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MARY SHELLEY'S

MATILDA

A REFLECTION ON POST-INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION
SOCIETY

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1. INTRODUCTION

As one of the most important events of the eighteenth century, the Industrial Revolution has left its mark on history, including literature. Literature is often reflects social changes, and is important in understanding historical phenomena. However, nineteenth century authors who have both written about social issues in relation to the Industrial Revolution and who have also left detailed written accounts of their own lives, so that the importance of these issues in their own lives can be established, are rare. Mary Shelley is one of the few authors who have done so, often incorporating both autobiographical elements as well as social issues into her work. However, there has been little discussion on how the Industrial Revolution has left its mark on Mary Shelley's work. Born in 1797 as the daughter of philosopher William Godwin and philosopher-feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, "Mary Shelley was brought up to share their central belief in the duty of engagement in public debate on all pertinent moral, social, and political issues as a means of contributing to the general welfare" (Clemit 28). Shelley's work therefore appears to be of particular significance in relation to the influence of the Industrial Revolution on society.

Shelley's most famous novel, *Frankenstein, or: The Modern Prometheus* (1818), is arguably the most explored of her novels. However, it is surprising that her other novels have not received the same amount of attention. The other novels, namely *Valperga, or: The Life and Adventures of Castruccio, Prince of Lucca* (1823), *The Last Man* (1826), *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck* (1830), *Lodore* (1835), *Falkner* (1837) and *Matilda* (1959), have not been discussed to a similar extent and academic publications available are limited, especially with regard to the influence of the Industrial Revolution. As discussing all of Shelley's novels is impossible due to both technical and time restrictions placed upon this thesis, this thesis will be limited to one novel: *Matilda*. *Matilda* was written in 1819 and, as Shelley chose not to have the novel published, fell into obscurity and was not printed until 1959 (Spark 150). The novel consists of a letter, written by the protagonist, Matilda, as a means of confessing her secrets. She has been living with her aunt after having been abandoned by her father after the

death of her mother, yet he returns from his travels when she is sixteen. After having spent several months with his daughter, Matilda's father begins to behave irrationally. Matilda urges him to confide in her, after which he confesses his love for her. Appalled by this revelation Matilda shies away from her father, who in turn resolves to commit suicide. Matilda tries to save him, yet arrives too late. Ashamed by what has happened, Matilda withdraws from society into a self-imposed exile. She meets Woodville, a poet who has just lost his wife. After befriending him, he asks her to share her burden with him. She declines and instead proposes a suicide pact, but Woodville rejects this idea. Matilda ultimately contracts an illness and, once more in solitude, writes down her confession before she dies.

Matilda deals with several themes including education, relationships and a general loss of morals reflected in various themes such as incest and suicide. However, the novel is often considered an autobiography. According to Spark, it was written at a time in Shelley's life when she struggled with another pregnancy after having lost three children (in 1815, 1818 and 1819), a failing marriage and a father who refused to support Shelley and her husband financially (150). Clemit states that this has often led critics to read *Matilda* as "an uncontrolled expression of Mary Shelley's psychological anxiety following the deaths in September 1818 and June 1819 of her two young children," (37) which seems to be the general consensus. In her journals, there are several entries in May 1819 that mention that Shelley's son, William, is ill. By June-August 1819, Shelley implies that her son has died: "I begin my journal on Shelley's birthday – we have lived ~~now~~ five years together & if all the events of the five years were blotted out I might be happy" (Feldman 293). Among the entries that comprise August 1819, Feldman notes that Shelley began working on *The Fields of Fancy* (294), the manuscript that eventually became *Matilda*. Given the circumstances, it is difficult to imagine that Shelley wrote *The Fields of Fancy/Matilda* without being influenced by her son's death: the bleak nature of the novel and overall content in which death is prevalent may attest to this. On the other hand, Spark considers the fact that *Matilda* was not published until 1959 to be meaningful: "[p]erhaps the fact that she did not publish the story during her

lifetime shows that she perceived, on reflection, that she had been merely relieving her feelings by over-dramatising her situation” (71).

The influence the Industrial Revolution has had on society, as reflected in *Matilda*, is noticeable through three themes: firstly, there is the importance of education. Shelley uses gender to illustrate a sense of inequality with regard to education, but also incorporates her own education in the novel as a means of illustrating its importance. Secondly, Shelley reflects on a society that is changing through topics such as incest and suicide, illustrating a loss of morals while at the same time reflecting on the troubled relationship between Shelley and her father. Finally, Shelley uses themes such as social isolation and the superficiality of society, as well as relationships, to comment on a society that was changing as a result of the Industrial Revolution. It is through these themes that this thesis will attempt to show that *Matilda* indirectly reflects the influence the Industrial Revolution has had on early nineteenth century British society.

2. SOCIAL EFFECTS OF THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION'S INFLUENCE ON SOCIETY

The Industrial Revolution in Britain occurred between 1750-1850, affecting both agriculture and industry (O'Brien 2). However, the revolution was not limited to industry and agriculture alone: it also influenced British culture, the economy and society ("Industrial Revolution"). At the time, consequences directly related to the availability of new technology included but were not limited to an increase in population, industrialisation, the installation of commercial railroad systems and urbanisation ("History of Europe"). Moreover, the changes in the industrial sector also affected everyday life. To gain a better understanding of the impact the Industrial Revolution has had on various aspects of society, particularly those that relate to *Matilda*, it is important to examine its influence further.

