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Woman, Subject, Writer: The Search for Selfhood in *Villette*

by

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Introduction

To understand the issues covered in this thesis, it is essential to look at the structure and chronology of Lucy's narrative. She begins her story in her early teens as she visits the home of her godmother, Mrs. Bretton. The arrival of another visitor, Paulina Home, interrupts the repose of Lucy's visit. Lucy dedicates the first three chapters of her story to the interaction between seven-year old Paulina and Mrs. Bretton's teenage son, Graham. The playful relationship Lucy observes prefigures the romantic relationship Graham and Paulina develop in adulthood. It is also a foreshadowing of the exclusion Lucy will suffer because of their attachment.

Eight years pass in Lucy's life before she continues her narrative. Toward the end of this silent period, some misfortune kept secret from the reader deprives Lucy of all family. Forced to support herself, Lucy accepts employment as a companion to an elderly, invalid woman, Miss Marchmont. Lucy's security is short-lived, for the sudden death of Miss Marchmont places her once again without a home or an income. In a moment of inspiration, Lucy decides to visit London. The trip which she had intended to last only a few days turns out to be a significant stepping stone in her adventure. Gathering all of her possessions, Lucy boards a boat to France and eventually arrives at the Pensionnat Rue Fossette in the city of Villette. The directress of the pensionnat, Madame Beck, hires Lucy to be a nursery-governess. However, Madame Beck soon recognizes the qualities of a teacher in Lucy and pushes her to teach English in her school. Lucy accepts the challenge and earns the respect of her students.

Despite her professional advances, Lucy prefers to remain on the periphery of the school's social activities. Her shy behavior and plain appearance partially secure her

from the uneasiness of social interaction. Yet, she does not succeed in escaping everyone's notice. Madame Beck takes a particular interest in Lucy, going to great lengths to "know" her newly-acquired employee. She uses freedom unauthorized by Lucy to spy and to rifle through Lucy's personal belongings. Though aware of Madame Beck's "espionage," Lucy does not confront her employer about such invasions of privacy. Instead, she respects the structure of Madame Beck's establishment with an attitude of mingled curiosity and admiration.

In addition to Madame Beck's meddling, Lucy also becomes subject to the interference of a fellow teacher, M. Paul. He refuses to let Lucy hide in the shadows of the school and profess a passive nature. M. Paul differs from all other characters in Lucy's narrative, for he alone sees a passion and a fire buried underneath her calm exterior. Like Madame Beck, M. Paul employs his own methods of observing Lucy and the other inhabitants of the Rue Fossette. He watches the women through a latticed window which overlooks the school's garden. Lucy reproaches him for his Jesuit-style spying, which she sees as a questionable extension of his Catholicism. Though his choleric personality initially makes him an irritable figure in Lucy's life, M. Paul's diametric views of her slowly change in her thoughts from hissing rebukes to welcomed challenges of intellect and spirit. In him, Lucy finds a kindred strength of mind and heart.

Although Lucy eventually finds friendship with M. Paul, a long period of loneliness and depression marks the first vacation she experiences at the Rue Fossette. In a desperate search for companionship, Lucy acts against her Protestant beliefs and wanders into a confessional at the nearby Catholic church. Her unorthodox confession

immediately attracts the attention of the priest, Père Silas. He tries to convince Lucy that the longing she possesses for friendship and purpose could be satisfied if she would only turn to the Catholic faith.

A fainting spell follows her confession and Lucy wakes in the home of her godmother, who has relocated to France. When she sees Graham, Lucy reveals to her reader that he is Dr. John, a medical practitioner who has been administering treatment to Madame Beck's daughter. Lucy acknowledges that she recognized him several chapters before she informs her reader, but she does not tell why she withheld such information.

At Mrs. Bretton's insistence, Lucy finishes out the remainder of her vacation in the Bretton home. She tentatively begins a friendship with Graham, accompanying him to art galleries, concerts, and plays. He confides in Lucy concerning his feelings for the school flirt, Ginevra Fanshawe, and Lucy voices her disapproval. As their friendship grows, Lucy's affection for Graham becomes more apparent. She tries in vain to keep her emotions in check, cherishing the letters she receives from him after her return to the Rue Fossette. When the emotion becomes too great for her, she buries the letters under an ancient pear tree in the garden.

The burial occurs soon after Paulina reenters the story. When Lucy and Graham attend the performance of a famous actress, whom Lucy calls "Vashti," the occasion brings a seventeen-year old Paulina, now the Countess de Bassompierre, back into Lucy's life and Graham's as well. The teasing behavior between Graham and Paulina resumes, but develops into a relationship bound for marriage. Lucy realizes that she will never be the recipient of anything except filial affection from Graham. She relinquishes her hope for love with him and tries to bury her grief.

The moments that Lucy's awareness of her feelings is most keen are also the moments in *Villette* when Brontë explores the Gothic style. When Lucy receives her first letter from Graham, she waits to read it until she is alone in the dimly-lit garret of the Rue Fossette. There, in the partial darkness, Lucy sees the figure of a nun. Whether it is real or imagined, Lucy cannot tell. However, she fears that it may be the ghost of a nun who was rumored to have been buried under the pear tree for some sin against her vow. Lucy sees the nun again in the garden when burying her letters, and a final time when she and M. Paul are together. Close to her narrative's end, Lucy discovers that the nun was neither a figment of her imagination nor the ghost of a buried nun. It was only a suitor of Ginevra's, Alfred de Hamal, who came secretly to the Rue Fossette under the guise of a nun.

M. Paul and Lucy's shared sighting of the nun strengthens the friendship between them, but their religious differences threaten to separate them. Aside from personal disagreements, which they ultimately resolve, Lucy's Protestantism creates conflict for M. Paul in his private life. Lucy learns that devotion to a young woman who died long ago keeps M. Paul indebted to the girl's surviving family. The woman's family, along with the M. Paul's priest, Père Silas, and Madame Beck, put pressure on M. Paul to end his relationship with Lucy, as her religious beliefs make her unfit to marry. In a last attempt to appease them, M. Paul promises to sail to the West Indies and fulfill an overseas obligation. Before his departure, he leaves Lucy with the finances and the furnishings to begin her own school, thus providing her with the means to be financially independent. He also asks her to marry him when he returns, a proposal which Lucy accepts.

Lucy tells her reader that M. Paul's journey keeps him away for three years. During that time, she manages her school well and gains sufficient resources to turn it into a pensionnat. As for M. Paul's return home, Lucy does not divulge many details. She tells of a great storm in the Atlantic and of many wrecks strewn over the ocean. But she does not tell if M. Paul comes back to her safely. Instead, Lucy leaves her ending open and her reader unsure of his outcome.

Purpose of this Work

In my research and writing on *Villette*, I have encountered varying theories and readings of Lucy's character. Though there has been considerable critical study of this novel, the work remains largely unknown to many readers of Brontë's more popular writings. The cause for *Villette*'s partial obscurity rests primarily with its even more obscure narrator. At a significant moment in the novel, the coquettish Ginevra asks Lucy the pointed question, "Who *are* you, Miss Snowe?" It is a recurring inquiry in *Villette*, for Lucy shrouds her identity with mystery for most of her narrative. She does not reveal her name until the second chapter or her age until the fifth. Her evasions frustrate the implied trust between reader and first-person narrator. She stays in the margins of her narrative, telling her story through the stories of others. Lucy discloses parts of herself throughout *Villette*, but structures her tale so that a second reading is almost imperative to truly understand her. Indeed, to interpret Lucy's search for selfhood, one must decode her writing and unravel the mystery of Lucy Snowe.

For this reason, I have organized my writing according to the progression of Lucy's self-realization rather than the progression of her narrative. In the first chapter, I examine how the theories of self, sanity and sexuality which were current in Brontë's day are

represented in *Villette*. In the Victorian period, science and religion held powerful positions of authority over the definition of self. Both doctor and priest professed the possession of knowledge necessary to know an individual's inner nature. The doctor relied on the emerging field of mental science, whereas the priest gained access to a person's private thoughts through the course of confession. These prevailing beliefs concerning identity and its demarcations greatly impacted the Victorian ideas of femininity. Sexuality in a woman was a dangerous threat to her social worth and her mental health. In *Villette*, these theories are manifested in pictorial and character illustrations of femininity.

Lucy's construction of identity occurs in the midst of unrealistic images of women. Lucy depicts this search for selfhood through her development of herself as subject of her story. She realizes that the lack of sufficient female roles leaves her without an adequate model to follow. Lucy therefore creates her own role and her own path to self-discovery. Although Brontë's writing predates the theories of Sigmund Freud, his ideas concerning repression and negation are articulated in Lucy's method of self-expression/repression. She tries to cover her inner emotions with secrecy and shadow. Nonetheless, despite Lucy's tendency to stay in the shadows, her behavior reflects and resists the social structure of her time. Her desire to play the games of society, but according to her own rules, illustrates her struggle to find self-definition. It is through her social relationships that Lucy ultimately stumbles upon the surprising realization of self.

The final chapter concentrates on Lucy's identity as a writer; for it is through writing that Lucy discovers her true voice. She uses a unique style of writing which is both illuminating and, at times, confusing. Lucy's struggle to express herself through writing

mirrors her search for selfhood in a patriarchal culture. Writing provides the means for creative expression and self-articulation. Lucy's narrative gives her a powerful voice which addresses the plight of a woman in Victorian society and the need for a woman to create herself.

