who wrote for the *Examiner* for 29 July 1848. Claiming that the authors of the Bell novels are “evidently children of the same family”, they “derive their scenes from the same country; their associations are alike; their heroines are for the most

part alike...and their heroes also resemble each other, in aspect, and temper, almost in habits” (quoted *ibid.*, 254). But all three of them are a “hard race”, not “common-place writers”, inserting rough characters who are “untamed by contact with towns or cities; wilful men, with the true stamp of the passions upon them” (quoted *ibid.*).

Thus, the Brontë novels are unique because they are unlike other novels written by women. The early reviews were full of “shock and moral outrage” precisely because the novels “flouted almost every convention” (Barker, 1995:90):

It was not simply the unprecedented passion with which they were written that dismayed the critics: the stories and characters, too, displayed all those qualities which polite Victorians most feared—a disregard for social niceties, an obsession...with violence, cruelty and vice, and a complete lack of that satisfying morality which doled out rewards to the innocent and good and punished those who had done wrong.

The reviewer for *Sharpe’s London Magazine* testified that most of the scenes in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* are “so revolting”, the language “so coarse and disgusting”, that the original reviewer “returned” the book “saying it was unfit to be noticed in the pages of *Sharpe*” (quoted in Allott, 1974:263).

Like *Sharpe’s* reviewer, the one writing for the *Rambler’s* September issue of 1848 complained about the novel’s religious doctrines: these are “either false and bad, or so vague and unmeaning as to add to the unreality of the scenes, without in any way redeeming for their blots, as uncalled-for and unhealthy representations of the viler phases of human life” (quoted *ibid.*, 268).

Other related remarks came from the novelist Charles Kingsley. He admitted that *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* was a “powerful and interesting book”, but it was not “pleasant to read, nor, as we fancy, was it a pleasant book to write” (quoted *ibid.*, 270). He claims that the main problem with the novel is a “coarseness of subject which will be the stumbling-block of most readers, and which makes it utterly unfit to be put into the hands of girls” (quoted *ibid.*). He is most likely referring to such scenes as Arthur’s drunkenness and Helen denying him his conjugal rights.

The critic of the novel for the *Spectator* attacked Anne for “abilities ill applied” (quoted *ibid.*, 250):

There is power, effect, and even nature, though of an extreme kind, in its pages; but there seems in the writer a morbid love for the coarse, not to say the brutal; so that his level subjects are not very attractive, and the more forcible are displeasing or repulsive, from their gross, physical or profligate substratum.

None of the reviewers denied that Anne had talent, but gender prejudice made them believe that she should have written like other women authors did. But it is precisely because the Brontës defied the standards set by Victorian literary culture that their novels have survived for nearly two centuries.

Brontë's defence of her writing is typical of the time, especially for a woman writer. Women writers reacted in various ways to responses of their works: some "acquiesced to traditional values" and continued writing, just "undermining the power of female characters"; when some defended their views they were "branded bluestockings and New Women; some played a bit of both games, seeming to adhere to the dominant ideology but offering opportunities for subversion within their texts" (Weber, 2006:550). But because Anne was a realistic novelist, she could not submit herself to any of these options. She stuck resolutely to what she believed to be the truth, regardless of backlashes from her family and the public.

The response to Anne's work reveals how the society in which she lived was uncomfortable with ideas that were completely new, such as her feminism, which has a decidedly "religious cast" (Shaw, 2013:337). Anne's is a "moral feminism", which is "almost accidental to the quest for a life of religious purpose in which the equality of souls before God finds a secular echo in a reasonable, respectful and egalitarian relationship between the sexes in marriage" (ibid.). The secularism that developed from the mid-nineteenth century probably explains why her work does not suit the taste of the atheistic culture of twentieth and twenty-first century feminism (ibid., 338). But this is a poor excuse not to study and appreciate the works of the youngest Brontë, who presented the culture and issues of her time as significantly as her sisters did.

Shirley received mixed reviews. According to Elizabeth Gaskell, Charlotte Brontë was determined to “preserve her incognito” and “even fancied that there were fewer traces of a female pen in it” than in *Jane Eyre* (Gaskell, 1985:387). Yet virtually all reviewers recognised that *Shirley*’s author was female, and judged the work accordingly.

Charlotte was upset when critics condemned her novels because of gender issues and not because of faults in the novels themselves. Quoting from reviews of *Jane Eyre* she makes it clear that she does “not respect an inconsistent critic” as the value of a literary work depends on the ability of the reader to “respect the source whence the praise and blame proceed” (Brontë, 2010:140). She quotes one critic’s insistence that if *Jane Eyre* was written by a woman, she ““must be a woman unsexed”” (ibid.):

In that case the book is an unredeemed error and should be unreservedly condemned. “Jane Eyre” is a woman’s autobiography—by a woman it is professedly written—if it is written as no woman would write—condemn it—with spirit and decision—say it is bad—but do not eulogize and retract. I am reminded of the “Economist”. The literary critic of that paper praised the book if written by a man—and pronounced it “odious” if written by a woman. To such critics I would say—“to you I am neither Man nor Woman—I come before you as an author only—it is the sole standard by which you have a right to judge me—the sole ground on which I accept your judgement.”

