

# Searching for Identity in *Villette*

*Charlotte Brontë, Lucy Snowe and the 21<sup>st</sup>-  
Century Woman Reader*

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Reader

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# Abstract

This thesis argues that there are parallels between the situation of women today and Lucy Snowe in Charlotte Brontë's novel *Villette* (1853). Based on reception studies, feminist theory and an historically informed close reading of the novel, my ambition has been to explore how *Villette* has been received by Victorian and 20<sup>th</sup>-century critics, as well as to examine the text-internal factors that may have contributed to the novel's continued appeal. In addition to this I have wanted to understand how it is being read today. Although readers' horizons of expectation have changed since *Villette* was published, many features of the reception remain conspicuously similar. The novel's reception shows that the predicament women have found themselves in as 'the Other' remains fundamentally stable. Due to new digital resources that give access to ordinary readers' responses, this thesis presents fresh insights into the modern readers' experiences of reading *Villette*. This thesis argues that the novel provides a female perspective that women in particular can relate to: they are able to identify with Lucy's double and ambiguous self in their own battle for self-definition.



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I dedicate this thesis to Charlotte Brontë. You were never in this alone.





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# Abbreviations

*V = Villette*

*Letters I = The Letters of Charlotte Brontë: with a Selection of Letters by Family and Friends. Vol. 1, 1829-1847*

*Letters II = The Letters of Charlotte Brontë: with a Selection of Letters by Family and Friends. Vol. 2, 1848-1851*

*Letters III = The Letters of Charlotte Brontë: with a Selection of Letters by Family and Friends. Vol. 3, 1852-1855*

*Belgian Essays = 'Letter from a Poor Painter to a Great Lord.' The Belgian Essays: a Critical Edition*

*A Casebook = Charlotte Brontë, 'Jane Eyre' and 'Villette' a Casebook*

*The Critical Heritage = The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*

# Introduction

I wish all reviewers thought 'Currer Bell' to be a man – they would be more just to him. You will – I know – keep measuring me by some standard of what you deem becoming to my sex – where I am not what you consider graceful – you will condemn me [...] Come what will – I cannot when I write think always of myself – and of what is elegant and charming in femininity – it is not on those terms or with such ideas I ever took pen in hand. (*Letters II 275*)

In this letter to the critic George Henry Lewes, Charlotte Brontë makes her opinion of the standards to which women were expected to adhere clear. Her final, and most autobiographical novel, *Villette*, deals with the life and psychology of an untraditional woman, corresponding closely with Brontë's own life. As a female writer, she challenged and to a great extent defied what was expected of her as a woman. While the term 'feminism' had not yet been established, it is reasonable to characterise Brontë as a proto-feminist. How Brontë was affected by Victorian attitudes toward women and how her own attitudes aligned themselves with those of feminism, emerges in *Villette*: her thoughts on the sexes, gender norms and society are largely in agreement with what 20<sup>th</sup>-century feminists later argued, and with the situation of women today.

Simone de Beauvoir states that woman has been invented as 'the Other' (26) – as a product of masculine visions and needs. Wanting to break free from their role as the Other, women cannot escape the fact that 'to be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined space, unto the keeping of men', and that because of this, women watch themselves at all times: 'She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself' (Berger 46). John Berger, as well as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, comment on the concept of the male gaze and how women have been authored by men and 'killed into a "perfect" image' (4) – an image that creates impossible standards.

For women with an awareness of themselves as subjects, the gaze causes the 'woman's self being split into two' (Berger 46). The gaze not only leads women to find themselves with one 'foot in and one foot out', they also catch themselves being critical of and distancing themselves from other women: so, in addition to women having to define themselves in relation to men, there is also the complicated relationship among women. While Elaine Showalter notes that 'women were just as merciless as men in judging their sisters' (35), Beauvoir suggests that the apparent lack of solidarity may be due to the fact that women have been living dispersed among men, more closely tied to them than to other women because 'humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself;

she is not considered an autonomous being' (26-7).

In the Victorian era, the ideal of the 'angel in the house' represented selflessness, passivity and 'alienation from ordinary fleshy life' (Gilbert and Gubar 24). In 'Sesame and Lilies' from 1865, John Ruskin's description of the sexes is a perfect example of the kind of ideological message men have been putting forth, tricking women into thinking that men are doing them a favour. He claims that 'the woman's power is for rule, not for battle', and that the man 'must encounter all peril and trial', 'protecting her from all danger and temptation' (506). Ruskin then continues by explaining exactly what is meant by the angel in the house: she must be 'incapable of error' to fulfil this role – 'enduringly, incorruptibly good; instinctively, infallibly wise – wise, not for self-development, but self-renunciation: wise, not that she may set herself above her husband, but that she may never fail from his side' (506-7).

Opposing this, Ruskin's contemporary John Stuart Mill took a different stance, exposing what has been men's tactic throughout history:

Men do not want solely the obedience of women, they want their sentiments. [...] not a forced slave but a willing one [...] they have therefore put everything in practice to enslave their minds. [...] All women are brought up from the very earliest years in the belief that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men; not self-will, and government by self-control but submission, and yielding to the control of others; to make complete abnegation of themselves, and to have no life but in their affections. (524)

This discussion about the role and nature of woman was referred to as 'The Woman Question', motivated by changes in women's political rights, such as the Reform Bills of 1832 and 1867 ('The Victorian Age'). The fact that there were debates about this issue in the Victorian period, shows that not all men had the same ideas about women. Ruskin and Mill represented opposing camps, and between the two of them nearly all of Victorian thought on the debate is compressed (Millett 89). Mill was aware that his statement on the historical and legal position of women, as well as their 'wifely subjection' (91), would be met with resistance by the general male audience. As a consequence, he, like outspoken women, was seen as immoral or mad.

Mill states, with reference to his own society, that the rule of men over women is 'accepted voluntarily; women make no complaint, and are consenting parties to it' (522): women have been conditioned to adhere to this way of thinking to such an extent that they instinctively behave as inferior beings. However, Mill adds that ever since women have been able to publish their written works, i.e. 'their sentiments', there have been increasing numbers of them protesting against their social condition (523). The pioneering women writers knew

that they risked isolation and criticism when venturing to open up debates regarding gender norms. While they undeniably still felt the effects of patriarchy, they had the courage to speak up about the hypocrisy and double standard men have created and women have complied to. A quote from Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* (1853) perfectly explains the situation Brontë and her fellow female novelists found themselves in:

The daily life into which people are born, and into which only one in a hundred has moral strength enough to despise and to break when the right time comes – when an inward necessity for independent action arises, which is superior to all outward conventionalities. (6)

Although Brontë's views on 'The Woman Question' can be gathered from her novels, it is in her letters we find her most unfiltered opinions of the role of women in what she considers a hypocritical society. Brontë had always felt different, insisting that she had a 'fiery imagination' that would eat her up and make her 'feel Society as it is' (*Letters I* 144):

As to society <it seems> I don't understand much about it – but from the few glimpses I have had of its machinery it seems to me to be a very strange, complicated affair indeed – wherein Nature is turned upside down [...]. (511)

It was perhaps for this reason that Brontë, ever since she was young, had 'adopted a masculine persona which freed her from the constraints of female society and conventions' (Barker 382-3). In a letter to Margaret Wooler, Brontë comments on the different treatment of the sexes:

You ask me if I do not think that men are strange beings – I do indeed, I have often thought so – and I think too that the mode of bringing them up is strange, they are not half sufficiently guarded from temptation – Girls are protected as if they were something very frail and silly indeed while boys are turned loose on the world as if they – of all beings in existence, were the wisest and the least liable to be led astray. (*Letters I* 448)

As has been made clear both from Brontë's letters and the many biographies written about her, she was highly conscious of her own plain appearance. She undoubtedly knew how critics would presume and comment on her 'peculiarities' as a woman writer – especially with the common Victorian theory that 'only unhappy and frustrated women wrote books' (Showalter 70). The sexual stigma of being unmarried and childless – being a 'barren spinster' – must have been a sensitive subject for her.

