2013

"Silence Is of Different Kinds": Gender, Narration, and Social Power in Charlotte Brontë's Villette

Anne Louise Boylan
Bard College

"Silence Is of Different Kinds": Gender, Narration, and Social Power in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*

Senior Project submitted to

The Division of Languages & Literature

of Bard College

By

Anne Boylan

Annandale-on-Hudson, NY

May 2013

Acknowledgements

I would be remiss if I did not thank the endless numbers of people who helped me reach this incredible point in my academic career, some in giant, impossible-to-ignore ways and others in ways so small they may not have even known.

Firstly, my parents, who gave me *Villette* as a gift on my 17th birthday and, still not content to leave it at that, would give me the incredible privilege of attending Bard College mere months later. Both these gifts have never stopped showering me with endless blessings in ways I cannot begin to estimate or express. As I've heard from a lot of critical texts this past year, words will always eventually fall short of expressing absolute meaning, and I could thank them forever and never fully be able to express my gratitude and love.

Secondly, I must thank Deirdre d'Albertis, who has shaped and directed this project arguably more than any other person. She has been a mentor and a guiding force since my first year at Bard, and through her example I saw the academic path I wished to travel.

Many more thanks to Stephen Graham, who caught my Tom Lehrer reference, Karen Sullivan, who kicked the five-paragraph essay out of me my first year, my whole family who helped me in manifold ways get through my time at Bard, the cats who have sat beside me and let me read, and, of course, Charlotte Brontë. Whatever comes after death, I hope she's been working on finishing *Emma Brown*. I really want to know how it ends.

Table of Contents

Introduction……1

I. “I Kept, Then, Both My Box and My Countenance”:

Withholding and Withdrawal as Societal Power……..6

II. “But Are You Anybody?”: Lucy’s Narrative, Reader, and Identity……..26

III. “The Retina of An Inward Vision”: Catholicism,

Surveillance, and Concealment……51

Conclusion……82

Works Cited…….88

Introduction

In her *Life of Charlotte Brontë,* Elizabeth Gaskell provides for her readers an excerpt of a letter from the Rev. Patrick Brontë, Charlotte's father:

> When my children were very young, when, as far as I can remember, the oldest was about ten years of age, and the youngest about four, thinking that they knew more than I had yet discovered, in order to make them speak with less timidity, I deemed that if they were put under a sort of cover I might gain my end; and happening to have a mask in the house, I told them all to stand and speak boldly from under cover of the mask (36).

Brontë proceeds to ask his children various questions, to which they respond with various childish pieties; he asks Anne "what a child like her most wanted" and she responds with, "Age and experience." Of Charlotte he asks what the best book in the world is and she responds, "The Bible." There seems to be little notable in this moment of early childhood education; all seem to respond with the sort of rote answers that a good child is taught. There is no deviousness to be uncovered beneath the safe intermediary of the mask, and the children do not seem to know more than Patrick Brontë had previously witnessed, as he seemed to suspect.

The incident is rather striking when one considers that Charlotte Brontë's reputation would endure as that of a highly autobiographical novelist. Her protagonists are often closely joined with her own personality and numerous settings and incidents have been corroborated with historical accounts of Brontë's own life. The early

significance of Patrick Brontë's strategic use of masks comes to light when one considers that, through the intermediary of the novel, Charlotte Brontë represented fictionalized moments of her own life. The narrative becomes the mask which allows the novelist to speak more freely. The novel is the safe haven of self-expression, allowing that which might have been unacceptable to state about oneself to be safely spoken by a character under the guise of fiction.

This is not to overstep and claim pure autobiography in Brontë's novels, but rather to emphasize the importance of the fact that in Charlotte Brontë's life, she felt it was necessary to mask herself under multiple layers of obscurity until she felt comfortable producing a narrative. This does not necessarily make her an outlier amongst her contemporaries; in fact, what makes this fact so interesting is that it has a precedent amongst Victorian female novelists. The social theorist Harriet Martineau recalled the fact that it was unbecoming for a woman to study or have time to herself; she writes, "if ever I shut myself into my own room for an hour of solitude, I knew it was at the risk of being sent for to join the sewing-circle or to read aloud" (Sternlieb 14). Florence Nightingale writes in her essay "Cassandra" a description of women reading aloud to each other that seems to bear more resemblance to torture. Like a young Jane Eyre attempting to hide behind the window-curtain, women in the Victorian era were regularly stripped of their ability to maintain an internal private life that was their alone. In a time when the Victorian woman was meant to be kept "as innocent as the grave," (Perkin 60) to express, or even hint at, some personal, internal passion was unacceptable. It is thus unsurprising that these female novelists would seek to add protective layers to distance their own private thoughts, wishes, and concerns from the intrustion of external viewers.

This is what makes *Villette* one of Charlotte Brontë's most fascinating novels. Still more than *Jane Eyre,* the novel is a profoundly puzzling multi-layered work. The layers do not end with the concealing nature of the text; Charlotte Brontë herself wrote her novels under the pseudonym of Currer Bell. In 1848, a year after the publication of *Jane Eyre*, Brontë was still denying that she and Currer Bell were one and the same to her closest friend, Ellen Nussey. Even to a lifelong confidante, Brontë knew that "her authority as 'Miss Brontë' displaces her authority as Currer Bell" (Gezari 147). As evidenced by the volumes of biographies about famous artists discussing the influences in their work, who a novelist is colors their novel just as deeply as the words themselves. The minute Charlotte Brontë let the cover of Currer Bell slip, she knew it would change even how her writing was viewed retroactively. Just as Charlotte Brontë withholds information about herself from her readers, Lucy Snowe recreates this movement writ throughout the entire narrative.

Villette is so perplexing and fascinating to study because it actively seeks to place so many protective layers between itself and its readers. It forces readers to feel as if they are the ones calling Lucy Snowe to the odious sewing circle, forcing her out of her solitude. She actively resists any attempts made to draw her out, both from readers and from fellow characters. In a letter to William Smith Williams, the reader for her publisher, Smith, Elder & Co., Brontë states, "As to the name of the heroine, I can hardly express what subtlety of thought made me decide upon giving her a cold name; But at first I called her 'Lucy Snowe' (spelt with an 'e'), which Snowe I afterwards changed to 'Frost'. Subsequently I…wished it 'Snowe' again…for she has about her an external

coldness" (Gordon 257). These layers of inscrutability and resistance to analysis make the novel all the more enticing.

In this study I will attempt to draw back a few of the layers of *Villette* which have generally troubled readers. Because it is such an intricate narrative which places so many barriers in its readers' way, the possibilities for interpretation are manifold. Many attempts at criticism therefore become somewhat reductive, and the novel is often dismissed as a mediocre attempt at repeating the success of *Jane Eyre* without any of the likeability. I cannot possibly examine every potentially problematic aspect, fascinating motif, or noteworthy moment in the novel, but I have elected instead to focus on the three aspects of the novel which most often cause it to be dismissed out-of-hand, or which cause readers to add stipulations to their endorsement.

The first of these problems is Lucy's withholding nature. She creates a cohesive narrative while simultaneously refusing to reveal key details, often disclosing important revelations after they occur or keeping them from her readers entirely. Bound up with this first issue is a second problem, which is her narrative attitude towards her reader. Lucy is constantly belittling, condescending to, and patronizing her readers, blatantly ascribing them characteristics which are clearly designed to be insulting. These two issues deal specifically with the shape that the narrative takes. In my third chapter, I will discuss the anti-Catholic rhetoric that marks *Villette* which many readers find so disturbing yet which, I argue, has as much to do with the narrative form of the novel as it does with sectariansim. I will seek to move past a mere defense of the novel. Instead I hope to dissect the novel's troublesome elements in order to open up the far deeper layers of significance beneath the surface. Rather than excuse, I hope to encourage a closer

examination. Lucy Snowe herself describes silence as a multi-faceted phenomenon, imbued with hidden meanings. To take her silence at face value and to neglect a further investigation is to entirely dismiss the value of the novel's hidden power.

I. "I Kept, Then, Both My Box and My Countenance": Withholding and Withdrawal as Societal Power

Lucy Snowe, the enigmatic and esoteric narrator of Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, is a most puzzling confidante. She at once bares her soul and, in the same proverbial breath, conceals still more than she reveals. Because of how infrequently Lucy says a true, honest thing about herself, the keenest insight into her own character often arrives when she is speaking about someone else. In this particular case, the subject is Paul Emanuel, the Professor of Literature. She narrates,

> Till the very close of the evening, he did not indeed address me at all, yet I felt, somehow, that he was full of friendliness. Silence is of different kinds, and breathes different meanings; no words could inspire a pleasanter content than did M. Paul's wordless presence (461).

This silence in which Lucy so revels is, in fact, a deep-seated and vital part of her character. She is a woman defined by the multitude of meanings she can attach to her own silence. As a supremely withholding narrator, she is constantly working to put the barrier of the unknown between herself and those around her. Others may reveal themselves to her, but she remains inscrutable.

Villette and contemporaneous works which bear similarities to it are often found to be difficult to relate to because of the sense of absolute aloneness that they instill. I do not say loneliness, because these women express such varying degrees of desire for the company of others over the course of their narratives, running the gamut from intense yearning for the love of others to total rejection and withdrawal from society, to the point

where to describe it as “loneliness” is a gross over-simplification. *Villette* is a far cry from a Jane Austen novel, with its depictions of the pitfalls and graces of society. It is instead a novel in which Lucy is remarkably and most frequently alone, separate from “lonely”.

This term, in fact, goes to the heart of the matter: is loneliness a powerful state? It is often seen as a state of vulnerability in which one is separated from the safety of the group. In this chapter, however, I will explore the varying degrees of power or powerlessness that can stem from being alone in both *Villette* and in the time it was written. This time period proves important to the subject in that the class structure and gender roles ascribed to women still demonized a woman acting separately from the group, yet the era also gave rise to remarkable critiques of this societal norm. In an age in which women had little legal power or property rights, they had little realistic financial or logistical means to remain on their own. Those that did choose to be alone were often looked on with a wary eye, or marked with terms such as “spinster,” the analogue of which, “bachelor,” has no such negative connotations. The Victorian era was also a time in which these mores began to fall under question as, for instance, the first suffragists emerged. In this chapter I will explore Lucy Snowe as a woman alone and the ways in which she survives in a society which persists in marginalizing her. When one understands the system within which Lucy lives, her often-disconcerting mode of narration gains a clearer motive.

One of the most powerful emblems of this ambiguous state of aloneness is the moment of individual resolve. In an era that subtly villainized a woman’s individual agency, such a moment is quite remarkable for its performer’s single-minded decision,

their decisive action, and even the very spark of independent thought that gives birth to it. Individual resolve rejects the slower form of societally-driven action or even group action that would represent a safer, more acceptable place for women. Women such as Lucy reject this form by acting completely on their own. The moments I discuss may seem like relatively trivial events, but in this chapter I hope to illustrate in addition how these individual moments of decision and action are not in fact minor trivialities but instead illustrate a striking and even radical departure from society.

Much of Lucy's action is, in fact, defined by being alone. One of the most quietly cathartic moments in the novel comes when a storm hits the Rue Fossette. Lucy has been ruminating on her childhood; this topic always brings to light the most evasive aspects of Lucy's nature, as it is the stretch of her life she most stridently seeks to keep secret. It is in this passage that she openly admits her deceitful, evasive nature when she narrates, "Oh, my childhood! I had feelings: passive as I lived, little as I spoke, cold as I looked, when I thought of past days, I *could* feel. About the present, it was better to be stoical; about the future—such a future as mine—to be dead. And in catalepsy and a dead trance, I studiously held the quick of my nature" (139). She is by no means emotionless and truly cold, as her name might imply. Instead, her childhood becomes the place to sequester all emotion which she does not know how to control. She seeks to quarantine that which is too powerful for her to acknowledge and understand, rather than attempt to resolve her emotions. She continues:

> At that time, I well remember whatever could excite—certain accidents of the weather, for instance, were almost dreaded by me, because they woke the being I was always lulling, and stirred up a craving cry I could not satisfy. One night a

> thunder-storm broke…the tempest took hold of me with tyranny: I was roughly roused and obliged to live. I got up and dressed myself, and creeping outside the casement close by my bed, sat on its ledge, with my feet on the roof of a lower adjoining building. Within the dormitory they gathered round the night-lamp in consternation, praying loud. I could not go in: too resistless was the delight of staying with the wild hour (140-1).

Lucy's ability to express and release powerful emotions is dependent on her being alone. As a woman who fears and detests being emotionally vulnerable in the presence of others, she must find alternative methods for releasing the powerful desires which remain hidden while others are watching.[1] Passion might not at first seem to be an emotion that would make one vulnerable, but to be a passionate woman in the Victorian era was highly troublesome. Sally Shuttleworth writes in *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology,* "Lucy has imbibed, and now admirably reproduces, the social code which decrees that women violate their femininity if they exhibit, or even experience, feelings which suggest a capacity to initiate desire" (228). This social code drives a wedge into her very personality, forcing her to hate the part of herself that feels passion, but nonetheless she cannot cease to feel it. This passion becomes a force drives her away from others, an anti-social movement that makes her remove herself from the safety and comfort of society. In the moment in which she is exposed to the storm, she describes the feeling of sitting out in the storm as "delight," calling it "too terribly glorious." The sublime elation the storm induces is in stark contrast to her thoughts regarding such lapses in control when she is not directly under their thrall; at these times she says that storms were "dreaded"

[1] And watching is, in fact, a very threatening act in *Villette* and one which Lucy constantly fears, as discussed in chapter 3.

because of the "being" she has been lulling. She has so deeply fragmented parts of herself that not only does she experience directly conflicting emotions about the storm, but she is in fact so powerfully unable to cope with such feelings that she instead sequesters them into a part separate from herself. Without a means to understand herself as a person capable of profound emotion, she is forced to call such feelings a "being" which is not Lucy Snowe.

The degree to which she has divided herself goes still further than this separate being. It is not merely that she has separated out emotion, but she has in fact actively worked to imprison it. She makes this link still clearer in the next passage:

> This longing, and all of a similar kind, it was necessary to knock on the head; which I did, figuratively, after the manner of Jael to Sisera, driving a nail through their temples. Unlike Sisera, they did not die: they were but transiently stunned, and at intervals would turn on the nail with a rebellious wrench; then did the temples bleed, and the brain thrill to its core (140).

The description is agonizing; the idea of splitting oneself so thoroughly and restraining a part so wholly that it becomes cut off, painful, and rebellious does not make Lucy's method of coping with her own passions appealing. Her description is laden with evocations of restraint, torture and torment. Lucy cannot kill the emotions which trouble her, and thus she feels that she must painfully imprison them. If the process of doing so is so torturous, why then does Lucy endure it? Those around her, Ginevra most notably, express freely, frequently and with great vehemence. Lucy, surely, has a reason; many of her actions which outwardly seem to prove her a masochist most often reveal themselves to be powerful strategies for navigating the social sphere into which she has been placed.

Insights into Lucy's rationale are best found when her method of restraining emotion is challenged, whether by an outside force or, in this case, her own self. Lucy forces herself to give up Dr. John, knowing he cannot consider her anything other than a friend. She buries his letters, a physical expression of the way in which she consciously seeks to embody the uncontrollable parts of herself in external objects and somehow imprison or otherwise restrain them. She must convince herself to sequester the part of her that desires Graham. She narrates:

> I never liked 'Lucy' so well as when he uttered it. But I learned in time that his benignity, this cordiality, this music, belonged in no shape to me: it was a part of himself; it was the honey of his temper; it was the balm of his mellow mood; he imparted it, as the ripe fruit rewards with sweetness the rifling bee; he diffused it about him, as sweet plants shed their perfume. Does the nectarine love either the bee or bird it feeds? Is the sweetbriar enamoured of the air? (480-1)

What is most important in this passage is her admission that his goodness to her does not, in a sense, "belong" to her. For a love to be satisfying to her, it must necessarily involve a mutual exchange. This is perhaps the most quietly potent description of the way in which Lucy perceives unrequited love; it is not the lack of love in return that upsets her, but the inability to truly make a person hers. Lucy, above all else, values self-control, and to love another without love in return is to place the ability to determine her self-worth into the hands of an external agent. This threat to her hard-won independence cannot be allowed to continue as Lucy knows that, above all, she must fight to retain absolute control of herself as a constrained entity. The danger in unrequited love as opposed to a mutual love

is that it cedes one's power to another while the other is required to give nothing back in return.[2]

Lucy's particular methodology of controlling herself is to recognize when she has begun to lose power, which is to say, when she has lost control over some aspect of herself. In response, she then seeks to cut that part of herself off at all costs. To understand exactly why she even feels that it is necessary to carry out this radical refusal to be dependent, it becomes necessary to examine further this idea of unrequited love as ceding a certain power to another. Lucy is a character who, above all, values self-reliance. She points out later that one of M. Paul's greatest faults is "the absence of what I considered desirable self-control" (411). To lose this power is equivalent to losing her self. After all, for Lucy to execute an action that is so powerfully painful to her, for her to slice herself into parts and components and cast off the undesirable ones, she must truly fear the consequences. In *Repression in Victorian Fiction*, John Kucich writes, "Victorian novelists clearly manifest a growing 19th century distrust of collective life" (29). To call what appears in *Villette* "distrust" would be something of an understatement. The novel is wracked with a constant fear of the machinations of society attempting to oppress Lucy's own individual autonomy.[3] Kucich argues that characters such as Lucy respond to this threat by utilizing what he terms "repression," which is similar to, but manifests different results from, the Freudian concept of the word.

