

ABSTRACT

RESEARCH PAPER: Sickness, Thinness and Pushing the Borders of the Ideal Victorian Body in Charlotte Brontë's Shirley

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Charlotte Brontë's novel, Shirley offers a view into the high expectations held for women in 19th century England. Brontë shows us through her two characters, Caroline and Shirley, that the binary opposition between grotesque and classical bodies is not exclusive. A woman can be between the two extremes; she does not have to choose one or the other in order to be accepted. The novel's two heroines struggle against their differing roles in society; both women suffer illness because of their inability to express their frustrations with societal expectations. Through Caroline's thinness Brontë questions the lines between the classical Victorian woman and the grotesque, gaping woman. Both Caroline and Shirley have to rely on others to aid them in their struggles; they rely on community over the individual which is, according to Bakhtin, a positive attribute of the grotesque. By embracing aspects of the grotesque in Caroline and Shirley, Brontë shows us that grotesquerie does not have to be negative for Victorians. I will show by examples of the two illnesses in the novel, though mainly through Caroline Helstone, that Brontë does not accept the idea that a woman must be the "angel of the house," the classical model of womanhood, but rather can fit between the two extremes.