Though it is only one piece of literature, *Villette* functions as a crucible of the psychological, religious, and social issues in Brontë's life. It draws upon the historical aspects of Victorian society and also upon the author's personal loves and losses. Yet, it is not a novel which covers matters only significant for Victorians. It also became a manifesto for women writers, ranging from Brontë's contemporaries to feminist authors in the twentieth century. As Lyndall Gordon writes in her biography of Charlotte Brontë:

Effaced by the current model of womanhood...there remained the shadow in which Charlotte lived: the dark dress of the governess; the shade of her closed eyelids as she wrote; the cover of "Currer Bell," the indeterminate name on her books. In this shadow there lurked the shape of an unknown character as it came into being: the source of a new voice of truth that was to burst on Victorian society in the late 1840s...To some extent, Currer Bell treats the disabling conditions which blocked women's rise (and this was her interest for feminists of the twentieth century), but primarily she believes that a woman must create herself (and this is where she speaks to generations yet to come). To rise is an imaginative act.¹

When Ginevra demands to know just *who* Lucy Snowe is, Lucy replies, "I am a rising character."²

It is a statement which holds true for Lucy and for Charlotte. Brontë's writing attests to her rise from oppressive circumstances into a powerful writer. Lucy Snowe mirrors Brontë in her struggle to live a life of honesty and fulfillment, despite the constant "tension between the snowy social self and the ardent inner self."³ Lucy's rise from obscurity and misfortune into confidence, independence, and an articulation of self in

writing follows the significant events in Brontë's life. Both women appear in society to be figures of "pathos in the shadow of tombstones," but each has within her a creativity which transforms the shadows of apparent feebleness into a "potency that goes unseen."⁴

For Lucy Snowe and Charlotte Brontë, the act of writing is not only a means of self-expression, but also a defiance of social structure. In *Villette*, Brontë tells a story similar in content to *Jane Eyre*, but different in style. Unlike Jane, Lucy is a secretive and elusive narrator. For over a century, her evasions have frustrated critics, some of whom have labeled Lucy a deceptive and confused storyteller. Others, like Gordon, take an opposing view, perceiving the author behind Lucy Snowe who lived a life of such evasions and represents them through her most personal narrative:

For some the most intense feeling, whether it be erotic or religious, requires mystery, concealment, privacy, and a sense of the unspeakable. This was true of all the Brontë sisters. There is no truth which does not include lost facts and silence—the question of what is *not* said... Her "Reader" is the person who responds to the stimulus of secrecy... Without secrecy, there would be no art.⁵

Brontë's passion and identity lay hidden from most of society. Only in her writing, both in novels and letters, did her voice find the clarity and force which her circumstances would have otherwise prevented.

¹ Lyndall Gordon, *Charlotte Brontë: A Passionate Life*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1995), pg. 2-3.

² Charlotte Brontë, *Villette* (New York: Penguin Books, 1979), chapter 27. All subsequent references will be to this edition and in chapter divisions.

³ Lyndall Gordon, *Charlotte Brontë: A Passionate Life*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1995), pg. 231.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 230-231.

Chapter I: The Self as Woman

At the time of its composition, *Villette* reflected and resisted current theories regarding self, sanity, and sexuality. New ideas of subjectivity in the Victorian period shifted the emphasis in selfhood from social interaction to inner constitution. Scientists and socialites alike became intrigued with what resided in the hidden, and perhaps unconscious, aspects of the individual. If one could not truly know the recesses of his or her mind, how could one then be certain of his or her sanity? The ability to determine mental health now rested in the hands of outside observers. The result of this thinking was both fear and fascination. Each individual strained to keep all signs of possible illness within his or her control. In her study of Victorian psychology, Sally Shuttleworth notes that “All had to remain vigilant against the momentary slippage of the social mask...Insanity was no longer a self-evident disease which demarcated the sufferer from the rest of humanity; it could lurk...within the most respectable breasts, to be spotted only by the trained eye.”¹

The uncertainty surrounding self and sanity generated a demand for those who could decode the language of selfhood. In the early modern period, the priest had held the primary position of interpreter.² The authority to gain access to inner secrets through confession gave him a powerful control over all individuals who walked through the church doors. However, the rise of mental science brought with it a rival to the priest's position. The doctor, like the priest, possessed, or at least asserted, the power of locating and treating concealed ailments. He used his knowledge of science and psychiatry to penetrate through a patient's outer layers to his or her inner nature:

The medical practitioner not only sees into the depths of the patient's mind, but reads there the biological processes, unknown to the patient, which actually compose the self. The mind is dissolved into biology, and only the doctor holds the key to its secrets. To arrive at self-understanding, and thus mental cure, the patient must place his or herself entirely in the hands of the physician. Power to infer integrity of selfhood, and understanding of the relationship between inner mind and outward show, now rests, it is claimed, within the hands of the medical profession.³

Foucault's depiction of confession mirrors the interaction between the psychiatrist and the patient: "It tended no longer to be concerned solely with what the subject wished to hide, but with what was hidden from himself, being incapable of coming to light except gradually and through the labor of a confession in which the questioner and the questioned each had a part to play."⁴ To ascertain what troubled the confessor, the priest probed and analyzed the individual, searching for hidden meaning and motivation in each of his subject's words. Then with his judgment drawn, he prescribed the cure through religious penance.

The similarity between the position and function of both the doctor and the priest is significant. Their authority provided the license to pry into the inner lives of individuals. For health and sanity's sake, people were encouraged to withhold nothing and grant these figures access to the deepest parts of their thoughts, emotions, and unconscious influences. The doctor and the priest shared the authority to judge what was healthy and unhealthy, or more specifically in the priest's case, what was moral or immoral. As Foucault puts it, "The one who listened was not simply the forgiving master, the judge who condemned or acquitted; he was the master of truth."⁵

Lucy as Subject of Scientific Surveillance

In *Villette*, Dr. John illustrates the scientific surveillance and powerful relationship between doctor and patient which characterized Victorian psychology. As a young girl in

the Bretton home, Lucy goes relatively unnoticed to Graham. He tells little Polly that “Mistress Snowe there” fails to yield him any amusement (chap. 2). Only when Lucy becomes a subject for Graham’s study does she attract his attention. After her fainting spell, Dr. John begins to view Lucy through the gaze of medical science. Her sighting of the nun creates a curious spectacle for him, and he officially sets her up as a patient: “I look on you now from a professional point of view, and I read, perhaps, all you would conceal—in your eye, which is curiously vivid and restless; in your cheek, which the blood has forsaken; in your hand, which you cannot steady” (chap. 22). He uses the power of interpretative observation, intrinsic to his medical position, to attempt an unveiling of Lucy’s hidden suffering. In this passage, Dr. John reveals his desire to be the “master of truth” over Lucy’s inner state. He determines to be the listener, judge, and master of Lucy, his subject.

However, as the novel progresses, the reader begins to see that despite his confidence in medicine and in his own powers of observation, Dr. John seems oblivious to Lucy’s true nature. When Lucy first sees the nun, she refuses to tell him of her sighting. Ultimately, Dr. John wins her confidence and she confides in him concerning what she saw. The closeness and confidentiality of the scene resembles the interaction in a confessional. Dr. John listens to Lucy’s experience and then stamps his judgment on the situation: “I think it a case of spectral illusion: I fear, following on and resulting from long-continued mental conflict...Happiness is the cure—a cheerful mind the preventive: cultivate both” (chap. 22). Apart from the secret horror that she might be suffering from some attack of insanity, Lucy feels that Dr. John’s assessment is not entirely realistic: “No mockery in this world ever sounds to me so hollow as that of

being told to *cultivate* happiness. What does such advice mean? Happiness is not a potato, to be planted in mould, and tilled with manure" (chap. 22). Lucy perceives an error in Dr. John's reasoning, which leads her to doubt his ability to truly know her. Eventually Lucy concludes, "In short, he regarded me scientifically in the light of a patient, and at once exercised his professional skill, and gratified his natural benevolence, by a course of cordial and attentive treatment" (chap. 23). She realizes that Dr. John cannot penetrate to the real Lucy Snowe, because all he sees in her is a patient.

In addition to Dr. John's medical gaze, Lucy finds herself the studied object of M. Paul. M. Paul makes his initial judgments based on the art of physiognomy rather than psychology. According to Shuttleworth, in the nineteenth century, physiognomy was held to be an extension of theology. Proponents of the practice believed that "God had inscribed a language on the face of nature for all to read." She says, "It necessarily followed, therefore, that an absolute correspondence existed between outer human form and inner moral quality."⁶ When Lucy seeks employment at the Rue Fossette, Madame Beck entreats M. Paul to decipher Lucy's inner character from her outer features. Lucy relates the experience, which marks her first encounter with M. Paul: "'Mon cousin,' began madame, 'I want your opinion. We know your skill in physiognomy; use it now. Read that countenance.' The little man fixed on me his spectacles. A resolute compression of the lips, and gathering of the brow, seemed to say that he meant to see through me, and that a veil would be no veil for him." When he has read Lucy's countenance, Madame Beck inquires whether it is good or bad. He replies, "Of each kind, without doubt" (chap. 7).

Lucy's narrative proves M. Paul's judgment of Lucy's character to be more accurate than Dr. John's. When Lucy reluctantly acts in a play under M. Paul's direction, she discovers a pleasure in acting of which she had previously been unaware. M. Paul sees it too and tells her, "I watched you, and saw a passionate ardour for triumph in your physiognomy. What fire shot into the glance! Not mere light, but flame" (chap. 15). He sees what others cannot and what Lucy herself often denies.

Lucy as Subject of Religious Surveillance

Apart from scientific surveillance, Lucy also experiences religious surveillance under the watchful gaze of the priest, Père Silas. He, like Dr. John, wishes to penetrate through Lucy's external layers to see the internal workings of her heart and mind. When loneliness and desperation lead Lucy to the confessional, Silas marks her as a target for conversion. He later tells her:

I, daughter, am Père Silas; that unworthy son of Holy Church whom you once honoured with a noble and touching confidence, showing me the core of a heart, and the inner shrine of a mind whereof, in solemn truth, I coveted the direction, in behalf of the only true faith. Nor have I for a day lost sight of you, nor for an hour failed to take in you a rooted interest...I realized what then might be your spiritual rank, your practical value; and I envy Heresy her prey. (chap. 34)

He concludes his revealing speech with a statement of prediction: "Daughter, you *shall* be what you *shall* be!" Silas's words divulge his intention to delve deeply into Lucy's inner person where he can turn her heart and mind to the path of "the only true faith." He believes that then, and only then, will Lucy find real peace and satisfaction. According to Marianne Thormählen, the priest's plan takes Lucy's character carefully into account:

Although he claims to be momentarily taken aback by the young woman to whom his customary set of routine responses does not apply, he soon divines her weak spots and engineers his temptations accordingly. Lucy's passionate nature, frustrated and mortified in her loneliness and desperation for kindness and affection, is one of his three targets. Another is her aesthetic sensibilities, which

he hopes to impress by way of the splendors of Roman Catholic worship. Finally, she has an extraordinarily active intellect allied to an ascetic, somewhat morbid streak and a conspicuous absence of any talent for contentment. Such people rarely attain serenity in a life by their own efforts, and Père Silas holds the key to that state: soothed by a carefully prescribed routine of good works, just arduous enough to keep her strictly occupied without exhausting her, her searching, irritable mind will surely find peace.⁷

Silas believes, as Dr. John does, that for Lucy to find solace and comfort, complete control must be placed in his hands.