---

[2] This interpretation to some degree intersects with the Victorian idea that it was unhealthy for a girl to love when she had not been asked, as it was in some way giving a part of her heart without any reason, in a sense losing her ideal chaste naïveté. However, the two interpretations stem from very different interpretive roots of femininity.

[3] The constantly repeating motifs of inanimate objects having eyes, the rampant voyeurism, and constant direct mentions of surveillance are sufficient to prove this, but will be discussed in far greater detail in chapter 3.

Repression, according to Kucich, is in fact an avenue to social power over others, though it is different from wealth or beauty, both of which more obviously bestow power. He defines repression as a retreating into oneself as a vehicle to gain greater social currency amongst peers. Similar to speaking softly in order to require an interlocutor to draw nearer, repression serves the purpose of masking one's history, emotions, and character in order to draw others in as they seek to plumb the depths of a character that they perceive as mysterious and elusive. Kucich writes, "repression heightens and vitalizes emotional autonomy, rather than threatening or suppressing it" (2). Though Kucich applies a specialized term,"repression," to this act, it seems rather intuitive once he sets forth the logic involved. Denied the ability to be overtly charming and beautiful and free to move about in social circles as one such as Ginevra is, Lucy withdraws and conceals herself behind many veils of deceit. Lucy withdrawing into, and relying solely on, herself is a highly powerful and even radical motion away from others in an era in which women were treated essentially as overlarge children. Françoise Basch notes in *Relative Creatures* that the ideal of Victorian women as portrayed in literature requires that they be "forced into a system that takes no account of the complexity of human behavior…the female characters appear for the most part to be deprived of that internal dialectic, social and psychological, which, according to Lukacs, is a prerequisite for the independent existence of the characters in great realistic novels" (xiii). This ideal expresses itself throughout much of Victorian fiction, making Lucy all the more an aberration for even such a simple act as desiring.

This desire makes Lucy one of the most repressed characters in Victorian fiction; she is in a constant state of withholding from all those around her. Lucy is a character

who draws away from everyone, including her reader, dissembling, concealing, and withdrawing constantly to create a matrix of painfully taut and intricate desire. She is in love with Dr. John yet will not admit it to anyone, including the reader, or even, to some extent, herself.[4] She is so repressive and withholding from those around her that, desperate to satisfy their curiosities, every character feels a need to speak a judgment of her nature, and they are unfailingly incorrect; their assessments often directly conflict with each other. One of the most extended and important of these moments comes when Ginevra draws Lucy to the mirror to compare their relative accomplishments and beauties. This moment remarkably parallels Brontë's other mirror-based comparison in *Jane Eyre* when Jane draws a portrait of Blanche and herself and compares the two in order to force herself to give up Rochester. In this particular scene, as Ginevra enumerates her own virtues, Lucy declines to speak and instead responds by asking Ginevra to tell her what she sees when she looks at Lucy in the mirror. Ginevra responds:

> [Y]ou have no attractive accomplishments—no beauty. As to admirers, you hardly know what they are; you can't even talk on the subject: you sit dumb when the other teachers quote their conquests. I believe you never were in love, and never will be: you don't know the feeling, and so much the better, for though you might have your own heart broken, no living heart will you ever break. Isn't it all true? (187)

This is not necessarily an enumeration of Lucy's objective faults, though it may seem that way at first. It is instead an enumeration of the ways in which Lucy cannot keep up with

[4] In writing this, I recognize how problematic it is to write about a woman who is both powerful and weak in terms of moments related to the men she loves, which seems a rather trite lens through which to view such a complicated woman. However, it is her mix of desire for, and repulsion from, the marriage plot that defines her nature as so strange and different from the conventional ideal Victorian female protagonist. As such, a centerpiece of my analysis must necessarily be the men who populate her almost-marriage plot.

the societal ideals set for a woman like her. The values which would traditionally vault a woman to the top of the social pyramid (looks, suitors, and love) are notably absent in Lucy's character.

Class also proves incredibly important in determining what a woman can and cannot do; Ann Weinstone's essay, "The Queerness of Lucy Snowe," contains an excellent examination of the class undertones that run through *Villette*. In *Jane Eyre,* after all, much of the plot is driven by conflicts of class, but there is an almost deafening silence on the matter from Lucy in *Villette*. Weinstone's primary concern is examining whether or not Lucy desires the marriage plot, from which the idea of class is inseparable. Consider, for instance, *Jane Eyre* as an illustration, especially the moment in which Blanche tells Rochester, "Why, I suppose you have a governess for her [Adele]: I saw a person with her just now—is she gone? Oh no! there she is still, behind the window-curtain. You pay her, of course; I should think it quite as expensive—more so; for you have them both to keep in addition" (205). She dehumanizes Jane so thoroughly that there is no chance of her (as a representative of the narrow-minded upper class as a whole) ever viewing her as a woman, let alone a being capable or worthy of love. Weinstone writes, "Lucy boldly enters the narrative as queer, for by withholding the story of her origin, she does not reject a specific marriage plot in favor of another specific, oppositional story, but claims the territory of indeterminateness vis-à-vis her own class and thus her marriageability" (370). Jane Eyre quickly discovers the limitations involved in her class. She is on a whole separate spectrum of judgment, one reserved for sub-classes. It is difficult to overstate how much more reified class divisions were in the heyday of the servant economy. Though industrialists were making their fortunes at this

time thanks to the Industrial Revolution, this class mobility was brand new and those who succeeded in this brand-new motility were still seen as outliers. Lucy seeks to avoid falling into this rigidly defined structure; finding herself without the traits that Ginevra finds most desirable, she conceals specifically in order to confound her reader out of being able to decide whether or not she "deserves" a marriage plot.

Arguably the most important element in the exchange between the two women is that no part of the enumeration of her flaws is spoken by Lucy herself. Lucy's response to Ginevra's "Isn't it all true?" is "A good deal of it is true as gospel, and shrewd besides" (188). This might at first seem to be a resigned agreement, but Lucy remains notoriously evasive. Most people hearing themselves ascribed a mismatched character would actively contradict what parts of it were untrue, but though Lucy implies that some of it may be false, she makes absolutely no effort to clarify precisely which parts. The same character who describes herself as "like snow beneath snow" (55) would not be so transparent as to casually admit to the flaws and facts of her character. Instead, this response is more passively disingenuous. The result of interactions such as this one is that Lucy is often read as a pitiable person, one easily trod upon, without talent or charm to confer social power upon her.

In part, this is true, and in my analysis I do not wish entirely to dismiss Lucy's lack of power, because this would deny the very societal structure which is so damaging to women in the Victorian period and continues to stymie gender relations today. Lucy is neither wealthy enough nor beautiful enough to draw others to her. It is in this structure of power that women's ability to attract others must be passive and internal, whereas men are able to prove their worth through their agency and actions. Rather, what I seek to

prove is that in this power structure in which Lucy is so naturally powerless, Lucy in fact finds a way to subvert the rules governing her power and find an alternative route to social currency, or something so closely approximating it that others cannot tell the difference. While she may seem like a person highly out of place in her social world, she is in fact working within the system of societal rules placed before her to alter gender paradigms.[5] This is why, even as I argue that Lucy is powerful, she is still restrained because she is working within a system which continually attempts to oppress her.

All this being said, Lucy is hardly the submissive creature that she seems upon one's first reading of *Villette*. What appears to be passive exhaustion with those around her and a mere timidity about correcting them when they improperly ascribe characteristics to her is, in fact, a conscious withholding of information. John Kucich's analysis of Lucy's power in this realm is excellent; he writes, "it is others who pluralize Lucy in their imaginations while Lucy herself remains an unknown entity to them" (48). She consciously, purposefully and even somewhat manipulatively withholds information from others. When she feels love for Dr. John, she conceals it under layers and layers of evasive narration, redirecting the energy of her passion (which Kucich would call "libidinal energies") towards further concealment of her character. What differentiates this conceptualization of repression from the Freudian vision is that, instead of a unilaterally negative act which painfully denies part of oneself, Kucich's repression can be a powerful and productive act, a use of this energy of sexual expression towards a

[5] Interestingly, the very same argument continues to rage in almost every political arena today between radicalism and more conservative means of bringing about change. The largest question is: is it better to work within the system to affect change, or is this just one more method to submit to an unjust system? Must one radically divorce themselves from a system and risk becoming irrelevant to it? For a seminal argument for radicalism, see Audre Lorde's "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House"

purpose which is more convenient for its repressor. Weinstone writes, "In this sense, the 'blanks' function not as sites of repression, or unknowing, but as marked absences, as cognizant, authorial withholding" (377).[6] The traditional associations that repression has with hysterical women and sexual desires which express themselves through nervous tics and fits does not hold here in a realm in which this energy can move one towards a greater sense of control rather than towards the stereotypical hysteric which is the image of the Victorian woman.

How or what does Lucy repress? The scene in which she passively declines to define herself to Ginevra is an excellent example; yet another occurs on M. Paul's fête-day. All the ladies in the class present him with "their nosegays" forming a "blooming pyramid" (449) so large it obscures M. Paul's face at his desk. Lucy withholds the watch-guard she has made for him and M. Paul is clearly disappointed. Zelie St. Pierre, with serpentine treachery, tells M. Paul through her teeth that Lucy "has regarded this ceremony as too frivolous to be honoured by her observance" (450) thereby shaming Lucy in front of the class. In a seeming panic of embarrassment, Lucy cannot bring herself to present M. Paul with her gift. This scene could be read as a painful moment of conflict between her desire to appease M. Paul and her reticence due to Zelie forcing her under scrutiny by the whole class. However, upon reading Lucy's narration of the event, there is little evidence of such a conflict of emotions:

> I might yet have made all right, by stepping forwards and slipping into his hand the ruddy little shell-box…The reader not having hitherto had any cause to ascribe to Miss Snowe's character the most distant pretension to perfection, will be

[6] Weinstone of course refers to the traditional conception of repression as a painful, damaging act, and in this sense Kucich's terminology becomes cumbersome because one must differentiate between his conception and the traditional conception of what "repression" means.

> scarcely surprised to learn that she felt too perverse to defend herself from any imputation the Parisienne might choose to insinuate: and besides, M. Paul was so tragic, and took my defection so seriously, he deserved to be vexed. I kept, then, both my box and my countenance, and sat insensate as any stone (450).

Her withholding is not, in fact, a conflict or a submissive fear but rather an attempt to withhold her own emotions in order to elicit a passionate reaction from M. Paul, thus proving herself more powerful than him. In Lucy's view, a passionate reaction is a revelation of the self, and thus a weakness. It breaks down the façade of a perfectly contained and controlled character and thus must be avoided; those who do react emotionally and uncontrollably are thus, if only for a moment, under Lucy's power.

This passage is bizarre because Lucy is so powerfully repressed, withholding not only her emotions but the physical object which has the power to buy M. Paul's favor. In this case it is clear though that his favor is not what she desires. First, as she does in the mirror scene with Ginevra, she declines to defend herself against allegations, claiming that she is no perfectionist. Even those who care nothing for perfection would still feel slighted at a slandering of their characters and feel compelled to defend themselves, yet Lucy remains silent. Even more notable, she decides that M. Paul "deserve[s] to be vexed". This is one of the most unusual things that Lucy admits; readers of *Villette* know rather early on that Lucy is untrustworthy and evasive even towards them, but a playfully cruel Lucy is still surprising when viewed in the context of her character as a whole. Especially alongside the Lucy who winces painfully upon appearing in front of a group of people wearing a pink dress, this Lucy who relishes performance seems oddly

contradictory. Kucich notes, "the usual pieties about Brontë's hatred of female duplicity do not at all address this performativeness" (45).

And Lucy is in fact highly performative; Lucy executes carefully choreographed outbursts against her students in order to subdue them. When Lucy and Ginevra leave a party with the latter in a foul mood over a lack of attention from Dr. John, Lucy narrates, "An explosion ensued: for I could be passionate, too…half in earnest, half in seeming, I made it my business to storm down Ginevra" (424). She is in fact quite calculating, exhibiting a cold understanding of the effect of her displays and using them to her advantage. To "seem" appears to be her greatest weapon and the most powerful force in her arsenal. To seem is to perform, but its implications are separate; a performance comes from the actor involved in the action, whereas seeming comes from the observer who believes in the performance. It is a far more thorough and believable word than performance, as it depends on the viewer and his or her perception of what is happening.[7] Lucy is not only an experienced performer, but also a highly practiced "seemer". This is where her power lies. She is disconnected emotionally from this outburst, even down to describing her own eruption in passive voice: "an explosion ensued." Lucy's repression finds an outlet as she and M. Paul "continually jockey for position in an attempt to elicit declarations of feelings from each other" (Kucich 90). This is the key to this moment in *Villette*. The true power which Lucy hopes to express is actually a passive one, a

[7] The power of "seeming" is thus like the power of beauty, which depends on a viewer to perceive one as beautiful. In this way seeming is also passive, but it is a bizarre mix of agency and passivity, as there is a distinct intent behind Lucy's ability to "seem" like something. Lucy rejects the passive power of beauty and instead clings to the power to seem. Thus once again she still operates within the rules of femininity, exhibiting her power passively, but manages to circumvent the traits and virtues which she does not possess.

withholding so that M. Paul is forced to express his emotions, thus giving Lucy the upper hand.

Here emotions are a sort of weakness, a sign of mere sentimentality. By withholding the watch-guard, *keeping* it as Lucy puts it, she also keeps her emotions just out of reach. She knows that such a performance of cool inwardness will upset M. Paul, and is in fact hoping to elicit such a fiery reaction as she knows he is prone to. Her cool or even flippant attitude provokes him to a display, meaning that he has essentially lost the competition to remain in control, which for Lucy is to remain in power. When he makes his emotions vulnerable to outside observers, he puts Lucy in a position of power over himself. Whereas some might seek to avoid an infuriated outburst from one they love, Lucy actively seeks it; her expression of desire is voiced through a continual attempt to keep more of her emotions out of sight than M. Paul, which puts her in the position of power rather than him. By obscuring, she gains power. By repressing, she appears powerful to others in such a way that it is nearly indistinguishable from actual social power, to the point where one does not know which came first: her power, or her semblance of power.

Much like Jane's portrait, Lucy's process of repressing desire also contains a class narrative, and a method of obtaining power that may be far more widespread in Victorian society than Lucy's mere actions. The lower classes were perceived as animalistic and unrestrained by Victorian society; the stereotype of the unclean family crawling with children, the brawling, rowdy husband and the mawkish, squawking wife hung heavy over England. Charles Dickens wrote on the children that populated the streets, often disowned by parents that could not care for them, that they "hop about like wild birds,

pilfering the crumbs which fall from the table of the country's wealthy" (Perkin 173). The ridicule accorded to such class stereotypes was overwhelming. Restraint was a trait of the upper classes, and lack thereof was seen as a justification for the lower classes' existing status. Lucy's desire for restraint therefore carries a class association, allowing her to display the marker of the upper class and distance herself from the stereotype of the working class.

Restraint is also, in and of itself, a means for attaining a higher class. Think, for instance, of the concept of the "social climber" or "old money" versus the "nouveau riche." Those who ascend the social ranks through a silent, confident certainty in their own place at the top rungs of the ladder are accepted into society, whereas those who seem to be too conspicuously seeking connections only tip their hand and are rejected as mere pretenders to power. Withholding is in fact a form of power, as is allowing others to decide on the content of one's character whilst remaining silent. Coolness as others misread character becomes a sign of innate confidence in one's true nature. In what way is repression in fact rather common in the struggle for power? Clearly in the struggle for class, repression finds its outlets. The answer may in fact be that withholding information in the quest for power is a sliding scale, an act that all people perform in some small ways as part of the necessary give-and-take of society. The difference is that characters such as Lucy use repression in far deeper ways, and for anti-social and anti-societal means rather than for more harmonious social interactions.