Education became increasingly important during the Industrial Revolution. From 1847 onwards, "educational opportunities for girls (and for non-elite boys) expanded dramatically. These new opportunities took three forms: the decision on the part of the state to take responsibility for educating all of its citizens; the founding of rigorous, academically-oriented schools for middle-class girls; and the opening of universities to women" (Steinbach 171). However, Shelley's *Matilda* was written in 1819, when education was not a priority. Steinbach states that "[i]n the late eighteenth century Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97) claimed that only an educated woman could be a virtuous woman, but her insistence on the importance of schooling the female sex put her in the minority" (162). Steinbach also goes on to say that "[u]ntil the late nineteenth century education was neither free, nor compulsory, nor state-provided. As a result, many children – and most children from working-class and poor families – were haphazardly advocated, if at all" (163). In fact, education was largely dependent on class: girls from wealthier families were educated at home, where "[b]eyond the basics of reading, writing, and religious instruction, they learned singing or piano playing, drawing, and modern European languages. They might also learn maths, science, or classics

from their brothers' tutors" (Steinbach 163). In middle-class families, girls were either taught by their mothers or, if their income allowed this, by a governess (Steinbach, 164). Essentially, "[g]irls' training, especially before 1850, usually emphasized polite social accomplishments rather than academic or practical ones" (Steinbach, 164). The situation was most dire for working-class families, who "had little time or income to spend on children's education" (Steinbach 165). However, education did become increasingly important: "[m]ost working-class families urged a more traditional view of children as contributors to the family economy, but they too could see advantages in sending their children to school where possible and restricting their work in dangerous factories" ("History of Europe"). Following the Industrial Revolution, concern for the general wellbeing, including education, increased among both the general populace as well as the government, which actively sought to improve education from 1847 onwards (Steinbach 171). Yet it is also important to consider what education Mary Shelley enjoyed. While her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, advocated the importance of education for girls as mentioned earlier, Shelley did not benefit from this. Rather than being brought up in accordance with her mother's wishes, it would seem that her father, William Godwin, did not think this necessary: "[a]lthough Godwin recognized that Mary was 'considerably superior in capacity' to Fanny¹ or Mrs. Godwin²'s children and acknowledged her active mind, her great desire for knowledge, and her 'almost invincible' perseverance in everything she undertook, he agreed with his wife that she required no formal education" (Mellor 8). Instead, Shelley was educated by her governess and after that, by her father and stepmother (Mellor 9). Her education was arguably a success, as "[o]ne of her first literary efforts, a thirty-nine quatrain expansion of Charles Dibdin's five stanza song, 'Mounseer Nongtongpaw,' was published early in 1808 when she was only eleven" (Mellor 10). Moreover, Shelley was allowed to make use of her father's library, and would often listen

¹ Mary Wollstonecraft's daughter and Mary Shelley's sister.

² William Godwin's second wife, Mary Jane Clairmont, whom he married after Mary Wollstonecraft's death.

in as her father entertained guests such as William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge (Mellor 11).

The Industrial Revolution also influenced morality. As the population increased due to industrialisation and an increase in welfare, there was also a massive increase in crime and disorder: the population in England and Wales quadrupled, but so did the number of indictable criminal offenses³ (Philips 158). Philips states that “[m]any contemporaries took these rising figures of committals to trial as a clear indication that the Industrial Revolution was leading directly to an increase in the commission of crimes” (158). However, he goes on to say that these numbers represent an increase in prosecution of criminal offenses rather than an increase in committed criminal offenses (159). Nevertheless, the publication of such figures may have caused an increase in awareness. As a result, “[t]he period 1780-1860 saw Britain undergo a dramatic change from an ‘unpoliced society’ to a ‘policed society’” (Philips 159). After a long period of social unrest caused by political campaigns such as the Luddite attacks of 1811-1816 and the Peterloo massacre in 1819 (Philips 176), new systems of law-enforcement were implemented by 1860: according to Philips, this is inextricably linked to the Industrial Revolution and its influences on society as a whole (175). Yet crime was not the only threat to morality. The early nineteenth century also witnessed the rise of societies such as the Society for the Suppression of Vice, which was founded in 1802 (Laqueur 102). However, this did not put a halt to behaviour considered immoral at the time. One perceived threat to morality was the greed women were felt to possess, especially those from the working-class: they were thought to be unable to control their impulses, especially when it came to spending their money (Laqueur 116). Moreover, it was also felt that greed would entice women into becoming prostitutes, as they would certainly need more money (Laqueur 117). Prostitution was, perhaps not surprisingly, the greatest vice of all: “[w]horing’, of course, had long been regarded as wicked and detrimental to the commonweal, but so had drunkenness, blasphemy and other disturbances of the peace. Not until the nineteenth

³ The numbers increased from 49 prosecuted criminal offenses per 100,000 residents to 194 per 396,000, respectively (Philips 158).

century did it rise to being '*the social evil*', a particularly disruptive, singularly threatening, vice" (Laqueur 120). The following fragment demonstrates the perceived extent of this moral turpitude: "[w]hen Flora Tristan, the French socialist and feminist, visited England's 'chief city' she reported that 'there are in London from 80,000-100,000 women – the flower of the population – living off prostitution'; on the streets and in 'temples raised by English materialism to their gods . . . male guests come to exchange their gold for debauchery'" (Laqueur 103). As Laqueur points out, this number is most likely not an accurate one, "but the point is made nevertheless that where some saw repression others saw an intimate link between an expansive sexual and economic life" (Laqueur 103). In other words, while some abhorred the easy virtue of prostitution, others profited from it.