Charlotte would come to confront a critic who judged *Shirley* on the basis of its author’s gender, and whom she knew personally: George Henry Lewes, about five years before he and George Eliot began their affair. His review was published in the *Edinburgh Review* in January 1850. Lewes begins by commenting on gender issues for several pages before discussing *Shirley*. “Men in general”, he observes, “are slow to admit woman even to an equality with themselves; and the prevalent opinion certainly is that women are inferior in respect of intellect” (quoted in Allott, 1974:160-161):

...the position of women in society has never yet been...such as to give fair play to their capabilities. It is true, no doubt, that none of them have yet attained to the highest eminence in the highest departments of intellect....The grand function of woman, it must be recollected, is, and ever must be, Maternity....Consequently for twenty years of the best years of their lives—those very years in which

men either rear the grand fabric or lay the solid foundation of their fame and fortune—women are mainly occupied by the cares, the duties, the enjoyments and the sufferings of maternity.

In defence of women, Lewes states that in literature “women have most distinguished themselves”, and Charlotte Brontë, *alias* Currer Bell, is “one of the most remarkable of female writers”: it is now “scarcely a secret that Currer Bell is the pseudonym of a woman” (quoted *ibid.*, 162). He cannot deny that the sensational but controversial *Jane Eyre* caused critics to suspect that the author was a “heathen educated among heathens”, when she was actually “the daughter of a clergyman! This question of authorship...helped to keep up the excitement about *Jane Eyre*” (quoted *ibid.*, 163). He indicates that gender in itself was a superficial stimulus in the contemporary reception of a book.

Shirley is, according to Lewes, “inferior to *Jane Eyre* in several important points”, although he was still unsatisfied with the coarseness of the latter novel (quoted *ibid.*). Unfortunately, the “same over-masculine vigour” is, according to Lewes, “even more prominent in *Shirley*, and does not increase the pleasantness of the book” (quoted *ibid.*):

...Power it has unquestionably, and interest too, of a peculiar sort; but not the agreeableness of a work of art....It is not quite so true; and it is not so fascinating. It does not so 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 unfrequently flippant; while the characters are almost all disagreeable, and exhibit intolerable rudeness of manner.

Given her defence of passion as the main link to unity between the sexes (particularly in marriage), Charlotte must have been offended when Lewes claimed that in *Shirley* “all unity, in consequence of defective art, is wanting”, that there “is no passionate link; nor is there any artistic fusion, or intergrowth, by which one part evolves itself from another” (quoted *ibid.*, 164). Although the three curates in the novel are “offensive, uninformative, and unamusing”, Charlotte’s realism is acknowledged when he mentions that the curates are “not inventions”, even if, somewhat puzzlingly, they are “not true” (quoted *ibid.*):

...nothing but a strong sense of their reality could have seduced the authoress into such a mistake as to admitting them at all. We are confident she has seen them, known them, despised them; and therefore she paints them!...they have no relation with the story, have no interest in themselves, and cannot be accepted as a type of class...and although not inventions, we must be permitted to say that they are not true.

Another patronising comment is, “Curren Bell has much yet to learn”, especially with regards to “her own tumultuous energies. She must learn also to sacrifice a little of her Yorkshire roughness to the demands of good taste” (quoted *ibid.*, 165). His discussion of the female characters is flattering but negative: although the heroines are “more lovable” than the heroes, Shirley would be “irresistible” if her “Yorkshire plainness” did not “imply want of breeding”, and Caroline is a “failure” despite being “remarkably sweet and engaging” (quoted *ibid.*). Mrs Pryor receives Lewes’ most scathing criticism. She “belies the most indisputable laws of our nature, in becoming an unnatural mother”, due to “some absurd prepossession that her child must be bad, wicked, and the cause of anguish to her” (quoted *ibid.*):

...Really this is midsummer madness! Before the child has shown whether its beauty did conceal perversity, the mother shuts her heart against it! Curren Bell! if under your heart had ever stirred a child, if to your bosom a babe had ever been pressed,—that mysterious part of your being, towards which all the rest of it was drawn, in which your whole soul was transported and absorbed,—never could you have imagined such a falsehood as that!

Charlotte found Lewes’ review offensive because of its sexism. Bearing in mind that she was a childless spinster and a former governess who had hated the occupation (but not necessarily the children whom she taught), his remarks on her seemingly negative attitude towards children would also have been hurtful. Shortly after the review was published she sent him an angry note: “I can be on guard against my enemies, but God deliver me from my friends!” (quoted in Gaskell, 1985:397). In another letter she gave the reasons why she “was so hurt” by the review (quoted *ibid.*, 398):

...not because its criticism was keen or its blame sometimes severe; not because its praise was stinted (for, indeed, I think you give me quite as much praise as I deserve), but because after I had said earnestly that I wished critics to judge me as an *author*, not as a woman, you so roughly—I even thought so cruelly—handled the question of sex. I dare say you meant no harm, and perhaps you will not now be able to understand why I was so grieved at what you will probably deem such a trifle; but grieved I was, and indignant too.

The review published in *The Times* in December 1849 was very harsh. Elizabeth Gaskell recalls in her biography that Charlotte “persisted” on seeing this article, only to have “tears stealing down the face and dropping on the lap” (ibid., 391). *Shirley* is, according to the reviewer, “very clever, as a matter of course”, but the structure spoils the novel (quoted in Allott, 1974:149):

The faculty of graphic description, the strong imagination, the fervid and masculine diction, the analytical skill, all remain visible as before, but are thrown away upon a structure that bears no likeness to actual life, and affords no satisfaction or pleasure to those who survey it. The story of *Shirley* may be told in a couple of pages, yet a more artificial and unnatural history cannot be conceived; and what is true of the plot is even more applicable to the *dramatis personae*.