One of Lucy's most engaging and radical moments comes when Lucy has the letters that Graham has written her sealed in a jar and buries them below the nun's tree. She cannot reveal information that might indicate to the reader that she is in love with

Graham, as this information could single-handedly destroy the power that repression has given her.[8] In what she sees as a war in which information is ammunition, she must not give up any part of herself or risk losing the power she has carefully constructed. This is why it is not until the moment in which she buries the letters that she is able to say aloud, "Good-night, Dr. John; you are good, you are beautiful; but you are not mine. Good-night, and God bless you!" (481). This is the closest she comes to revealing her true feelings for Dr. John. The word "love" indicating romantic passion never occurs in her narration in reference to him. The specter (figuratively, soon to be literally) of unrequited love appears again, threatening to put Lucy's sense of value in someone else's hands, and therefore Lucy realizes that she cannot continue loving Dr. John. In one sense, this moment is deeply tragic; Lucy turns away from social connection by turning her back on her love of Dr. John, thus severing another tie that would draw her nearer to the ideal path of the life of the Victorian woman. At the same time, the gesture is a turning away from mere comparison. She rejects outside influence in favor of her own self-sufficiency and reiterates the self-reliance which she so values.

This moment is also odd in that as she buries the letters and speaks the final eulogy for her love for Dr. John, as if she had spoken an incantation, she almost conjures M. Paul to appear:

[8] Though Lucy is most excellent at revealing information only once it has become irrelevant to the reader, the true master of this habit is Esther Summerson of Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*. She only hints that she is in love with Woodcourt in that she omits so much about him; only once she is disfigured and certain he will no longer care for her does she mention, "And now I must part with the little secret I have thus far tried to keep. I had thought, sometimes, that Mr. Woodcourt loved me" (501). As usual, to "keep" becomes the key word in these characters' withholding.

> Thus I closed my musings. 'Good-night' left my lips in sound; I heard the two words spoken, and then I heard an echo—quite close. 'Good-night, mademoiselle; or, rather, good evening'" (481).

It is as if in the moment in which she releases her grip on her repression of her love for Dr. John, she finds a conduit for expressing her repressed desire towards M. Paul. He tells her, "I scarcely know any one, Miss Lucy, who needs a friend more absolutely than you…you want so much checking, regulating, and keeping down." This becomes an excellent example of the mutual verbal fencing matches of repression which define their relationship. M. Paul seems to draw forward by offering his friendship to Lucy, but in fact it is wholly a trick to get her to accept; by making it clear that is friendship is offered from a position of instructor and mentor, he does not submit to her at all, but he by no means outmatches Lucy. She coolly narrates in response, "I listened to him, and did not trouble myself to be too submissive; his occupation would have been gone, had I left him nothing to 'keep down'" (482). She toys with him, performing the role of the woman he so desperately wishes to reform, in order to keep him striving to subdue her. She performs in order to keep him at arm's length from her true character as he grapples for power over her by indicating himself as an instructor and disciplinarian. Once he successfully reforms her and she becomes the person he wishes her to be, the match is over and the state of strained desire will be broken.

This distinctly Brontëan desire is "a means of distancing others in order to preserve a desirable state of inward tension" (Kucich 41). The seemingly paradoxical nature of this desire involves "oppositional tensions between expression and repression…in which both gestures are affirmed" (38). Desire in these novels is

expressed through repression, a medium which is in fact more complex, heightened and intoxicating than a more open discourse of desire. These moments of "keeping" information to oneself are movements facing in two directions, a Janus of desire, both inward towards the anti-social self and outward towards society. Kucich argues that this desire does not want to fuse withholding and passion, but rather seeks to intensify isolation. This is why it is so difficult to categorize these acts of repression as either subjugating or powerful, because they represent a movement in two directions. In one sense, they are feminist acts of removing oneself from society and stoking a greater sense of self-reliance. On the other hand, they represent a quest to draw others inward and gain social power from others' desire to perceive their characters. It represents a rigid control over the self which, set apart from other members of society, is in and of itself pleasing to those who engage in it.[9] In addition, it is important to realize that we, as readers, are engaging in the very same scrutiny of character that those around Lucy, Esther and Jane do to convey social power, and that we as readers in fact give social power to these female protagonists through our reading. Here we may begin to answer the constant, and highly difficult, question in narrative theory which arises especially when a story is told in first person: why is this story being told? Why to us?

[9] For a deeper investigation into this idea of internal vs. external self-control, see chapter 3 as much of this dichotomy is based on whether religion seeks to control through external or internal means.

II. "But Are You Anybody?": Lucy's Narrative, Reader, and Identity

In her remarkable book of criticism unifying direct address in the novel and the act of public speaking, *Gendered Interventions*, Robyn Warhol addresses the implications of women speaking in public in the 19th century which would drive them to use novel writing as a useful alternative for addressing an audience. She explains that while a woman speaking in public to only women could be portrayed by popular media of the time as foolish, a woman speaking to a mixed, or "promiscuous," audience was profoundly more dangerous because she would surrender her femininity in the public's unforgiving eye. Shamed in newspaper cartoons, articles, even letters written by other women, they were criticized as squawking hags or drawn with harsh, ugly, mannish features. Some were even dehumanized; an 1829 cartoon poking fun at Fanny Wright, the great feminist lecturer, depicts her as a woman with a duck's head. The caption reads, "A Downwright Gabbler, or a goose that deserves to be hissed." All other features remain intact, down to her finely curled hair, but her beak is mockingly open.

Warhol points to a letter written by Catharine Beecher, the elder sister of Harriet Beecher Stowe, describing Fanny Wright, who seems to be quite a favorite target for derision. She writes of "her great masculine person, her loud voice…she has so thrown off all feminine attractions, that freedom from temptation is her only, and shameful palladium" (Warhol 160). In speaking to men, specifically debating them, Catharine Stowe takes aim, ironically, at her presumed chastity. While it is an important feminine virtue of the time, Stowe lambasts her for lacking in the ability to inspire desire in men; her lack of feminine virtue is the greatest criticism lobbed against her for her public

speaking. As Warhol points out, this is quite the paradox: "What is 'shameful' about Wright's 'freedom from temptation' is that a feminine Victorian woman, while she must repulse sexual overtures from men, is also required to inspire them" (Warhol 161).

In the previous chapter I discussed the intricate doublethink required for Lucy to fulfill her desire for social power through repression. This mode requires a complex movement in two seemingly opposing directions; in one motion she withdraws from her reader and those around her while at the same time consciously motioning them inward in an attempt to gain social currency through their desire to solve her like a puzzle. This is not where Lucy's complex and paradoxical machinations end. As it turns out, many of her interactions with both characters and the reader involve sets of equally paradoxical actions, writ large in the medium of the narrative itself. These narrative movements make the structure of *Villette* what it is and provide a vital element of what makes the novel so layered and complex. In this chapter I will examine these tangled threads that comprise the very fabric of the narrative itself which so many readers often find troubling and inhospitable. I will both examine and contextualize in order to better understand the convolutions of narrative that were, I would argue, especially required of female novelists. The narrative elements that mark *Villette* so distinctly, rather than barriers to trip up readers, are instead survival tactics, a shield against the sort of ridicule that so often met women attempting to speak their minds to a Victorian audience.

In an intense state of extreme isolation and despair during a school vacation, Lucy enters a depressive episode which will eventually lead her to a desperate visit to a Catholic church. The landscape of her mind during this spell is sympathetic by its very nature; she describes heart-wrenching yet easily comprehensible emotions which resonate

to some degree with any reader who has experienced some degree of sadness. It is a rare moment in which Lucy bares her emotional state to a reader; at various points throughout the novel she alludes to floods of tears without naming the cause, yet here, she explicitly states her anguish. She so punishes herself for her despair and then, suddenly, breaks from the narrative to address her presumed reader with a scolding:

> "Religious reader, you will preach to me a long sermon about what I have just written, and so will you, moralist; and you, stern sage: you, stoic, will frown; you, cynic, sneer; you, epicure, laugh" (Brontë 202)

She speaks to imagined multitudes of readers in what appears at first to be a direct address which attempts to cover all possible types of reader who could be reacting negatively to what she has just said. Lucy has just delivered to the reader such a feelingly sympathetic passage, however, that it is difficult to imagine any novel-reader reacting to a touching description of profoundly low spirits with a lecture. The passage, instead, has distinct echoes of Wayne Booth's writing in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* on Katherine Anne Porter's *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*. He writes specifically of the silence of the author as the narrator, Miranda, experiences the death of the man she loves during an influenza epidemic. The narrative style of the tale is in many ways very different from *Villette*, but his analysis rings true: "Very little heightening of her character is needed to make us unite with her against the hostile world around her; simply because she is the only sensitive person visible…she wins us irresistibly" (Booth 276). Simply because Lucy has been our guide through the whole text, and by the very nature of her first-person narration which prevents us from seeing such complex emotions in any other character, we will irresistibly be sympathetic to Lucy over all others.

As such, it is highly unusual that Lucy feels so determined to point out her reader's assumed dislike of her; after so long in a narrative in which the reader is privy to intimate, though skewed, details of Lucy's life, it is surprising that she takes such pains to defend herself against imagined attacks. She is an insecure narrator, or at least a self-conscious one, but her vehemence in her defense speaks of an issue with her view of her reader, rather than her view of herself. When she must return from the Brettons' home, she narrates, "It will be conjectured that I was of course glad to return to the bosom of my kindred. Well! The amiable conjecture does no harm, and may therefore be safely left uncontradicted" (Brontë 42). Though in this case it is not impossible that a reader might imagine her happiness, it is nonetheless a remarkably condescending move; she openly acknowledges that she will not inform her readers of the true course of events or her true feelings because she feels they are inadequate in some way, whether unable or unwilling to hear about more despair in her life. Like a child shut out from the conversation of adults, no reader would feel respected or valued as an equal to Lucy when forced to undergo such a scolding. Lucy is an extremely distancing narrator, as violently opposed to the engaging "dear reader"-type narrator of such novels as *Jane Eyre*.

Warhol discusses this very issue when writing on narrators who put arm's length between themselves and readers or seek to bring them into his/her confidence. She discusses why a direct address can be so jarring to readers:

> The reader may or may not be interested in how closely the narrative 'I' resembles the actual author; readers can only speculate…But one can know whether the narrative 'you' resembles oneself, and surely the way one experiences

> fiction is affected by how personally one can take its addresses to 'you'" (Warhol 32).

By Warhol's definition, and certainly by the estimation of any reader who has realized he/she is being talked down to by her, Lucy is a distancing narrator. Readers who take Lucy's address personally realize that they are by no means her intended audience. In fact, regardless of what the readers' actual desires for the narrative are, Lucy's description of her readers will nonetheless offend them because it is so flattening. She describes them as unilaterally snobbish, prudish, blindly moralistic, and interested only in romance. If a reader, say, desired a felicitous union between Lucy and M. Paul at the conclusion of the novel, he/she would nonetheless rebel against being labeled as blindly romantic and given no other descriptors to balance such an underhanded remark. Lucy intentionally puts her readers on guard, calls them in to defend themselves against her backhanded attacks. While the eponymous narrator of *Jane Eyre* is constantly aiming to endear her readers, it is nearly impossible for readers to feel truly unguarded and emotionally connected to a narrator who forces them to shield themselves at every moment against her slander. Yet in its contradictory nature, the narrative also powerfully inspires sympathy with Lucy simply because the narrative is so confined internally to Lucy's perspective, so an assumption that the reader is disinterested and even hostile is not only wrong, but truly offensive to the reader.

There is, however, another possible reaction in the reader's repertoire. In this lecture against the moralist, sage, and stoic, Lucy could alternatively be creating a more united relationship between herself and the reader, for nothing bonds together like shared adversity. The hypothetical readers could react with a sense that Lucy is misidentifying

them and respond with indignant outrage and distance, or readers could read the passage as directed at readers other than themselves. Lucy addresses more than one reader in her lecture, which opens up the possibility that not all of these traits are aimed at the real-life reader; if a reader interprets the passage this way, he/she could just as easily assume that *none* of the prescribed traits are in fact aimed at him/her, but rather at a whole legion of imagined attackers. A reader's response to this would be, naturally, to stand with Lucy against her perceived attackers, thus unifying the two of them. Though it is impossible to make claims about how any given *real* reader would react to a text, this response would be perhaps most emblematic of Lucy's nature, which is prone to double-movements and seemingly contradictory actions. In calling out her attackers, Lucy could be creating a valuable ally in the reader. Both responses seem perfectly plausible, but further investigation of the vocabulary surrounding such a complex narrative movement is necessary.

Here Warhol's lexicon becomes useful; she defines the narratee as the presumed ideal subject that the narrator speaks to, while the reader is the real-world person who actually consumes the text. Thus a distancing narrator is one who seeks to create a gap between the narratee and the reader, while an engaging narrator either seeks to unify the two or avoids direct address altogether in order to avoid alienating the reader. Warhol writes, "In constantly coming forward to confront the narratee, the distancing narrator draws attention to the reality of the novel's textuality, dismissing implications that the story is in any literal sense 'true'. The actual reader stands clearly and distinctly outside the text, the narrator, narratee, and characters are within" (Warhol 44). Lucy confronts the textual nature of the narrative quite frequently throughout *Villette,* ensuring that her

readers never forget that they are separate from the characters, including the narratee. But in a certain sense, can this be engaging?

This examination enters a territory which Warhol does not address. She writes on distancing narrators who make it clear that their reader is not their narratee, but what about a narrator who so clearly does not like or care at all for her narratee? Might a reader be able to join her in her dislike of her perceived reader, seeing him/herself as an outsider to the disliked group, and thus form a stronger bond with Lucy? This narrative technique seems rather risky, but might also fit with Lucy's constructed persona, which is that of a person who takes great pains to appear not to care for her readers' attentions while simultaneously attempting to draw them in and garner their interest.

Still, even as she constructs an us-against-them ethos with the reader, Lucy remains a prickly narrator; while readers may side with her against the greater of two evils, it remains difficult to feel nurtured by or truly close to her. According to Warhol, the distancing narrator describes what the narratee wants and then immediately disappoints those ascribed desires. Lucy does this and more. She acknowledges, for instance, that the narratee wishes to learn more details of her life and simultaneously and consciously skips over them. She refuses to allow readers to have the satisfaction of the "truth," as Warhol puts it. Because Lucy wills it to be, the "true" story of her childhood is "Picture me then idle" (Brontë 42). In reacting with anger or a feeling of being cheated out of the truth, readers are forced to confront the reason Lucy evinces such a powerful response: because they realize the story must be written to be told. Visibly warping the truth before readers' eyes draws back the veil of suspension of disbelief and forces readers to realize that they are merely reading a story, the truth does not exist, and is in

fact a construct of Lucy's narrative. Booth brings up a valuable distinction when he notes that in the Bible, Job is referred to as "perfect and upright." He notes:

> [I]f a friend confided his view that his friend was 'perfect and upright,' we would accept the information with qualifications imposed by our knowledge of the speaker's character or of the general fallibility of mankind (4).

Somehow, in novels, unless rattled out of the suspension of disbelief, a narrator is still believed not only to be reliable, but to be perfectly objective until proven otherwise. Lucy goes specifically out of her way to upset this paradigm. Not only does she, before her readers' very eyes, display how malleable truth within a narrative is, she also broadly paints a crude portrait of her narratee; were a reader to identify themselves with the narratee, she would be quite an insulting narrator. In addressing the moralist, the sage and the stoic, Lucy jars her reader into a feeling of being out of place. If he/she does not fit in to the characteristics she enumerates and self-identify as one of those characters, he/she is distanced emotionally from relating in a complete way to the text. Rather than a seamless and trustworthy narrator, Lucy forces her way into the narrative at every turn, refusing to allow her readers to believe she is merely giving an impartial account.

It is also important to note that it is quite impossible for the techniques Lucy as a narrator uses to be incidental, accidental, or merely a depiction of a prickly and unlikable woman. Brontë's work shows incredible deliberation across its entire breadth, and its layers are not to be dismissed as imagined complexities. In fact, it is Lisa Sternlieb's main contention in her critical text, *The Female Narrator in the British Novel: Hidden Agendas* that narrators such as Lucy are quite frequently manipulated in very complicated ways by authors such as Charlotte Brontë. In her introduction she introduces her central

point, that "narratives which have been noted for their artlessness, naturalness, and directness *work* because of their artfulness, artifice, and self-protectiveness" (Sternlieb 1). Though often subtle, at various points in *Villette* the hand of the author nonetheless makes itself visible.