The influence of the Industrial Revolution was not limited to education and morality: in fact, the influence of the Industrial Revolution on society is a diverse one. The English population increased from over 5 million in 1701 to 16.7 million in 1851 (King 209), mostly due to a decrease in death rates. While the cause of the decrease in death rates remains unclear, it is certain that "[i]mprovements in food supply and transport eliminated the prospect of famine and combined with a healthier climate to reduce mortality rates. Death rates from disease, most notably plague, but also other potential killers such as tuberculosis, typhus, smallpox and influenza, also fell" (Stevenson 232). However, while the welfare increased, the Industrial Revolution also gave rise to discontent. It has been said that "where it occurred industrialization disrupted an older and, implicitly, better way of life" (Stevenson 238), and that "'the rise of great industry' led to the loss of freedom and skills, an 'intellectual and moral chasm' between rich and poor, individuals dehumanized by the factory system, and an ugly and brutish life in the industrial towns" (Stevenson 238). These ways of thinking gave rise to a new movement: the Luddites, various groups of workers who lost their livelihoods due to technological progress (Stevenson 241). They resisted the implementation of machinery by protesting and rioting; however, "these forms of protest were a symptom of the breakdown of an older, paternalistic 'moral economy' of work and reward, of pricing and retailing, which was being ruthlessly discarded with the adoption of laissez-faire economics"

(Stevenson 243). Therefore, “skilled workmen were forced into violent confrontation with their masters and, ultimately, with the authorities to resist the introduction of new machinery or the use of machinery in ways which abrogated traditional norms of independence and reward” (Stevenson 243). This of course ties into the establishment of the aforementioned ‘policed society’.

In conclusion, the Industrial Revolution influenced nineteenth century British society in many ways: education became increasingly important, a loss of morals occurred (as reflected in, for instance, the increase in both crime and prostitution), and a new way of life was created. Some welcomed change, but most did not: yet ultimately, these are the changes Shelley incorporated into *Matilda*, both directly and indirectly.

3. THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION IN *MATILDA*

Throughout *Matilda*, a special role seems to be reserved for the importance of education. There are two different ways in which she illustrates the importance of education: firstly, Shelley uses her characters' education as a reflection on the role of education during the nineteenth century. Secondly, she incorporates her own literary knowledge in the novel, thus simultaneously demonstrating her own knowledge as well as the importance of education.

Shelley makes a clear distinction between male and female characters as far as education is concerned, and by doing so, reflects on a post-Industrial Revolution society. Men are the ones who are educated, who achieve more and who are awarded with more opportunities, while woman clearly are not. Shelley does not explicitly object to this inequality, but does so implicitly. Matilda's father "was sent to Eton and afterwards to college; and allowed from childhood the free use of large sums of money; thus enjoying from his earliest youth the independence which a boy with these advantages, always acquires at a public school" (Shelley 152). He does not explicitly benefit from his education, but is clearly awarded more privileges than women just because he is first a man, and secondly, born into a wealthy family. There is only one other man in *Matilda* who plays an active part in Matilda's life, namely Woodville, the poet she befriends after retreating into her self-imposed exile: "Woodville was the son of a poor clergyman and had received a classical education. He was one of those very few whom fortune favours from their birth; on whom she bestows all gifts of intellect and person with a profusion that knew no bounds" (Shelley 191). Shelley later adds to this that "[h]is genius was transcendent, and when it rose as a bright star in the east all eyes were turned towards it in admiration" (191). Woodville has clearly benefited from his education. He lacks the wealth Matilda's father possesses, and this may explain the difference in how they both benefited from their education: Woodville depends upon his education in order to become successful, whereas Matilda's father is already wealthy and therefore does not depend upon his education. There is one more mention of another man, namely the

minister who “was engaged to give [Matilda] lessons in reading, writing and french, but he was without family and his manners even to [Matilda] were always perfectly characteristic of the profession in the exercise of whose functions he chiefly shone, that of a schoolmaster” (Shelley 157). What education the minister may have enjoyed remains unknown, as does Shelley’s opinion on his education and social position. Ultimately, these three men were allowed to study, and the benefits of their studies were perhaps dependent on their wealth: Matilda’s father benefits little from his education, whereas Woodville and the minister depend upon it to be successful in their endeavours. The men were also the ones who educated women; no mention is made of a woman educating another woman, as for instance a governess would.