Lucy's response to Catholicism's methods of surveillance is anything but admiring. According to Lucy, its system of control takes "great pains...to hide chains with flowers" (chap. 14). Rather than know the inner nature of its members, Lucy asserts that the Catholic Church only wishes to enslave them. When reflecting on the religious surveillance exercised over girls at the Rue Fossette, Lucy draws inference between the followers of Lucifer and those of the Catholic Church, as well as the temptations of Christ:

Each mind was being reared in slavery... There, as elsewhere, 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. I hold their cure—guide their course: I guarantee their final fate."... Lucifer just offers the same terms: "All this power will I give thee, and the glory of it; for that is delivered unto me, and to whomsoever I will I give it. If thou, therefore, wilt worship me, all shall be thine!" (chap. 14)

Lucy distrusts the institution of the Catholic Church, its agent the priest, and its method of domination, the confessional. Lucy refers to its system of management as "the surveillance of a sleepless eye" and its tool as "the mystic lattice" (chap. 36). According to Shuttleworth, the lattice of the confessional is a means through which the female nature can be watched and unveiled: "The 'magic lattice' forms another medium for the male gaze to penetrate through to the recesses of the female psyche, furnishing

information which is then appropriated to judge and censor, in accordance with male definitions of female decorum.”⁸ It is through this lattice that the priest acquires knowledge of his confessor’s secret thoughts and feelings. Lucy, however, cannot relinquish control over the things the priest would wish to know, because she fears that he sees her only as a potential convert.

Just as M. Paul’s efforts to read Lucy’s nature through scientific surveillance differ only slightly from the doctor’s, so too do his religious techniques of surveillance bear significant resemblance to the priest’s. He watches Lucy and the other women of the Rue Fossette through his own “magic lattice” which overlooks the garden. M. Paul tells Lucy, “When the English teacher came, I saw her, marked her early preference for this alley, noted her taste for seclusion, watched her well, long before she and I came to speaking terms” (chap. 31). His observations “save” him from Zélie St. Pierre, whose “arts” he witnessed and judged by way of the lattice (chap. 31). Though Lucy condemns his methods as unwarranted spying, M. Paul’s surveillance reveals a truer picture of the women watched by the “sleepless eye” of Rome. Through his lattice, he sees what the priest cannot.

Figuring in Femininity

Central to the issues of self and sanity was the subject of woman. Femininity became a popular topic for debate and discussion as emerging ideologies shaped woman into a text to be deciphered and dissected. Women were the focus of an interpretative gaze which sought to understand the female nature through penetration of its outer layers and control of its core. Women were also closely linked to theories of insanity, because they were considered more susceptible to instability and the problems of excess. Shuttleworth

notes that theories of gender division characterized men as having self-control and women as being subject to the forces of the body.⁹ Consequently, women were thought to fall into hysterics and insanity more readily than men. The search to understand the processes of the female body extended to include understanding of the female mind. The two were then hinged together by scientific and religious concepts of female sexuality.

Sexuality, like the self and sanity, was a complex but fascinating subject within Victorian circles. It was considered taboo for young, unmarried women, but was studiously examined through medical and religious surveillance. Peter T. Cominos defines the Victorian idea of innocence to be a “pure-mindedness” or “inherent purity” which “was an exalted state of feminine consciousness, a state of unique deficiency or mindlessness in their daughters of that most elementary, but forbidden knowledge of their own sexuality, instincts and desires as well as the knowledge of good and evil.”¹⁰ Young women were closely monitored to protect them from any awareness of their own sexuality. This theoretically prevented them from falling into immoral behavior, since they lacked the knowledge of sexual sin.

In addition to threatening a woman’s virginal worth, sexuality as seen through Victorian eyes also posed dangers to a woman’s body. Sexuality was viewed as potential excess; and excess in any area put at risk what Victorians considered to be normal and natural functioning:

Nineteenth-century physiology and psychiatry broke down earlier absolute divides between the normal and pathological, insisting that disease arose merely from an excess or deficiency of elements integral to normal functioning. Excessive activity in one sphere might engender physical or mental breakdown; valuable qualities might turn into agents of pollution if developed to too high a degree.¹¹

Any activity engaged in too enthusiastically was thought to cause unnatural excess in the individual. If that activity stemmed from sexuality, it was considered even more dangerous. Foucault provides a telling description of sexuality which resembles the view of insanity: "Sexuality was a medical and medicalizable object, one had to try and detect it—as a lesion, a dysfunction, or a symptom—in the depths of the organism, or on the surface of the skin, or among all the signs of behavior."¹²

One disease attributed to excess was monomania, which was characterized by partial insanity. Esquirol, in defining the disorder, based his categories upon areas of what he considered to be female vulnerability. According to him, women were more likely to fall into religious and erotic melancholy, which led to religious and erotic monomania.¹³

Religious melancholy resulted from a transfer of sexual desire to excessive religious devotion. As Cominos states, the outlets for female desire were limited and monitored: "While gentlemen were urged to conquer their sexual instincts by complete sublimation through work, genteel, women, barred from work and confined to the family circle, sublimated through religion, 'the only channel' through which the sexual emotions could be expressed 'freely without impropriety.'"¹⁴ The passion usually reserved for humans was transfigured into an ideal love for Christ.¹⁵ However, even such a proper and approved love of religion still appeared dangerous when engaged in too zealously.

Models of Femininity

When Lucy visits an art gallery with Graham, she casts a critical eye on two representations of female desire—one which manifests in the woman's body and the other which manifests in religious devotion. The "Cleopatra" depicts a large, indecently-clad woman lying lazily on a couch, with no apparent goal except to be gazed upon.

Lucy offers her candid opinion on the painting, calling it “an enormous piece of claptrap” and a “coarse and preposterous canvas” (chap. 19). She offers an equally unflattering commentary on the pictures to which M. Paul directs her, which portray religious monomania and are entitled “La vie d’une femme”:

They were painted rather in a remarkable style—flat, dead, pale and formal. The first represented a “Jeune Fille,” coming out of a church-door, a missal in her hand, her dress very prim, her eyes cast down, her mouth pursed up—the image of a most villainous little precocious she-hypocrite. The second, a “Mariée” with a long white veil, kneeling at a prie-dieu in her chamber, holding her hands plastered together, finger to finger, and showing the whites of her eyes in a most exasperating manner. The third, a “Jeune Mère,” hanging disconsolate over a clayey and puffy baby with a face like an unwholesome full moon. The fourth, a “Veuve,” being a black woman, holding by the hand a black little girl, and the twain studiously surveying an elegant French monument.

Lucy finishes her description, saying, “All these four ‘Anges’ were grim and gray as burglars, and cold and vapid as ghosts...insincere, ill-humoured, bloodless, brainless nonentities! As bad in their way as the indolent gipsy-giantess, the Cleopatra, in hers” (chap. 19).

Although the two pieces of artwork present qualities of female life which men desired, they also resemble the potential excesses of sexuality and religion believes to cause monomania. The “Cleopatra” represents the sensual woman, the one who exists purely for male pleasure and carnality. She is the beautiful, sexual, material woman. The character from Lucy’s story most like this image is Ginevra. She garners much praise and attention for her outward beauty, yet she is vain, sarcastic, and materialistic. She disrespects authority, manipulates men for money, and cares nothing for the academic pursuits in life. Her shallowness is masked only by her attractiveness. Despite her shortcomings, she exists for most of the novel as Dr. John’s love interest. Not until he catches a telling glance between Ginevra and De Hamal does Dr. John relinquish her as

the object of his affection. He tells Lucy, "It was a look marking mutual and secret understanding—it was neither girlish nor innocent. No woman, were she as beautiful as Aphrodite, who could give or receive such a glance, shall ever be sought in marriage by me" (chap. 20). The realization of Ginevra's active sexuality immediately casts her into a category of women who are outwardly attractive, but undesirable for marriage. Though Ginevra possesses the sensuality which men admire, her desire to use her sexuality outside marital boundaries pushes her dangerously close to the image of an erotic monomaniac.

While the picture of Cleopatra presents the sexual woman, the paintings to which M. Paul points Lucy illustrate the life of the "innocent" woman absorbed in submission to religion. According to Cominos's description of Victorian femininity, the perfect woman was a combination of the domestic woman and the innocent sensual woman.¹⁶ There existed little room for variation: "Women were classified into polar extremes. They were either sexless ministering angels or sensuously oversexed temptresses of the devil; they were either aids to continence or incontinence; they facilitated or they exacerbated male sexual control."¹⁷ The set of four pictures clearly demonstrates the life of a "sexless ministering angel." The first painting shows a young girl leaving church, which carried an implied message to women that any premarital love or desire was to be channeled into the sacred form of religious devotion. The young, unmarried woman was to dedicate herself to God just as she would dedicate herself to her husband. The second painting depicts a similar situation with a woman kneeling and clasping her hands together. However, the title of "Wife" indicates that her energies are now transferred from serving the church to serving her husband. In the third painting, the woman has become a

mother, and thus has fulfilled the primary duty of the female life. Husband and child are the focuses of her affection. And finally, in the fourth painting, the widow shows her lasting devotion to her husband, though he is no longer with her. In each of these portraits, a woman is depicted in submission to male authority. The pictures replace the excess sexuality of the "Cleopatra" with an excess of religious and familial devotion.

Just as Ginevra reflects the sensuality of the Cleopatra painting, so also does Paulina mirror the Victorian ideal of a woman's life. As a child, little Polly possesses the simplicity and innocence Victorians cherished in their daughters. She models herself after the genteel lady, looking to Lucy like a miniature woman, a "mere doll" (chap. 1). She absorbs herself completely in finishing her tasks, behaving properly, and, most significantly, adoring her father. Paulina's relationship with her father was ideal by Victorian standards, but it also made her susceptible to emotional and mental unbalance: "Her upbringing thwarted her mature development toward becoming free of parental authority and synthesizing both figures [father and husband] in her conscience. On the contrary, so great was the deference for the figure of the authoritarian father, that the young daughter often formed a neurotic attachment to the father and transferred the feeling to her husband."¹⁸ Paulina clearly demonstrates this neurotic attachment to her father which she then transfers to her suitor.