Perhaps the most valuable evidence of Brontë's intentional construction of such a crafty narrator as Lucy is her willful construction of Lucy's narrative opposite, Jane Eyre. After Jane has her dream of desertion just before her wedding, she addresses her reader as she waits for Rochester's return: "Stay till he comes, reader; and, when I disclose my secret to him, you shall share the confidence" (Brontë 318). To be fair, this passage does have a certain edge of Snowe-esque craftiness itself; Jane is perfectly capable of telling her reader what she dreamt as it occurred, but instead chooses to wait until her interaction with Rochester to describe it. The gesture is still much more confidential in this instance than any interaction Lucy engages in with her reader. She placates the reader with professions of closeness, drawing the reader in to share her secret. Brontë creates a narrator who is incredibly trusted by the reader, and very deliberately so. Jane would be plucky and likeable to most readers without the use of direct address, but Brontë consciously uses this technique in an attempt to strengthen the direct one-to-one bond between Jane and her reader.

Brontë tries her best to unify Jane's narratee and her reader. The closer the two are, the more engaging the narrator. It is impressive then that the same author who created a narrator who is nearly impossible to trust and incredibly deliberate and dissembling could create a narrator who is seldom questioned in her reliability. Alison Case addresses this very issue in her book, *Plotting Women: Gender and Narration in the*

Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century British Novel. In her section on *Jane Eyre*, Case addresses the fact that Jane repeatedly points out how other characters consider her devious or underhanded, especially in her childhood. Her engaging tactics thus prove remarkable when, instead of causing her to become suspect, it creates a greater sense of a bond between her and the reader. A reader who feels he/she knows the true narrator and simultaneously feels that others do not will thus draw nearer to the narrator, as one might rush to the protection of another friend when his/her reputation is called into question. Case writes, "Perhaps the most important difference between Jane and the literary heroine-narrators who preceded her is her willingness to choose a course of action solely—and this is crucial—solely on the basis of its calculated effect on another person. That she is able to do so without becoming morally suspect as a manipulator in the process is a tribute to Brontë's skill in working self-consciously within and against the conventions of feminine narration" (Case 106). Her ability to create a highly trustworthy narrator only serves as a tribute and testament to her skill at manipulating the reader's attitude towards a narrator, and this ability proves to be a double-edged sword when wielded to create Lucy Snowe.

Instead of adding to readers' confidence in Lucy because of their trust in Jane, this willfulness and plotting mindset thus makes Lucy more suspect because of Brontë's deliberation. This becomes especially important because it colors the way that many other aspects of *Villette* appear as either devious or naïve on the part of the author. *Dear Reader: The Conscripted Audience in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* by Garrett Stewart is an otherwise overdone text on novels' relation to readers, but it contains a valuable summation: "Conscripted reading, once recognized as such, makes the

fundamental operations of reading visible" (251). It is a powerful technique for unsettling and discomfiting the reader[10] and helps to call almost all other aspects of the text normally left unseen and seamless into question.

Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* acts as a stark contrast to *Villette* in that Esther, the text's periodic narrator, so vehemently disavows any agency or cunning or ulterior motive of any sort. Case writes, "Her opening thus disclaims both narrative agency and narrative authority: if she believes she is 'not clever,' she can hardly be presumed to be claiming full understanding of the shape and meaning of the story she tells" (Case 128). Lucy absolutely flies in the face of Esther's approach to her narration in this respect. She not only warps the narrative openly simply for the purpose of demonstrating that she is in absolute control of it, as in her stirring final cry of "Here pause: pause at once" (657) but she also refuses to conceal how aware she is of what is happening to her in the story that she is telling. Take, for instance, Esther and Lucy's respective willingness to admit that they are telling a story after the fact. Both narrate their story in the present tense, but it is not until the end of the novel that Esther casually drops a major alteration to her narrative; she tells us, "My husband—I have called him by that name full seven happy years now—stood at my side" (Dickens 858). So late in the novel she finally tips her hand and reveals how truly secretive she has been with us; she has known for the whole duration of the novel how it will end and has just revealed to us that all of her techniques for creating suspense have thus been just that: narrative techniques. Though she has shown hints of this ability before, as when she mentions Woodcourt only long after she has spoken with him, this is the most open and broad admission that she gives us.

[10] Kathe Koja's psychological horror uses this unsettling force to great effect; in a story entitled "Jubilee," a woman is menaced by the voice of her own internal monologue, forcing the reader to confront the narrator who at that very moment is "reading" the story aloud in his/her own head.

Lucy, however, has no such restraint. Rather than wait for the reveal, she attempts to display the conceit of the narrative as soon as possible. While she is still telling of her youth at the Brettons' home, she narrates, "Fifty miles were then a day's journey, (for I speak of a time gone by: my hair which till a late period withstood the frosts of time, lies now, at last white, under a white cap, like snow beneath snow.)" (55). She could have quite easily implied that she was merely writing her childhood from the vantage point of an adult, but instead, right from the start she makes it clear that all events depicted in the novel have already come to pass and she is now an old woman. This also makes her revelation of Dr. John and Graham Bretton as the same person all the more devious. She admits that she had figured out the linkage in the scene in which she examines him in the mirror and subsequently withheld that fact for multiple chapters, but by the very nature of the narration, the white-haired Lucy telling the story has known this fact since Dr. John first stepped into the scene. Every twist or revelation in the novel is deceitful in its nature because every event has already come to pass and is known to Lucy. In revealing in this one specific case that she has withheld a piece of information for a duration of time (the stated duration of which is, of course, a lie) Lucy purposefully calls into question all other events in the novel, subjecting them to readers' suspicions. In playing with withholding, revealing, and essentially lying about when she acquires information, Lucy refuses to allow her readers to shift comfortably into the act of reading seamlessly by which most people consume texts. Frank Kermode writes in *The Art of Telling* that "all narrators are unreliable, but some are more expressly so than others" (140). Many narratives rely on the conceit of a narrator telling a story retroactively to the reader, perhaps from some vantage point later in life. Readers have come to accept this fact

without necessarily acknowledging that this makes every narrator devious, releasing and withholding information as he/she sees fit. *Villette* will not allow this process of willful ignorance to go unchecked. The odd mental state involved in suspension of disbelief in which readers unconsciously acknowledge that the story is not in a strict sense "true" but nonetheless remain invested in the text and its characters is impossible in *Villette* because Lucy keeps calling attention to the narrative's conceit. Just as dreams involve a suspension of disbelief in which the brain both creates and discovers a landscape and thus wakes when forced to confront the unreality of the dream, Lucy is determined to wake the dreamer consuming her novel and create a uniquely unsettling narrative experience which shines a light into the gulf between the narrative and the reader.

Without a third person narrator to act as a relatively impartial measure of the honesty or lack thereof of a first person narrative, *Villette* does not merely conceal the truth, but in fact makes it entirely moot. Rather than contrasting a first person narrator with a third, one must instead read within the lines of Lucy's narrative to extract information from her subjective descriptions. The image of the mirror in the novel proves to be a highly important one in this respect in that Lucy at many points throughout the novel tips her hand by repeating or doubling motifs (for instance, the ghost nun and Justine-Marie) providing readers with indications of what motifs to pay attention to. In its first appearance, Lucy inspects Dr. John in secret by peering at his reflection in a mirror so that she is hidden. Her efforts to remain invisible are unsuccessful and Dr. John spots her movement and stops her: "I am not vain enough to fancy that it is my merits which attract her attention; it must then be some defect. Dare I ask—what?" (126). The mirror is an object that presents an image or likeness, but is not an entirely objective one. Rather

than the image of a whole person, Dr. John assumes that Lucy can only be studying his flaws or his merits. It is a reflection, but not necessarily a complete one. This motif continues throughout the novel in a remarkable number of encounters in which characters are viewed but not necessarily seen in their totality, or are seen entirely incorrectly. To compound the moment with Dr. John, perhaps the most powerful encounter with a mirror comes during the party at which Lucy must wear a pink dress. She examines the crowd and notices especially three guests she spots:

> I noted them all—the third person as well as the other two—and for the fraction of a moment I believed them all strangers, thus receiving an impartial impression of their appearance. But the impression was hardly felt and not fixed, before the consciousness that I faced a great mirror, filling a compartment between two pillars, dispelled it: the party was our own party. Thus for the first, and perhaps only time in my life, I enjoyed the 'giftie' of seeing myself as others see me. No need to dwell on the result. It brought a jar of discord, a pang of regret (274).

The mirror presents Lucy with a reflection of others' perception of her, but it is not one which matches up with her own perception of herself. This moment aligns with her descriptions of how other characters view her; every person who comes into contact with Lucy seems to feel the need to describe who she is to her, as if drawn to place a comfortable label on her. The descriptions never match up with her true nature, and even directly contradict each other in many cases. Dr. John calls her "a being inoffensive as a shadow" (418) to which Lucy reacts by outwardly smiling and inwardly restraining a groan. Mere pages later, M. Paul calls her "Petite chatte, doucerette, coquette!" (420) as if vehemently determined to absolutely contradict all that Dr. John has just said about her.

This instance throws into the sharpest relief the fact that no one in the text truly recognizes Lucy for what she is, just as readers come to the realization that they can never truly know Lucy because she will never allow them to draw so near to her.

Lucy seeing herself in a mirror and actually being unable to recognize herself is remarkably jarring; the experience is not overtly horrific, but rather bears the distinct mark of the uncanny. It is reminiscent of the doppelgänger, an experience of seeing a double of oneself usually thought to portend death or great misfortune. The doppelgänger usually has an implication of cognitive dissonance or some mental disconnect that causes one to see a likeness of him/herself. Lucy's vision of herself disconnected from her self becomes linked to a motif of doubling which resonates and repeats again and again throughout the text. Characters frequently leave the text only to re-enter it later with different names, a character prefigures one to appear later, and characters are described so similarly as to be forced beside each other for comparison. All these experiences are branching networks of moments which enact the experience of Lucy's mirror for the reader. The unsettling sensation of seeing oneself without recognizing it is repeated again and again on a larger scale.

Most of the main players in *Villette* have more than one identity or name under which they are known. The start of the novel introduces Polly Home, a doll-like child with an overweening attachment to her father. She appears to pass out of the narrative without remark, only to return on the night of the fire as Paulina de Bassompierre. Not only is she using the full version of her first name now that she has grown older, she has also conveniently gained a new title. The second meeting provides an opportunity for Lucy to be shocked once again by revealed identities; Paulina is Ginevra's cousin, yet

under her new title Lucy had been unable to make the connection between the two identities as one and the same when Ginevra spoke of her. The ghost nun which so terrifies Lucy on the grounds of the Rue Fossette is doubled later in the form of Justine-Marie, of whom Lucy first learns upon paying a visit to Madame Walravens. She is confronted upon entering by a portrait which she at first mistakes for a Madonna before realizing it to be "a woman's portrait in a nun's dress" (520).[11] Just as the nun haunts Lucy out of her happiness and peace of mind, Justine-Marie denies Lucy of her happiness once again by laying claim to M. Paul's devotion. She is the means by which other characters are able to manipulate M. Paul through guilt for her death away from Lucy. The character with the most identities in the text is Dr. John; he begins the narrative as Graham Bretton during Lucy's childhood. Later, Ginevra is able to speak of him without Lucy realizing who the subject of her derision is because she has taken to calling him Isidore, finding his English name ugly. At the Rue Fossette he is Dr. John, insisting the children call him by his first name which conveniently allows him to remain disguised and separate from Graham Bretton until Lucy chooses to reveal his identity as such.

This proves to be the key to understanding Lucy's near-obsessive use of multiple identities: her desire to retain information about others. In layering different identities on the characters she portrays for her readers, she is able to mirror the layers of deceit which are intrinsic to her portrayal of their characters. Dr. John proves to be the most important of these characters because he has the most identities, totaling three, as well as the greatest numbers of disappearances and reappearances under a different guise. He is the

[11] Lucy also judges the portrait in a repetition of her judgment in the museum; she notes that "its very amiability was the amiability of a weak frame, inactive passions, acquiescent habits; yet I looked long at that picture, and could not choose but look" (520). The experience is very similar to her disapproval of the decadent portrait of Cleopatra.

childhood companion, then the white knight who guards Lucy on her first night in Villette, then the amiable doctor, then Ginevra's love interest before all the identities are finally revealed to be one. He is also the character which Lucy has most cause to want to conceal information about because he is the object of her unrequited love. In Lucy's world where a love that is not returned is a personal weakness in her, she has great reason to conceal the emotions that surround him. In the first person narrative that Lucy has created, characters take on the forms not of real humans, but continuous constructs formed out of Lucy's own thoughts and associations. Dr. John is not a person, but a fluctuating reflection of how Lucy feels about him over the course of their interactions. Thus when she feels a need to mask her emotions about a person, she must necessarily mask the character himself.

This repetition of characters has a dual effect, not only of cloaking the narrative in further mystery and thus protecting Lucy's true feelings, but also creating a bizarrely claustrophobic world. The very name, Villette (meaning 'little town'), creates an insular environment when one considers that it is based on Brussels, a large capitol city. The Rue Fossette (meaning 'dimple,' but also a small hole or crevice) furthers this incredible feeling of smallness or interiority. In this tiny world, any number of happenstance events occur which are nearly too convenient to be true; when Lucy faints after leaving confessional, she is taken to the Brettons, whom she last saw in England, yet they had not notified her that they were even in Labassecour. Any number of similar tenuous threads unite characters in endless chains of untold connections which reveal themselves at convenient narrative points. This motif continues down to the most minute instance; on her first night in the city, Lucy is menaced by men who follow her until she is forced to

knock at the Rue Fossette to escape them. Near the end of the book, many chapters afterwards, Lucy is required to write a French composition to defend herself against accusations of outside help. The two men who are to be her examiners strike a chord in Lucy's memory:

> These, I felt morally certain, were the very heroes who had driven a friendless foreigner beyond her reckoning and her strength, chased her breathless over a whole quarter of the town (534).

The move is too intentional to be narrative laziness, a mere avoidance of creating two more characters for the novel. The sudden realization that the cruel and mocking examiners are her long-past tormentors is too neat and unsettling. Janet Gezari writes that "such coincidences are the stuff of persecution fantasies. They sustain a paranoid perception of the world as a place in which everything hangs together" (Gezari 165). The constant doubling of characters combined with their constant disappearance, reappearance, and intricate links to each other creates an environment of sustained paranoia. Other characters constantly attempting to ascribe her a character, fail as they might, only serves to prove that these characters populate her narrative in a sense as inquisitors, agents attempting to penetrate her defenses and understand her true character. It is no wonder, then, that Lucy layers her narrative defenses against what she perceives as a world constantly seeking to strip them away.

The way in which other characters misunderstand Lucy turns out to be a two-way street. Lucy makes a point of flattening every character around her. She forces the relationship between her and her reader to become a captive one; she will not allow any other character to appear as interesting as herself in her own tale. One factor in this

dynamic is the fact that the first-person narrative is insular by its very nature, but as the text progresses, Lucy's feelings towards the characters she portrays and the way she displays their traits to her reader begin to seem disjointed, disconnected and almost dissonant. Many of the characters react in predictable ways depending on their stated traits. The best character to use in this instance is Dr. John, both in his relationships with women and Lucy's own shifting attitude towards him over the course of the novel. Lucy clearly loves Dr. John, only just barely skirting an outright admission. She comes close to such overtly honest speech when she narrates that she has realized Dr. John is not entirely indifferent to her, but rather views her as a friend:

> …he proved to me that he kept one little closet, over the door of which was written 'Lucy's Room.' I kept a place for him, too—a place of which I never took measure, either by rule or compass: I think it was like the tent of Peri-Banou. All my life long I carried it folded in the hollow of my hand yet, released from that hold and constriction, I know not but its innate capacity for expanse might have magnified it into a tabernacle for a host (607).