The women in *Matilda*, except for Matilda herself, are poorly educated. Matilda’s mother is described as being “well acquainted with the heroes of Greece and Rome or with those of England who had lived some hundred years ago, while she was nearly ignorant of the passing events of the day: she had read few authors who had written during at least the last fifty years but her reading with this exception was very extensive” (Shelley 154). The fact that Matilda’s mother has read so many historical books may indicate that her education was similar to that of a wealthy family, as described earlier, yet her ignorance with regard to daily life is remarkable. It is unclear what this means: perhaps it serves to create a more whimsical image of Matilda’s mother as Shelley does point out that such an education has its benefits as well: “[t]hus although she appeared to be less initiated in the mysteries of life and society than he her knowledge was of a deeper kind and laid on firmer foundations” (Shelley 154). Perhaps it also serves to set her apart from the men: men too would have had a knowledge of ancient Greece and Rome, for instance, as it was part of their formal education (Steinbach 163). Another woman who is mentioned in *Matilda* is Elinor, Woodville’s wife: “Elinor had not the genius of Woodville but she was generous and noble, and exalted by her youth and the love that she every where excited above the knowledge of aught but virtue and excellence. She was lovely; her manners were frank and simple; her deep blue eyes swam in a lustre which could only be given by sensibility joined to wisdom” (Shelley 192). Like with Matilda’s

mother, the education Elinor has enjoyed seems to be similar to that of a middle-class family: “[g]irls’ training, especially before 1850, usually emphasized polite social accomplishments rather than academic or practical ones” (Steinbach 164). Shelley once more points out the redeeming qualities a woman may possess to make up for a lack in education. Despite whatever education they may have enjoyed, neither of the women mentioned in the novel seem to benefit from their education: in fact, Matilda’s mother and Elinor die before the reader is able to learn much more about them. Finally, there is Matilda herself. Her basic education as provided by the minister, as described earlier, is reminiscent of the education girls from wealthier families received: “[b]eyond the basics of reading, writing, and religious instruction, they learned singing or piano playing, drawing, and modern European languages” (Steinbach 163). In the novel it can be read that Matilda is taught reading, writing and French by the minister (Shelley 157), and later there are also references to be found to Italian. However, no references are made to activities such as singing or drawing. Throughout the novel, Matilda also has access to various books by, for instance, Milton and Pope. Shelley also refers to a great number of literary works through Matilda, making her seem all the more educated: for instance, Matilda identifies with a character from Dante Alighieri’s *Paradiso*, and often mentions an author or novel. In fact, Shelley incorporates over 30⁴ references to or citations of authors, both contemporary and classical, or classical works of literature; these include but are not limited to the Bible, Boccaccio, Coleridge, Milton, Shakespeare, Spencer, Sophocles, Wordsworth, and her husband, Percy Bhyse Shelley. While Shelley’s motivations for doing so are unclear, it could be argued that she is demonstrating the knowledge she acquired during her life, or it may be that she is illustrating the importance of education: after all, if the reader is not educated, it is not likely he or she will understand all of these references, as some are considerably more explicit than others. Moreover, some of these references occur in their original languages, such as Italian. Despite the division Shelley makes with regard to gender, her focus on education, as demonstrated in the attention she bestows on it throughout the novel, illustrates its importance to her. Education became more

⁴ Based on the references mentioned in the footnotes of the edition of the novel used for this thesis.

important during the nineteenth century, as “[m]ost working-class families urged a more traditional view of children as contributors to the family economy, but they too could see advantages in sending their children to school where possible and restricting their work in dangerous factories” (“History of Europe”). In short, as the general welfare increased so did the importance of education. Moreover, Shelley herself shared her parents’ aforementioned commitment to “the duty of engagement in public debate on all pertinent moral, social, and political issues as a means of contributing to the general welfare,” (Clemit 28) and does so by making education a vital component of her novel.

There is also a peculiar link between *Matilda* and Dante Alighieri’s *Divina Commedia*. Four references are made to it throughout *Matilda*, and it can be discerned from Shelley’s journal that she began reading the *Divina Commedia* in December 1818 (Feldman 246). Furthermore, in Dante’s *Purgatorio*, there is also a character named Matilda: “[i]n the *Purgatorio*, Matilda is the Lady of Innocence, Eve before the fall, who gathers flowers in the Garden of Eden” (Mellor 196). According to Mellor, Shelley both refers to Dante and has used the name ‘Matilda’ intentionally (196). However, Mellor also argues that the allegory is a purely sexual one, where Dante is “distracted from his ultimate spiritual goal by the lovely Matilda, he is led astray, seduced by the desires of the flesh” (196). This is reminiscent of Matilda’s father, who has fallen in love with his daughter. However, this only takes this particular section of the *Divina Commedia* into consideration: only two of the four references made to Dante pertain to the *Purgatorio*, whereas the other two refer to the *Paradiso*. It may be that *Matilda* is also a representation of the *Divina Commedia*: there is a descent into hell, or in Matilda’s case into misery, as her father confesses his love for her (thus representing the *Inferno*). As she goes into voluntary exile, she is on her way to redemption (redemption being the essence of the *Purgatorio*). Finally, as she dies, she thinks she will return to heaven where her father awaits her (not unlike Beatrice waiting for Dante in *Paradiso*). In fact, Matilda longs to be reunited with her father: “[i]n truth I am in love with death; no maiden ever took more pleasure in the contemplation of her bridal attire than I in fancying my limbs already enwrapped in their shroud: is it not my marriage dress? Alone it will unite me to my

father when in an eternal mental union we shall never part” (Shelley, 208). Her subsequent death completes the allegory: Matilda is reunited with her father in heaven, as Dante is reunited with Beatrice and enters heaven. Either way, by writing *Matilda* as a representation of Dante’s *Divina Commedia*, Shelley again draws on the importance of knowledge and education.