Caroline’s illness is scathingly denounced by the reviewer. Disappointment in love “never in its bitterest working perpetrated a hundredth part of the mischief it produced in the delicate frame of Caroline Helstone”, and “no rational theory” can be given for her illness when looking at her “skeleton and withered form” (quoted ibid.). Mrs Pryor comes across as the “dreariest gentlewoman it has seldom been our lot to meet”, and Caroline is not the only character who wants romance, as love-making, “in one shape or another, is going on from the first page to the last...” (quoted ibid., 150-151):

...and as soon as one couple quits the scene another comes up to entertain the spectators with dialogues such as no mortal lovers ever spoke, or, we trust, ever will speak in Miss Currer Bell’s books again....Need we protract the story or proceed with extracts? Two marriages take place one fine day in August. Such, of course, is the end of a very simple story, which it has taken a thousand octavo pages to tell, and to tell most cumbrously and artificially...

Even remarks like the “fair authoress” and “gems of rare thought and glorious passion shine here and there throughout her volumes” cannot compensate Charlotte for the sharp criticism levelled at *Shirley*

(quoted *ibid.*, 151):

Shirley is not a picture of real life; it is not a work that contains the elements of popularity, that will grapple with the heart of mankind and compel its homage. It is a mental exercise that can bring its author no profit, and will not extend by the measure of an inch her previous well-deserved success....*Shirley* is at once the most high flown and stalest of fictions.

William Howitt's review, published in the *Standard of Freedom* on the 11th of November 1849, was more positive. He begins by stating that the public will "warmly welcome" a new novel "from the author of *Jane Eyre*", and they will "not be disappointed" (quoted *ibid.*, 133). For those who still questioned the author's sex on reading *Jane Eyre*, the "perusal of *Shirley*" will have that doubt "dissipated", for the "hand of a woman is unmistakably impressed on the present brilliant production", leading him to compare Currer Bell with Elizabeth Gaskell (quoted *ibid.*, 133-134):

The two authors, though kindred in the qualities of mind—great vigour, freshness, comprehension of individual character, and independence of feeling—regard life from two very different points of view....the author of *Shirley* [sets her novel] in the country; and both introduce the struggles of master manufacturers and their work-people....both preserve a fine impartiality as regards the question at issue, and make you feel that it is not party but humanity that guides the pen.

It is fitting to an extent that Charlotte is compared with Elizabeth Gaskell. Charlotte began writing *Shirley* in 1848, when *Mary Barton*, Elizabeth Gaskell's debut novel, was published. Although Charlotte admired Elizabeth Gaskell's writing, *Mary Barton* caused some concern, as she feared that readers might suspect she intentionally borrowed themes from it. Although the two novels are different, Charlotte had been "pre-empted in both subject and incident" in her focus on the conditions of the working-class in northern Britain (Barker, 1995:585).

Howitt further states in his review that *Shirley*'s author is "unquestionably" a "church-woman" who, despite her parodying the three curates, presents other clerical characters "in a manner that makes you respect them" (quoted in Allott, 1974:134). He also admires Charlotte for having "intimate knowledge" of the district in which the novel is set (quoted *ibid.*).

According to Howitt, *Shirley*'s faults are to be found in the number of characters and dialogue. He praises main characters for being "strong, prominent, and original", but the "canvass is too much crowded with figures" (quoted *ibid.*, 135):

Beyond the story, however, the delineations of character, and the management of the passions of the actors, display the hand of real genius, and the deep and searching glance of women's intuition....The fault of the book is in its too-extended dialogue; it does not advance but retards the development of the story. But the landscapes are so fresh, the people so living, the whole so abounding with a free, lifelike, and most genial spirit, that it will leave a lasting and delightful impression on the reader.

The *Daily News*' review for 31st October 1849 begins with the statement that there "are few things more forbidding than the commencement of a novel by the author of *Jane Eyre*" (quoted *ibid.*, 117). The three curates at the opening of *Shirley* are denounced as "quite as vulgar, as unnecessary, and as disgusting" as the Reed family in *Jane Eyre*; the story "is in keeping with the scenes and class in which it is laid" (quoted *ibid.*, 117-118):

The adventures are simple, brief, and few: scarcely culled indeed, but almost carelessly taken from every-day life....*Shirley* is the anatomy of the female heart. By *Shirley* we mean the book, and not the personage; for the true heroine is the rector's niece, the history of whose heart is one of the most beautiful chronicles ever set down by a female pen.

It is interesting and revealing (in the light of the notion of "suffering women" being a beacon in the darkness to men) that the reviewer regarded Caroline as the heroine and her story as beautiful; since Charlotte, of course, used Caroline to condemn the suffering experienced by women of the age. The whole point of the "grim realism" of spinsterhood in the novel was to argue that it was "hardly right" that single women were confined to a life "of self-sacrifice, requited only by a distant praise for their devotion and virtue" (Barker, 1995:602).