Brontë's attitude toward her own femininity is contradictory: on the one hand, she was bitter about her own looks, showing an internalisation of male values; and on the other hand, or perhaps *because* of this, she made it clear that she would not consider 'what is elegant and

charming in femininity' in her writing (*Letters II* 275). Physically, she did not represent the ideal woman, and the notion of the male gaze was certainly as familiar to her as it was to other women – all of whom had been brought up with 'the object of being attractive to men' being 'the polar star of feminine education and formation of character' (Mill 524). Brontë was insecure about her tiny frame, her poor sight causing her to wear glasses, and her 'harsh and unengaging features' (*Belgian Essays* 362). Brontë's self-condescension was certainly a consequence of the gaze, but not wholly unwarranted; John Everett Millais (qtd. in Barker 761) said that she 'looked tired with her own brains' – ironically suiting his idea of what a genius ought to look like. Equally, in his journal, George Smith, Brontë's publisher, found it strange that *despite* her genius, Brontë could not escape 'the weakness of an excessive anxiety about her personal appearance'. Even more notably, he continues:

I believe she would have given all her genius and her frame to have been beautiful. Perhaps few women ever existed more anxious to be pretty than she, or more angrily conscious of the circumstances that she was *not* pretty. (qtd. in Barker 660)

Although Smith's comment confirms how Brontë viewed herself, it is patronising and would undoubtedly have hurt Brontë had she known what Smith, whom she was infatuated with, thought of her. It is nevertheless remarkable that someone with her intellect could not overcome the internalised notion of the power and comfort of a pretty appearance. Unable to escape her own anxiety and depression, Brontë seems to have turned her weakness into strength. It appears she took pride in confusing critics as to her gender, and that she developed a feeling of transcending the intellect and purpose of other women – because she saw herself in some ways as excluded from that group. She could not change the way she looked, but she could fight against the injustice she felt her lack of femininity imposed on her.

On the topic of what fueled Brontë's activism as a writer and her ability to deconstruct the world's absurdities, Juliet Barker further suggests that Brontë would not have been as preoccupied with the condition of women had it not been of relevance to herself and her own unhappiness (656-7). It might be far-fetched to speculate that this bitterness would rouse fire in Brontë, but she seems particularly to have distanced herself from other members of her sex who displayed feminine qualities of which she could not approve. She found it intolerable that a life of self-sacrifice was what was demanded of women, and she pitied 'families of daughters waiting to be married' and the idleness and dependency which would 'infallibly degrade their nature' (*Letters II* 226).

Brontë herself was certain she would never marry. However, she received four

marriage proposals and notably declined her first, and what could have been her only, proposal when she was 23, refusing to marry without love. She explicitly said that she would ‘never for the sake of attaining the distinction of matrimony and escaping the stigma of an old maid take a worthy man whom I am conscious I cannot render happy’ (*Letters I* 185). She could easily have married and had a comfortable life – but she would not settle. She also clearly states her view of women’s inferior role in marriage in a letter she wrote ‘in excitement’ to Ellen Nussey:

Certainly those men who lead a gay life in their youth and arrive at middle age with feelings blunted and passions exhausted can have but one aim in marriage – the selfish advancement of their interest; And to think that such men take as wives – as second selves – women young, modest, sincere – pure in heart and life, with feelings all fresh and emotions all unworn, and bind such virtue and vitality to their own withered existence – such sincerity to their own hollowness – such disinterestedness to their own haggard avarice – to think this, troubles the soul to its inmost depths. Nature and Justice forbid the banns of such wedlock. (*Letters II* 341)

Surprisingly modern in her approach to marriage, Brontë knew that she would be judged by society – especially as a woman writer. Acknowledging that ‘one great curse of a single female life is its dependency’ (226), she chose writing over marriage in her pursuit of independence. For this reason, it is especially interesting that after Brontë married Arthur Bell Nicholls at the age of 38, her attitude toward the domestic role changed drastically. It is perhaps natural to suspect that she settled – the one thing she claimed she would never do. She was getting older, she was not the most attractive woman, she had had some tough, lonely years after her siblings’ deaths, and then this man, who was endlessly fond of her, came along. Nicholls might not be what she had wanted, i.e. the handsome George Smith, but Brontë must have realised that Smith was very much a surface kind of man, and at eight years younger than her, he would marry someone akin to himself. Her father’s opposition to her marrying Nicholls could have been another reason why she chose to do so. He did not think a clergyman was good enough for her, and he wanted her to marry differently, if at all.

Brontë was even convinced that marriage had saved her from a life of lonely unhappiness. While she grew increasingly fond of Nicholls and felt genuine affection for him, she seems to have been surprisingly submissive. She even hinted at the fact that a happy marriage offered more than her success as a novelist: ‘if true domestic happiness replace Fame – the exchange <is> will indeed be for the better’ (*Letters III* 290). One can wonder whether the tables turned now that she was on the ‘inside’ of the institution of which she had only been a looker-on. As such, her marriage appears to have been a perfectly balanced last

act of defiance and protocol – somewhat mirroring the ambiguous ending in *Villette*.

This thesis argues that *Villette* is as relevant today as it was in the Victorian period because of how it overrides its contexts in terms of ‘The Woman Question’. I have observed that Lucy Snowe’s search for identity in *Villette* not only represents Brontë’s own reluctance to conform to the set gender norms of Victorian society, but that it also indicates the continued relevance of certain issues associated with women.

My motivation for researching this topic is my own reading experience of *Villette*. Since I identify so strongly with Lucy that it at times feels like Brontë has described my exact thoughts and feelings, I have wondered if this is a shared experience among readers. However, my own reading is not necessarily representative of the novel’s overall audience. I cannot generalise on the basis of my own experience alone. While I am, as the title of this thesis suggests, mainly concerned with how the 21<sup>st</sup>-century woman reader experiences *Villette*, this thesis will also be based on a reading of the novel and other sources from both the first and later receptions. My approach will be reception studies and an historically informed close reading of *Villette*, and I will include historical and contemporary responses to support my argument. I will also be particularly indebted to feminist theory.

In this thesis, my ambition has been to explore what it is in *Villette* that encourages a feminist reading, as well as how it was received in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, how it has been received since, and how it is being read today. The weaknesses of earlier reception studies are that they have been focused on critics and academics, and thus limited to professional readers’ responses. Since I have access to new digital archives, it is possible to carry out new readings and make new discoveries about how *Villette* is being read today. Thus, a different kind of insight is available to us. This thesis aims to reveal something previously undiscovered about how 21<sup>st</sup>-century readers experience *Villette*. Are there others with a similar experience to mine?

Throughout this thesis, I will often refer to the ‘modern reader’, by which I generally mean anyone who reads *Villette* from a 21<sup>st</sup>-century feminist point of view, and who, in some way, feels the pressure of the gender norms of our current culture. For the most part, this applies to young adults. As a woman in my twenties, I am, like many of my peers – and Lucy – overwhelmed by the sense of having to be something that is prescribed for me.

I will divide my exploration of *Villette*’s continued relevance for issues of feminism into three sections. In Chapter One, I will introduce Victorian and modern criticism of *Villette* to establish if the reception has changed in line with the progress of feminism and how, as a



consequence, interpretations of Lucy have been modified. What about *Villette* did critics of the 19<sup>th</sup> century find unusual, and what new insights does 20<sup>th</sup>-century criticism offer? Lucy is, as I will argue in Chapter Two, in many respects a modern woman. I also contend that *Villette* is a female *Bildungsroman*, as well as an early example of the New Woman novel, a term which was not to appear for another forty years after Brontë's death in 1855. Finally, I will draw parallels to today's society and discuss how the gaze is extended and amplified because of social media, and how self-policing, especially in women, continues to affect perceptions of identity and self. In Chapter Three, I will examine modern readers' opinions and thoughts on the novel. *Villette* taught me something about myself, and I have been curious to discover whether this is the case for other readers, particularly other women. Since I am convinced that *Villette* continues to be a relevant feminist novel, I hope to find that there is something about Lucy's ambiguity and struggles with her own 'insane inconsistency' (*V* 388) which resonates with readers today. I furthermore propose that the readers' willingness to project themselves into the text has an impact on their reading experience, as well *their* search for identity alongside Charlotte Brontë and Lucy Snowe.

# 1 Reception

*Villette* was the first novel Charlotte Brontë published under her own name and with her true identity known: and for this reason she was prepared for people to judge the novel by what they knew of her. *Villette* was for the most part favourably received, and the intricacy of Brontë's characters has been widely agreed upon, both by Victorian and modern critics. Most of the complaints, not surprisingly, concerned the seeming lack of plot and Lucy's failure to live up to Victorian ideals of femininity (Barker 847).