When Paulina comes to the Bretton home as a tiny child, her entire world consists of her father. She tends to him as a wife would and seems content only to be near him. After his departure, however, Graham becomes the new fixture of Paulina's affection. Lucy watches the development with careful eye: "Herself was forgotten in him... One would have thought the child had no mind or life of her own, but must necessarily live,

move, and have her being in another: now that her father was taken from her, she nestled to Graham, and seemed to feel by his feelings: to exist in his existence" (chap. 3).

Paulina's transfer of feelings perfectly mirrors the concepts of the Victorians which Cominos describes:

Conventional Victorians feared improvement in the lives of women which might strengthen them to stand alone. Women were praised for their "childlike innocence and infantine simplicity." They were brought up to be clinging and dependent and their relatedness to the world was a highly dependent one. When they married, they merged their existence into that of their husbands. It was widely believed that "the wife's true relation to her husband" was that her "whole life and being, her soul, body, time, property, thought, and care, ought to be given to her husband; that nothing short of such absorption in him and his interests makes her a true wife."¹⁹

When Paulina reenters the story as a young lady, she retains the characteristics Victorians cherished in their daughters. She remains childlike, innocent, and fully devoted to the male authority in her life.

The paintings of Cleopatra and the life of a woman reflect not only the different models of Victorian women, but also the way they are composed. The pictures and the ideas of femininity are male-derived constructions of woman. The Cleopatra is allowed her sexuality, but she is still cordoned off and set up to please the male gaze. De Hamal, the eventual husband of Ginevra, gazes approvingly at the "Cleopatra." The sensuality of the painting gives him pleasure as does Ginevra's illicit sexuality. The four women in the other paintings are more "active" than the Cleopatra, but they are also completely subject to male authority. Their action is limited to that which serves the patriarchal structure. One kind of woman exists for male pleasure, the other for his service. In both depictions, Victorian ideology frames and flattens the female life. The male artist holds the power in his hand to draw woman whatever way he pleases.

Amid the different types of surveillance and the contrasting models of femininity, stands the singular figure of M. Paul. He borrows from the arts of medicine and religion, creating his own kind of penetrating gaze and concentrating it on Lucy. M. Paul turns her away from the “Cleopatra” and toward the “La vie d’une femme,” avowing that Lucy’s nature is too passionate to look on such a display of sensuality. Though Lucy initially resists his interference and condemns his form of surveillance, Lyndall Gordon remarks, “Unlike the voyeur of ‘Cleopatra’ or dissembler of Vashti, M. Paul is a man who can ‘see’ a woman. Lucy is outraged by what she takes to be his ‘Jesuitical’ spying. But he is determined to know her, and in the end, she finds it compelling.”²⁰ M. Paul does not conform to one form of surveillance, just as Lucy does not mold herself to either portrait of femininity. And this shared resistance to social stereotypes proves to be a key influence in Lucy’s search for selfhood.

Vashti

When Lucy goes to the theatre for Vashti’s performance, she sees a female model which transcends both the sensual Cleopatra and the cold portraits of a woman’s life. Lucy’s use of the name “Vashti” signifies the actress’s subversive behavior. In the Book of Esther, Vashti was a queen who disobeyed the king’s command to parade her beauty in front of him and his men. When she refused to come at the king’s bidding, the men in his company worried what the women in the kingdom would do when they heard of Vashti’s disobedience. They feared that men would lose respect and control in their households if nothing were done. Therefore, to make a statement, the king had Vashti banished and promptly began a three-year long search for the most beautiful virgin to take her place. The space given to Vashti in the Book of Esther is minimal. However, her impact is

great when viewed from a feminist perspective. Vashti denies the patriarchal system its power to control her actions, and she is then exiled in favor of a new, more submissive woman.

When Lucy attends Vashti's performance, she finds herself unable to hand out a neutral, passive judgment. Her contradictory statements reveal the ambiguity of her opinion: "It was a marvelous sight: a might revelation. It was a spectacle low, horrible, immoral" (chap. 23). Lucy's struggle to define the experience resembles the difficulty Victorians had in defining more than two types of women, as Cominos remarks:

Victorian society and the family spawned two kinds of women, the womanly woman and her negation, the wholly whore: the pure and the impure... No dialectic could join the two; a great and impassable gulf divided them. In summary, the respectable ideal of purity represented unadulterated femininity; her opposite represented the *projection* of those rejected and unacceptable desires and actions that must be destroyed to keep women pure beings. If those thoughts and actions could not be totally suppressed inside the womanly woman, they had to be destroyed in the projected outside version of herself.²¹

Vashti represents the woman who has allowed her passions to run rampant within her, and has therefore had them projected onto her external appearance. She is the outward expression of "Madness incarnate" (chap. 23). She does not bury passion in sexual indulgence like the "Cleopatra" or in devotion to male authority as the women of "La vie d'une femme" do. She gives it free reign, and it exorcises her from Victorian society, writing "HELL on her straight, haughty brow" (chap. 23). Although Vashti's display of unhindered passion excites and moves Lucy, the life Vashti represents is an impossible model for Lucy to follow. Tony Tanner describes the horrifying alternative that such a life would be for Lucy:

She is the wrong kind of shadow, and has given up substance in a deadly cause—the complete capitulation of the body to be an expressive instrument for undifferentiated passion. She is not a lucent lamp but "wasted like wax in flame,"

feeding the fires that devour her. What will be left will not be an authentic self, but merely a “hollow,” all substance lost in the shadow of non-Being.²²

Letting passion consume the self would not be true to Lucy’s character. Yet it is this expression of passion—not mere sensuality or false humility—that Lucy admires and envies.

During Vashti’s performance, Lucy makes two significant realizations concerning the feminine roles society has pushed on her. Lucy invokes the artist of the Cleopatra to “come and sit down and study this different vision. Let him seek here the mighty brawn, the muscle, the abounding blood, the full-fed flesh he worshipped: let all materialists draw nigh and look on” (chap. 23). In Vashti, Lucy sees a woman who is not simply sexual or voluptuous. She is passionate, and her passion is one not yet captured by the male painter’s hand.

Lucy also realizes the failings of the medical doctor, Dr. John. When asked for his opinion, Dr. John gives Lucy “a few terse phrases,” in which Lucy says, “He judged her as a woman, not an artist: it was a branding judgment” (chap. 23). His judgment is marred by Victorian ideals and his own male prejudice. Thus, he bases his conclusion on her sex rather than her abilities. According to Shuttleworth, Dr. John “replicates, in the ‘intense curiosity’ with which he watches her performance, the professional gaze he has recently imposed on Lucy. His verdict underscores, for Lucy, his indifference to the inner movements of female experience...Dr. John’s response is determined entirely by predefined categories of suitable female behavior.”²³ Vashti reveals, as Shuttleworth observes, a union between mind and body, “whilst the artist reduces woman to a material expanse of flesh, and the doctor to a mere encasement of nerves.”²⁴

The theories concerning sanity and femininity discussed in this chapter structure the setting for Lucy's story. Situated between two unrealistic and unforgiving models of female life, and aware that she is subject to the constant scrutiny of male surveillance, Lucy struggles to define herself amidst and against the societal standards of her time. She judges the two pictures of femininity in the gallery to be both implausible and empty. She has neither the desire nor the financial security to laze about as the Cleopatra does. Her hunger for passion and intellect could never be satisfied in the contrasting life of subservience which resembles the life of a cloistered nun. Yet, Vashti's powerful and unhindered performance presents an equally impractical life for a Victorian woman. Lucy knows that to be so emotionally unbound would surely brand madness across her brow, just as she envisions "HELL" written upon Vashti's. Thus, Lucy is left with no adequate model of femininity to follow.

¹ Sally Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pg. 9, 221.

² See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, (New York: Random House, 1978), Vintage Books ed. Foucault discusses the role of a priest as both a confidante and an authoritarian figure in the nineteenth century.

³ Ibid., pg. 45.

⁴ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, (New York: Random House, 1978), Vintage Books ed., pg. 66.

⁵ Ibid., pg. 67.

⁶ Sally Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pg. 59.

⁷ Marianne Thormählen, *The Brontës and Religion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pg. 31.

⁸ Sally Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pg. 225.

⁹ Ibid., pg. 4.

¹⁰ Peter T. Cominos, "Innocent Femina Sensualis in Unconscious Conflict." *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*. Ed. Martha Vicinus, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), pg. 157.

¹¹ Sally Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pg. 12.

¹² Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, (New York: Random House, 1978), Vintage Books ed., pg. 44.

¹³ Sally Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pg. 230.

¹⁴ Peter T. Cominos, "Innocent Femina Sensualis in Unconscious Conflict." *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*. Ed. Martha Vicinus, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), pg. 163.

¹⁵ Ibid., pg. 164.

¹⁶ Ibid., pg. 156.

¹⁷ Ibid., pg. 167.

¹⁸ Ibid., pg. 169.

¹⁹ Ibid., pg. 161.

²⁰ Lyndall Gordon, *Charlotte Brontë: A Passionate Life*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1995), pg. 264.

²¹ Ibid., pg. 168.

²² Tony Tanner. Introduction. *Villette*. By Charlotte Brontë. Ed. Mark Lilly, (New York: Penguin Books, 1979), pg. 24.

²³ Sally Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pg. 238.

²⁴ Ibid., pg. 239.

Chapter II: The Self as Subject

Lucy's struggle to develop herself as the subject of her story reflects her search for selfhood. Forced into action by circumstances attributed to fate, Lucy finds that she cannot remain in a passive existence. She must forge her own path and uncover her voice. However, each movement pierces her with the often jarring realization that she lacks what most Victorian women rely upon for identity—wealth, family, and beauty. To protect herself from possible pain, loss and rejection, as well as to make a role for herself, Lucy attempts to move outside the realm of social interaction and observation. She becomes an observer, an appropriator of the gaze usually focused on her. Lucy creates a type of watchtower from which she can safely guard her inner self while trying to uncover the true natures of those around her. The activity of watching, analyzing, and concealing develops into her construction of selfhood.