While the "merit" of *Shirley* lies in "the variety, beauty, and truth" of its heroines, none of its heroes, the critic defensively writes, "are genuine" (quoted *ibid.*, 118):

There are no such men. There are no *Mr. Helstones*, *Mr. Yorkes*, or *Mr. Moores*. They are all as unreal as Madame Tussaud's waxworks. And in truth the mind of the writer must have been darkened by the shade of some lay figure, some wooden man stuck up between the light and the easel used in painting....Let Currer Bell get some one else to paint men, and himself do none but the female figures, or dissect at least none save female hearts.

Although the Luddites are “sketched with a pencil of truth”, Charlotte is best at establishing a “microscopic opening into the breast of some young lady” and despite the novel's faults, the female characters “are all divine, and *Shirley* is indeed an intellectual harem” (quoted *ibid.*, 118-119).

Had the critics known of the poignant circumstances under which *Shirley* was written, they might have been more sympathetic to its structure, which they thought poor. Whatever the novel's faults, it should always be considered “remarkable” that it was finished at all (Wilks, 1986:173). The final passage in *Shirley* may indicate that Charlotte had anticipated being criticised. It shows that she was, initially, prepared for negative comments (Brontë, 2008:542):

The story is told. I think I now see the judicious reader putting on his spectacles to look for the moral.

It would be an insult to his sagacity to offer directions. I only say, God speed him in the quest!

As mentioned in chapter two, George Eliot knew that *Romola*'s readership would be smaller than that of her previous novels. It turned out to be a “far more learned piece” than anything she had yet written, and it required exhaustive study and writing (Carroll, 1971:18). Lewes was to describe the novel's reception as a “universal howl of discontent” (quoted *ibid.*, 19). But although *Romola* was undoubtedly not a bestseller, its critical reception was not completely negative. Eliot was told that many “devout English ladies” had copied passages from *Romola* into their Bibles (*ibid.*, 20). The aspect of the novel that impressed the most was its “deep moral tone” and from now on readers and critics began to regard Eliot as a “great ethical teacher” (Laski, 1973:82).

Contemporary authors expressed their admiration for *Romola*, including Anthony Trollope. Although he warned Eliot not to “fire too much over the heads of your readers”, since the majority of them will find her “words too hard”, he praised her for having “done a great work”, with the heroine

being “artistically beautiful,—a picture exceeded by none that I know of any girl in any novel” (quoted in Carroll, 1971:195-196). He wondered at the “toil you must have endured” in writing *Romola*, but thinks it would still be better if Eliot could write for “tens of thousands” instead of “thousands” (quoted *ibid.*, 195).

The review published in the *Westminster Review* in October 1863 stated that *Romola* is “less popular than its predecessors”, but critics “do not hesitate to say that it is its author’s greatest work” (quoted *ibid.*, 213). Although the “recourse for a foreign background” is a “sign of weakness and exhaustion”, any critic who can “discern any powers of failing in *Romola*” is himself “weak” (quoted *ibid.*, 213-214):

But this is the greatness of George Eliot, that where others are feeble she is strong, and it is only to be regretted that she is too regardless of that much less difficult accomplishment which is within reach of any one with one tenth of her genius. On this account we think it is to be regretted that *Romola* is an Italian story, and a story of the fifteenth century. By departing so far from the life around her she enters into a more full command of her whole material, which forces her to rely upon her imagination for those parts of her fable which the character of her mind strongly leads her to neglect.

The critic comments on how the “general novel-reader is impatient” at the minute historical details and “longs to hear more of that struggle between Romola and her husband” (quoted *ibid.*, 216). Eliot’s “deep insight into the self-questioning human mind”, though admirable, is “another reason why *Romola* is not popular with the crowd” (quoted *ibid.*).

Romola and Tito are the most interesting characters, according to the reviewer. Romola, “lovely and noble” as she is, “would even now be more admired than loved....It is not yet given to every one to love a Romola” (quoted *ibid.*, 217). Nevertheless, she has “so much more the character” of a “modern Englishwoman” than that of a Florentine lady (*ibid.*). Tito smacks “more of the intellectual strength and moral weakness” of the Victorian Age, making him a “child of the nineteenth century” (quoted *ibid.*). Thus the critic, though he sees connections between past and present in the book, does not appreciate the fact that the novel consciously reflects on Victorian cultural issues.

The conclusion appears to be the “weakest part” of the novel simply due to “need of action”; a scene such as the pestilential village is indicative of “those extravagantly fortuitous circumstances of which the author makes such free use” (quoted *ibid.*, 219-220). In the end, *Romola* “is not likely to be generally popular; it is too great both in mind and heart” (quoted *ibid.*, 218). This prediction has indeed proven to be true, as *Romola* remains to this day Eliot’s least read novel.

The article published in the *Saturday Review* on 23 July 1863 opens with the remark “No reader of *Romola* will lay it down without admiration, and few without regret” (quoted *ibid.*, 207):

Great as is the power displayed in it, and varied as is the interest awakened in it, there is still the general impression produced by it that the authoress has been tempted into a field where, indeed, she is not less than she has been, but where her merits are obscured, and their effect impaired.