In conclusion, Shelley demonstrates the inequality between the two sexes as far as education is concerned through the use of gender. Her male characters are intelligent, have been educated and have accomplished more in life, whereas her female characters are described as being not particularly intelligent, but are in possession of redeeming qualities, such as being gentle or well-mannered. This inequality seems to be an accurate representation of education during the first half of the nineteenth century, specifically before 1847. Moreover, during a time in which education became increasingly important as the general welfare increased, Shelley incorporated over 30 references to authors, both contemporary and classical, into her novel, both to demonstrate her knowledge while simultaneously drawing attention to the importance of education. Furthermore, Dante’s *Divina Commedia* seems to be of particular importance in regard to *Matilda*, whether as an allegory or the latter being a representation of the former. As such, the link to the Industrial Revolution is not a direct one, but rather an implied one: education is important and represented accurately, but its importance not mentioned explicitly.

4. MORAL TURPITUDE IN *MATILDA*

There are several instances in *Matilda* that reflect on moral turpitude, such as the incestuous love Matilda's father harbours for his daughter. While these are not explicitly linked to the Industrial Revolution, like the increase in crime discussed earlier, they do reflect on an era during which morality was threatened by various vices such as prostitution and greed. This threat is reflected in the novel in two instances: the relationship between Matilda and her father as well as Matilda's apparent suicide, the latter of which is considered immoral because of its implied lack of social involvement. It is also important to consider Shelley's own life concerning these themes to better understand the circumstances under which the novel has been written.

The relationship between Matilda and her father and its slowly changing nature gradually make its way into the novel, even though Matilda often implies that something terrible has happened in the letter she writes. She uses instances such as "I lament now, I must ever lament, those few short months of Paraisaical bliss; I disobeyed no command, I ate no apple, and yet I was ruthlessly driven from it. Alas! my companion did, and I was precipitated in his fall" (Shelley 162) to hint at something awful without ever really explaining what exactly has happened. However, no mention is yet made of Matilda's moral and emotional ambivalence. The reader is then introduced to Matilda's father's morals, which are explicitly mentioned to be different from others: rather, these morals have been established by himself over time. Shelley attributes this both to the many journeys he embarked upon and his education:

He had seen so many customs and witnessed so great a variety of moral creeds that he had been obliged to form an independant one for himself which had no relation to the peculiar notions of any one country: his early prejudices of course influenced his judgement in the formation of his principles, and some raw college ideas were strangely mingled with the deepest deductions of his penetrating mind. (161)

Over time and as a result of his journeys, Matilda's father has apparently united some of the morals and values he had developed while going to college with those he has developed during his journeys. As such, he has created a unique mixture of morals, indirectly related to the influences of the Industrial Revolution: in a time in which society changed rapidly, morals were changing and, at times, fading. Matilda's father's unique set of morals is reminiscent of this.

After having been reunited with his daughter after sixteen years have passed, the behaviour he displays becomes slightly more erratic. When Matilda is courted by a young man, his behaviour borders on jealousy. Matilda describes it as follows: "but I now remember that my father was restless and uneasy whenever this person visited us, and when we talked together watched us with the greatest apparent anxiety although he himself maintained a profound silence" (164). At first his behaviour, while arguably irrational, seems natural: it could be interpreted as being overprotective, even more so given his absence during the first sixteen years of Matilda's life, causing him to miss her childhood and to be confronted with a young adult who is courted by men. However, as the novel progresses, Matilda's father attempts to replace Matilda's mother with Matilda herself: "[w]e walked together in the gardens and in the evening when I would have retired he asked me to stay and read to him; and first said, 'When I was last here your mother read Dante to me; you shall go on where she left off.'" (167). It is surprising that Shelley refers to Dante here as well: perhaps Shelley indeed intended to write *Matilda* as an allegory of Dante's *Divina Commedia*, as discussed earlier. After a few months, Matilda has grown suspicious of her father's behaviour, and chooses to confront him. He has continuously sought to avoid her, and has resorted to silence rather than talking to his daughter. She relentlessly attempts to discover the source of his misery, and her efforts culminate in a shocking revelation: her father admits that he harbours romantic feelings for her, his daughter. Matilda is disgusted by this declaration and flees, hiding in her room until the following day, thus condemning her father's love for her as immoral. Her father has left their house, leaving a letter for her to read: in this, he confesses his true feelings once more and also bids her farewell, for he intends to commit suicide.

Distraught, Matilda sets out to follow him but arrives too late: her father has drowned himself.