Without using so many words she concedes the affection for Dr. John that she has been nursing for nearly the entire novel. This leads the reader to believe that Dr. John must be interesting to her, and she certainly does describe him as charming and polite and handsome. In spite of this, when one actually examines his character, he proves to be rather flat and uninteresting, especially in his attitudes towards women. At first he is in love with Ginevra, who is (at least by Lucy's accounts) utterly vapid and shallow. He describes her virtues in the most fawning of modes, and even admits once he has gotten over her, "I have not been accustomed to look on Miss Fanshawe in the light of a feather-

brained school-girl. Was she not my divinity—the angel of my career?" (285). With all of Lucy's praise of Dr. John, his sycophantic devotion to Ginevra seems rather out of keeping with what Lucy portrays as his discerning intelligence. He is so desperately devoted in his love for her, desperately buying her gifts and clearly emasculating himself in Lucy's view out of his utter devotion, while Ginevra feels nothing for him and patronizingly calls him Isidore, as she claims to dislike the English sound of his real name.[12]

Dr. John quite clearly barely even knows Ginevra, as when he first finds out that Lucy knows her he tells her, "You—every woman older than herself, must feel for such a simple, innocent, girlish fairy, a sort of motherly or elder-sisterly fondness. Graceful angel! Does not your heart yearn towards her when she pours into your ear her pure, child-like confidences?" (195). Lucy and her reader know first-hand that Ginevra is anything but child-like, and her confidences often involve mocking Dr. John and the attentions that he and other men give her. He so clearly has no concept of who she truly is, just as he has no sense of what Lucy's character is. This seems entirely out of keeping with Lucy's perception of the very man who chivalrously guided her through the streets of Villette on her very first night. It is almost as if, in the very same way Dr. John idealizes Ginevra while caring little for her real personality, Lucy does the same with Dr. John, unwilling to acknowledge his vapidity and only willing to focus on her secretly-cultivated love for him.

[12] The use of "Isidore" is also notable because it is yet another name for Dr. John/Graham Bretton which is not immediately unified with his character (i.e., Lucy does not at first know that Ginevra's Isidore is her Dr. John). His multiple identities are perhaps indicative of the layers under which Lucy attempts to parcel out his identity to prevent him from becoming a unified, multi-dimensional character: Isidore the puppyish lover, Dr. John the perfect gentleman, Graham the childhood playmate.

Dr. John proves himself to be truly unsuitable for Lucy when his extreme devotion shifts abruptly onto Paulina Home, the pleasant but childish former companion of their long-ago summers at Bretton House. Lucy meets her again when she is seventeen, and she is described, almost to the point of wearisome repetition, as a fairy or sprite. Her father enters from the snow and Polly dances "in a circle about her equally white sire…The bear shook himself, and the little sprite fled far from the frozen shower. Back she came, however, laughing, and eager to aid in removing the arctic disguise" (369). Polly is described again and again as childish, and Lucy draws extreme attention to her unfailing devotion to her father, both in this passage and throughout the text. Lucy acknowledges her as beautiful, and adds that Graham "had not been unobservant of the fairy's dance; he had watched it, and he had liked it" (371). Polly is certainly what Lucy acknowledges as the ideal, but she is still oddly childish, doting, naive and impish in a distinctly unsettling way.[13]

Dr. John's ultimate fall from Lucy's good graces comes when his obvious affection for Polly blossoms into an actual courtship and, ultimately, marriage. Lucy knows and emphasizes for her readers that Polly's mode of loving is unsettling. In "Gothic Desire in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette,*" Tony Wein writes, "Each of the women in Villette…survives by a strategy of substitution" (Wein 8). The substitution she describes bears some similarity to Kucich's repression in that it is a mode of subduing desires which are unacceptable for a Victorian woman to express by instead substituting some other emotion or action. Polly's mode of substitution is to love her father with absolute

[13] It is fascinating that Jane is described in similar language by Rochester as a fairy, imp or witch. In *Jane Eyre* such language removes her from comparison in physical beauty to such characters as Blanche, sparing Brontë the explanation of how Rochester could love the less conventionally beautiful Jane. If her beauty is unearthly or supernatural, it cannot possibly be compared to Blanche's worldly attractiveness. Here, however, it is used to neuter and flatten Polly into the vague outline of a girlish ideal.

devotion before suddenly shifting the very same mode of affection off her father and substituting Graham. Lucy watches the shift occur when they are children and Polly leaves off pining for her father only when she takes up an obsession with Graham, to the point where she strokes his boot after he kicks her. As an adult, Polly undergoes the same one-to-one substitution of Graham for her father.

Lucy paints their love as perfect, almost a celestial ideal, but simultaneously flat, neutered, sexless. There is no passion in their union as Lucy portrays it, only a dull, flawless perfection when viewed from the outside. It is possible that this is the true nature of their union, but it is highly unlikely. Like any marriage viewed from the outside, Lucy's perspective is warped by her opinions of the couple and a lack of any ability to truly know what they are like without Lucy as a spectator. While speaking with Polly, Lucy narrates, "There is, in lovers, a certain infatuation of egotism; they will have a witness of their happiness, cost that witness what it may. Paulina had forbidden letters, yet Dr. Bretton wrote; she had resolved against correspondence, yet she answered, were it only to chide. She showed me these letters; with something of the spoiled child's willfulness." Their expressed desires and real wishes are in perfect harmony, everything fitting quaintly together in a way that clearly disgusts Lucy as she calls it "egotism" and adds, "She *made* me read them" (565). Though he has been gradually becoming more and more two-dimensional throughout the narrative, Graham's flattening is truly complete by the time he falls in love with Polly. The two become a pleasantly idealized but realistically boring couple. It is at this time that M. Paul takes center stage as the object of Lucy's narrative attentions as well as her growing affection, and it is through a

combination of that occurrence and Lucy's gradual disillusionment with Dr. John that makes her begin to phase him out of a position of any importance in the novel.

Dr. John is not merely phased out in terms of importance, but even morphs over the course of the narrative. This is perhaps the greatest proof of Lucy's conspicuous narrative control over readers' attitudes towards characters other than herself. Whereas characters such as Polly are rather like naïve, immature cream puffs from the start, Dr. John morphs before readers' very eyes. He enters the narrative portion set in Villette as the epitome of a white knight. When Lucy is at her most friendless and isolated in a new city in which she does not speak the language, he rescues her by not only providing directions but later saving her from the uncomfortable attentions of the locals. He continues to appear noble and unreachable as the local doctor who cares for the students of the *pensionnat*, though Lucy finds him somewhat inscrutable and impenetrable. By the time he loves Ginevra, Lucy releases more and more information about how emasculated he is by his obsessive gifts and protestations of love which are obviously unreturned and uncared-for. When he describes giving her an expensive bracelet and praises her lack of care for worldly goods by admitting that she was not at all impressed by it, Lucy asks, "Then, of course, not valuing it, she would unloose, and return it to you?" His puppyish response is, "No; for such a repulse she was too good-natured" (254). Earlier in the quarrel Lucy admits that she laughed out loud: "I had heard her adjudge to every jewel its price" (253). His willful blindness begins to turn him somewhat into a character much like Dickens' Richard, an optimistic fool. Both his clear lack of perception of others' characters and his conspicuous lack of romantic feeling for Lucy cause him to gradually degrade in Lucy's estimation. She releases more and more information about his

foolishness as time goes on, finally completing the descent from the perfect gentleman into a subservient, sighing lover, just the sort of weakness and sensibility that Lucy disdains.

Lucy's control of the narrative is, or at least attempts to be, absolute. She speaks at first of M. Paul as a strange and tempestuous little man with typical French manners, but gradually lets slip the hints of a warming affection. When the two quarrel and Lucy, in a fit of rage, demands that he ceases to teach her, she later narrates, "The books, however, were not taken away; they were always restored with careful hand to their places, and he came as usual to teach me" (468). Though she is uncomfortable with admitting that the "careful hand" was his, she nonetheless uses such descriptors to gradually portray a different side of M. Paul. This control means that Lucy will only allow characters around her to become likeable, vulnerable or dimensional should she will it. The technique is an accurate one, reflecting her inner mental state and attitudes towards those around her, but nonetheless reveals just how plotting she can be. It also reveals an incredible desire for absolute control of her narrative. Polly is one of the few characters who does not attempt to tell Lucy she has her figured out. She asks Lucy outright, "But *are* you anybody?" (408). Strange, then, that she is one of the most flattened characters in the novel, a fairy interloper in Lucy's plans for happiness. Lucy's desire to control all aspects of her narrative reveal the seams in the potential answer to Polly's question. It is an uncomfortable moment for readers, as they are forced to realize the difference between their perceived answer to Polly's question and Lucy's answer. In the world of the text, Lucy could be anyone, and could answer the question in any number of ways. Just as the characters around her are only what she allows them to be,

for readers, Lucy could be nothing at all but the stories she permits readers to know about her.

III. "The Retina of An Inward Vision": Catholicism, Surveillance, and Concealment

In a particularly pivotal moment in *Villette*, Lucy arrives at the Rue Fossette to discover that Madame Beck's school is like nothing she has ever encountered in England

thus far. To call what Lucy experiences "culture shock" would be a massive understatement. She nearly obsesses over the vast gaps between her own mode of living and that of the inhabitants of the Rue Fossette. She describes her first impressions of the school thus:

> [G]reat pains were taken to hide chains with flowers: a subtle essence of Romanism pervaded every arrangement: large sensual indulgence (so to speak) was permitted by way of counterpoise to jealous spiritual restraint. Each mind was being reared in slavery…the CHURCH strove to bring up her children robust in body, feeble in soul, fat, ruddy, hale, joyous, ignorant, unthinking, unquestioning. 'Eat, drink, and live!' she says. 'Look after your bodies; leave your souls to me…' Lucifer offers the same terms (163).

This moment is one of many in which Lucy almost seems to lose the thread of her narrative in order to embark on a tirade against Catholicism. She has just been criticizing Zélie St. Pierre for her lack of morality and venting her outrage that, in spite of the fact that Madame Beck is aware of her flaws, she will not be dismissed when she is distracted by her sudden swerve into invective against Catholicism.

Lucy is so incredibly vindictive against a character who, apart from being mildly malicious towards her, does not seem to display any incredible faults of character, or possibly any character at all. Lucy has reason to dislike her; Zélie is the one who peevishly points out to M. Paul that Lucy has not brought in flowers on his fête-day amongst other similar acts of childish ill will. She is almost a caricature of needless malice, a person seemingly present in the narrative only to make Lucy's life mildly more

difficult, warranting Lucy's epithet for her, "that snake" (161).[14] Immediately after mentioning her lack of morality, Lucy applies the critique on a larger scale, assigning the same loose morality to the general "Romanism" of the Rue Fossette.

This moment of diversion into indiscriminate condemnation of the Catholic Church as a whole is more important than merely a moment of Victorian discrimination. The great societal feud between the French and the English comes to a head in *Villette* as Lucy would seem to spew the most stereotypical vitriol over the Catholic faith. Whereas in *The Professor* Brontë had no qualms about calling Brussels by its actual name, in *Villette* she creates the eponymous city whose name is "little town" in French, set in Labassecour, "the farmyard." As Beth Torgerson points out, this is less to protect the identity of Brussels as the use of its real name had not troubled Brontë in her previous novel. Instead, it provides Brontë with an opportunity, intentional or not, to conflate Brussels and France, ostensibly to criticize both in one pass.

The unabashed disdain for all things French and Catholic has, in the past, proved quite disruptive to the reading experience of many who have plumbed the depths of *Villette* or, at least, many critics have claimed so. In fact, in reading criticism focusing on the motif of Catholicism in *Villette*, many critics go out of their way to point out the fact that many readers are annoyed by the anti-Catholic sentiment which sits so heavily on *Villette*. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, the veritable giants to which all other feminist critics must look to even if only to respond, write: "Nothing is more irritating to some readers than the anti-Papist prejudice of *Villette*" (411). Even those who will work to

[14] Her reference to Zélie as a snake is also somewhat inextricable from the aforementioned religious tirade. The treachery of the snake is so engrained in any Old Testament-rooted mindset that it is impossible to divorce the association of serpentine malice from the story of original sin. Zélie is therefore a figure present to stir up trouble where otherwise there could potentially be paradise.

absolve Brontë of accusations of blind religious discrimination, such as Diana Peschier in *19th Century Anti-Catholic Discourses*, admit that many find the anti-Catholic sentiment galling. Sally Shuttleworth writes that "Lucy's violent antagonism to Roman Catholicism [is] treated so often by critics as an intrusion of Brontë's personal prejudice". Few critics, however, discuss readers' reactions at length; most breeze past this fact as a cursory apology before launching into an investigation of why their frosty reactions are misdirected.

I am more interested in asking: why does this reaction occur? *Villette* is far less likely to be assigned to the uninitiated than, say, *Jane Eyre,* which is a favorite staple of grade school required reading. Most readers will likely have some previous exposure to Victorian literature by the time they come across *Villette*. By that time they would presumably be at least somewhat prepared for the racism, xenophobia, and sexism of the time which, in most Victorian literature, essentially comes with the territory. Why, then, do readers nonetheless take offense at *Villette* even with the knowledge that much of what Brontë says would have been a non-issue to many of her British contemporaries?[15] Could it be that there is a deeper significance to why readers are so "irritated," as Gilbert and Gubar put it, by a relatively standard Victorian practice?

One factor definitely plays a role in many judgments of Charlotte Brontë, though exactly how large a part it plays is somewhat indeterminate. In the last chapter I cited Lisa Sternlieb's central contention in her *Female Narrator in the British Novel: Hidden*

[15] This is not, obviously, to excuse prejudice and hatred solely based on the time period in which it occurs, which continues to be an egregiously employed justification to this day. Rather, it is to better place an argument in a historical context in order to decide whether its bigotry goes above and beyond its contemporary levels, and also to acknowledge that a discussion of discrimination through a modern lens with modern vocabulary may not be the most productive approach to a time period even as recent as the Victorian period.

Agendas; she argues that female authors frequently use the façade of artlessness, naïveté and simplicity to conceal ulterior themes which might have been unacceptable for a woman to deal with. In a time when women who knew more than they let on were not just subversive but dangerous, such measures were necessary, like a wasp mimicking the color patterns of a bee to camouflage itself. I would argue that criticism leveled against Brontë, both contemporary and modern, quite frequently operates under the assumption of artlessness on her part before intent. It is easy to see why, for she follows in the shadow of many women whose reputations were, and continue to be, for writing what they know. The image of Jane Austen as the parlor authoress, writing about her own world of society and social comedy and coyly hiding her papers under a blotter, still haunts the 19th century female author. It is a trope defined by the genius of the female author in spite of her ignorance of the world at large.

It is a modern form of the separate spheres ideology, in which critics assume that, because these women were kept from experiencing all the aspects of life open to men of the time, that they are necessarily more ignorant and less worldly than, say, male authors. It is yet another subtle form of modern critical prejudice to assume that a woman has had a narrower range of experiences than any given man of the time by default. While it is true that many aspects of society were closed to women in the Victorian period, it is conversely true that many aspects of typically female experiences were just as closed off to men as the reverse. It is therefore a distinctly oppressive value judgment to discount the numerous experiences women would have had which would have been closed to the masculine sphere as secondary, trifling, or insignificant. This leads to overly lauding female authors for their creation of a successful piece of self-expression *in spite* of, rather

than *because* of their nature as women. For example, Emily Dickinson is celebrated for her highly-developed emotional life in spite of the fact that she seldom left her home, ignoring the fact that she could very possibly have a far more developed sense of introspection and emotional development in a life that afforded her the time for such activities.

This very subtle form of condescension is just the typical attitude that affords the cover that Sternlieb discusses. By taking advantage of a critical attitude still prevalent to this day, women could write the devious narratives that they wanted to, allowing men to flatten their narratives into naïve scribbling and thus avoid the censure of an era in which women were, if not sufficiently ignorant and innocent, hyper sexualized and evil. Kermode writes in *The Art of Telling* that "the 'artlessness' of the narrator is not a guarantee of factuality so much as a hint that the text is extremely artful" (45). Thus we reach another emblem of condescending sexism which, I argue, is a vital factor to consider when examining the criticism leveled against her anti-Catholicism as it manifests in *Villette*: a simple conflation of the author and the narrator's voice. I do not want to argue, however, that Charlotte Brontë was without personal prejudice against Catholicism. Rather, I would like to present a possible double purpose for her vitriol. Charlotte Brontë herself and her opinions about Catholicism and the voice of Lucy Snowe speaking against Catholics are different; while they may have much in common, it is far more valuable a study to view the two as in conversation and complex interchange with each other rather than viewing Lucy merely as a conduit for Brontë's outpouring of personal views.

Brontë especially is an author who is known for her autobiographical narratives. Writers such as Lyndall Gordon take great edification from drawing the numerous parallels between Brontë's real life and the characters she writes in her novels. Of course, this sort of study does in fact have great value. The parallels between Dr. John and George Smith and M. Paul and Constantin Héger[16] are both fascinating and, in many cases, highly useful to parse Charlotte Brontë's internal emotional state during her time in Brussels. For a woman who could never admit a passion for a married man, *Villette* proves an invaluable emotional cipher for Brontë's internal life.