While Eliot’s intense portrayal of historical detail, such as the “popular feeling about the Church, the wavering of opinion that preceded the Reformation, and the scholarly quarrels of the literary heroes of the *Renaissance*”, is admirable, a “lesser hand might have been employed to collect these simple treasures”, even if Eliot’s version of Florentine life is “full of salient curiosities which catch and delight a studious English eye” (quoted *ibid.*):

....But it seems a pity that these things should be done by the authoress of *Adam Bede*....However instructive it may be, it is not without a tax on our patience that we read long accounts of Florentine antiquities, and translations of sermons by Savonarola, and extracts from chronicles of processions.

The reviewer reminds us that “readers can only have what authors can give them, and authors cannot always give what readers would most like” (quoted *ibid.*, 209). Before *Romola* Eliot had “already published four tales of English life” which are “quite enough to use up the experience and exhaust the reflections even of a mind so acute, so observant, and so meditative” (quoted *ibid.*). Eliot belongs to “another order of minds, which is creative and original, but which is always driven into the same groove, and works within bounds which have probably been assigned by the actual experience of life” (quoted *ibid.*).

The *Athenaeum* review for 11 July 1863 begins with the remark that, as a serial, *Romola* was “not attractive” as readers “found their patience wearied by the minuteness with which they were required to follow the transitions of popular feeling in Florence” (quoted *ibid.*, 196). Yet the conditions in which the characters find themselves are “as vivid as if they concerned English men and women of 1863” (quoted *ibid.*, 196-197). Critics have thus always found in *Romola* themes which are universal for any society.

This reviewer also believes that Savonarola is “the gem” of the novel, and his story has been “grasped and delineated with a wonderful force and truth” (quoted *ibid.*, 197). However, Tito is “not successful”, regardless of “his grace, his beauty, his fascination”; he always remains “vague in image, and there is a certain weariness in his sayings and doings” (quoted *ibid.*, 197-198). In their final summary, *Romola* “cannot be called entertaining”, because it is “by no means light reading” (quoted *ibid.*, 198):

...but those who do not seek the mere amusement of an exciting story will find noble things in *Romola*—eloquent and beautiful pages—subtle utterances and lovely thoughts. It has not the powerful interest that is to be found in the author’s former novels; but there are indications of much higher powers of mind. The winding up of the book is very well managed, and is quite satisfactory. *Romola* is left in the possession of a far better life than if all her early hopes had been fulfilled.

Eliot’s novels after *Romola* became more complex, even if they did indicate, as the reviewer hints at, “much higher powers of mind” (quoted *ibid.*). Also, the critical reception and sales of the later novels were not the same as those of the earlier works. Even her greatest novel, *Middlemarch*, was initially regarded as “slow” and its themes “too intellectual” (Sanders, 1980:9). Yet some readers thought *Romola* to be Eliot’s best book. Indeed, most Victorians knew Eliot “simply as ‘the author of *Romola*’” (*ibid.*, 7). In 1885, before *Romola* began to be dismissed as “unworthy and unreadable”, Henry James thought it ““on the whole the finest thing she wrote”” (*ibid.*, 7,9).

R.H. Hutton’s review, published in the *Spectator* for 18 July 1863, claims that it “was easy to be mistaken in the first chapters of this book”, which turned out to be “one of the greatest works of modern fiction” (quoted in Carroll, 1971:198). Once again, the minute historical details are dismissed:

readers “do not care about the light Florentine buzz” and Eliot does not “carry her readers *away*” (quoted *ibid.*, 199). That the novel has a “great artistic purpose” is also evident (quoted *ibid.*, 200):

The great artistic purpose...is to trace the conflict between liberal culture and the more passionate form of the Christian faith in that strange era, which has so many points of resemblance with the present, when the two in their most characteristic forms struggled for pre-eminence over Florentines who had been educated into the half-pedantic and half-idealistic scholarship of Lorenzo de Medici.

The observation that the Renaissance was a time “when mingling faith and culture effervesced with more curious result” also serves to explain Victorian themes: the indication that Renaissance scepticism had cleared away the “petty rubbish of Romanist superstition..., revealing the mighty simplicities of the great age of Greece” summarises to a certain extent Victorian doubt, when people substituted faith with science and evolutionary theories (quoted *ibid.*).

Furthermore, the critic sees Eliot’s usage of language in *Romola* as a way to indicate parallels between characters and themes (quoted *ibid.*, 201-202):

That sense of the great *power* of language, of which we have now so little, which, indeed, it is the tendency of the present day to depreciate, was in that day full of a new vigour, and to some extent contested with the mysteries of the Gospel the control of great men’s souls. This is the picture which *Romola* makes so living to us....that of clarifying and sifting the false from the true elements in the great mysterious faith presented to her conscience by Savonarola....This fundamental conflict between the Greek scholarship and the mystical Christian faith which runs through the book, is made even more striking by the treacherous character of the man who represents the Greek culture cut adrift from all moral or religious faith.

According to the reviewer, *Romola* is the character of whom it is “less easy to say whether one is absolutely satisfied or not”, because she comes across as the “least perfect figure in the book, though a fine one” (quoted *ibid.*, 203-204):

...that she is a shade more modernized than the others, several shades less individual, and, after all, though the pivot of her character turns, as it were, on faith, that she does not show distinctly any faith except the faith in rigid honour, in human pity, and partially also in Savonarola’s personal greatness and power. We do not say the character is not natural,—we only say it is half-revealed and more suggested

than fully painted, though these harder feminine characters always seem to ask to be outlined more strongly than others.