According to Sally Shuttleworth, the art of concealment coincided with the structure of identity in the Victorian era. She says, "...the condition of selfhood is dependent on having something to conceal. The egoist who acts without self-consciousness is self-less. Awareness of an audience, and of one's ability to baffle their penetration, constitutes the essential basis of selfhood."¹ This is true for Lucy both in her relationships to other characters in her novel and also in her relationship to her reader. Each person in her story, including the reader, exists as an audience and exercises a form of surveillance over her. In response to this imposed scrutiny, Lucy creates different masks to cover aspects of her self. Her desire to keep certain thoughts and emotions hidden prefigures the theories Freud develops on repression and negation over fifty years after *Villette* was

written. However, as Shuttleworth notes, the ability to conceal is not enacted merely as a defense against prying eyes. It is rather a part to play in the game of social interaction and self-construction: "The self does not exist prior to social interaction, but is actually *constituted* in the social struggle to baffle penetration. The desire of the other to read the self brings to the subject of surveillance a reassuring sense of self-‘possession’: a sense of selfhood is actively produced through the experience of the power to withhold."² Lucy is an actor and a spectator, an agent and a subject. She stands on the outside edges, but she cannot escape that essentially she *is* the story.

In her study of Bronte’s earlier writings, Shuttleworth notes a similar “erotic interplay” of self-actualization through social interaction and concealment. One of Bronte’s first pieces presents a heroine, Miss West, who is both entrapped and enraptured by the power of the external gaze. Shuttleworth says:

She is clearly caught up in the double-bind of Victorian femininity, forced to conceal, but convinced that such concealment is sinister. At a deeper level, however, the passage suggests that she comes to self-conscious awareness only through the sense of her self as an object to an external eye, whose gaze she must nonetheless baffle if she is to retain integrity of selfhood. The external gaze simultaneously constitutes and threatens to dissolve the self.³

This contradictory relationship between the self and the social gaze dominates Lucy’s narrative and her search for selfhood. She must conceal her self in order to discover it. She must bend to the gaze before she can resist it. She must become the subject of her story to also become its writer.

Social Masks

Aware that she does not possess physical beauty, Lucy retreats into a world of shadow and invisibility. Her role as an onlooker benefits from this quality, and instead of compensating for plain appearance, Lucy embraces it. At Madame Beck’s birthday

celebration, Lucy feels the keen contrast between her ordinary form and the loveliness of the young school girls. They comprise a “field of light” against which she is a “mere shadowy spot.” However, instead of allowing her felt deficiency to depress her, Lucy affirms, “In this same gown of shadow, I felt at home and at ease; an advantage I should not have enjoyed in anything more brilliant or striking” (chap. 14). Lucy’s plainness allows her more freedom to observe and move than she would possess with charms that attracted the notice of others. When Mrs. Bretton orders a pink gown for Lucy to wear, Lucy shrinks from its bright color, declaring to herself, “A pink dress! I knew it not. It knew not me. I had not proved it.” Lucy partially covers the dress with a black shawl, but does not feel at ease in it until she can determine Dr. John’s opinion: “It was but the light fabric and bright tint which scared me, and since Graham found in it nothing absurd, my own eye consented soon to become reconciled” (chap. 20). The donning of a pink dress places Lucy closer to social competition for attention and acceptance. Dressed with her ordinary attire, Lucy can remain at a safe distance from the game she feels she surely cannot win.

Lucy’s desire for shadowy seclusion leads her to the private nook in the Rue Fossette’s garden. Although the alley was forbidden for students and “carefully shunned” by teachers, Lucy tells her reader, “From the first I was tempted to make an exception to this rule of avoidance: the seclusion, the very gloom of the walk attracted me” (chap. 12). The location of the alley mirrors Lucy’s place as onlooker. It is near, but not directly involved with the bustling city streets which are “brightly lit” and “teeming” with life (chap. 12). Like the alley, she stands a silent and often overlooked observer

whose almost invisible nature secures her from being noticed. Lucy comments on the similarity between herself and her secluded area:

For a long time the fear of seeming singular scared me away; but by degrees, as people became accustomed to me and my habits, and to such shades of peculiarity as were engrained in my nature—shades, certainly not striking enough to interest, and perhaps not prominent enough to offend, but born in and with me, and no more to be parted with than my identity—by slow degrees I became a frequenter of this strait and narrow path. (chap. 12)

The “quiet and shady” alley enhances her role as an observer, for it allows her a retreat and it affirms the “shades of peculiarity” which distinguish her from the playmates in the garden. Its shadows provide the same comfortable covering as her gray dress does, and it keeps her out of the social interaction enough to retain the proper proximity for a spectator. Lucy tells her reader: “I might have had companions, and I chose solitude...I took refuge in the garden. The whole day did I wander or sit there alone, finding warmth in the sun, shelter among the trees, and a sort of companionship with my own thoughts...not that I felt solitary; I was glad to be quiet. For a looker-on, it sufficed” (chap. 14). Thus, as Lucy’s words reveal, the little alley provides her with a physical hiding place, as well as an additional layer to her carefully-constructed social mask.

The most telling example of Lucy’s physical appearance acting as a mask comes in her performance as Ginevra’s fop. When urged to assume full male attire for the part of suitor, Lucy resists and demands to have control over her appearance. She adamantly insists, “It must be arranged in my own way: nobody must meddle; the things must not be forced upon me. Just let me dress myself” (chap. 14). Lucy’s refusal to let others dictate how she looks and how she acts reflects her overall resistance to social pressure. Lucy knows that to play the role assigned to her she must bend somewhat. Yet she takes the matter into her own hands and makes a costume of her own design. She blends

masculine and feminine attributes, therefore placing herself slightly outside the norms of either sex. Her androgynous attire allows her the freedom of expression which a forced uniform would have limited.

Negation and Repression

This freedom of expression which Lucy discovers also threatens to unmask the emotions she desires to suppress. She tells her reader that a “keen relish for dramatic expression” had revealed itself as part of her nature (chap. 14). Despite the satisfaction Lucy finds in letting her emotions free, she knows that such a display of feeling would undermine her position as an outside observer: “To cherish and exercise this new-found faculty might gift me with a world of delight, but it would not do for a mere looker-on at life: the strength and the longing must be put by; and I put them by, and fastened them with a lock of resolution which neither Time nor Temptation has since picked” (chap. 14). Lucy gives her reader a similar charge to keep feelings in restraint, regardless of how tempting the momentary pleasure of emotional release may be:

These struggles with the natural character, the strong native bent of the heart, may seem futile and fruitless, but in the end they do good. They tend, however slightly, to give the actions, the conduct, that turn which Reason approves, and which Feeling, perhaps, too often opposes: they certainly make a difference in the general tenor of a life, and enable it to be better regulated, more equable, quieter on the surface; and it is on the surface only the common gaze will fall. As to what lies below, leave that with God. (chap. 17)

In order to maintain her position as a removed observer, Lucy must prevent her emotions from seeping through the surface into the view of others. Her ability to mask her feelings increases the protection already afforded by her external plainness. She says, “I had a staid manner of my own which ere now had been as good to me as cloak and hood of hodden gray; since under its favour I had been enabled to achieve with impunity, and

even approbation, deeds that if attempted with an excited and unsettled air, would in some minds have stamped me as a dreamer and a zealot" (chap. 5).

Lucy's struggle to preserve a calm exterior illustrates the close connection Victorians made between self and sanity. Shuttleworth notes: "The border to be policed was not so much between self and other, as between the conscious and unconscious self. If all individuals were liable to eruptions of insanity, the only visible sign one could cling to that one was not insane would be one's capacity to exert self-control."⁴ When Lucy first identifies herself in her narrative, she states her full name and follows it with an affirmation of her sanity: "I, Lucy Snowe, plead guiltless of that curse, an overheated and discursive imagination" (chap. 2). The stating of "Lucy Snowe" becomes the repeated signifier Lucy uses to inform her reader what she is and is not. When all around her is heightened emotion, Lucy simply says, "I, Lucy Snowe, was calm" (chap. 3). When her own emotions take too strong a hold of her, she makes quick recovery and avows that "next day I was again Lucy Snowe" (chap. 13). With each pronouncement, Lucy is stating that her sanity is safe and her identity secure.

For the first three chapters of her novel, Lucy uses this pattern of affirmation and negation to distinguish herself from the dangerous tendencies she perceives in little Polly. From the start, Lucy characterizes Paulina as an unnatural and curious child. Lucy refers to her as "it," "the creature," and "a mere doll" (chap. 1). Through careful examination, Lucy deems Paulina's behavior to be unusual for a child and unhealthy for her future. As her observations continue, Lucy begins to think that not only is Paulina a strange child, but she may also be a sufferer of the monomaniac insanity which so many Victorians feared: "This, I perceived, was a one-ideal nature; betraying that monomaniac tendency

I have ever thought the most unfortunate with which man or woman can be cursed” (chap. 2). With each movement Paulina makes, Lucy sees new evidence for a lurking insanity.

Alongside Lucy’s judgments of Paulina’s behavior come assertions of her own mental health. Relying on her powers of observation, Lucy increasingly differentiates her nature from Paulina’s: “She sat listlessly, hardly looking, and not counting, when—my eyes being fixed on hers—I witnessed in its iris and pupil a startling transfiguration. These sudden, dangerous natures—*sensitive* as they are called—offer many a curious spectacle to those whom a cooler temperament has secured from participation in their angular vagaries” (chap. 2). In this passage, Lucy attributes to Paulina a “sudden, dangerous” nature and to herself a “cooler temperament.” Lucy believes this calm disposition protects her from the excess of emotion which characterizes Paulina. Her use of negation, which Freud defines as “the intellectual substitute for repression,” lets Lucy draw a definitive line between herself and those with “dangerous” natures.⁵

Lucy’s insistence that she possesses a calm nature shows her reliance on this quality for security in her identity. Each time she says that she was once again “Lucy Snowe,” Lucy imposes a created persona upon herself. This “Lucy Snowe” is a construction of her reason, whose sole aim is to gain a mastery over feeling. According to Shuttleworth, in the Victorian time, “Madness is envisaged less as an inescapable physiological destiny, than as a partial state, to which anyone under stress is liable, and which endures only so long as passion overturns reason.”⁶ To avoid an excess of passion and its implications of partial insanity, Lucy represses the emotions she fears with the heavy weight of reason.

According to Freud, repression functions as a method of rejecting certain impulses or instincts from consciousness. Repression rarely achieves completion and can instead split the instinct into something abhorred and something idealized. Freud remarks, "As we have found in the origin of the fetish, it is possible for the original instinct-presentation to be split into two, one part undergoing repression, while the remainder, just on account of its intimate association with the other, undergoes idealization."⁷ In Lucy's narrative, her repression of fear of being insane divides her reason and her emotions into opposite categories. Feelings become the undesirable impulses to be pushed away, and reason is idealized as the holder of truth and sanity. With each occurrence of passionate emotion, Lucy immediately uses her faithful affirmation of "Lucy Snowe" to force down the unwanted feelings.