Matilda cannot bear to continue her life while carrying the emotional burden of her father's confession, and so stages her own suicide so that she can withdraw from society without having to answer any questions as to why she is leaving. This implied lack of social involvement, from both Matilda's point of view as well as society's, could also be considered immoral: Matilda wishes to withdraw from society using a rather crude method, and it would seem that no one notices Matilda's secrecy and, even more so, her survival. She moves to a cottage outside a village, without any servants other than one woman from the village who works for her for a few hours a day. In this solitude Matilda contemplates her life, until she meets Woodville, a poet who has lost his wife. Matilda refuses to speak of what has happened, but is drawn to Woodville's misery: ultimately, she proposes a suicide pact. Woodville refuses to take part in this and leaves her to take care of his ailing mother. Once more confronted with solitude and while contemplating all that has transpired in her life, Matilda leaves for one of her walks in the surrounding area, something she does quite often. However, she is so preoccupied with her thoughts that she loses her bearing and cannot find her way home. She decides to spend the night outside, as she is under the impression that she is accustomed to the cold weather. She ultimately falls ill, and dies of consumption a couple of days later. While Matilda is on her deathbed, she confesses to long for death. Fragments such as "I no longer exhaust my miserable heart by bitter tears and frantic complaints; I no longer reproach the sun, the earth, the air, for pain and wretchedness. I wait in quiet expectation for the closing hours of a life which has been to me most sweet and bitter" (208) and "[i]n truth I am in love with death; no maiden ever took more pleasure in the contemplation of her bridal attire than I in fancying my limbs already enwrapped in their shroud: is it not my marriage dress? Alone it will unite me to my father when in an eternal mental union we shall never part" (208) illustrate this, but also illustrate two other points: firstly, that Matilda's illness could be a means of committing suicide. Her suicide pact had been rejected by Woodville, and Matilda admits to long for death: it could be argued that she deliberately contracted her

illness by choosing to spend the night outside. Secondly, it demonstrates an ambivalence concerning her father's feelings for her. It clearly contradicts the shock, horror and disgust felt earlier, and as such puts her frantic search for her father in a new perspective: it could be that she wanted to stop him merely because he is her father and she could not bear his death, or there could be another motive for her actions altogether: if so, it might be that the unbearable secret she could not share with society (which was her sole reason for her self-imposed exile) is the incestuous love she feels for her father, rather than his secret love for her. This ambivalence has also been noticed by Robinson, who writes that "[t]here is an equal craftiness in the artistry of Mary Shelley, who embedded in Mathilda's narrative a number of allusions to other incest texts, some of which emphasize the daughter as the sexual aggressor" (83). Robinson continues to say that "[w]hat I am proposing is that Mathilda has peopled her own incest narrative with even wilder 'fancies of [her] own creation.' Her solitary years of living fictions⁵ led her to fictionalize the last years of her life and to color the narrative in such a way that she represses or denies her own sexual desire for her father" (87). Perhaps her feelings are reflected most adequately in the final words she writes about her father, nearing the end of both the letter and Matilda's life:

I now saw that divine orb, gilding all the clouds with unwonted splendour, sink behind the horizon; it disappeared from a world where he whom I would seek exists not; it approached a world where he exists not. Why do I weep so bitterly? Why does my heart heave with vain endeavour to cast aside the bitter anguish that covers it 'as the waters cover the sea'. I go from this world where he is no longer and soon I shall meet him in another. (Shelley 210)

Matilda is scared of dying, but also longs for death. Perhaps she is sad for all that she leaves behind, but also clearly longs to be reunited with her father. Either way, it could be argued that the love Matilda's father felt for Matilda was not at all unrequited.

⁵ Matilda often seeks refuge in books, sometimes fantasising about them or identifying with a character.

It would seem that the questionable nature of the relationship between Matilda and her father has been inspired by Shelley's relationship with her own father. As Clemit states, "[f]ollowing Nitchie⁶, most critics have read this story of incestuous love between father and daughter as an uncontrolled expression of private anxieties concerning Mary Shelley's relationship with her father, William Godwin, and her husband, Percy Bhyse Shelley" (64), a view also supported by Robinson (76). Shelley's relationship with her father had never been an easy one. Mellor writes that, "[i]n this story Mary Shelley projects and displaces her deepest and most ambivalent feelings towards her father during the painful summer of 1819. Godwin had been horrified by Mary's elopement with Percy Shelley, and for two-and-a-half years, he had rigidly refused to see or correspond with her" (193). She later adds that "Godwin's behaviour tormented Mary, who continued to love him despite his manifest cruelty, duplicity, and selfishness" (193). Mellor also adds that "[i]n *Matilda*, Mary Shelley both articulates her passionate devotion to her father and takes revenge for his cruelty towards her" (194). She continues to argue that the events preceding Matilda's father's confession are an ideal father-daughter relationship on the one hand, while the relationship represents a shift in the power relation between Shelley and her father on the other (194-195). In other words, it could be that Shelley chose to use her strained relationship with her father as inspiration for the relationship between Matilda and her father as a means of expressing her anger in *Matilda*. While her father had power over her in her own life, Shelley reversed the balance of power, thus enabling her to be in control.

The instances of moral turpitude in *Matilda*, namely the relationship between Matilda's father and Matilda herself, as well as Matilda's apparent suicide that further establishes the ambivalence of Matilda's feelings towards her father, indirectly reflect on the loss of morals that occurred both during and after the Industrial Revolution, as reflected in, for instance, an increase in crime and prostitution. It could be argued that Shelley laments this loss: both Matilda and her father die as a result of their immoral behaviour.