Overall, *Romola* will “never be George Eliot’s most popular book—it seems to us, however, much the greatest she has yet produced” (quoted *ibid.*, 205).

Eliot responded to this review in a letter written to Hutton on 8 August 1863. Finding “nothing fanciful” in his interpretation of *Romola*, she is “confirmed in the satisfaction I felt” when first reading the article (quoted *ibid.*, 206). She is also “not surprised” at his dissatisfaction with *Romola*’s character, for the “many difficulties belonging to the treatment of such a character have not been overcome” (quoted *ibid.*, 207):

...I am sorry she has attracted you so little; for the great problem of her life, which essentially coincides with a chief problem in Savonarola’s, is one that readers need helping to understand. But with regard to that and to my whole book, my predominant feeling is...that great, great facts have struggled to find a voice through me....That consciousness makes me cherish the more any proof that my work has been seen to have some true significance by minds prepared...by that religious and moral sympathy with the historical life of man which is the larger half of culture.

Richard Simpson published the first major critical assessment of all Eliot’s novels thus far in October 1863, titled “George Eliot’s Novels”. He professes that Eliot’s choice of subject for *Romola* was a “direct defiance to those who supposed George Eliot to be incapable of painting refined and educated society” (quoted *ibid.*, 226). She may have “completely changed her scene” but she “had kept her old power, her old idea of art, and her old purpose” (quoted *ibid.*).

Simpson further provides a general overview of the novel. Novels “with a purpose” evoke strong prejudices: they “are chiefly religious; and their chief characteristic is the ludicrous contrast between their pretension and their power” (quoted *ibid.*, 227). Measuring *Romola* against what he believes to be the three main elements of a novel, namely “the plot, the development by description and dialogue, and the characters”, he sees *Romola* as a “great advance upon the compound plan” of Eliot’s previous novel, *Silas Marner* (quoted *ibid.*, 229). As to the characters, Simpson argues that Savonarola represents “religious movement”, Bardo represents the political and *Romola* and *Tito* give

readers the novel's "psychological interest" (quoted *ibid.*, 230).

The plots of all Eliot's novels, according to Simpson, are "social, characteristic, and endogenous, rather than individual, incidental, and developed by external accident", reminding the reader "of detached figures in front of a crowded bas-relief" (quoted *ibid.*, 231-232):

It is only in *Romola* that the author's plot has attained its full symphonic form, in which the orchestral parts become as important as the solos; she is not yet, however, a perfect contrapuntist, nor is she always successful in preparing her dissonances, or giving a natural *entrata* to her subjects.

With *Middlemarch*, published eight years after *Romola*, Eliot became not just a "perfect contrapuntist", but one of the most remarkable English novelists of the nineteenth-century, a reputation which rests, if not on *Romola*, then on the latter masterwork. But by all accounts, *Romola* was the starting-point in the perfecting of her craft.

Victorian novel-reading gave readers the opportunity to become immersed "in a world teeming with vital characters" from "different social landscapes"; they could discover what life was like in London and in different parts of Britain, and through the expansion of the British Empire they could imagine for themselves new worlds as presented by the colonies (*ibid.*).

Far from being just entertainment, the novel for the Victorians functioned as an educational tool, bringing complex and controversial topics like politics, religion and scientific discoveries to common readers (*ibid.*). It was truly a unique contribution to Victorian culture, and the reading of fiction, which functioned as "an activity which combined flexing the imagination with anticipating and reacting to the dynamics of range of narratives", gave people the opportunity of "inhabiting other lives", and even "changing" their own (Flint, 2013:13).

Although novel-reading began to be popular in the eighteenth century (thus making it another cultural theme with pre-Victorian roots), the growth of technology in the nineteenth century increased the rate of the production and publication of fiction during Queen Victoria's reign.

The most popular (and the most famous) format was the three volume-per-novel format, usually “small ‘post octavo’”, and novels had been thus published since the beginning of the nineteenth century, culminating in the 1830s (Tillotson, 1985:22). Instead of buying the novels at bookshops, most readers obtained them from the circulating libraries, which were “everywhere” by the 1840s (ibid., 23).

The popularity of circulating libraries is confirmed by the fact that readers could get novels at the subscription rate of a mere guinea a year (ibid.). The publication of novels in serial magazines almost overtook the three-volume format in terms of popularity. Even if a reader could not buy a three-decker novel, he could get, for one shilling, monthly parts of novels, whetting his appetite for the remainder of the instalments (ibid., 25).

It is worth noting that of all three novels discussed in this dissertation, only *Romola* was published in serial form. Published in the popular *Cornhill Magazine*, it went on to become Eliot’s most complex and least popular novel. As explained, Anthony Trollope warned that it was the kind of novel which would “‘fire too much over the heads’ of average readers and thus disaffect them” (Brown, 1994:x). Serial publication was itself a very stressful experience for Eliot. The “unaccustomed” pressure of deadlines caused her bouts of illness; after *Romola* she “resolved” to avoid serial publication for the rest of her writing career (ibid.).

Class distinction played a significant role in the reading and writing of novels. One reason why conditions were so “ripe” for novels in the Victorian age is due to the fact that the Industrial Revolution “expanded and strengthened the position of the middle classes”, and they made up the majority of novel readers (Wheeler, 1986:4). The “considerable upward and downward social mobility” of the middle classes was a “favourite” theme with novelists (ibid.). Most of the “broad cultural” changes of the nineteenth century, such as society, religion and gender, found their way into countless novels. (ibid., 5).