In his discussion of repression, Freud also points to the "return of the repressed," which is the appearance of a rejected instinct in disguised form.⁸ The repressed instinct, he says, "ramifies like a fungus, so to speak, in the dark and takes on extreme forms of expression, which when translated and revealed to the neurotic are bound not merely to seem alien to him, but to terrify him by the way in which they reflect an extraordinary and dangerous strength of instinct."⁹ Full repression is not successful, for the impulse returns in a stronger and stranger form.

For Lucy, her rejected emotions and passions return in the form of the nun. As Mary Jacobus notes, Lucy's nun sightings occur at moments of intense feeling.¹⁰ When she first sees the nun, Lucy is in the dim garret, anxiously reading her letter from Graham. The second full sighting comes when Lucy is burying her letters and symbolically, her love for Graham. And the third sighting occurs with the realization of her emerging love

for M. Paul. Each vision of the nun follows an experience of heightened emotion. In these moments, Lucy becomes aware of her romantic attachments and the possible rejection they pose. Her desire to push these emotions out of her consciousness only results in the ghostly appearance of the nun.

In her reading of *Villette*, Shuttleworth attributes Lucy's repressed feelings more specifically to sexual desire and religious anxiety. Lucy rejects sexual desire for fear of falling into the partial insanity of erotic monomania and to safely remain within the bounds of innocent female life. The Rue Fossette holds a legend of a nun buried alive "for some sin against her vow" (chap. 12). The implied sexual sin of the nun gains significance when Lucy sees her nun at moments of romantic passion. In Lucy's second encounter with the nun, Shuttleworth writes that "Lucy, burying her precious letters from Dr. John above the nun's grave, is clearly associating the unspecified 'sin' with sexual transgression...the ghostly pursuit to which she is subject seems to embody externally her own activities of self-suppression."¹¹

According to Shuttleworth, the nun also symbolizes Lucy's rejection of the Catholic religion.¹² When relating the legend of the buried nun, Lucy tells her reader that a monk punished the young girl, thus invoking the male religious surveillance which sought to control and limit female life. Lucy's distrust of the male-dominated church manifests in her resistance to confession. Shuttleworth says, "It is this 'abuse of office' which Lucy most fears: the subjection of the self to a male authority consequent on the revelation of the inner self...The threat of confession for Lucy lay in the enforced articulation of that which should be kept hidden even from her own consciousness."¹³ Lucy struggles to keep her inner self a secret even to herself. Therefore, to hand control over to a male

authority would place her under restriction and open her up to the glaring overindulgence she sees in the Catholic faith: "Whilst her own moderate Protestantism represents for her the requisite model of mental balance and control, Catholicism, and extreme Methodism, suggest a frightening addiction to passionate excess, and hence a sacrifice of the mind's autonomy and control."¹⁴ In the majesty and pomp of Rome, Lucy sees the same kind of excess which she deemed dangerous in others: materialism, unrestrained emotion, and the subjection of reason to passion.

Surprised by Self

There is no doubt that Lucy's search for selfhood is an elusive path sometimes resembling a game of "hide and seek." A social mask will momentarily shift and reveal an illicit thought or emotion, only to be replaced as quickly as it slipped from Lucy's control. Lucy appears to play games with her reader, the characters in her story, and even herself. She omits important information from the text, pointing the spotlight toward other figures and away from herself. She constructs and hides behind various social masks. She retreats into the shadows and out of social interaction to avoid being seen. She represses and denies to herself the existence of certain thoughts and emotions. In a sense, Lucy seems to be running from rather than searching for selfhood. However, it is this art of concealment and social interplay which brings to Lucy a realization of self.

Lucy's relationship with Dr. John illustrates her coming into self. In the early stages of their acquaintance, Lucy purposely sets herself apart from the action of social exchange. When he visits Madame Beck's daughter, Lucy takes her part as the silent and invisible observer. She says, "He laid himself open to my observation, according to my presence in the room just that degree of notice and consequence a person of my exterior

habitually expects" (chap. 11). Lucy protects herself from possible rejection by becoming the unobtrusive spectator. She attributes Dr. John's lack of attention to her plainness rather than to a fault in his character. However, in the latter part of her narrative, when Lucy sits with Dr. John as he observes and compares Ginevra with Paulina, her perspective has decidedly changed:

These epithets—these attributes I put from me. His "quiet Lucy Snowe," his "inoffensive shadow," I gave him back; not with scorn, but with extreme weariness: theirs was the coldness and the pressure of lead; let him overwhelm me with no such weight... With now welcome force, I realized his entire misapprehension of my character and my nature. He wanted always to give me a role not mine. Nature and I opposed him. He did not at all guess what I felt: he did not read my eyes, or face, or gestures; though, I doubt not, all spoke.

(chap. 27)

Lucy bristles under the realization that the man whom she had thought to be a good judge of character cannot read the truth of her own nature. The significance of this passage rests not only with Lucy's rejection of Dr. John's judgments, but also with her rejection of the very words she had previously used to describe herself. For the majority of her story, Lucy refers to herself as quiet, shadowy, and removed. Thus, this moment serves as a turning point in Lucy's recognition of her nature.

The relationship which brings the most significant realization of self is Lucy's friendship and eventual love with M. Paul. His judgments, casting Lucy as a coquette rather than an inoffensive shadow, completely oppose the observations of Dr. John. He tells Lucy, "You are one of those beings who must be *kept down*. I know you! I know you! Other people in this house see you pass, and think that a colorless shadow has gone by. As for me, I scrutinized your face once, and it sufficed" (chap. 15). M. Paul refuses to see Lucy as she and others view her. He perceives a fiery and adventurous nature that, though well concealed, must be monitored and controlled. Over time, Lucy's responses to

M. Paul's judgments of her character soften, reflecting her growing affection for him and her growing confidence in herself. In an amusing tone, Lucy thinks to herself:

Who would have thought it? You deemed yourself a melancholy sober-sides enough!...Dr. John Bretton knows you only as "quiet Lucy"—"a creature as inoffensive as a shadow"...Such are your own and your friends' impressions; and behold! There starts up the little man, differing diametrically from all these, roundly charging you with being too airy and cheery—too volatile and versatile—too flowery and coloury...You are well habituated to be passed by as a shadow in life's sunshine: it is a new thing to see one testily lifting his hand to screen his eyes, because you tease him with an obtrusive ray. (chap. 28)

Lucy finds for the first time that someone has not relegated her to the realm of shadowy existence, but has judged her to be one who lives *too* much.

Though she initially cringes from his hissing rebukes, Lucy learns that his harshness is merely his method of testing true character. She acquires respect for M. Paul, because his opinions are not swayed by materialism, sensuality, or social ideals. From her own wearying yet satisfying experience, Lucy describes M. Paul's tireless search for the true nature:

'Prove yourself true ere I cherish you,' was his ordinance; and how difficult he made that proof! What thorns and briars, what flints, he strewed in the path...And when at last he allowed a rest, before slumber might close the eyelids, he opened those same lids wide, with pitiless finger and thumb, and gazed deep through the pupil and the irids into the brain, into the heart, to search if Vanity, or Pride, or Falsehood, in any of its subtlest forms, was discoverable in the furthest recess of existence. (chap. 30)

In M. Paul, Lucy finds a kindred spirit. They each keep close watch of others, constantly searching for the truth existing under social masks. Significantly, the night M. Paul reveals that he has been observing Lucy through his "magic lattice" is also the same night that he urges her to see how alike they are in countenance and nature. Dr. John had attempted to draw similarities between himself and Lucy, but his comparisons only brought a groan to her heart. In M. Paul, Lucy sees the same strength of intellect and

passion which she feels in herself. They are alike in their inner natures and not merely in the social games they may play. In addition, that very night they see the nun together, thus tightening the bond between them.

The love Lucy discovers with M. Paul has the greatest influence on her sense of self. He provides her first chance for financial security and independence with the establishment of her small school. He does not seek to control her, but simply gives her the means to be free. In their final meeting together before his departure, Lucy ventures to ask his opinion in the one area she has avoided throughout the novel: “Do I displease your eyes *much*?” She says, “I took courage to urge: the point had its vital import for me. He stopped, and gave me a short, strong answer—an answer which silenced, subdued, yet profoundly satisfied. Ever after that, I knew that I was for *him*; and what I might be for the rest of the world, I ceased painfully to care” (chap. 41). Lucy essentially finds her self in M. Paul. She relinquishes her desire to gain the approval of social gentlemen such as Dr. John, and she chooses to live a life more aligned with the sense of self she has realized.

Although Lucy maneuvers throughout her narrative in an apparent effort to avoid visibility, her realization of self stems directly from what is seen by M. Paul. He shares her desire to observe and analyze others, her witnessing of the nun, and even aspects of her physical appearance. He allows his passion to be seen and argues that Lucy’s passion is not as invisible as she imagined. Just as M. Paul could see the true nature of the women he watched through his magic lattice, he also can see through the masks Lucy holds up. He teaches her to express rather than conceal, an act which unlocks her creativity and her identity.

Lucy's struggle to define her self within the rigid framework of Victorian society results in an intricate and elusive search for selfhood. She appears to live a passive existence shrouded by shadow and a cool demeanor. She draws away from social interaction and attempts to become an observer rather than a participant. However, Lucy's efforts to remain under the cover of a calm exterior are not entirely successful. Moments of unguarded emotion alert Lucy to a passionate nature which lies buried beneath her constructed persona of "Lucy Snowe." Her gradual acknowledgement and acceptance of her feelings for M. Paul lead to a stronger sense of self. And through the art of writing, Lucy discovers the voice to express this self and the path she trod to find it.

¹ Sally Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pg. 38.

² Ibid., pg. 46.

³ Ibid., pg. 39.

⁴ Ibid., pg. 35.

⁵ Sigmund Freud, *General Psychological Theory*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), pg. 214.

⁶ Sally Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pg. 35.

⁷ Sigmund Freud, *General Psychological Theory*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), pg. 108.

⁸ Ibid., pg. 111.

⁹ Ibid., pg. 107.