In this chapter I will be looking at the reception of *Villette* from its publication in 1853 up until the 21<sup>st</sup> century in order to test my argument that the novel reveals a continuity in the female experience. By considering Victorian and modern criticism, I aim to understand *Villette*'s ability to transcend context and how ever-changing attitudes toward women open up for new interpretations of the novel. I am intrigued to see what, if any, opinions and interpretations remain the same or similar. What was it about *Villette* that caused reactions? I will consider the strengths and weaknesses of the criticism, mainly drawing on relevant concepts from Hans-Robert Jauss' reception theory as well as feminist theory.

## 1.1 Victorian Reception

According to New Historicism, literary texts are products of the 'specific historical conditions' in which they were produced (Brannigan 170). If literature indeed is inseparable from history in the making, it is also 'rife with the creative forces, disruptions and contradictions, of history'. Thus, it becomes even more important to consider the contexts of the times and the social conditions. In the introduction to this thesis, I intended to unveil what would have been the Victorians' 'horizon of expectation', by which Jauss (7) means that we can only understand works of literature within our own social and cultural context, and that each reader's expectations will vary accordingly. He emphasises the importance of bridging 'the historical distance between the alien horizon of the text and the interpreter's own horizon', thus enabling us 'to understand it as a plurality of meanings that was not yet perceivable to [the text's] contemporaries'. It follows that such a historical understanding would not be possible if our present horizon did not encompass the original horizon of the past – since we can only grasp the otherness of the past by separating it from what is remote from our own horizon.

### 1.1.1 Early Reception: 1853

The first criticism Brontë received, was from her publishers. After having read the first two volumes of the novel, George Smith, and particularly William Smith Williams, had objections to the character Lucy. He was worried it would be seen as a self-portrait of Brontë, but she merely responded by explaining that ‘I consider that she is both morbid and weak at times – the character sets up no pretensions to unmixed strength – and anybody living her life would necessarily become morbid’ (*Letters III* 80). Williams was also critical of the way in which the novel was written, to which Brontë replied by saying that the ‘regular novel-reader’ would have to ‘be satisfied with what is offered’, as ‘the emotion of the book will be found to be kept throughout in tolerable subjection’ (80).

Smith, on the other hand, was curious about Dr. John – a character which he undoubtedly recognised as himself – and his fate. Brontë explained that if Lucy marries at all, she would marry ‘the Professor – a man in whom there is much to forgive – much to “put up with”’. However, she adds that ‘from the beginning I never intended to appoint her lines in pleasant places’ (78). Brontë’s decision about Lucy’s fate was possibly the result of her realisation that someone like her would never marry someone as handsome as Smith. This was a boundary she did not want to overstep, and she believed that such a pairing might cause offence to the readers. Additionally, it ‘would have been unlike Real Life, inconsistent with Truth – at variance with Probability’ (88).

The first review appeared only five days after the book’s publication (Barker 843). Written by Harriet Martineau (in the *Daily News*, qtd. in *The Critical Heritage* 172-3), whom Brontë had considered a friend, the criticism must have been hurtful – especially since Martineau drew on her personal knowledge of Brontë (Barker 848). She found *Villette* to be ‘over-wrought’, not ‘very intelligible’, and ‘almost intolerably painful’. She then blamed the author for making ‘readers so miserable’ and for allowing ‘no respite’. Lastly, she thought Lucy and the other female characters were too preoccupied with love, arguing that ‘there are substantial, heartfelt interests for women of all ages, and under ordinary circumstances, quite apart from love’, and that there was an absence of ‘introspection, an unconsciousness, a repose in women’s lives [...] of which we find no admission in this book’. She ended the review by criticising Lucy’s charm and health, but she admitted that Lucy has ‘sense, conscience and kindliness’. Martineau’s accusation that the writer’s ‘tendency to describe the need of being loved’ is ‘so incessant’, surely hit a weak spot in Brontë. She responded

angrily, discarding the notion that anyone, man or woman, should 'feel ashamed of feeling such love' (*Letters III* 118).

It certainly is interesting that as a woman, Martineau was unhappy with Brontë's presentation of women and their 'interests'. It supports the fact that Brontë was breaking new ground in describing the inner life of a woman who indeed is heartbroken and desperately wants to be loved and to find love. Perhaps Martineau was worried that this transparency of a woman's inner thoughts and feelings only would confirm what patriarchy already had assigned to women. Additionally, Helene Moglen refers to Martineau's mistaking Brontë for Lucy, calling Martineau's feminist perspective 'rigidly structured' (27). Nevertheless, Martineau's disapproval of Brontë's view of women confirms that there were, between women expressing their opinion of 'The Woman Question', clear differences as to how women ought to be represented.

The other harsh review Brontë received was also written by a woman. Anne Mozley (in the *Christian Remembrance*, qtd. in *The Critical Heritage* 202-8) had previously attacked *Jane Eyre*, and while she found *Villette* to be an improvement, she disagreed with Brontë's support of female independence. Mozley claimed that readers 'want a woman at our hearth; and her impersonations are without the feminine element' and that 'self-dependent intellect – to that whole habit of mind which, because it feels no reverence, can never inspire for itself that one important, we may say, indispensable element of a man's true love'.

Juliet Barker points out that even Thackeray expressed his opinion of the novel in a manner Brontë would have disagreed with had he not done so privately (848-9). In interpreting the novel purely autobiographically, he did exactly what Brontë wanted to avoid: not being fairly judged as an author, but rather as a woman and as *herself*. Thackeray's criticism was fair nevertheless in the sense that he commented on Brontë's actual insecurities. Writing to Lucy Baxter, he noted that Brontë was not attractive enough to be able to fulfil her desire (of love), but he did applaud her courage to write as she did:

it amuses me to read the author's naïve confession of being in love with 2 men at the same time; and her readiness to fall in love at any time. The poor little woman of genius! The fiery little eager brave tremulous homely-faced creature! I can read a great deal of her life as I fancy in her book, and see that rather than have fame, rather than any other earthly good or mayhap heavenly one she wants some Tomkins or another to love and be in love with. But you see she is a little bit of a creature without a penny worth of good looks, thirty years old I should think, buried in the country, and eating up her own heart there, and no Tomkins will come. You girls with pretty faces and red boots (and what not) will get dozens of young fellows fluttering about you – whereas here is one a genius, a

noble heart longing to mate itself and destined to wither away into old maidenhood with no chance to fulfil the burning desire. (qtd. in *A Casebook* 93)

It is, however, worth mentioning that Thackeray was not likely to know that Brontë had been proposed to four times. In that sense, Brontë overcame the stereotypical image of the woman writer which even Thackeray assigned to her. One can imagine how discouraging criticism of this sort must have been, confirming Brontë's anxiety about herself. Credited for being a genius, however much pride she took in such a label, was not enough – as proven in Brontë's letters and in *Villette*.

Despite these unfavourable reviews, *Villette* was praised by fellow women writers George Eliot and Elizabeth Browning. Browning, in a letter from September 1853, wrote: 'If you can read novels, and you have too much sense not to be fond of them, read "Villette". The scene of the greater part of it is in Belgium, and I think it is a strong book' (qtd. in *The Critical Heritage* 299). Eliot, in letters to one Mrs. Bray, stated that 'I am only just returned to a sense of the world about me, for I have been reading *Villette*, a still more wonderful book than *Jane Eyre*. There is something almost preternatural in its power', and '*Villette – Villette – have you read it?*' (192). In her own essay, called 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists', Eliot shows her disregard for most novels written by women. She, like Brontë, objected to the typical plot of the female novel with its beautiful heroine, happy ending and overall unrealistic aspects, arguing that these 'silly novels' will lead its readers to conclude that women do not benefit from education. However, Eliot does remind the reader that there have been great women writers, one of which is Brontë.

There were without a doubt more women who sympathised with Brontë and Lucy. One of them, Mrs. Holland, sent Brontë a letter in which she says how she found *Villette* to be a consolation in the midst of her own grief (Barker 862). Brontë was understandably touched by such a response. Knowing that others shared similar feelings, she felt less alone: 'One assurance that we have done good; one testimony that we have assuaged pain – [...] comes more healingly to the heart than all the eulogiums on intellect that ever were uttered' (*Letters III* 171).