Serial publication also gave novelists the opportunity to interact with their readers. The reading public grew as the population explosion took over. Between 1820 and 1860 alone, the annual number

of new publications rose from 580 to more than 2,600 (Williams, 1987[2]:10). Since most Victorian authors were also deeply affected by the social, historical and religious crises of the age, it provided them with material to engage emotionally with their readers. At the hands of the novelist, the “crisis of experience” became a “creative working” and a “discovery”, making it much more than a mere “reaction” to changing events (ibid., 11). Simply put, without the reading public, and without various social problems, there would have been no Victorian novelists.

Literacy rates also made a valuable contribution to the production and reading of fiction. By the end of Queen Victoria’s reign ninety-seven per cent of the British population were literate (Altick, 1973:60). But while literacy levels increased the demand for fiction, not all readers approved of it. The Evangelical movement had a tendency to react with “anxiety” towards novel-reading and other entertainments: theatre and cards were respectively regarded as “the Devil’s chapel” and his “prayer book” (Flint, 2013:13-14). As to the novel, it was a “kind of Devil’s Bible, whose meretricious attractions waged an unholy competition against God’s word” (quoted ibid., 14).

It is ironic that there existed a religious prejudice against novels, since the Victorian period produced more fiction about religion than any other period in English literature. There was a tendency, especially in the 1840s, to write and read a “mass of novels and tales, bearing on controversial religious questions” (Tillotson, 1985:128). All of these issues raised several questions for the critics, which reflect the concern with social-cultural and historical currents of the era. Should novels retain their “racy affiliations with romance, teach uplifting moral lessons” and especially “educate curious readers about a rapidly changing society” (David, 2013:2)?

All of the novels written by the Brontës and Eliot (including the three discussed in this dissertation) contain themes about personal and socio-cultural changes, which are interwoven into the plots to teach the readers important ethical and social lessons. This justifies the idea that *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, *Shirley* and *Romola* are very much novels of their time, because their authors were much concerned about the ways in which culture was changing their world and the impact this had on their fellow Victorians.

Victorian novelists were not just influenced by each other's works. They also owed a debt to numerous other fields of literature. The impact of the Romantic sensibility on the nineteenth century has already been mentioned in chapter one. The literature of the Romantics especially provided the Brontës with "exciting plots and strong feelings": it enabled them to be concerned with the "free" expression of "love, hate, and remorse" (Ingham, 2008:72).

By comparison, the Brontës did not read as widely in contemporary Victorian literature. Since Emily and Anne died in 1848 and 1849 respectively, and Charlotte in 1855, the novels which would have been available to them would be the "silver fork" or "Newgate" types; these novels dealt with stories of "high life with tepid plots", and with the "Newgate Calendar" and its accounts of "notorious criminals" (ibid.). These novels fell under the same category as Caroline Helstone's hysterical Methodist Magazines. Despite the prevalence of such silver fork novels, there were also outstanding works by Thackeray and Elizabeth Gaskell, which were admired by Charlotte.

The Brontës were attacked by critics because their novels went completely against the standard of the day of *what* a novel was supposed to be like. Novels were "acceptable" by certain Evangelicals if they did not breach "standards of propriety": they liked the sort of work which would not shock "an unmarried and innocent young girl" and tempt her into wicked thoughts (ibid., 84). But the Brontë novels shocked everyone, regardless of sex or religion. It is understandable why they sparked the fury of their critics.

George Eliot could easily rank first if one were to compile a list of the Victorian age's most "experienced" and "exceptionally well-read" authors (Sanders, 1990:375). In addition to languages and German theology and literature, her interests comprised the "broader cultural life—music and theatre, the visual arts and architecture, travel and leisure" (Dolin, 2009:76):

The extent and density of Eliot's reading is felt in the commanding range of literary and intellectual reference in her fiction, most obviously in chapter epigraphs and direct allusions, but also in the texture of the language itself.

This mentioning of the texture of Eliot's language indicates that she wrote in a specific style different from that of the average novelist. She produced fiction that was "intellectually demanding", circulating in the "thousands" rather than the tens or hundreds of thousands (ibid., 100). This is because fiction, for Eliot, was a "*form of thought* itself" and provided ideas and emotions that none of the other Victorian fields of thought, such as theology, philosophy and geology could offer her (ibid.,90).

Eliot's reading of other ideas enabled her to create her own psychological perspective in her novels. Humans are, according to Eliot, "imitative beings. We cannot, at least those who ever read to any purpose at all...help being modified by the ideas that pass through our minds" (quoted in Flint, 2013:14). Perhaps this explains why *Romola* is the least popular of her novels, precisely because it is the most philosophical and intellectually demanding.

George Eliot was also one of the greatest writers of realist fiction. Realism in literature began in the eighteenth century as a "response" to the upheavals caused by the political revolutions in France and America (Levine, 2013:86). Realism in novels also gave readers the opportunity to respond to history, generally summarising the past and trying to predict the future like the rest of the society, since the aim was to provide readers both with "new subjects" and "new objects" with themes from "natural curiosities to expensive commodities", with "heirlooms, outfits, instruments, fetishes, furniture, gems, exotic species, foodstuffs, antiquities, and even limbs" (ibid., 93).