The danger, however, comes in marrying the two too closely. In assuming that female authors are bound to be more artless than males by definition, there is far more of a tendency to assume that female authors will write best when they "write what they know," as the modern wisdom dictates. Thus a woman who writes a nuanced narrative of quality is even more likely to be presumed as taking inspiration from her life, whereas a poor female writer was most likely writing on a topic about which she knows nothing and therefore has an excuse for the lack of nuance in her narrative. Meanwhile, men are inherently assumed to be able to transgress and project themselves into any number of situations and lives they have not experienced. Ironically, a member of the sphere assumed to be more empathetic is more harshly criticized when attempting to empathize with a voice which is not necessarily her own. The danger proves even more immediate for Brontë, who already incorporates many strongly autobiographical elements into her

[16] There is enough contention as to make it clear that Brontë's real-life inspirations are not one-to-one equivalencies. Irene Tayler writes in *Holy Ghosts* that "although M. Paul exhibits important characteristics of M. Heger, he has his immediate imaginative basis in Charlotte's encounter" with James Taylor, part of her publishing firm, who was "an irritable and despotic little man…he courted her with unwelcome forcefulness, apparently showed himself jealous of her vain attachment to Smith, and was in 1851 suddenly dispatched by the firm to India for five years" (203). Though the growing affection present in *Villette* was absent for Charlotte in real life, Tayler's depiction of events is fascinating.

work. Thus critics easily fall victim to the assumption that the anti-Catholic prejudice in *Villette* is due to Brontë's own views finding their way into her narrative. By assuming artlessness, they assume that Lucy's opinions are merely Brontë's mouthpiece, rather than reasoning that part of that equation may be her authorial initiative. Though all instances of anti-Catholicism are spoken in Lucy's voice, critics, more often than not, assume that this is Brontë's voice through Lucy rather than an element of Lucy's character.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Brontë is an author of exceeding ability and craft. The variation between the first person narrators she constructs in both *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* are a testament to her skill at constructing a highly crafted narrator. When Lucy speaks of her anguish at having to sit through tales of "the dread boasts of confessors, who had wickedly abused their office, trampling to deep degradation high-born ladies, making of countesses and princesses the most tormented slaves under the sun" (149-50), it is strange that many critics actually assume that this is coming from Brontë speaking through Lucy. The same author who writes a narrator so profoundly elusive that she never even reveals who her family is can still somehow be labeled as allowing her own prejudices to seep into and, for many readers, spoil a text. Why do readers assume that Lucy's anti-Catholic prejudice is merely pointless hatred and discrimination? It is certainly true that such blind xenophobia would have been well within the social mores of the time; what would now constitute hate speech against Catholicism was essentially expected to come with the nature of being an English Protestant at the time. It is not entirely unreasonable that Lucy is criticizing Catholicism to set herself apart as a still more dedicated Protestant, and this is certainly a factor in her

attitudes. What I wish to examine is precisely what proportion of her anti-Catholic prejudice is unproductive, resulting from Brontë's own opinions, and how much of it serves a legitimate purpose within the narrative, hateful as it may be.

As evidence of Brontë's opinions on the matter, Enid L. Duthie points to the correspondence between Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell in *The Foreign Vision of Charlotte Brontë* as painting a portrait of a woman deeply devoted to her faith. Mme. Héger's devotion to Catholicism was a source of growing tension between the two women. Duthie writes, "[W]hen Mrs. Gaskell referred to Charlotte Brontë's dislike of Romanism as one of the chief causes of the silent estrangement between the two women during the second year of her stay in Brussels, she was stating a tragic truth. Her religion in fact meant as much to Mme. Heger as her own faith did to Charlotte Brontë" (153). Though it is true that there were other factors in play (not the least of which was Charlotte's unrequited passion for Mme. Héger's husband), and that Elizabeth Gaskell is a notoriously biased biographer, there was at least a significant enough tension as to cause noticeable friction between Charlotte and Mme. Héger, enough for Mrs. Gaskell to take note. In terms of Charlotte's feelings about Catholicism in general apart from Mme. Héger in particular, Duthie reveals a most illuminating passage from a letter that Brontë writes to her good friend and longtime correspondent, Ellen Nussey:

> People talk of the danger which Protestants expose themselves to in going to reside in Catholic countries—and thereby running the chance of changing their faith—my advice to all Protestants who are tempted to do anything so besotted as turn Catholic—is to walk over the sea on to the continent—to attend mass regularly for a time to note well the mummeries thereof—also the idiotic,

> mercenary aspect of *all* the priests, and *then* if they are still disposed to consider Papistry in any other light than a most feeble childish piece of humbug let them turn Papists at once that's all…At the same time allow me to tell you that there are some good Catholics—who are as good as any Christians can be to whom the bible is a sealed book and much better than scores of Protestants (31).

This passage seems to fit reasonably well with the author of such a novel as *Villette*. She is certainly not without her own prejudices but, as with M. Paul, is not averse to the existence of what she deems "good Catholics," whom she nonetheless portrays as exceptions to the rule. Brontë views on Catholicism are caustic, and to ignore this fact is to whitewash history. In defending her as a female author, it would be a lapse in integrity and even counterproductive to ignore her prejudice against Catholicism. It is a fact. To merely condemn and move on to more elevating topics, however, is just as reprehensible, for only in examining the bigotry that plagues *Villette* can it truly become a multi-dimensional text, rich in both complexities and flaws.

For a richer understanding of the anti-Catholic sentiment in *Villette*, it is necessary to examine the contemporary contexts from which the work emerged. Societal prejudice does not occur in a vacuum, and the Victorian era gives rise to an excellent study of the evolution of hatred. 19th century England, more than many places and time periods, was defined by a sudden surge in anti-Catholic sentiment. Peschier points out in a very important critical moment that the 19th century was a time in which England was reacting to a steep influx of Irish immigrants. While smaller famines occurred in the 18th century leading up to the era, the largest and most famous Potato Famine in Ireland occurred in the 19th, leading to a sudden and steep uptick in immigration by the Irish

seeking to leave a starving homeland. The increase in the number of Irish caused an already fraught relationship of colonizer to colonized to come to a head, bringing about a release of all England's paranoia about the threat of Catholicism. In addition, the Oxford Movement catalyzed much of England's fear of its citizens defecting to the Catholic church from within the country. Marianne Thormählen points out that Catholics had enjoyed religious freedom in law if not in practice for years; in the 20s the Catholic Emancipation Act allowed Catholics to participate in government and in 1850, three years before publication of *Villette*, the Catholic Church re-established its place in England in what was dubbed the "Papal Aggression." Thormählen writes, "There is hence biographical proof of Charlotte's interest in events in the field of ecclesiastical politics, as well as of her dislike both of the Church of Rome and of the High Churchmen in her own Church" (25). Though sensationalized by paranoia of the time, Brontë's fears would have been based in what was perceived as a real threat. Both external from Irish immigration and internal from Dissenters, the idea of Catholicism being engaged in some devious plot to overtake the Anglican Church would have had its basis in the religious sentiments of the time.

Even further, Peschier argues, the discourse against Catholicism was focused heavily not on the religion itself, but disproportionately on its effects on women, especially women's sexualities. She writes, "Mid-nineteenth-century anti-Catholic discourse was fuelled by stories of girls being inveigled into convents, terrible goings on within the convent walls, and warnings of how Roman Catholicism could destroy even the bonds of matrimony" (10). This scare rhetoric was powerfully employed in the Victorian period to stoke a culture of sensationalist fear around Catholicism. By

appealing to a culture's fears about the vulnerability of the women supposedly under their protection, this rhetoric hits on the most sensitive and protective instincts of Victorians, specifically targeting men. Peschier delves wonderfully into how sexually-charged the discourse surrounding Catholicism is in the Victorian era[17], including the 19th century implication that a Catholic woman made her husband a spiritual cuckold. Tales of the confessional abounded, paying special attention to the fact that it was essentially the only place a woman could talk about sexuality openly and without stigma. Therefore much of the propaganda spoke to men of "the confessing woman having two husbands, one who has her soul and the other her body" (Peschier 25). This sort of language was used to inspire the most basic and broadly prejudicial instincts in men about women's vulnerable minds and bodies, and would also create a societal fear of the Catholic woman as a lax, indulgent creature essentially engaging in spiritual unfaithfulness to her husband.

Thus much of the fear and hatred in England surrounding Catholicism was centered not necessarily on the religion itself, but its imagined implications. This is relatively typical of an insular society in which most people would have known few Catholics. Such ignorance would have allowed caricatures, propaganda, and blind paranoia to crop up in a society. These implications become most important as I turn to examining specific instances of sectarianism in *Villette*. Thus far I have argued that Charlotte Brontë certainly does have strongly anti-Catholic biases, and to a certain degree, many of these biases express themselves in her novel. To seal the book here with a condemnation of her bigotry curtails what is, in fact, an incredibly interesting literary analysis, for it is precisely the implications of Catholicism as interpreted through the lens

[17] This becomes especially important later when I will discuss the nun in *Villette,* one of the novel's most explicitly sexually-charged elements, as well as an emblem of Catholicism.

of a Protestant England that proves to be so incredibly rich with insight into a time and place now foreign and distant. Catholicism as it is truly is separate from Catholicism as represented in *Villette*, and it is this fact that is so fascinating and provides such an insight into Lucy's mind. Lucy sees Catholicism as distinctly threatening, encroaching, overwhelming her in a foreign land. What threatens? Why does Lucy cower from the very faith that Brontë calls "a most feeble childish piece of humbug"?

M. Paul would seem to corroborate Brontë's letter to Ellen Nussey, as he recognizes Lucy's unassailable nature. When she gazes without scruple on the garish painting of the sensuous, overlarge, decadent Cleopatra, M. Paul is shocked and desperately attempts to draw her away and keep her from looking at it, as if seeing such a woman might corrupt Lucy instantly. She calmly waves him off and admits that she dislikes the painting, but incurs no harm by looking at it. M. Paul responds, "You nurslings of Protestantism astonish me. You unguarded Englishwomen walk calmly amidst red-hot plough-shares and escape burning. I believe, if some of you were thrown into Nebuchadnezzar's hottest furnace, you would issue forth untraversed by the smell of fire" (268). M. Paul draws a distinct line between the Catholic mode and the Protestant one; from the vantage point of *Villette* it may be true or false that Protestant women are made of sterner stuff than their Catholic counterparts, somehow able to endure greater trials and maintain their faith and virtue intact, yet this is not particularly significant. What is significant is that M. Paul, like many of the characters in the book, see a great need to control, police, and watch those around him. The novel is in fact consumed by a motif of surveillance, with characters watching others while attempting to remain unseen themselves. Here, this sort of check that M. Paul attempts to place on Lucy is explicitly

linked to both her virtue and her religion, which is what makes it so important to understanding part of Lucy's anti-Catholic passion. What she reacts to is not necessarily the Catholic faith itself, as she does eventually come to love M. Paul, though he is her opposite in many ways in addition to his "Romanism." It is instead the linkages she has made between Catholicism and its perceived effects on her way of life, especially control and often overweening protection and external checks placed especially on its female practitioners.

Beth Torgerson writes that "as a Protestant woman living in a Catholic country, Lucy must come to terms with both religions' scripts for her as a single woman" (60). As Catholicism attempts to exert its prescribed role for her (including through the image of the single woman as nun), Lucy reacts by condemning Catholicism as a whole. Lucy repeatedly expresses a fear of becoming a literal nun. After the confessional scene, Lucy remarks that had she gone to the address the priest had given her, she "might just now, instead of writing this heretic narrative, be counting [her] beads in the cell of a certain Carmelite convent" (210). This image of the woman alone as a sequestered, forcibly silenced creature does not at all line up with the desires of a woman who cannot resist climbing out on to the roof in a storm whilst her Catholic counterparts pray and fiddle with their rosaries. In part, Lucy fears being forced in to a convent, and yet at the same time she leaves unspoken what Brontë also hesitated to acknowledge: she fears being won over by the convent. Père Silas appears to be at first a highly sympathetic man; Lucy's first impressions of him (which go beyond mere fancy to physiognomic analyses) are of a man who is inherently sympathetic. She admits after the fact, "He was kind when I needed kindness; he did me good" (211) yet, by the novel's close, he has become one of

its chief conspirators, among Madame Walravens and Madame Beck, seeking to keep M. Paul and Lucy apart. He does not force Lucy, he does not lie to her, he does not willingly feed her propaganda. Once he attempts to manipulate her life in any way, however, whether by encouraging her to return after she goes to confessional or attempting to separate Lucy and M. Paul, she reacts most virulently.

There was certainly no lack of sensationalist scare literature circulating around Catholicism in Victorian England, including the most famous, *The Monk* by Matthew Gregory Lewis, in which a Spanish monk's faith is tested and he sinks into depravity, leading him to commit rape and murder. Peschier addresses the confessional scene in *Villette* by pointing out that "Brontë's readers would be well acquainted with the idea of the confessional being utilized to discover the penitent's secrets so enabling the confessor to cause dissension between family and friends" (Peschier 160). This in fact occurs in *Villette*, when Père Silas uses Lucy's confession to attempt to separate her from M. Paul. Aside from being overtly cruel and malicious, the act also speaks to a deeper fear which Lucy harbors: the fear of machinations and manipulations going on over one's head and without one's knowledge. The world of *Villette* is defined by voyeurism and surveillance; from the section on Lucy's childhood (which barely touches on *her* childhood, instead focusing on Lucy's studied observations of Polly and Graham) to Madame Beck's near-compulsive devotion to secretive observation, the novel's characters are always watching, being watched, or watching others watch. Lucy is not blameless in this world; in fact, she is far from the hapless victim of others' surveillance. She takes great pleasure in being an unseen or unrecognized spectator. She explains, for instance, that she had long known that the Graham Bretton of her childhood and the Dr. John of her adulthood are one and

the same, yet she enjoys the pleasure of retaining her identity as the Lucy of his childhood. She narrates,

> To *say* anything on the subject, to *hint* at my discovery, had not suited my habits of thought, or assimilated with my system of feeling. On the contrary, I had preferred to keep the matter to myself. I liked entering his presence covered with a cloud he had not seen through, while he stood before me under a ray of special illumination, which shone all partial over his head, trembled about his feel, and cast light no farther (228-9).

Brontë could scarcely have found an image more voyeuristic in nature than that of Lucy cloaked in a cloud from which she has the pleasure to view Dr. John while remaining unseen. Thus what Lucy fears is not surveillance in general, but rather a shifting of control in which she becomes the subject rather than the surveillant. I have already established that Lucy intensely seeks absolute control of the release of information in her narrative, and this characteristic plays out in her life as well, as she attempts to be the primary surveyor of those around her.

Surveillance exists as a thematic element in the novel outside of religion, an overarching motif unbounded by time and space; it exists in Lucy's childhood and adulthood, it is executed by both French and English characters, and by both men and women. However, when this motif of surveillance pairs with Catholicism and the fears discussed thus far that Catholicism holds for the Protestant Lucy,[18] the danger becomes still keener. When Lucy starts to admit her growing fondness for M. Paul, she suddenly shifts to hinting darkly that he is in fact under "the surveillance of a sleepless eye: Rome

[18] Namely the threats propagated by anti-Catholic sensationalism of the time dealing with women's vulnerability to coercion into convents and the threat of male priests for impressionable young English women.

watched jealously her son" (544). On its own as a repeating element, surveillance not tied to religion is at worst an annoyance; Madame Beck does not present much of a threat to Lucy as she is, in fact, not a terribly skillful surveillant. Her methods are an open book to Lucy; she watches Madame Beck rummage through her belongings and feels no need to stop her, and later Madame Beck is given away by her "sneeze out of season" when Dr. John is on the point of revealing his love interest to Lucy. She is always relatively transparent to Lucy; as long as Lucy remains the ultimate surveillant, still able to keep Madame Beck in full view, her actions present no threat. When the watching eye becomes the Catholic church as a whole, the danger is far more real; under this banner of Catholicism and the dead Justine Marie, Madame Beck will later become a threat, when she unites with Père Silas and Madame Walravens. On her own, she is relatively harmless; with the aid of the monolithic Catholic Church, their modes of surveillance become so heightened that Lucy must fight in order not to be subjected to their powers of observation.