The *Examiner* (qtd. in *The Critical Heritage* 175-7) also thought highly of *Villette*. The male critic applauded the 'humour', 'skill and truth' and pointed out that the characters 'have flesh and blood in them'. He did, however, comment on what he claimed to be 'the one defect of the book': he faulted the author's accusing

fate, to account happiness an accident of life to some who are more fortunate than others, to lapse occasionally into a tone of irony a little harder than is just and now and then give vent to a little morbid wail.

Despite the changes Brontë made to the ending, the reviewer could not fathom that the author would spoil the happiness that was within her reach, 'to the sure vexation of all lookers-on'.

Yet another anonymous reviewer in the *Literary Gazette* (178-81) commended *Villette*, saying that the novel would have made Brontë famous if she had not been so already. He thought it was 'infinitely delightful' and that there was 'throughout' a 'charm of freshness'. He further noted that the writer 'excels' in the 'masterly delineation of character and analysis of emotion'. This reviewer found the characters to be as real 'as if we had known them', 'all of that mingled yarn which life presents – none all good, none all bad'. He commented on the fact that Lucy becomes 'loveable' only when

you see, by degrees, into its depths, when she flashes upon you revelations of emotion and suffering akin to the deepest you have yourself experienced, and when you feel what a flow of tenderness and loving-kindness is burning under the unattractive and frigid exterior, that you admit her into your heart.

The next reviewer took it a step further and declared that *Villette* was better than *Jane Eyre*: the unsigned review in the *Spectator* (181-3) stated that some of the characters 'are painted with a truth of detail rarely surpassed'. Although he did not think Lucy's life was as miserable as that of a lot of other people, he saw the novel as 'a bitter complaint against the destiny of those women whom circumstances reduce to a necessity of working for their living', with 'a constant tormenting of self-regard'. It is obvious that he believed that the novel was based on Brontë's personal life. He used the word 'autobiography', and said that the 'spasms of heart-agony' have 'a terrible feeling of reality about them, which seems to say that they are but fictitious in form, the transcripts of a morbid but no less real personal experience'.

The *Athenaeum* (187-90) in part shared Martineau's notion that *Villette* is all about love. Still, this critic was more generous in saying that 'a burning heart glows throughout it, and one brilliantly distinct character keeps it alive'. He even pointed out that 'the oldest man, the sternest, and the most scientific, who is a genuine novel-reader', will find that the novel lingers in the mind. What sets this review apart from the others, is the explicit commentary on female authorship. The critic thought there was a 'strange pathetic, painful revelation of Woman's nature' which 'may – and possibly does – belong to our times'. However, he went on to say that

it may be inevitable that the tendency of female authorship should lean towards defense rather than deprecation: - but by perpetually setting it forth, the chances of healing, calming, strengthening, setting free, and placing aright the sufferer are not increased.

Finally, the critic of the *Athenaeum* found *Villette* unrealistic and too fragmented, ending the review by saying that '*Villette* is a book which will please much those whom it pleases at all.' Similarly, Matthew Arnold (qtd. in *A Casebook* 93) wrote that *Villette* was disagreeable 'because the writer's mind contains nothing but hunger, rebellion and rage'.

The *Critic* (qtd. in *The Critical Heritage* 190-2) agreed with the other reviewers in that the characters are powerful in their descriptions, but thought *Villette* was 'too heavy' and 'too good' to be a favourite: 'there is too much substance and thought in them for people who read novels for the story'. The journal further appreciated the 'quiet humour, a lively wit, brilliant dialogue; vivid description, reflections that are both new and true, sentiment wholesomely free from cant and conventionality, and bursts of eloquence and poetry flashing here and there'. Rather than criticising the lack of plot, this critic praised Brontë's telling of the story while acknowledging that the novel was not for readers who read for the story itself.

The *Eclectic Review* (195-6), a nonconformist periodical known for its uneasy mixture of praise and condemnation, claimed that they could not 'with every desire to do so, fall in love with the heroine herself. She is sensible, clever, and somewhat emotional, but she lacks enthusiasm and deep womanly love'. Such judgments correspond with Elaine Showalter's comment that the critics 'wondered if the women novelists had removed themselves so far from the sphere of the common woman that they had lost the power to describe it' (80).

Eugene Forcade, in his review in *Revue des deux mondes* (qtd. in *The Critical Heritage* 199-200) admitted that 'the struggles [Lucy] delights in are those in which the individual, alone and thrown entirely on his own resources, has only his own inner strength to rely upon', but while interesting the readers, 'she does not soften us'. He also claimed that 'Currer Bell's' manner was 'harsh, tormented, a little uncouth' and that 'the scenes of her drama are arranged with a skill disguised beneath a contempt for the conventional and the commonplace'.

*Putnam's Monthly Magazine* (215) found both *Villette* and *Ruth* unrealistic: one is 'aware that it is a drama, and not a fact; that it is an author writing a very fine book, and not the scenes of life developing themselves before you'. However, the reviewer was also of the opinion that *Villette* had 'more grace than *Jane Eyre*' and was 'bold, original and interesting'.

Unlike most other critics, *Dublin University Magazine* (qtd. in *A Casebook* 99-101)

was of the opinion that the novel was ‘constructed with great care’, with ‘so abundant a variety of resources’ and ‘such a perfect mastery of the springs of character’. Still, it pointed out that the moral of the novel is ‘that there can be no real happiness to a woman, at least independently of the exercise of those affections with which nature has endowed her’. The review continued by saying that ‘we have each of us to bear our burden of sorrow’, and that the two main defects of the book were the focus on tragedy and the ‘too elaborate analysis of characters’ who ‘have but little claim upon our sympathy or regard’.

G. H. Lewes (in *The Leader*, qtd. in *A Casebook* 78-80) commented on Currer Bell’s passion and power. He said that what made her ‘so original, so fascinating’, was her ability to passionately feel while powerfully ‘give feeling shape’. Lewes, like other critics, recognised Brontë’s weaknesses, but he argued that a remonstrance of these faults would be idle: ‘Is it not enough for us to accept her *as she is*?’ As for the characters, he thought they were ‘of deep feeling, clear intellects, vehement tempers, bad manners, ungraceful, yet loveable persons’, and that while ‘you dislike them at first’, ‘you learn to love them’. He concluded that while critics and readers alike would have much to say about the novel’s faults, he spoke highly of the individuality of the book. His heartfelt conclusion goes as follows:

How she has looked at life, with a saddened, yet not vanquished soul; what she has thought, and felt, not what she thinks others will expect her to have thought and felt; this it is we read of here, and this it is which makes her writing welcome above almost every other writing.

In a later review, ‘*Ruth and Villette*’ (*Westminster Review* qtd. in *A Casebook* 104), Lewes moreover deemed *Villette* a book ‘you will not easily forget’.

In this early reception, two things stand out: the critics’ concern with Brontë’s skill of creating character and the autobiographical perspectives. Although many critics liked the characters, they had an issue with Brontë’s incoherent writing and her dual presentation of plot *and* characters (Lind-Olsen 61). They also blamed *Villette*’s ‘faults’ on the fact that the author was a woman.

### **1.1.2 Late Reception: 1855-1900**

In the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, campaigns ensured changes in women’s rights. In 1857, the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act permitted women limited divorce, and in 1891, men were denied conjugal rights to their wives’ bodies without consent. In the Married Women’s Property Act of 1870, married women were allowed to control and retain their income, and in 1882 they could own and control property. Lastly, in 1878, women were admitted into higher



education (Diniejko).

Miriam Allott points out that in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was an increased interest in ‘the Brontë story’, shifting the focus from the Brontë sisters’ literary achievements onto the details of their everyday lives (*A Casebook* 26-7). Following Brontë’s death in 1855, the obituaries expressed ‘a universal sense of personal loss’, and Mrs. Gaskell’s biography of Brontë had opened up for a broader sense of the conditions under which the sisters had lived and thus a reconsideration of the previously claimed ‘coarseness’ and ‘immorality’ of their works (28).

Margaret Oliphant, in ‘Modern Novelists – Great and Small’, in *Blackwood’s Magazine* (1855) (qtd. in *A Casebook* 117-22), observed that Brontë has ‘a grasp of persons and places’ and ‘the changes of the atmosphere, like no one else’. She remarked that *Villette* feels so real that while we afterwards ‘may disapprove at our leisure’ and we ‘never draw our breath’, nor do we have ‘a moment’s pause to be critical till we come to the end’.