The purpose of realistic fiction was to "shock" readers with presentations of "ugly, lowly new content" and give them a "new understanding" of their own place in society (ibid., 91). That readers were confronted with such controversial material explains why the works of the Brontës and even some of Eliot's met with hostile responses.

The reading of novels during the Victorian age paved a way to a new cultural standard of reading as a whole. Novels have always been more popular than poetry and the nineteenth-century novel set a new standard for the function of the novel as a form of moral discourse. Conveyed through "authorial narrators" who make use of "judgements" of their characters, resolving all themes in the end, novels functioned in this form as a serious educational and critical touchstone, which eventually

led critics to accept them as a literary and artistic genre of consequence, even if it took a considerable time for them to do so (Wheeler, 1986:9).

The publication and reading of fiction in the Victorian era remains a fascinating topic and one of the most important aspects of the period's culture. Through the Romantics' insistence on feeling the Victorian novel came to challenge both the "emotion" and "sensation's self-evidence" of writers and readers alike (Ablow, 2013:205). Based on this concept of emotion, the novel encouraged "understanding and compassion" between those populations and classes who may have "lost the habits of real contact and communication" (ibid., 202).

On the surface the popularity of novels in the nineteenth century appears simple and straightforward. But as one looks deeper, one realises that it was also, like other cultural matters during Queen Victoria's reign, a complex issue, riddled with contradictions. The attitude towards reading as portrayed by the Victorians reminds those who live nearly two centuries after them that reading always was and always will be a "curious activity" because it is both a "shared experience, and a highly private one" (Flint, 2013:27):

While Victorians might discuss their reading with family or friends, join a reading circle based on the ideal of self-improvement, read literature according to syllabi prescribed by schools or, by the end of the century, by universities, what happened between them and the words on the page, as they entered into other lives and experiences, or as they condemned or praised the sentiments expressed...is very hard to recover, except through hypothesis.

We could just as equally form our own hypothesis for the reading of novels in the twenty-first century, but whether it would prove as challenging and interesting as that of the nineteenth is another question.

Conclusion

This dissertation supplied a series of answers to the following research question:

“How do the novels *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* by Anne Brontë, *Shirley* by Charlotte Brontë, and *Romola* by George Eliot, as works by women authors, interrogate changing Victorian socio-cultural values and phenomena?”

The argument is that, in order for one to understand how these three novels present and interrogate socio-cultural themes, one must have a clear understanding of several important Victorian socio-cultural concerns. The most salient cultural themes in the novels centre on society, history, religion and gender, matters of the utmost importance and concern for the Victorians, including Anne Brontë, Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot. While many other authors were also concerned with socio-cultural issues, these three are representative, for the purposes of this dissertation, as being particularly aware of the turbulent times they were living in, and of assuming the necessity of informing their readers of this in their writings.

Aspects of society explored in the novels include class issues, education and alcoholism. To understand *Romola* within the context of Victorian socio-cultural themes, it was necessary to explore certain Florentine social customs in the Renaissance period that were familiar to the Victorians. Since all three novels are set in pre-Victorian times, it was vital to briefly analyse the historical happenings which made an impact on the period itself. *Shirley* and *Romola* can be classified as historical novels, but history as a socio-cultural theme is not so important in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, even though the latter was also deeply informed by historical events, as its characters and action indicate.

Religion and gender are perhaps the two most significant themes in the novels because they are the most personal. With regards to the former, each author’s religious experiences were complex and slightly controversial. Anne Brontë, despite being a devout Anglican, embraced the doctrine of Universal Salvation, which the majority of Christians reject as heretical. Charlotte Brontë’s religion comforted her during the numerous personal tragedies that she had to endure during her short life.

George Eliot was one of the most famous Victorian agnostics, although she always valued Christianity as a vitally important socio-cultural concern.

As all three authors were women, they were exposed to the unfair gender issues of their day. The three novels discussed in this dissertation clearly indicate that Victorian women endured many social and psychological hardships because of gender inequality. In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and *Romola* the dangers of being naïve and over-romantic with matters regarding matrimony are examined in great depth; whilst in *Shirley* a desperate plea is made that women be granted more independence and freedom from domestic captivity.

The critical reception of all three novels was generally mixed. Most reviewers acknowledged that the three novelists had unique talent, although many were deeply offended with the authors' treatment of controversial topics, especially religion and gender. But it is because the Brontës and George Eliot broke away from the restricted and slightly ridiculous writing styles of nineteenth-century female authors that their novels have survived to this day. The inclusion of contemporary reviews and reactions in the last chapter helps to provide a unique insight into the reading culture of the Victorian period.

In conclusion, it becomes clear that in the nearly two centuries that have passed since Queen Victoria's reign, the socio-cultural concerns of the Victorian period made a significant impact on the period itself and on the society of today. In many parts of the world society has numerous unfair aspects; history will continue to influence all cultures and societies until the end of time; many religious conflicts and controversies survive to this day, and gender inequality has not been resolved in all societies. The reading of novels such as *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, *Shirley* and *Romola* can do more than just act as entertainment: these novels can provide readers glimpses of a world that seems to have completely vanished, yet echoes and reflections of it will always survive.

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