⁶ Elizabeth Nitchie, who first transcribed and edited *Matilda* before seeing it published in 1959.

Furthermore, an incestuous love as described in *Matilda* was considered immoral (as evidenced from Matilda's shock after her father reveals his feelings for her), especially because of Matilda's ambivalence towards her father, and because of this it is surprising that Shelley dared to write something as shocking. However, the novel, while not autobiographical, does incorporate elements from Shelley's own life as well. As such, the novel could be seen as a representation of Shelley's feelings towards her father.

5. THE REPRESENTATION OF RELATIONSHIPS IN *MATILDA*

One of the main themes in *Matilda* is, in fact, almost an absent one: society. While Shelley does not specifically mention aspects that were important at the time, such as the effects of industrialisation or urbanisation on the general populace and working classes, the role of society in *Matilda* is rather an implied one. Through *Matilda*, Shelley comments on the effects of social isolation, the importance of gender, the superficiality of society, and makes a remarkable reference to the master-servant relationship. Ultimately, Shelley comments on nineteenth century British society itself.

Following her father's confession of his incestuous love for her and his subsequent suicide, *Matilda* withdraws into a self-imposed exile after having staged her own suicide to prevent others from questioning or following her. Prior to sharing her story with Woodville, she comments on her solitude: "I live in a lone cottage on a solitary, wide heath: no voice of life reaches me" (151). Throughout the novel, it would seem that *Matilda* finds comfort in her solitude: for instance, she spends time reading and goes on long walks in the countryside. She has but one servant, a woman from a nearby village who works for her a few hours a day. However, when *Matilda* looks back on her friendship with Woodville, she claims that "[s]olitude also lost to me some of its charms: I began again to wish for sympathy; not that I was ever tempted to seek the crowd, but I wished for one friend to love me" (190). While at first she finds comfort in her friendship with Woodville, their goals seem to be different: while Woodville wishes to overcome his grief, *Matilda* desires nothing more than to perish with it. Seclusion has turned *Matilda* in a selfish creature who resents those that do not do her bidding, as demonstrated by the outrage she feels when Woodville rejects her proposed suicide pact. Yet *Matilda*'s self-imposed exile is not her first experience with social isolation. After her mother died and her father left England, *Matilda* was placed under the care of her aunt. Their relationship, however, was not an affectionate one: "I believe that without the slightest tinge of a bad heart she had the coldest heart that every filled a human breast: it was

totally incapable of any affection. She took me under her protection because she considered it her duty; but she had too long lived alone and undisturbed by the noise and prattle of children to allow that I should disturb her quiet” (Shelley 156). As such, Matilda has spent much of her life in solitude rather than being involved in a loving parent-child relationship. This forms an indirect link with the Industrial Revolution, through which Shelley comments on the importance of social relations.

The only relationship Matilda has had that proved to be both affectionate and vivid was her relationship with her father in those few months they spent together before his suicide. According to Mellor, this is an attack on patriarchal society as it existed during Shelley’s life (198). Mellor comments that: “[i]n a society where the father or male is the dominant authority and wielder of power and the female is taught to love and obey, the father-daughter relationship becomes a paradigm for all male-female relationships” (198). Perhaps Matilda’s motivation for her seclusion hinges upon this: a need to recreate the father-daughter relationship, which has proven impossible. For instance, Matilda aims to recreate the destructive nature of their relationship in her relationship with Woodville by proposing the suicide pact. At one point in the novel, Matilda also considers a more drastic measure than a retreat to the countryside to avoid society: “I would retire to the Continent and become a nun; not for religion’s sake, for I was not a Catholic, but that I might for ever be shut out from the world. I should there find solitude where I might weep, and the voices of life might never reach me” (175). This is the second time in the novel that Shelley uses the expression “the voices of life,” without explicitly mentioning to what or to whom this refers. It could be a general statement, but it could also reflect on the relationship between Matilda and her father: it may be that Shelley uses the expression deliberately to emphasise the importance and vivacity of Matilda’s relationship with her father. Mellor also comments that “[a]ll her novels show the ways in which an uninhibited male egoism contributes to human suffering and may even cause the annihilation of human civilization. Mary Shelley would have us see that only a culture that mothers all its members, a behaviour traditionally embodied in but not necessarily limited to the work of women, can prevent the making of

monsters capable of destroying us all” (216). While this fragment also alludes to Shelley’s other novels, such as *Frankenstein, or: The Modern Prometheus* and *The Last Man*, it does indicate that Shelley perceives men to be the cause of a lot of society’s problems: in *Matilda*, it is Matilda’s father’s confession that is the catalyst that sets the downward spiral of misery in motion.