Furthermore, John Skelton (in *Fraser’s Magazine* (1857), qtd. in *A Casebook* 123-9) thought that *Villette* was about ‘the realities of life’, with a ‘tearless’, ‘intense’ and ‘protracted’ pain. With the possibility of being an ‘elaborate psychological examination’, Skelton recognised the ‘subtle’, even ‘obnoxious, charm in this pale, watchful, lynx-lie woman’. He also commented on the reader’s role and how, when gaining deeper insight, ‘we see further’ as ‘leaf after leaf has been unfolded’.

W.C. Roscoe (from a review of Mrs. Gaskell’s biography in the *National Review* (1857), qtd. in *A Casebook* 129-31), in contrast to the majority of the early critics, found that Brontë never ‘thoroughly comprehends’ character – despite vivid characterisation being her forte. Roscoe complimented her method of narration, speculating that Brontë ‘seemed herself to be discovering rather than inventing’. While she ‘is perfectly master of narration’ and the study of character, ‘she never thoroughly understands it’, lacking the intuition ‘true perception of character’ requires. He faulted Brontë’s tendency ‘to see both sides’ of a character simultaneously, criticising her wanting to make ‘new discoveries in her characters’ as a lack of character development: ‘we never know where we have them’.

E. S. Dallas (from a review of Mrs. Gaskell’s biography in *Blackwood’s Magazine* (1857), qtd. in *A Casebook* 131-2), commented on the poor quality of *The Professor* and how Brontë managed to rewrite it in a manner in which it ceased to be flat. With its connection to *Villette*, he called *The Professor* ‘one of the most curious works that have ever been printed’. This allowed the observant reader to witness the development of Brontë as a writer, and to

consider the extent to which she had replotted *Villette*.

One of Brontë's biggest supporters seems to have been A.C. Swinburne (from *A Note on Charlotte Brontë* (1877), qtd. in *A Casebook* 144-8), who wrote a monograph on her. He deemed her a genius, outshining George Eliot, and he prophesied that Brontë would survive all the 'female immortals' of the hour and be read throughout the ages. Swinburne did not hold back his admiration:

I must take leave to reiterate my conviction that no living English or female writer can rationally be held her equal in what I cannot but regard as the highest and rarest quality which supplies the hardest and surest proof of a great and absolute genius for the painting and handling of human characters in mutual relation and reaction.

Swinburne also saw Lucy as a 'faithful likeness' of Brontë, painted 'with the hard austere precision of a photograph rather than a portrait'.

Leslie Stephen (from 'Hours in a Library' in *Cornhill Magazine* (1877), qtd. in *A Casebook* 148-56) criticised the 'narrowness' of M. Paul, commenting that though Brontë had the ability to 'reproduce acute observations of a character from without', her strength was in painting characters from within. While dismissing *Villette* as being too full of inconsistencies to be a work of 'wisdom', he did admit to its portrayal of Brontë's 'best solution of the great problem of life'. Conclusively, and complying with what I have previously claimed about Brontë, he argued that 'her best impulses are continually warring against each other'; 'she is between the opposite poles of duty and happiness', pursuing 'one path energetically, till she feels herself to be in danger, and she shrinks with a kind of instinctive dread', resolving 'not only that life is a mystery, but that happiness must be sought by courting misery.'

However, Stephen also condescendingly stated that 'undoubtedly such a position speaks of a mind diseased, and a more powerful intellect would even under her conditions have worked out some more comprehensible and harmonious solution.' Finally, he commented on the inexhaustibility of *Villette*: 'It is allowable to interpret her complaints in our own fashion, whatever it may be. We may give our own answer to the dark problem, or at least indicate the path by which an answer must be reached.' He also admitted to its sympathy inducing quality: 'we can but feel the strongest sympathy'.

George Smith's review (from 'The Brontës' in *Cornhill Magazine* (1875), qtd. in *A Casebook* 141-4) is of particular interest, considering his previous relation to Brontë. He claimed *Villette* to be 'the most uninteresting' of her works 'to the ordinary English reader', while recognising its mostly favourable reception among critics. Still, he did not think it

worthy of the praise it had received, nor did he think it inhabited by the same genius as *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley*. He mercilessly called the novel ‘disappointing’ and unable to ‘beget a personal interest’, thus losing ‘its chief charm’. One might suspect that Smith’s unsympathetic review was caused by his disapproval of Dr. John.

Anthony Trollope (from ‘On English Novelists of the Present Day’ in *Autobiography* (1883), qtd. in *A Casebook* 157-8) called Brontë ‘a marvellous woman’, and while thinking more highly of *Jane Eyre* than *Villette*, he, unlike Stephen, thought that M. Paul was ‘a wonderful study’; gathering that Brontë must ‘have been determined to prove to herself that she was capable of loving one whose exterior circumstances were mean and in every way unprepossessing’.

Emile Montégut (as reprinted in *Ecrivains modernes de l’Angleterre* (1885), qtd. in *A Casebook* 133-9) saw ‘the life of Charlotte Brontë’ as ‘the very substance of her novels’, encapsulating ‘what she had imagined, seen or felt’. Thus, he felt that *Villette* was a novel about ‘her true moral life’. He saw Lucy as ‘the prosaic, living Charlotte’, as opposed to *Jane Eyre*, who was ‘the ideal and poetic Charlotte’. He accordingly found the ending of *Villette* excessively harsh.

Lastly, Mary Ward (from the Introductions to *Jane Eyre and Villette: The Life and Works of Charlotte Brontë and her Sisters* (1899-1900), qtd. in *A Casebook* 158-64) emphasised the presence of Brontë’s own personality in her novels, which in this case was ‘fresh, strong, ‘surprising’ and, in the end, compensating for all her improbabilities, weaknesses and absurdities’. Ward acknowledged that, while not accounting for it alone, ‘the most compelling elements in their work derive from the powerful impress of their own personality’. She agreed with the early reviewers in that *Villette* was a masterpiece, yet she acknowledged its ‘repellent’ elements – alienating readers whose mind have ‘no energy of its own responsive to the energy of the writer.’

Ward moreover noted that ‘not seldom the qualities which give a book immortality are the qualities that for a time guard it from the crowd – till its bloom of fame has grown to a safe maturity beyond injury or doubt’. She furthermore agreed with the ‘truth’ found in M. Paul’s character, judging Dr. John as ‘the least tangible’. Whereas she thought that certain aspects of Lucy were unconvincing, she claimed that this was due to Brontë’s having given Lucy her own inner life. She also disagreed with Martineau’s criticism. Ward lastly pointed to *Villette*’s universal appeal:

The truth, of course, that it is precisely in and through her treatment of passion – mainly, no doubt, as it affects the woman’s heart and life – that she has earned and still maintains her fame.

This late-Victorian reception was in many ways a continuation of the early reception. There was an even greater focus on the autobiographical elements after Brontë’s death, and less on gender bias. While most critics praised Brontë’s genius, others were still unsatisfied with her characters. And, notably, a few critics explicitly made a point about *Villette*’s inexhaustibility and immortality.

## 1.2 Modern Reception

Between the last reviews of *Villette* in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the modern reception in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, suffragettes had continued to fight for equal opportunities to education, employment and the right to own property. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the women’s movement rematerialised as the second wave of feminism had women claiming that the personal was political and fighting for broader civil rights. The seventies as a whole was one of the most important decades for feminist literature because of the open debate and theorisation about women’s roles.

The incredibly vast number of works of criticism indicates the continued interest in Brontë and her novels. As Ian Gregor observes, criticism of the Brontës has been ‘voluminous’, and although very ‘uneven’, there have mainly been two main questions which keep recurring: namely that of the relationship of the artist to the material, and the scope of possible interpretations (1). Pauline Nestor further mentions that with the emergence of new critical theories, older theories were questioned and deconstructed (1). Feminism, for one, has drawn attention to the inherently political nature of literature. Nestor highlights how feminism especially has been influential in the ‘re-estimation’ of the Brontë’s works. In this section, I will focus on three major pieces of feminist criticism, all of which were published in the seventies. Whereas these criticisms constitute the foundation upon which I continue the interpretative discussion about *Villette*, I will include a wider selection of relevant criticism to support my own analysis in Chapter Two.