Beth Torgerson brings up an excellent point on this subject in her essay, "Hysteria, Female Desire, and Self-Control in *Villette.*" The essay on the whole tends towards the reductive, but her insight on the motif of self-control in the novel is excellent. I have discussed at length just how defined by self-control Lucy is, yet Torgerson makes the link between that self-control and Lucy's religion. She writes, "Brontë connects Catholicism's system of education with its theology, connecting Mme Beck's system of surveillance with the Roman Catholic church's 'surveillance of a sleepless eye', as Brontë calls the confessional" (64). The entire Rue Fossette, in fact, thrives on this mode of surveillance. It is not overtly linked to Catholicism; Lucy criticizes the school in turn

for French frivolity and Catholic laxness in turn, but the fact that Catholicism plays into the daily lives and educations of both students and teachers (for instance, the nightly readings of the *lecture pieuse* that thrill and disgust Lucy) makes it inextricable from the school's character. Catholicism and the Rue Fossette are not treated in exactly the same attitude by Lucy, but to ignore the religion's profound influence on Lucy's impressions of the school would be a gross oversight.

The school's Catholic character and its mode of controlling and regulating those under its care are deeply woven together. Brontë frequently links the two, as when Lucy first walks the *allée défendue*: "I saw by a light in the oratory window that the Catholic household were then gathered to evening prayer—a rite, from attendance on which, I now and then, as a Protestant, exempted myself." (118). She voluntarily excludes herself from the school's Catholic ritual, choosing instead to walk in the garden. In doing so she comes across "an alley, which ran parallel with the very high wall on that side the garden [which] was forbidden to be entered by the pupils" (119). Lucy has this time to herself to walk the alleyway because she is an outsider, because she feels out of place in the community of the school during their *lecture*. The other students are drawn into the ritual, but Lucy is allowed to walk free.

It is also important to note that the students are not allowed to walk the *allée défendue*. It is one of the many strictures and safeguards in place in the *pensionnat* to prevent transgressions. The alleyway divides the girls' quarters and the boys', as the letter dropped by de Hamal falls into this very alleyway that divides the two buildings. It is a physical gendered boundary to separate the students and prevent the sort of taboo rule breaking which, of course, de Hamal seeks to engage in with Ginevra. Lucy's ability to

walk the alley is specifically because she is a teacher, as it is forbidden to students only, but it is worth noting that the other teachers never do; it is "narrow," overgrown, and strictly abandoned after dusk. Until M. Paul walks with Lucy later in the novel, no other teacher is seen traversing it. This combined with the fact that Lucy walks it because she is not a member of the Catholic society of the school makes a spider's thread of a link between Lucy's religion and her privilege in walking the alley.

The link becomes more specifically gendered just after Lucy introduces the alley; she notes that "any girl setting foot there would have rendered herself liable to as severe a penalty as the mild rules of Madame Beck's establishment permitted" (119). The alley divides young men and women, but punishment is only noted as falling upon the women of the school. The Rue Fossette is predominantly a society of women, excluding the male faculty and Dr. John, but it is nonetheless fascinating that such modes of control are leveled against women, in precisely the way that Peschier argues that British anti-Catholic discourse specifically focused on the need to protect young women from its threat. Like general British fears of the time, it would seem that *Villette* too focuses on "a nexus of sexual fear" (Shuttleworth 226) of women's susceptibility to the confessional. In Brontë's vision of Catholicism, control is externalized; with all her desire to withhold and coolly control her desires, Lucy is a paragon of internal control. The women of the Rue Fossette, however, require constant external supervision by those who run the school. The alley is a strict physical dividing line; rather than relying on the students to know where the conceptual line between virtue and dishonor lies, the school draws a literal one.

In the moment in which Madame Beck is arguably most open about her methods, Lucy narrates:

> [S]he seemed to know that keeping girls in distrustful restraint, in blind ignorance, and under a surveillance that left them no moment and no corner for retirement, was not the best way to make them grow up honest and modest women; but she averred that ruinous consequences would ensue if any other method were tried with continental children—they were so accustomed to constraint, that relaxation, however guarded, would be misunderstood and fatally presumed on (81).

In this vicious cycle, the women of the Rue Fossette mature completely without a knowledge of how to exercise self-control, thus necessitating further control from Madame Beck to prevent lapses. The *allée défendue* is not the only emblem of the school's method of control externalized; Madame Beck's whole system relies upon it. Torgerson draws a contrast to the Rue Fossette method when she writes, "The Protestant system is based on an internal control of both emotion and sexuality" (62). The responsibility for the school's method of external control lies somewhere with both the French continental nature of its students and their Catholicism. Protestantism emphasizes a one-to-one relationship with God, without worldly intercessors such as confessional or saints. The emphasis is placed on the self, and the ability to maintain that relationship with God within oneself. Thus Brontë draws the method of the Rue Fossette, with all strict controls outside of the self, even closer to Catholicism by highlighting this contrast. Through their upbringing in a system with such luxuries as the confessional[19] which allows them to forgo developing a sense of self-control, *Villette* paints an image of a group of women atrophied by their religion, grown decadent and indolent. This control is

[19] Lucy emphasizes that " 'J'ai menti plusieurs fois' [I have lied many times] formed an item of every girl's and woman's monthly confession: the priest heard unshocked, and absolved unreluctant" (91). The women of the Rue Fossette are punished for trivial offenses such as novel-reading (which of course Lucy knows the reader will scoff with her about, as he/she is in the act of reading a novel) yet forgiven for lying.

portrayed as highly damaging, and Lucy reacts by clinging still tighter to her favored methods of control. She will not indulge in emotional outbursts as others such as Ginevra do. As discussed in the first chapter, Lucy's power lies in her ability to withhold an emotional reaction longer than those around her. When Madame Beck searches her room suspecting an entanglement between Lucy and Dr. John, it brings on a tumult of emotion for Lucy; Madame Beck presuming upon an attraction which in fact exists on Lucy's end unreciprocated sends her into waves of "soreness and laughter, and fire, and grief" all at once. She narrates, "Complicated, disquieting thoughts broke up the whole repose of my nature. However, that turmoil subsided: next day I was again Lucy Snowe" (152-3). She sequesters the part of her that feels complicated, passionate emotions; implicitly, she views that part as not-Lucy Snowe. An emotional reaction is somehow something outside of herself. In Madame Beck's world of sharp surveillance, this is also a survival tactic by which Lucy may retain her view of herself as a person absolutely in control of her situation. She remains the ultimate surveillant.

Characters who execute surveillance against her are a threat, unless, as with Madame Beck, Lucy may still watch them. It is in the very same *allée défendue*, however, that M. Paul watches Lucy without her knowledge. He observes her walks frequently, as well as watching her in other areas of the Rue Fossette with or without her knowledge, only revealing this fact later in the novel. When she is in the refectory, she spots "a cap-tassel, a brow, two eyes fill[ing] the pane of that window; the fixed gaze of those two eyes hit right against my own glance: they were watching me. I had not till that moment known that tears were on my cheek, but I felt them now" (304). The moment is more discomfiting than flattering; M. Paul seeks to observe Lucy at every opportunity

that is given him. Surveillance is an act which is executed in order to observe predominantly women, as they are seen as the ones in need of surveillance. It is not always executed by men, as Madame Beck is one of the primary surveillants of the novel, but it is executed by a male-dominated system, such as the Catholic Church or M. Paul himself. This system of surveillance emanates from various sources, yet almost always flows in a direction towards women. Just as in the discourse surrounding Catholicism in England at the time, the modus operandi of the Rue Fossette is portrayed as one which is a direct and constant threat to women. Lucy, the character who knows better through the benefit of her English upbringing, recognizes the environment as toxic, though the students do not.

In *19th Century Anti-Catholic Discourses* Peschier writes of the threat of the single woman as portrayed through Brontë's writing:

> In England, the loneliness and self-sufficiency of a single woman is accepted as normal even though pitiable, whereas in Catholic Belgium the single woman is seen as dangerous, a person to be tamed, converted, even placed in a convent (140).

As the women of the Rue Fossette cannot be trusted to regulate and control themselves, they would be a threat as single women. When Lucy arrives, however, her desire for self-control is in direct conflict with the desire of the society around her to exert control over her. This threat is embodied in no figure more strongly than it is in the ghost of the nun. Lucy first introduces her as a character in the chapter titled "The Casket,"[20] in which she

[20] The chapter title refers primarily to the box dropped by de Hamal and discovered by Lucy, but as *Villette* is characterized by repetitions and echoes of motifs, characters and events, "The Casket" presumably also refers both to the nun's burial and foreshadows the casket of letters that Lucy will later bury under the same tree.

ominously begins that "A vague tale went of a black and white nun, sometimes, on some night or nights of the year, seen in some part of this vicinage" (135). The Rue Fossette, formerly a convent, housed a nun centuries before who committed "some sin against her vow" (136) and for this offense was buried alive at the base of a pear tree which grows on the grounds.

The nun is a complex figure for precisely the reason that she seems relatively straightforward at first. It is easy to write the nun off as a relatively simple Freudian symbol.[21] The nun is buried for breaking her vows, which almost always refers to some sexual indiscretion; the act of live burial seems like a relatively simple metaphor for repression. It would in fact be easy to close the book on the nun by calling her a symbol for Lucy's repressed sexual desires, appearing when she feels a sort of conflict which inspires in her romantic feelings. As Beth Torgerson's essay deals with the subject of hysteria, her interpretation of the nun lines up with the doctor's: "Dr. John's reading of the nun as a 'hallucination' based on Lucy's hysterical tendencies has validity once we connect the Victorian concept that the need for self-control, taken to its extreme, resulted in the manifestation of hysteric symptoms" (69). The concept certainly has some validity, and in fact I do not wish to dismiss it entirely; the nun expresses a matrix of complex emotions including Lucy's inability to express any sort of powerful emotion freely, including her sexuality. However, what most indicates that this interpretation cannot be entirely true is in fact that Dr. John says it. The same man who calls Lucy "a being inoffensive as a shadow" (418) cannot possibly fully understand Lucy's psyche. The point that Lucy stresses perhaps most forcefully throughout the novel is that other

[21] It is just as important to note that assessing the nun as a Freudian symbol is also an anachronistic analysis, as Brontë writes before Sigmund Freud. It is a modern perspective imposed retroactively, which could potentially have some value, but would nonetheless require the anachronistic qualifier.

characters will consistently misrepresent and misunderstand her. To discern Lucy's true nature, one would do best to believe the opposite of what characters say about her. Thus to write the nun off as a hysterical manifestation would not only be to oversimplify the novel, but also might be falling into the very traps that Lucy lays for her readers throughout the text, inviting them again and again to believe something about herself which is not true.

Instead, it is more beneficial to take this interpretation of nun-as-repressed-sexuality interpretation and combine it with the other factors involved. Lucy is in an environment which consistently seeks to stifle her agency and prevent her ability to move freely as a single woman. The Rue Fossette, defined by control, attempts to gain a hold on Lucy. The single woman as a figure who must be confined (as in a convent, as Peschier argues) is a specter that haunts Lucy made literal. The nun is the figure representative of this desire to control, in one sense the spirit of surveillance. When Lucy sneaks away to read Dr. John's first letter, she feels a presence:

> Something in that vast solitary garret sounded strangely. Most surely and certainly I heard, as it seemed, a stealthy foot on that floor: a sort of gliding out from the direction of the black recess haunted by the malefactor cloaks. I turned…I saw in the middle of that ghostly chamber a figure all black or white…Say what you will, reader—tell me I was nervous, or mad; affirm that I was unsettled by the excitement of that letter; declare that I dreamed: this I vow—I saw there—in that room—on that night—an image like—a NUN (322-3).

Dr. John's letters seem to cause more internal conflict for Lucy than even interacting with him in person. She drops vague allusions to the fact that she longs for them to be love

letters, but accepts that they are not and will not be at any time. The aforementioned moment in which she spots Madame Beck searching through them is proof of this; she is wracked by powerful emotions she cannot or will not name. She knows that, on the one hand, she will remain blameless in Madame Beck's eyes, but simultaneously, she might just prefer not to be innocent of a love affair. Later when she buries the letters in a casket, she takes special pains to draw parallels between the burial of the letters and a real burial; she lingers "like any other mourner, beside a newly-sodded grave" (391) and chapters later dreams of hair "still golden and living" (480) protruding from the casket she has buried.

In this sense, the nun is at least in part a representation of her withheld desires. The symbolic link in the fact that she buries the letters on the same ground that the nun condemned for indiscretions was buried is impossible to ignore. The letters represent the feelings for Dr. John that she cannot control and the stream of hopes and wishes that flow unbidden which she is attempting to stem. When she is reading Dr. John's letters, the nun appears, again in response to her desires rising to the surface. The identity of a nun is so bound up inextricably with sexuality; the vow of chastity is tied inherently to its image, and the buried nun makes the link all the more definitive. Peschier writes that "Nuns are seen as women out of their natural and proper womanly sphere [and] they are therefore marked as potentially threatening, and undesirable" (86). If Lucy were to admit her nature as a woman who feels desire and is also single, she would be a social pariah. Such a concept was, if not taboo, at least entirely unacceptable to express in Victorian England. Nuns are seen as threatening for similar reasons through Protestant eyes of the time; they fulfill a role that is unnatural, and Peschier also points out that priests and nuns were

perceived as being too idle and "for this reason in danger of being overcome by their animal passions and lapsing into immoral behavior" (72). The nun is both a sexual and asexual threat, representing the danger of a figure who has no viable place in society. Is this what the nun represents for Lucy? She, like Bertha in *Jane Eyre*, could be a representation of the danger of being split in two: a woman both consumed by, and ostensibly defined by a lack of, desire. Lucy would fit this character; others believe her unworthy of notice, even unworthy of love, but even from what passion she does allow readers to see, they can deduce a fiery character beneath.

This reading of the nun, however, ignores the revelation of its true nature. The nun stalks Lucy at vulnerable moments, appearing, for instance, after she buries Dr. John's letters. Because she has just symbolically put her love for him to rest, she laments that she can no longer take solace in telling him, "I have again seen the nun" (392). She also appears, perhaps most notably, when Lucy and M. Paul walk together in the *allée défendue*. This moment is important especially because it is the first time the nun appears when another person is present other than Lucy, putting to rest her fears that the ghost is a figment of her exhausted and depressed mind. In addition, having discussed the importance of the *allée défendue* as a representative of external control, a physical boundary separating young men and women to prevent their unchaste mingling, it is highly significant that the nun appears in this location. The nun walks this liminal boundary, just as Lucy does, unconstrained by the concept of what a transgression it is in the text. In this way, portraying the nun only as a symbol of sexual constraint is too reductive. The nun and her vow of chastity are objectively a symbol of forced restraint, in Victorian England even a symbol of unnatural feminine denial of the role of women. This

ghostly nun instead breaks such bonds, traversing a distinctly gendered boundary. Later, it is revealed that the ghostly nun that so plagues Lucy's mind is in fact de Hamal in disguise, using the costume of a nun to gain access to the girls' dormitory to visit Ginevra.

This revelation changes the whole nature of the nun as a symbol. Lucy comes upon her costume in her opiate-addled state, returning to her room to find "stretched on [her] bed the old phantom—the NUN" (624). It turns out to be the costume of the nun, left there by de Hamal, by its very location proof that he has entered the girls' dormitory. The costume of a nun permits, and in fact empowers de Hamal to cross gender boundaries. The nun cannot therefore be solely a symbol of constraint; it must also be observed at least partially as a symbol of freedom, at least from gender roles.

The *allée défendue* would seem to be the primary stomping ground for the novel's rampant motif of surveillance. It is the location in which de Hamal is most likely to be spotted, most in danger of being caught in the act of crossing the boundary placed there by the Rue Fossette for the protection of the virtues of its students. It is the location where M. Paul most often watches Lucy, which he casually admits to her later. In a moment that is more telling than it at first appears, Dr. John begs Lucy to go out into the *allée* to pick up another parcel which has been dropped for Ginevra. He tells her, "Go at once; pick it up and bring it here…nobody will take notice of *you:* I should be seen" (158). In one sense, he is wrong, because Lucy is constantly being taken notice of, whether she realizes it or not. In another sense, he reveals the *allée* as the most dangerous place for a man to be. Even a man who regularly moves about the school freely (as a doctor he frequently enters the girls' quarters) must be careful not to alert the gendered

surveillance of the alleyway and its forbidden nature. This is why the nun is so powerful: in her guise, de Hamal can pass freely across something that is an insurmountable boundary even to one such as Dr. John. In discussing Lucy's performance in the school play, Gilbert and Gubar write, "Though cross-dressing can surely signal self-division, paradoxically it can also liberate women from self-hatred, allowing for the freer expression of love for other women" (413). Though they are not writing about de Hamal's cross-dressing specifically, the idea at the core of it nonetheless rings true. De Hamal's nun, instead of being a symbol of repression and sexual constraint instead becomes the vehicle of expression for sexual freedom (which de Hamal is presumably expressing quite frequently with Ginevra). Instead of being a disguise, a shameful concealment, a splitting of the soul, cross-dressing in *Villette* provides tremendous power, perhaps the power to overcome the victimhood of the hapless surveillance subject.