¹⁰ Mary Jacobus, "The Buried Letter: Feminism and Romanticism in *Villette*." *Villette: Charlotte Brontë*. Ed. Pauline Nestor, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), pg. 128.

¹¹ Sally Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pg. 226.

¹² Ibid., pg. 230.

¹³ Ibid., pg. 226, 228.

¹⁴ Ibid., pg. 230.

Chapter III: The Self as Writer

Inseparable from Lucy's roles as woman and subject is her role as a writer. She writes her autobiography under a whiteness of hair which matches her name. It is her pen which draws up past events and interprets them in literal or figurative fashion, creating and bridging gaps where the writer wishes. Her ability to write her own story places her in the conventionally masculine position of observer and narrator. As a woman writer, she must articulate the feminine experience with male-dominated language. Close study of Lucy's style reveals important aspects of her character which the content of her story alone does not divulge. To gaze only at the portrait Lucy paints would be to see her but partially. Instead, the reader must expand his or her vision to include the artist. Only then can the truest form of Lucy be seen.

Symbolic Language in Lucy's Writing

In becoming a writer, Lucy enters the realm of male-constructed language. Margaret Homans, in her examination of women writers and culture, argues that the greatest obstacle for women writers in the nineteenth century was the inability to express femininity in a language controlled by male subjectivity. The result was an ambivalent use of both literal and symbolic language. Women writers leaned toward the expression of literal meaning and literal femininity, but they were forced to write within the language of figurative substitutes in order to retain legibility.¹

One area in which Lucy relies significantly on symbolic language for description is her physical appearance. She usually uses images of shadow and obscurity to portray herself. Few times in the course of her narrative does Lucy comment on what she sees

when looking in a mirror. She gives little concrete detail about what she looks like, except for one occasion when she tells her reader the color of her hair.² Rather than give the literal description of her appearance, Lucy uses figurative language. When she catches a glimpse of herself in mourning garb, she describes what she sees as a “faded, hollow-eyed vision” (chap. 4). Gazing at her new surroundings after her fainting spell in the alley, Lucy spots a gilded mirror on the wall and says, “In this mirror I saw myself...I looked spectral; my eyes larger and more hollow, my hair darker than was natural, by contrast with my thin and ashen face” (chap. 16). And when Lucy fails to recognize herself as the person walking alongside Graham and Mrs. Bretton, her momentary mistake causes such pain that Lucy barely gives a description at all: “...for the first time, 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; it was not flattering, yet, after all, I ought to be thankful: it might have been worse” (chap. 20). Lucy dodges a literal description of her appearance and replaces it with figurative substitutes. In doing this, Lucy can lessen the pain that a true representation of herself would inflict. By covering her literal image with figurative language, Lucy can also control the image of herself which her reader sees.

The most revealing example of Lucy’s figurative language occurs when she must deal with writing itself. Lucy narrates in detail how she answered Graham’s letters, illustrating her reliance on language to both express her literal emotions and restrain them with false substitutes. The battle between reason and emotion wages heavily within her with each letter she receives and writes:

Does the reader...care to ask how I answered these letters: whether under the dry, stinting check of Reason, or according to the full, liberal impulse of Feeling?

To speak truth, I compromised matters; I served two masters...I wrote to these letters two answers—one for my own relief, the other for Graham's perusal. To begin with: Feeling and I turned Reason out of doors, drew against her bar and bolt, then we sat down, spread our paper, dipped in the ink an eager pen, and, with deep enjoyment, poured out our sincere heart. When we had done—when two sheets were covered with the language of a strongly-adherent affection, a rooted and active gratitude...when, then, I had given expression to a closely-clinging and deeply-honoring attachment...then, just at that moment, the doors of my heart would shake, bolt and bar would yield, Reason would leap in, vigorous and revengeful, snatch the full sheets, read, sneer, erase, tear up, re-write, fold, seal, direct, and send a terse, curt missive of a page. (chap. 23)

Lucy concludes her account of Reason saying, "She did right." The act of writing is a release for her emotions, but also an exercise in self-control. She will never allow the letter which shows her literal feelings to be seen. Instead, she rips it and replaces it with an emotionally-repressed substitute. Lucy can therefore escape the threat that her literal attachment to Graham poses. Paulina makes a similar effort to control passion when she answers her letters from Graham. She tells Lucy, "I wrote it three times—chastening and subduing the phrases at every rescript; at last, having confected it till it seemed to me to resemble a morsel of ice flavoured with ever so slight a zest of fruit or sugar, I ventured to seal and dispatch it" (chap. 32). Lyndall Gordon comments on the chilled writing which Lucy and Paulina use to mask their affection: "Desire can surface only as unsent letters of uncensored expression and there it must terminate: in unuttered, soon-buried words which may not reach their implied (male) reader."³ In the end, the desire is too much for Lucy to bear. Her attempts to sublimate her feelings through writing having failed, she buries the letters from Graham underneath the ancient pear tree. She later asks herself, "Was this feeling dead? I do not know, but it was buried" (chap. 31).

Writing with Nature: The Struggle between Literal and Symbolic Meaning

Lucy's struggle to simultaneously articulate and repress literal meaning through writing surfaces in her treatment of nature. Homans asserts that the "literal" is historically associated with nature. She says, "...it is through nature that texts in our dominant literary tradition articulate both the female and the literal in language" and "...it is against identification with nature that women writers stage their ambivalent defenses against becoming identified with the literal and the object."⁴ This ambiguous approach to nature appears throughout Lucy's writing. Gilbert and Gubar note Lucy's contradictory illustrations of nature: "The very problematic quality of the water imagery...reflects Lucy's ambivalence. It is as confusing as it is illuminating, as much a camouflage as a disclosure."⁵ Lucy represents nature as a force which brings life and death, renewal and loss. She employs figurative language to distance and subordinate nature, but also depicts it as a literal entity intrinsic to her own identity. Her ambivalent attitude toward nature reflects her struggle to write within the symbolic structure of language while retaining the literal meaning of her thoughts and experience.

The friendship Lucy develops with Graham and the subsequent loss of that affection to Paulina stir up emotions of great happiness and great pain inside her. Lucy combines literal events of nature with symbols of water and weather to mark the emotions of contentment and anxiety which these experiences produced. Twice Lucy refers to time spent with the Brettons as a time of tranquility and safety. As a child, Lucy remembers, "Time always flowed smoothly for me at my godmother's side; not with tumultuous swiftness, but blandly, like the gliding of a full river through a plain" (chap. 1). When Lucy finds herself in their home after fainting in the street, she views the home with stronger affection than before, seeing it as a sanctuary from fierce wind and waves:

When I closed my eyes, I heard a gale, subsiding at last, bearing upon the house-front like a settling swell upon a rock-base. I heard it drawn and withdrawn far, far off, like a tide retiring from a shore of the upper world—a world so high above that the rush of its largest waves, the dash of its fiercest breakers could sound down in this submarine home, only like murmurs and a lullaby. (chap. 17)

These two moments of calm and safety are soon followed by destructive forms of nature.

Each one heralds an arrival of Paulina, first as the young child and then as a young woman. Lucy recalls the night Paulina first comes into the Bretton household as one of storm when “the rain lashed the panes, and the wind sounded angry and restless” (chap.

1). When Graham and Paulina are reunited in the theatre at Vashti’s performance, the night is plagued not by a storm of rain and wind, but by the more violent element of fire.

Flames consume the stage and Paulina emerges out of the ensuing stampede. The angry and restless storm evolves into a ferocious fire, for the rivalry little Polly threatened as a child becomes a reality for Lucy in adulthood.

When Lucy addresses her emotions more directly, she uses imagery not only of the natural world, but also of the supernatural. Before the first letter from Graham had even been written, Lucy knew that her self-control would be tried by a renewed friendship with him and his mother. The comfort of family and the promise of even a platonic attachment to Graham evoke emotions almost too great for her to endure. She entreats Reason to keep her from grasping onto false hope and to prevent her imagination from robbing her of sanity: “‘Do not let me think of them [Mrs. Bretton and Graham] too often, too much, too fondly,’ I implored, ‘let me be content with a temperate draught of this living stream: let me not run athirst, and apply passionately to its welcome waters: let me not imagine in them a sweeter taste than earth’s fountains know’” (chap. 16).

Despite pleading with Reason, Lucy cannot escape the power of her feelings and she

imagines her letters to be divine in origin. Later reflecting on the writings which were once so precious to her, Lucy says, "...when I first tasted their elixir, fresh from the fount so honored, it seemed a juice of a divine vintage: a draught which Hebe might fill, and the very gods approve" (chap. 23). Unable to fully express her emotions, Lucy describes the letters and the feelings they conjure with symbolic language.

She employs the same type of imagery when feelings of rejection replace those that renewed friendship with Graham had brought. Lucy's beloved letter writer redirects his addresses to Paulina, infusing them with the warmth of romantic love which overshadows the filial affection in Lucy's letters. Realizing she has lost the hope of future letters and future love from Graham, Lucy mourns her bereavement:

I had seen the last of them. That goodly river on whose banks I had sojourned, of whose waves a few reviving drops had trickled to my lips, was bending to another course: it was leaving my little hut and field forlorn and sand-dry, pouring its wealth of waters far away. The change was right, just, natural; not a word could be said: but I loved my Rhine, my Nile; I had almost worshipped my Ganges, and I grieved that the grand tide should roll estranged, should vanish like a false mirage. (chap. 26)

Rather than admitting the love she has for Graham, Lucy makes her letters the figurative substitutes for affection. Yet she cannot even relate her emotional attachment to those letters without shifting into symbolic language. To confess her feelings would be to lose composure, and it is a battle she fights with repression and a burial.

In addition to emotional repression, natural imagery also signifies Lucy's desire to live. It is a desire she does not always embrace, but cannot fully resist. Paradoxically, Lucy discovers this need to survive when she experiences loss and is surrounded by death. After some unknown catastrophe leaves her without family, Lucy describes the event with the image of a storm at sea:

I must somehow have fallen over-board, or...there must have been a wreck at last. I too well remember a time—a long time, of cold, of danger, of contention...I even know there was a storm, and that not of one hour nor one day. For many days and nights neither sun nor stars appeared; we cast with our own hands the tackling out of the ship; a heavy tempest lay on us; all hope that we should be saved was taken away. In fine, the ship was lost, the crew perished. (chap. 4)

Lucy uses the destructive side of nature to relate her misfortune. Yet, it is this event which initiates the development of Lucy's independent character and strength—qualities she will later rely upon to make a life in a foreign land: "Thus, there remained no possibility of dependence on others; to myself alone could I look. I know not that I was of a self-reliant or active nature; but self-reliance and exertion were forced upon me by my circumstances" (chap. 4).