Kate Millett’s analysis of *Villette* in *Sexual Politics* (1970) was a pioneering work of feminist criticism, coinciding with Simone de Beauvoir’s theories that men have always sought to maintain their sexual control of women. Millett sees Lucy’s suffering as a consequence of a male-dominated society, and as a heroine, Lucy represents desires of freedom ‘of every conscious young woman in the world’ (144). Millett agrees with John

Stuart Mill that ‘most of what women produced when they began to write was but sycophancy to male attitude and ego: the caveat is profoundly true both then and now’. She further includes comments on the gaze and the hypocrisy of the double standard: how women are converted into sex symbols ‘devoid of mentality or personality’. Still, Millett adds that despite the truth of these statements, ‘one can find in Brontë the real thing’ (139). Agreeing with other critics in that the ambiguity allows Brontë to escape Victorian conventions, Millett further analyses her ‘breaking’ of people ‘into two parts’ to expose their ‘divided and conflicting emotions’ (140). She ends by calling *Villette* ‘one of the wittier novels in English’, ‘one of the most interesting books of the period’, and ‘a work of some importance’ (147).

In ‘Charlotte Brontë: The Self Conceived’ (1976), Helene Moglen applies psychoanalytic principles to her analysis, arguing that there is a connection between Brontë’s life and *Villette*. Her conviction that ‘the nature of the feminist struggle’ and ‘self-diagnosis’ are central to the novel indicates that Brontë transcends the personal and exposes the conflict of ‘larger social and psychological forces’. She further claims that Lucy’s development is caused by a struggle between sexual expression and sexual repression. Moglen addresses the representation of George Smith through Dr. John and M. Heger through M. Paul as Brontë’s exploration of her traumatic relationships, and believes that she, through Lucy, manages to express ‘hidden androgynous’ aspects of her own personality and fear of ‘loss of rational control’ (18). The ambiguous ending is ‘an attempt to come to terms with the crucial if unexpressed problems’, in which Lucy has ‘rejected the silences, the claustrophobic spaces, and the labyrinthian ways of anxiety and repression’ (25). Moglen points out that Lucy is Brontë’s attempt at a reconciliation of an ‘independent self-realisation’ and a ‘need to be submerged in the powerful, masculine “other”’ (25). Additionally, Moglen holds that the novel offers the reader insights into women’s struggles and the female psyche.

In *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar highlight the ‘importance of subversive context in women’s writing’ (Nestor 57). They argue that ‘Lucy’s repression is a response to a society cruelly indifferent to women’, and explain Brontë’s exploration of ‘unattractiveness, and sexual discrimination or stereotyping’ as facts imposing ‘self-burial on women’ (402), corresponding with Brontë’s view of herself and other women. They further comment on Lucy as a narrator and the ways in which she increasingly becomes the ‘heroine of her own story’ – turning into ‘the author not only of her own life story but of her own life’ (434). In conclusion, they find that Brontë has invited ‘her readers to experience with her the inferiority of the Other’ (439). However, Gilbert and Gubar have, along with

Millett, been criticised for their presentation of a ‘patriarchal aesthetics’, constructing the woman writer as the authoritative source with a fixed, rather than fragmented, identity.

In this modern reception, critics have not assessed *Villette* according to what is right or wrong, ‘realistic’, ‘coarse’, lacking in plot and so forth. Rather, they reviewed the historical context along with the novel to try to gather what *Villette* reveals about ‘The Woman Question’ of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Beauvoir’s groundbreaking feminist manifesto had been published over twenty years before Gilbert and Gubar, Moglen and Millett published their work. Thus, compared to earlier critics and readers, they had access to a new vocabulary and a more structured way of thinking about ‘The Woman Question’ and the history of patriarchy.

### 1.3 Concluding Remarks

From the Victorian reception as a whole, we gather that *Villette* caused divided opinions throughout. Many critics thought that the novel was unrealistic and that the characters were unsympathetic. Other critics praised the truth of the novel, acknowledging the effect it had on female readers in particular, and commented on how it would stand the test of time.

While Victorians found the ending of *Villette* abrupt and unfulfilling, modern critics mostly seem to think that it symbolises conflicting emotion and an escape from convention. The Victorian heroine was supposed to have a happy ending involving marriage, and Brontë’s desire to keep it realistic left the contemporary readers hanging in a way they seldom had experienced before. The very fact that the critics responded to Lucy’s illegitimacy, shows that on some level they were aware of the threat posed by women like her. Some female critics were also harsh, but better understood the reasons for the distortion of their values (Showalter 66). Feminist critics, on the other hand, have viewed *Villette* in the light of the history of women, exploring what the novel can tell us about the search for a female identity.

Even with these insights, we cannot take for granted that our modern interpretations of *Villette* are any less problematic and complex. With our horizon of expectation, new interpretations become available when seen in the context of ‘The Woman Question’ of today. Just like Brontë’s attestation of the condition of women is ‘mediated by available cultural models of identity and the discourses in which they are expressed’ (Eakin 4), so is the modern reader’s understanding of *Villette*.

## 2 Lucy Snowe

Who are you, Miss Snowe?’ she inquired, in a tone of such undisguised and unsophisticated curiosity, as made me laugh in my turn. [...] ‘Who am I indeed? Perhaps a personage in disguise. Pity I don’t look the character.’ (*V* 311-2)

How is a person to answer such a question? Lucy’s awareness of her own ‘seeming inconsistency’ (195) suggests that she, in accordance with the idea that gender is a construct, acknowledges that there is no pre-existing mould of what women ought to be like. Because Lucy does not have what it takes in terms of beauty, position, money or conformity, she lacks the traits which constitute a woman’s worth according to the rules of society. Lucy does not match the constructed feminine ideal, and as a consequence she puts on a tough, indifferent façade to ensure her own survival as a ‘nobody’ (313).

The gaze dominates *Villette*, and today’s social media arguably functions much like the pressure to live up to the ideal notion of womanhood in the Victorian era. After the emergence of social media in the noughties, we are in new ways affected by the surveilling power of the gaze. I propose that Lucy’s behaviour, thoughts and ways of presenting herself to others, offer parallels to the realities of being a woman today.

Moreover, Harriet Bjørk claims that Lucy is an ‘individualistic self-help heroine who enters on the modern quest for self-reliance’ (111). As such, I believe that Lucy’s ambiguous character is defined by her unwillingness to conform, yet without being able to stop measuring herself by existing standards. By reinterpreting *Villette* in the light of the current situation of women and the feminist movement, I aim to show that there is something in the novel which transcends time, especially for women and as regards women’s predicaments. Lucy’s narrative and her being a ‘personage in disguise’ (*V* 312) can certainly remind readers of ways in which we administer how we want others to perceive us, especially on social media.

In this chapter, I will examine Lucy’s relationship to herself, other characters and Victorian standards of womanhood. I am also going to link Lucy’s modernity to current women’s issues. As there already are numerous interpretations and analyses of *Villette*, I am not necessarily expecting to present anything revolutionary through my own rereading of the novel. However, I wish to reinforce and supplement arguments supporting Lucy’s relatability to modern readers, and to argue that the ways in which Brontë presents the female psyche in a male society were ahead of her time.

## 2.1 *Villette* as a New Woman *Bildungsroman*

New Woman novels made an appearance in the 1890s, after there had been a number of changes in laws for women such as the establishment of institutions of higher learning for women and the Married Woman's Property Act. With these official changes in women's rights, it is perhaps only natural that more women writers who wrote novels dared to rethink traditional gender roles through literature. These novels would refer to middle-class, well-educated women who were especially critical of marriage and parenthood, and who had the courage to speak out in favour of equality (Senf xiii). In *The New Woman and the Victorian Novel* (1978), Gail Cunningham states that the New Woman represented a new type of heroine who 'refused to conform to the traditional feminine role, challenged accepted ideals of marriage and maternity, chose to work for a living, or who in any way argued the feminist cause' (3). These novels extended the possibilities for women characters: women in fiction could have careers and marriages alike, they could voice their opinions, have intellectual aspirations and sexual desires (Senf xvi). By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, society had more or less caught up with women fronting the feminist cause, and women's issues were more openly debated. I would argue that although Lucy does not completely break free from the constraints of society, there is a sense in which her rebellious spirit anticipates the New Woman novels to come.