Though initially terrified of her forced performance in the play, Lucy seems to find herself in it; or rather, to find confidence in *not* being herself. She notices that Ginevra is consciously acting "at" Dr. John. She narrates,

> There was language in Dr. John's look, though I cannot tell what he said; it animated me: I drew out of it a history; I put my idea into the part I performed; I threw it into my wooing of Ginevra. In the 'Ours,' or sincere lover, I saw Dr. John. Did I pity him, as erst? No, I hardened my heart, rivaled and out-rivalled him. I knew myself but a fop, but where *he* was outcast *I* could please" (181).

She utterly places herself into her role, as many good actors do. This is remarkable especially when one considers that this is the same Lucy who separates her outbursts of emotion and other unacceptable feelings into a not-Lucy, the same Lucy who, upon

regaining her composure and her sense of self-control says, “next day I was again Lucy Snowe” (153). For her to speak in the role of the fop while maintaining first person, identifying the character as part of herself, is of massive import. She is not fully cross-dressing, as she purposely refuses to don full male costume, accepting only a jacket to wear over her dress. Her dress is therefore something between genders, a hybrid; this mixed cross-dressing allows her a freedom, and she takes what appears to be truly genuine joy from the liberty that this affords her. Like de Hamal in the nun’s costume, she is liberated through her performance.

These two instances of cross-dressing as freedom might seem unexpected; de Hamal’s dress allows him to pass unobserved, while Lucy’s costume is for the benefit of observers, heightening surveillance, it would seem. The self-consciousness of her performance frees her, allowing her to acknowledge and accept observers and, in fact, to glory in them. It is yet another way of freeing herself from surveillance, even if in the process she might seem to gain more observers. Because she is acting, drawing the audience’s gaze towards a character, it frees the true Lucy from observation. In a sense, this is a microcosm of Lucy’s unknowable character in the novel. As evidenced by her behavior in attempting to avoid detection and avoid releases of information about herself that she has not specifically sanctioned, her whole self-concealing mode of action is an attempt to escape surveillance. As every character attempts to know and understand Lucy, she artfully uses Kucich’s concept of repression to conceal herself, to prevent their discovering who she truly is. Their constant surveillance is an attempt to conquer her efforts, to see her when she is unaware that she is being watched, to somehow observe her true self without her realizing that she has been observed. Thus, she acts; when she

shows Ginevra what appears to be an emotional outburst, it is in fact highly controlled: "half in earnest, half in seeming, I made it my business to storm down Ginevra" (424). In a game in which her object is to remain concealed and others' objective is to reveal her, she could not survive without a measure of acting ability. This very ability she exhibits with great skill. It is a survival tactic, a way for her to pass freely and undetected throughout the Rue Fossette, itself an *allée défendue* writ large.

Diana Peschier writes, "The text of *Villette* contains too many internal contradictions to be read as purely anti-Catholic. For example, Lucy Snowe's attitude towards the Roman Church is by no means consistently hostile, and more importantly her 'saviour' is a Jesuitical Catholic" (149). This is why it is so difficult to make a conclusive statement, to condemn or laud Charlotte Brontë for her treatment of Catholics in *Villette.* While the biographical facts of how Charlotte Brontë the historical and literary figure viewed Catholicism are relatively two dimensional, laid out in letters and writings, *Villette* as spoken through an implied author's voice is considerably more difficult. For instance, the reason I have thus far left M. Paul as a character and as a Catholic untouched is because he says much, and yet says nothing at all, about Charlotte Brontë's perception of Catholics. To call M. Paul Lucy's "saviour" and use it as evidence for Charlotte Brontë's open-mindedness proves just as problematic as citing her rhetoric as evidence that she is blindly hateful of Catholicism. Marianne Thormählen brings up an excellent point in her text, *The Brontës & Religion*. She writes, "Paul possesses qualities which render a union with him feasible from a religious point of view. Despite his reverence for his Jesuit confessor, he is too intelligent and open-minded to cling to what Lucy calls his prejudices when they are cogently challenged" (35). Thus he is the

embodiment of what Charlotte Brontë meant when she wrote that "there are some good Catholics," that is, that M. Paul is acceptable as a potential partner for Lucy because he listens to "reason" (which is to say, Lucy's views) and does not dismiss her out of hand. To pass a value judgment on this element of the text is thus to dismiss not only its complexities, but the complexities to be gained from an analysis of the content of this anti-Catholic rhetoric.

Brontë's work, dismissed as anti-Christian upon its publication, is often now called too preaching, too Christian. Thormählen most eloquently sums up the nature of these critiques which, it seems, have been dismissive since *Villette* was published. She writes, "Any criticism against the conduct of clergymen, and against opinions and values commonly held by Anglican Christians, expressed in the Brontë novels has always been interpreted as a more or less covert repudiation of the Christian faith" (7). Many critics fall into this trap of viewing, for instance, M. Paul as a redemption for Catholicism in *Villette* just as St. John Rivers is viewed as a representative of religion made flesh in *Jane Eyre*. Thormählen points out, "The Christian life is a foreign country to most people today, and I believe it serves some purpose to be reminded that to the Brontës it was home, with the occasional irritations as well as the manifold blessings of the domestic sphere" (9). To make any one character a representative and a model would be to ignore the complexities of the text, just as attempting to place a stamp of "good" or "bad" on Brontë's attitudes towards Catholicism reduces the text to flatness. In a moment reminiscent of her burial of the letters, Lucy narrates, "I almost wished to be covered in with earth and turf, deep out of their influence" (204). She desperately desires to be away from the watchful gaze of others, from their ability to penetrate to her innermost

character. A rejection of Catholicism intricately plays a role in this desire; it is telling in more ways than one that Lucy wishes for a live burial rather than subject herself to "the surveillance of a sleepless eye."

Conclusion

As *Villette* draws to a close, Charlotte Brontë's ever-patient readers are readying themselves for the finale. In spite of the fact that continuously throughout the novel Lucy has sought to upset any and all narrative conventions she can, and the fact that readers have just come out the other side of a chapter-long digression into an opium-induced hallucination, the novel appears to be climbing towards a cathartic close. Lucy just barely begins to hint at the outcome of M. Paul's voyage, and just as she insinuates that there may have been a storm and a shipwreck, she halts:

> Here pause: pause at once. There is enough said. Trouble no quiet, kind heart; leave sunny imaginations hope. Let it be theirs to conceive the delight of joy born again fresh out of great terror, the rapture of rescue from peril, the wonderous reprieve from dread, the fruition of return. Let them picture union and a happy

succeeding life. Madame Beck prospered all the days of her life; so did Père Silas; Madame Walravens fulfilled her ninetieth year before she died. Farewell (657).

Though it gives no information, this closing is heartbreaking because of the satisfaction that it does not allow its readers. Firstly, Lucy ends the narrative the way she begins it: a spectator. Just as she begins a mere observer in the interaction between Polly and Graham, Lucy again sidelines herself in the closing of her own narrative, giving only the sunny fates of the three characters who worked hardest to prevent her from receiving a cathartic marriage plot ending with M. Paul. Secondly, the narrative denies readers any semblance of closure in its ending. Readers are forced to confront the fact that they are allowed neither to mourn M. Paul's drowning nor celebrate his survival and reunion with Lucy. When a novel closes with a simple "missing, presumed dead," readers have no sense of what emotions they should feel, what they are allowed to feel, or what is natural to feel. By refusing to conform to any baseline structures of the natural way to end such a narrative, *Villette* also denies its readers the ability to draw on any stored knowledge of a standard expected reaction to the ending of most novels.

The power in this ending comes in that it forces readers to confront their concept of how the story "shouldn't" end; most readers, at least, react with a sense of the wrongness of the conclusion of *Villette.*[22] In reacting this way, readers must also confront their preconceived lexicon of just how a novel should end. When readers react to what they see as a narrative event that should not happen, they are by that very fact thinking of what they think ought to occur at the point in the narrative in which they are reading.

[22] And, in fact, was the reaction of Rev. Patrick Brontë, who may be responsible for the ambiguous ending; Charlotte originally wrote the story to end with M. Paul drowning, but her father told her it was too bleak and urged her to change it. Unwilling to give the novel an entirely happy ending, Charlotte took his advice and made it an undefined ending instead.

Implicit in this realization is the question of why readers believe that something, or anything even, *should* happen in a novel. In life few things follow such neat plotlines as readers expect in novels; characters in real life narratives do not always get what they deserve and plot lines are left without satisfying resolutions all the time. Because it falls into the period-appropriate genre of realist fiction, *Villette* forces readers to confront, should they pause for a moment to consider further, the nature of expectations which tropes and clichés encourage. There are few things more out of place in reality than predictable endings; why then do readers tolerate them in novels which take place in what is meant to be a photorealistic imitation of the real world? In order to force her readers to consider this question, Brontë must necessarily shock and startle them out of the unconscious act of reading.

This digs to the heart of what *Villette* aims to accomplish: by creating unsettling gaps between the expectation and the reality of the narrative, it forces readers to view the inner workings through the veil of fiction. Throughout the novel Lucy seeks to expose the scaffolding underlying the structure of writing. She reveals the working cogs in what otherwise might appear to be a smoothly-oiled, lifelike machine, instead making the gulf between reality and reading all the wider. She jars her readers again and again out of the seamless process of consuming a text. To absorb a narrative is so often to consume it as if it were a true account of life; hordes of book lovers weeping over the deaths of characters are a testament to this. There is a certain comfort in coming to know and understand a novel and its characters, in feeling as if one has been transported to live another life. *Villette* refuses to allow this out-of-self experience to run smoothly. Instead, it seeks to

throw its readers into turbulence, to disrupt and shake them from the easy, comforting flow of the expected.

This willingness to expose the conceit of the narrative means that *Villette* may be read by many as an unpolished and failed narrative. The unexpected digressions, rather than planned upsets to the status quo, could easily be seen as narrative clumsiness, manifesting a poor ability to edit out information and keep the story on track. Lucy's attitude towards her readers could be read as an ill-fated attempt at an unreliable narrator, resulting in one so unfailingly unlikable as to render her story unreadable. Ultimately, I believe these interpretations to be a result of a surface-level reading, the product of a reader falling into the very trap which the novel seeks to expose: the trap of assuming naïveté before deviousness. *Villette* constantly attempts to elicit the question from its readers of whether the narrative is intentionally unconventional or accidentally poorly-written. The measure of its success in this endeavor comes in how often readers are disrupted from suspending their disbelief. Rather than being an artistically imperfect narrative, *Villette* in fact confronts the looming trope of the realist novel head-on and toys with it in magnificent and unsettling ways.

In this study I have sought to do more than merely defend an often-overlooked novel. Rather than a failure to create a linear and cohesive story, *Villette* is instead a shimmering success of meta-fiction. The questions it draws out, the tropes it upends and the reactions it elicits are all a testament to its attainment of its goals rather than the hallmarks of its failure. I chose therefore to focus on the three elements that readers most often find problematic in the novel in the hopes of addressing what may be an overly hasty dismissal of the novel. Readers so often find Lucy's unwillingness to disclose

information to her audience abrasive and unfriendly, and on the surface it may seem such. I have attempted to address the contradictions that lie below the surface of her behavior. It is not merely that Lucy acts unfriendly but is not; in fact, she is difficult to reach because she wishes her readers to attempt to reach her. Problematic though it may be, it is an element of the narrative style rather than a failing of the author to create a likeable *Jane Eyre*-esque confidante. Secondly, readers who reach past Lucy's withholding nature often find her compulsive desire to control all about herself and her narrative before her reader's eyes grating and frustrating. This narrative move, withholding while disclosing that she is keeping information to herself, forces readers to confront the fact that she is by no means more withholding than any other narrator. What annoys them is the fact that she admits to it. Every narrator, after all, is unreliable by nature; every story told in present tense is manipulating time, every story that attempts photorealism falls short of true experience, every story that omits the most minor detail has fallen short of an absolute truth. What defines unreliable narrators is whether or not they let slip their technique. Finally, those long-suffering readers who have come to terms with *Villette*'s unfriendly narrator and her withholding nature are often struck by how small-minded and xenophobic Lucy's religious attitudes are. I seek to tread a line between acknowledging Charlotte Brontë's own Protestant sentiments against Catholicism while still pointing out the narrative function that the motif serves, as a complex representative of the fear of surveillance and external control. This is by no means an exhaustive account of the problematics of *Villette*; its elements are diffuse, and part of its benefit lies in its endless inexhaustibility. There are as many interpretations, complaints and defenses for the novel as there are readers.

In this study I do not seek to ignore the flaws in *Villette*, in Lucy, the narrative, or in the author herself. I do not wish to hail a literary second coming or claim that the work is impenetrable to real valid criticism. Instead, I have written at such length about a single novel's perceived flaws in order to provoke a sense of awe. To condemn a novel is sometimes valid, but to marvel in sheer disbelief at how a work was accomplished is to reach for the pure joy of reading. Putting *Villette* into context creates a texture so rich in material, a landscape in which readers may consider what makes the novel extraordinary. *Villette* opens itself up beautifully to both modern and historical psychological analyses, in spite of being written before Freud changed the whole landscape of the field. Charlotte Brontë as a member of the class of single women, a group largely incapable of making its voice heard in the Victorian era, created a novel with such a unique voice that it remains a critical subject more than 150 years later. A provincial, plain, middle-class woman in a time when those flaws mattered still more than they do today created a work that transcended her relatively short life and grew even larger than herself. To halt and reconsider the hidden merits of a text which one has too quickly written off is to discover a treasure in a spot where one had already searched, and this sense of wonder is the highest goal of reading. Criticism loses its luster when it forgets that what reading eventually comes back to is a shared joy between the reader and the written.

Works Cited

Basch, Françoise. *Relative Creatures: Victorian Women in Society and the Novel*. Trans. Anthony Rudolf. New York: Schocken, 1974. Print.

Booth, Wayne C. *The Rhetoric of Fiction.* Chicago: University of Chicago, 1961. Print.

Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. London: Penguin Classics, 2008. Print.

Brontë, Charlotte. *Villette*. New York: A. Knopf, 1992. Print.

Case, Alison A. *Plotting Women: Gender and Narration in the Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century British Novel*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 2005. Print.

Dickens, Charles. *Bleak House*. New York: Knopf, 1991. Print.

Duthie, Enid L. *The Foreign Vision of Charlotte Brontë*. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1975. Print.

Gaskell, Elizabeth. *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*. London: Everyman's Library, 1984. Print.

Gezari, Janet. *Charlotte Brontë and Defensive Conduct: The Author and the Body at Risk*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1992. Print.

Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1979. Print.

Gordon, Lyndall. *Charlotte Brontë: A Passionate Life*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1995. Print.

Kermode, Frank. *The Art of Telling: Essays on Fiction*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983. Print.

Kucich, John. *Repression in Victorian Fiction: Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Charles Dickens*. Berkeley: University of California, 1987. Print.

Perkin, Joan. *Victorian Women*. New York: New York University Press, 1995. Print.

Peschier, Diana. *Nineteenth-Century Anti-Catholic Discourses: The Case of Charlotte Brontë*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. Print.

Shuttleworth, Sally. *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. Print.

Sternlieb, Lisa Ruth. *The Female Narrator in the British Novel: Hidden Agendas*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2002. Print.

Stewart, Garrett. *Dear Reader: The Conscripted Audience in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. Print.

Tayler. *Holy Ghosts: Male Muses of Emily and Charlotte Brontë*. Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1990. Print.

Thormählen, Marianne. *The Brontës and Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999. Print.

Torgerson, Beth E. *Reading the Brontë Body: Disease, Desire, and the Constraints of Culture*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. Print.

Warhol, Robyn. *Gendered Interventions: Narrative Discourse in the Victorian Novel*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989. Print.

Wein, Tony "Gothic Desire in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*" from *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 39, No. 4, The Nineteenth Century (Autumn, 1999),

pp. 733-746. Rice University. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1556271>

Weinstone, Ann. "The Queerness of Lucy Snowe." *Nineteenth-Century Contexts: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 18.4 (1995): 367-84. Print.