This self-reliance leads Lucy to the confining, but safe, environment of Miss Marchmont's home. The security is short-lived, however, as Lucy finds she cannot remain in a passive existence, though she may wish it: "It seemed I must be stimulated into action. I must be goaded, driven, stung, forced to energy...I had wanted to compromise with Fate: to escape occasional great agonies by submitting to a whole life of privation and small pains. Fate would not so be pacified; nor would Providence sanction this shrinking sloth and cowardly indolence" (chap. 4). The figurative storm with which Lucy described her earlier loss returns in literal form to steal her tranquil life with Miss Marchmont. On the night of her elderly companion's death, Lucy hears and feels the warnings of the approaching tempest:

The wind was wailing at the windows: it had wailed all day; but, as night deepened, it took a new tone—an accent keen, piercing, almost articulate to the ear...I had heard that voice ere this, and compulsory observation had forced on me a theory as to what it boded. Three times in the course of my life, events had taught me that these strange accents in the storm—this restless, hopeless cry—denote a coming state of the atmosphere unpropitious to life. (chap. 4)

After the night has passed, Lucy discovers Miss Marchmont dead and that she is once again forced to find her own way alone.

Though a literal storm has taken away her companion and her shelter, Lucy receives direction from another form of nature—the Aurora Borealis. Lucy's situation had left her with an "inward darkness," but she says, "In spite of my solitude, my poverty, and my perplexity, my heart, nourished and nerved with the vigour of a youth that had yet counted twenty-three summers, beat light and not feebly" (chap. 5). Her circumstances are not welcomed, but they are familiar. The inner strength which her first misfortune had birthed deepens in this return to forced independence. She walks calmly on her starlit path and sees the Aurora Borealis, which she admits would usually had frightened her:

But this solemn stranger influenced me otherwise than through my fears. Some new power it seemed to bring. I drew in energy with the keen, low breeze that blew on its path. A bold thought was sent to my mind; my mind was made strong to receive it. "Leave this wilderness," it was said to me, "and go out hence." "Where?" was the query...I mentally saw within reach what I had never yet beheld with my bodily eyes; I saw London. (chap. 5)

The wind that had signaled death for Miss Marchmont now brought strength and new life to Lucy. She starts out on the bold journey to London, which eventually leads her to Villette. Had she allowed herself to live a passive existence, Lucy may have never ventured outside her own city. The movements of nature, however, move her out of passivity and into the more literal life of activity.

Lucy's sighting of the Aurora Borealis does not initially seem to fit the theme of figurative and literal language. She does not view it as an event that must be repressed or symbolically narrated. In actuality, it is a brief glimpse of the union between femininity and nature—the two forms of the "literal" which were feared and suppressed through

figurative language. For a moment, Lucy steps outside the language of masculine symbolism, which has harassed her through storm and wind, and she takes up the other language of literal meaning. Nature speaks to her and strengthens her. Nevertheless, Lucy cannot continue in the literal language alone. As soon as her journey commences, her ambivalence toward literal and symbolic meaning returns. She reaches London on “a dark, raw, and rainy evening” to a “Babylon and a wilderness of which the vastness and the strangeness tried to the utmost any powers of clear thought and steady self-possession with which, in the absence of more brilliant faculties, Nature might have gifted me” (chap. 5). Yet within this wilderness, Lucy looks and confesses, “While I looked, my inner self moved; my spirit shook its always always-fettering wings half loose; I had a sudden feeling as if I, who had never yet truly lived, were at last to taste life” (chap. 6). Her independence inspires fear as well as the need to live life more fully and create it on her own terms.

When she comes to Villette, the battle continues between Lucy’s reluctance to be active and the forces of nature which drive her. Lucy attempts to hide in the shadows of her secluded alley, away from the society of the city. She tries to control her emotions, saying, “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.” However, impending storms usher anxiety into Lucy’s heart, for she says, “...they woke the being I was always lulling, and stirred up a craving I could not satisfy” (chap. 12). One night, when a severe thunderstorm rocks the inhabitants of the Rue Fossette in their beds, Lucy says, “...the Catholics rose in panic and prayed to their

saints. As for me, the tempest took hold of me with tyranny: I was roughly roused and obliged to live” (chap. 12).

The most significant storm in Lucy’s narrative occurs at the end of her story. M. Paul has sailed and Lucy awaits his return:

The skies hang full and dark...I know some signs of the sky; I have noted them ever since childhood...The wind shifts to the west. Peace, peace, Banshee—“keening” at every window!—it shrieks out long: wander as I may through the house this night, I cannot lull the blast...That storm roared for seven frenzied days. It did not cease till the Atlantic was strewn with wrecks: it did not lull till the deeps had gorged their full sustenance. Not till the destroying angel of tempest had achieved his perfect work, would he fold the wings whose waft was thunder—the tremor of whose plumes was storm. (chap. 42)

Lucy leaves the ending of her narrative open. In the course of describing the storm, she suddenly stops and simply says, “Here pause: pause at once. There is enough said.

Trouble no quiet, kind heart; leave sunny imaginations hope...Let them picture union and a happy succeeding life” (chap. 42). Lucy’s reasons for an open ending are arguable.

However, if the previous events in nature were meant to force Lucy to live, then perhaps this is the final effort. In M. Paul’s absence, Lucy had secured financial independence and her own school. Whether or not he returns, Lucy has made a life for herself despite the misfortune of her childhood and her natural tendencies to live life as a shadow.

Woman as Writer

In her narrative, Lucy presents herself as a passive observer. The ability to tell her story, however, undermines the weak appearance which Lucy projects. Lucy’s role as a writer reflects the role of narrator which Lockwood occupies as the male narrator of *Wuthering Heights*. In her study of gender and narration in *Wuthering Heights*, Beth Newman discusses the hidden strength behind narrating one’s own story and the story of others. Lockwood uses his role as an observer to make powerful what might otherwise

appear to be a passive position: "He depicts 'the situation of the looker-on' as one of harmless passivity. But the novel equivocates about this claim... suggesting that his voyeuristic role arrogates power to itself, a power that takes the form of the ability to narrate, to appropriate another's story."⁶ Though Lockwood remains tangent to the action of the plot, his role as an observer and narrator provides him with a voice and the ability to manipulate events through language.

Like Lockwood, Lucy attempts to stay in the margins of her story. She remains a quiet, somewhat obscure character throughout her novel. She repeatedly affirms to herself and her reader that her exterior appearance and position in life exclude her from the bustle of Victorian society. Yet, the act of writing provides Lucy with a voice and a visibility which her station in the social order and her lack of beauty would apparently prevent. Writing is a submission to and a rebellion against the social structure. She will not yield to passion as fully as Vashti does. Nor will she bend the breadth of her heart and mind to a course determined by male authority as Paulina does. Instead, she stands a silent observer, reserving voice and passion for her writing, which flows from her pen and is fueled by the creative force churning inside her. According to Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Lucy's narrative illustrates her ill fit within Victorian society, but her ability to write reveals the new position which women would come to occupy:

Lucy cannot be contained by the roles available to her. But neither is she free of them, since all these women do represent aspects of herself. Significantly, however, none of these roles ascribe to women the initiative, the intelligence, or the need to tell their own stories. Thus Lucy's evasions as a narrator indicate how far she (and all women) has come from silent submission and also how far all must yet go in finding a voice. In struggling against the confining forms she inherits, Lucy is truly involved in a mythic undertaking—an attempt to create an adequate fiction of her own.⁷

Her writing, like Lockwood's narrating, gives force to a seemingly passive position by providing her voice and visibility in situations which would otherwise eclipse her.

Lucy's role as a writer gives her a voice to articulate the struggles and triumphs in her search for selfhood. It is her ultimate expression of self in society and self against society. Brontë's ability to write a woman who rises from obscurity and the oppression of female stereotypes into a confident and self-possessed writer speaks to the situation of women writers in the nineteenth century and those who would come after her. George Eliot, a contemporary of Brontë's, wrote of *Villette*, "There is something almost preternatural in its power."⁸ Author Kate Millet brought *Villette* to the forefront of feminist writing when she analyzed the gender politics in "a book too subversive to be popular."⁹ Despite its lack of popularity, *Villette* prevails as Brontë's most autobiographical, passionate, and challenging novel. Her writing embodies the art which Gilbert and Gubar see in Vashti: "Unlike the false artists who abound in *Villette*, Vashti uses her art not to manipulate others, but to represent herself. Her art, in other words, is confessional, unfinished—not a product, but an act; not an object meant to contain or coerce, but a personal utterance."¹⁰ Brontë's writing confesses her rise from obscurity and it remains unfinished in its influence on women writers.

¹ See Margaret Homans, *Bearing the Word* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), pg. 5. Homans says, "...the differential valuations of literal and figurative originate in the way our culture constructs masculinity and femininity, for if the literal is associated with the feminine, the more highly valued figurative is associated with the masculine." Literal meaning is aligned with female nature. Fear of literal femininity results in figurative language, which seeks to control and express it through figurative substitutes.

² See chap. 14 in *Villette*.

³ Lyndall Gordon, *Charlotte Brontë: A Passionate Life* (New York, 1995), pg. 264.

⁴ Margaret Homans, *Bearing the Word* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), pg. 68, 85.

⁵ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, "The Buried Life of Lucy Snowe." *Villette, Charlotte Brontë*. Ed. Pauline Nestor. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), pg. 44.

⁶ Beth Newman, "'The Situation of the Looker-On': Gender, Narration, and Gaze in *Wuthering Heights*," pg. 1034.

⁷ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, "The Buried Life of Lucy Snowe." *Villette, Charlotte Brontë*. Ed. Mary Jacobus. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), pg. 45.

⁸ See Rosemarie Bodenheimer, *The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans: George Eliot, Her Letters and Fiction* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), pg. 96.

⁹ Kate Millet. "Sexual Politics in *Villette*." *Villette, Charlotte Brontë*. Ed. Pauline Nestor. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), pg. 32.

¹⁰ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, "The Buried Life of Lucy Snowe." *Villette, Charlotte Brontë*. Ed. Mary Jacobus. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), pg 49.