*Villette* has likewise been seen as a subverted *Bildungsroman*. Whereas the New Woman novels were centred around women, the traditional *Bildungsroman* was male. The genre demonstrates a formation of character, with the male protagonist leaving his home to experience the world (Maier 318). Due to the different treatment, education and expectations of Victorian girls and boys, in which girls were schooled in dependency and conformity, and boys in independence, a true realisation of self was a complex matter for women. Although girls had the same desires to be self-creative and transcend their circumstances, they did not have the same autonomy as boys.

Sarah Maier points out that the essential difference between the female and male genre, is that female narratives

must recognize woman's need to negotiate both with and against society's expectations for 'proper' womanhood while exploring how those same expectations may place restraints on the self-creative impulses of the girl-child, and how, by necessity, successful development will integrate several roles which meet the demands placed upon a mature woman in society because if it does not, her fragmentation will not allow for any further profession in education or development. (333)



It is interesting that Maier mentions that women had to integrate several roles in order to avoid fragmentation. Just as Kate Millett, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have been criticised for presenting the woman writer as having a fixed identity, I wonder if a fragmentation of a woman's identity is what was *required* for this new sense of self to emerge: in order to come to terms with redefined gender roles, women needed to rebuild their sense of identity. As for Lucy, Anna Gibson agrees that she 'experiences and narrates herself as fragmented, heterogeneous, and processual rather than unified and stable' (208). Laura Ciolkowski also supports the idea that women indeed take on different roles. She claims that Brontë manipulates the conventions of the *Bildungsroman* to forge a new Victorian feminine identity by redescribing the way in which 'authentic' Victorian women were 'produced, policed and refigured' (219). On this basis, all women were, and arguably still are, in actuality forgers of the figure or version of themselves which is most likely to be desired by society.

Bjørk connects the New Woman novel and the *Bildungsroman* by suggesting that Lucy 'represents the new woman of the modern age but as a travelling reporter her sphere is restricted indeed' (112). As a woman travelling alone seeking work, Lucy is an easy prey for men. While she enjoys the 'ecstasy of freedom and enjoyment' of travel, and admits that 'to do this, and to do it utterly alone, gave me perhaps an irrational, but a real pleasure' (V 48), she also experiences sexual harassment. Claiming that she was neither 'wretched' nor 'terrified', Lucy says one man 'offered me up as an oblation, served me as dripping toast', while another 'laid hands' on her. She speaks up and 'shook off his touch' (50). Moreover, Lucy finds herself in a compromised position when she arrives in Labassecour: she is a solitary woman in a country whose language she does not speak, and she has lost her possessions. Despite being helped by the yet unidentifiable Dr. John, who tells her that 'it is too late and too dark for a woman to go through the park alone', she is followed by two 'bearded, sneering simpletons' (63). While Lucy puts on a brave face, she is terrified and unable to escape the fact that her vulnerability is directly linked to her gender.

Lucy also refuses to let the reader in on her past. She only mentions a metaphorical shipwreck in which 'the crew perished', leaving her to fend for herself: 'Thus, there remained no possibility of dependence on others; to myself alone I could look. I know not that I was of a self-reliant or active nature; but self-reliance and exertion were forced upon me by circumstances' (V 36). Lucy's expressed disbelief in her own 'active nature' suggests that her self-reliance is the façade she has found it necessary to adopt: it is her best shot at survival, literally and figuratively. Through intervals of conflicting thoughts, from commenting on her

‘clear thought and steady self-possession’ (45), to remembering the starkness of her situation, Lucy bravely tries to maintain a sense of hope. With ‘unutterable loathing of a desolate existence past’ (49), she travels in search of a new life. Arriving in London on her way abroad, not knowing what will happen, she despairs:

All at once my position rose on me like a ghost. Anomalous, desolate, almost blank of hope, it stood. What was I doing here alone in great London? [...] What prospects had I in life? What friends had I on earth? Whence did I come? Whither should I go? What should I do? (46)

Millett explains Lucy as someone who has been ‘traumatically cast out of the middle class’, unprepared to live in a world which expects her to ‘exist parasitically’ (145) – which is the last thing Lucy wants. She thinks that everything good bestowed upon her inevitably will be taken away again, a pattern of thought which keeps her in a loop of a constant inner battle. Alternating between thoughts of insecurity and keeping her spirits up, she cynically admits that any feeling of happiness probably will not last: ‘My fancy budded fresh and my heart basked in sunshine. These feelings, however, were well kept in check by the secret but ceaseless consciousness of anxiety lying in wait on enjoyment, like a tiger crouched in a jungle’ (V 60).

Lucy’s state of despair conjures a courage in her which secures her a job at Madame Beck’s boarding school, first as a nursery governess, then as a teacher. Lucy’s work is an important aspect of her self-reliance, sparing her ‘the pain of being a burden to anybody’ and ‘comfort of mind’ knowing she can support herself (290). While she admits that her work does not interest her, at least she finds relief in being ‘without anxiety’ (77). Moreover, Lucy shamelessly confesses to Mr. Home and Paulina, who expect ‘motives of pure philanthropy’ to be ‘the most lenient way of accounting’ for Lucy’s ‘eccentricity’, that she works for the money (290).

It is not true, however, that this is all her work is. When Madame Beck unexpectedly demands Lucy to teach, Lucy’s first instinct is to ‘escape action’ (76). But, reluctant to show Madame Beck her ‘cowardice’, she is determined to succeed: ‘My mind was a great deal bent on success: I could not bear the thought of being baffled by mere undisciplined disaffection and wanton indocility, in this first attempt to get on in life’ (82). Lucy manages to bring her students, ‘this stiff-necked tribe’, under her influence, and gradually gets a sense of self-worth through the mastery of her job. In spite of that, she is not happy to be working for someone else, and she is opposed to depend financially (and emotionally) on anyone. She is determined to figure out

how I should make some advance in life, take another step towards an independent position; and whenever a certain eye was averted from me, and a certain countenance grew dark with unkindness and injustice, into that track of speculation did I at once strike; so that, little by little, I had laid half a plan. (364)

However much Lucy comes to enjoy being a teacher, she recognises that it does not offer her fulfilment. On the basis that she lacks external attributes such as appearance and connections, Lucy decides that she must ‘train for a life of labour rather than for love, marriage and motherhood’ (Bjørk 129-30). Because she does not expect to find love, independence is what she sets out for. As such, *Villette* fits into two sub-categories of the novel in which neither provides a standardised trajectory for Lucy to follow. The identity search, intellectual development, protest, and dealing with economic, social and psychological difficulties signal both the non-conformity of the female *Bildungsroman* and the rebellion of the New Woman novel.

## 2.2 Lucy and States of Mind

I previously discussed the contradictions of Brontë’s self-deprecation and her criticism of other women. The same attitude is found in Lucy, and it is a recurring topic in the novel. Lucy is ‘a worn-out creature’, ‘a faded, hollow-eyes vision’ (*V* 36). Interestingly, when Lucy looks in the mirror, she creates a distance between what she sees and her inner self. While wanting to believe that brains are more important than beauty, she cannot help but feel trapped by her plain appearance. It is almost a relief to the reader that among Lucy’s self-deprecating thoughts, she still believes she has the ability to speak up when prompted: ‘Though I knew I looked a poor creature, and in many respects actually was so, yet nature had given me a voice that could make itself heard, if lifted in excitement or deepened by emotion’ (80). She takes pride in the fact that she, unlike many women, is able to speak her mind.

Nevertheless, Lucy struggles to convince herself that this part of her weighs up for her lack of femininity. She reprimands herself for not being pretty, strong or self-contained enough, and she loathes the feminine qualities of which she seems deficient. Lucy’s plainness actually thwarts the traditional notion of the gaze, because she ‘does not serve as an icon of beauty’, which is what causes ‘woman’ to be viewed (Lawrence 450). Rather, she notes that ‘unobserved I could observe’ (*V* 143). Nancy Rabinowitz points out that especially by gazing at Dr. John, and thus acting ‘like a man and an equal’, Lucy breaks ‘a series of gender, class and narrative conventions’ (72). Moreover, Lucy frequently turns her gaze toward women, from a ‘double and even more complicated point of vantage’ (Millett 141). The gaze

functions as a divide between her and other women: she criticises their attributes – especially those she finds absurd, or rather, ones she does not allow herself to display. This is an example of the double standard which has converted ‘woman into sex symbol, flesh devoid of mentality or personality’ for itself to gaze upon (Millett 144).