After her father commits suicide, Matilda finds it increasingly difficult to bear the secret of the nature of her father’s love for her while at the same time trying to cope with her grief:

[m]y convalescence rapidly advanced, yet this⁷ was the thought that haunted me, and I was for ever forming plans how I might hereafter contrive to escape the tortures that were prepared for me for when I should mix in society, and to find that solitude which alone could suit one whom an untold grief separated from her fellow creatures. Who can be more solitary even in a crowd than one whose history and the never ending feelings and remembrances arising from it is known to no living soul. (Shelley 185)

As demonstrated in this fragment, Matilda struggles with the burden of having to keep such a secret, as well as the “tortures” she refers to, which would be imposed upon her as she returned to society. While the nature of these “tortures” is unknown as Shelley does not describe them, the phrase may refer to the difficulties Matilda encounters as she struggles to find solitude within society. It is clear that Matilda wishes to avoid these tortures by any means necessary. Even at the cost of her own personal happiness, Matilda struggles to keep her burden a secret: “[o]ver the deep grave of my secret I must heap an impenetrable heap of false smiles and words: cunning frauds, treacherous laughter and a mixture of all light deceits would form a mist to blind others and be as the poisonous simoon to me” (Shelley 185). This fragment demonstrates both the extent of Matilda’s unhappiness as well as the superficiality of society as she perceives it.

⁷ The question of how to escape from society (Shelley 184).

Finally, there is one instance in which Shelley comments on the relationship between masters and servants. As Matilda rushes to the coast to prevent her father from committing suicide, one servant seems to be particularly useful in making arrangements for her. Shelley then writes that “in moments like these the mistress and servant become in a manner equals” (Shelley 182). It is likely that this is a deliberate comment made towards the inequality of servants and their masters, but it is the only instance in the novel in which it occurs. Shelley’s motivation for making such a comment remains unclear, but it could very well be another allusion to the inequality she encountered in early nineteenth century society.

While it remains debatable whether or not this is an exaggerated impression or interpretation rather than a true reflection of nineteenth century society, Shelley shows an uncaring side of society by exploring its lack of involvement, thus establishing another indirect link with the Industrial Revolution. Rather than opting for the perhaps more obvious themes such as industrialisation or urbanisation which are not mentioned nor commented upon, Shelley comments on a superficial society by examining the effects of seclusion upon Matilda. Furthermore, Shelley reflects on the effects of gender upon the nature of relationships and demonstrates how these have affected Matilda. Finally, Shelley comments on the superficiality of society and the inequality between masters and servants, even though her motivation for this remains unclear.

6. CONCLUSION

While often read autobiographically, *Matilda* is a novel that also comments on the influence the Industrial Revolution has had on society. Through its contents, Shelley reflects on various aspects of society that have been influenced by the Industrial Revolution: these aspects are the importance of education, a general loss of morals as reflected in the presence of incest and suicide within the novel, and social isolation and the superficiality of society itself.

By implementing gender as a focal point, Shelley has demonstrated the inequality between the two sexes as far as education is concerned. The male characters are educated and are able to achieve more, whereas the female characters are described as lacking in intelligence, but are redeemed by their gentle and caring nature. This seems to be an accurate representation of the importance of education in the nineteenth century, specifically its importance before 1847, which was the year that marked the government's shift from a passive to an active role in the development of the availability of education (Steinbach 171). Shelley's own education mirrors that of a middle-class family, as she was educated by a governess, and later by her father and stepmother (Mellor 9). She has also incorporated her own knowledge of literature into *Matilda*, thus demonstrating the importance of education. Furthermore, she has also given importance to Dante Alighieri's *Divina Commedia*.

The events that take place in *Matilda* and question morality, such as the (incestuous) relationship between Matilda's father and Matilda herself, as well as Matilda's apparent suicide, reflect on a loss of morals that occurred both during and after the Industrial Revolution. In a time in which so many things changed, people perceived a loss of morals. At the time, this moral turpitude established itself in, for instance, an increase in crime and prostitution. An incestuous love as described in *Matilda* would have been considered immoral, especially because of Matilda's shock and subsequent ambivalence towards her father. However, the novel, while not autobiographical, does reflect on the relationship between Shelley and her father, William Godwin. As such, the novel could be seen as a representation of Shelley's feelings towards her father.

While it remains debatable whether or not this is an exaggerated impression or interpretation rather than a true reflection of nineteenth century society, Shelley shows an uncaring side of society. Rather than opting for the perhaps more obvious themes such as industrialisation, urbanisation, and the fear of a new way of life that replaced the old one which are not mentioned nor commented upon, Shelley comments on a superficial society by examining the effects of seclusion upon Matilda. She also examines the importance of gender within nineteenth century society, and concludes that a patriarchal society has its shortcomings (Mellor 198). Furthermore, Shelley reflects on the nature of relationships and demonstrates how these have affected Matilda. Finally, Shelley comments on the inequality between masters and servants, even though her motivation for this remains unclear.

The purpose of this thesis was to determine how the Industrial Revolution has influenced Mary Shelley's *Matilda*. Rather than opting for the themes of the Industrial Revolution such as industrialisation, urbanisation, an increase in crime and prostitution or the fear of a new way of life we now consider prevalent, Shelley has indirectly incorporated different aspects of the Industrial Revolution into her novel to illustrate its effects on society. While at times Shelley draws on personal experience, she has highlighted themes such as the importance of education, incest, suicide, social isolation, and superficiality to establish a difference between society before and society after the Industrial Revolution, as well as an indirect link between *Matilda* and the Industrial Revolution.

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