It has been argued that Polly is Lucy’s foil in that she acts out what Lucy suppresses. Lucy finds Polly’s attentions to her father ‘absurd’ (*V* 16), which, considering her own family situation, sounds more like envy than genuine mockery. She further comments on Polly’s eagerness to please Graham; how she would ‘adapt herself to such themes as interested him’ and how she ‘seemed to feel by his feelings, exist in his existence’ (26). Lucy characterises sensitivity as ‘sudden, dangerous natures’ which ‘offer many a curious spectacle to those whom a cooler temperament has secured from participation in their angular vagaries’ (14). She makes it clear that she little respects ‘women or girls who are loquacious either in boasting the triumphs, or bemoaning the mortifications of feelings’ (376).

Lucy further applauds her own capability to endure hardship by commenting that Ginevra Fanshawe and women like her, with ‘light, careless temperament’, and ‘fair, fragile style of beauty’ are at ‘an entire incapacity to endure: they seem to sour in adversity, like small beer in thunder. The man who takes such a woman for his wife, ought to be prepared to guarantee her an existence all sunshine’ (57). Ginevra, on the other hand, harshly compares their social positions, concluding that she is happy and Lucy is miserable. She sums Lucy up as ‘nobody’s daughter’ with ‘no relations’, without ‘attractive accomplishments’ and ‘no beauty’. Perhaps she is at her most hard-hitting when she goes on: ‘I believe you never were in love, and never will be; you don’t know the feeling: and so much the better, for though you might have your own heart broken, no living heart will you ever break. Isn’t it all true?’ (147). Lucy agrees that solitude is sadness, but that ‘life, however, has worse than that. Deeper than melancholy, lies heart-break’. ‘Lucy, I wonder if anybody will ever comprehend you altogether,’ Ginevra concludes (427).

Comprehending Lucy is indeed a challenge. Many have found Lucy to be manipulative in the way she deliberately conceals information from the reader. While I agree with Elin Lind-Olsen’s suggestion that rather than being manipulative, Lucy is trying to present a fuller picture (65), I think Lucy is extorting her power as an autobiographer, presenting herself to the reader as she pleases. As W.A. Craik points out, we ‘hear of events only as they impinge on Lucy’s consciousness as significant’ (191), which is reminiscent of the ways in which we in the 21<sup>st</sup> century attempt to author ourselves in social media. Lucy

cannot control her existence, but she can at the very least control the telling of her existence (Rabinowitz 75).

Moreover, as in reality, *Villette* deals with inconsistencies and temporary ignorance before a situation or a person is fully known, both in the presentation of Lucy and other characters. Lucy works against retrospective wisdom and she knows that she cannot trust others to perceive her as she is (Silver 90). She even admits to a ‘perverse mood of the mind which is rather soothed than irritated’, as people ‘can never be rightly known’ (*V* 99). Lucy further delights in knowing others’ character without them knowing hers. Referring to Dr. John, she says: ‘I liked entering his presence covered with a cloud he had not seen through, while he stood before me under a ray of special illumination’ (177). Until others learn to recognise her significance, Lucy feels empowered by operating with knowledge that others are denied (Nestor 88). Rather than risking being overlooked because she is a nobody, Lucy’s choice is to withhold information from the people in her world. Because she is an outsider, she refuses to exist on their terms. Additionally, in being misunderstood, Lucy is not put down because of who she really is, but rather because of the roles she is given (Rabinowitz 72). She thus adopts strategies, not unlike other forgers, as a means of survival. Yet, what sets Lucy apart from the rest, is perhaps the way she openly advertises this (Ciolkowski 220).

Karen Lawrence suggests that Lucy’s resistance to categorisation stems from her failing to conform to what men see as significant enough to interpret (452). Lucy is fully aware of how people have sized her up and defined her as she appears to them: to Madame Beck she is ‘learned and blue’, to Ginevra ‘ironic and cynical’, to Mr. Home a ‘discreet’ and ‘conventional’ ‘model teacher’, and to M. Paul ‘indocile’, ‘adventurous’ and ‘audacious’ (*V* 307). Lucy reflects on the ‘contradictory attributes of character we sometimes find ascribed to us, according to the eye with which we are viewed’ (307), and she asks if how others see you is ‘the fault of your character or of another’s perceptions’ (194) – drawing attention to the potential power we assign to the opinions of others.

Pauline Nestor argues that Lucy’s detached persona is a betrayal of her fullest self (91), and I would add that Lucy represses her feminine qualities because of her belief that displaying them creates a vulnerability in her that someone in her position simply cannot afford. Ginevra, on the other hand, is in many respects Lucy’s alter ego because *her* social position allows her to express that side of herself. At the same time, Lucy concedes that someone like Madame Beck, while offering Lucy a role model of independence, is too harsh a character for her liking: Madame Beck’s power is not her kind of power (Lattanzio 55).

Rather, Madame Beck is an embodiment of Lucy's self-control and system of surveillance, which Lucy expresses through her own masculine, observing gaze.

Altogether appearing to take pride in her ability to suppress her emotions, Lucy says that 'I again surpassed my usual self, and achieved a neat, frosty, falsehood' (326) and 'the next day I was again Lucy Snowe' (120) – arguably because she inhabits 'self-control' and 'strength of self-denial' which she is 'not accustomed to find in women' (295). On the other hand, she admits that 'seldom I could properly act out my resolution to be reserved and cool where I had been grieved and hurt' (325). Her conscious manoeuvring of appearance and character supports the fact that Lucy's exterior is a response to society's particular encouragements. Despite her conscious effort of putting on a façade, she is as empathetic as any other person.

The pressure Lucy endures due to her circumstances undoubtedly has effects on her mental wellbeing, and she is radically open about her anxiety and depression throughout her narrative. Bjørk notes that this 'narrative pattern of recurrent stages of depression, partial recovery and calm acceptance of existence without eager hope for the future' is an important factor in the development of the female sphere in the English novel (114). Lucy is 'shaken in nerves' (V 43) after Miss Marchmont's death, and life to Lucy is 'but a hopeless desert' when 'looked on by such as me' (159). Already 'constitutionally nervous' (370), Lucy falls into a psychosis when she is left alone in the pensionnat. Momentarily losing faith in her self-sufficiency, she admits that her 'spirits had long been gradually sinking [...] even to look forward was not to hope: the dumb future spoke no comfort, offered no promise' (158). The episode indicates how the effects of extended solitude, an uncertain future and female self-suppression cause the climax of her desolation. Now that there is no one around, Lucy can exist without a façade – and thus, what she has repressed is released.

How Lucy allows herself to be treated by men says a lot about her sense of self-worth and its development. As foils, Dr. John and M. Paul draw attention to the simultaneous need and contempt women feel toward men. Lucy's conflicting emotions for Dr. John go against her own principles because it is a superficial kind of attraction: Dr. John is the kind of man who is barely aware of the fact that Lucy is a woman, because he does not find her attractive. Still, Lucy scolds Ginevra for refusing his love when she takes for granted what Lucy can never have: 'Have you power to do this? Who gave you that power? Where is it? Does it lie in your beauty – your pink and white complexion, and your yellow hair?' (150).

Lucy observes that 'while Graham could devote to others the most grave and earnest,

the manliest interest, he had no more than light raillery for Lucy, the friend' (321). Yet, he patronises her on the basis of her sex: 'I believe if you had been a boy, Lucy, instead of a girl [...] we should have been good friends: our opinions would have melted into each other' (320). However, she buries her feelings for Dr. John along with his letters, as she sees that his lack of depth would never truly satisfy her: 'I realised his entire misapprehension of my character and 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' (323).

M. Paul, however, is arguably the one person who has had any real understanding of Lucy from the start. 'Indeed, everybody in the Rue Fossette held a superstition that "Meess Lucie" was learned; with the notable exception of M. Paul' (239). With him, she cannot hide behind her exterior: '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 colourless shadow has gone by. As for me, I scrutinised your face once, and it sufficed' (157). He furthermore tells Lucy that she reminds him of 'a young she wild creature, new caught, untamed, viewing with a mixture of fire and fear the first entrance of the breaker-in' (236). What he says is potentially significant in three ways. First, the quotation sums up the spirit of the first feminists – the new women who refused to abide by current gender norms. Second, it points to an accompanying ambiguity: the mixture of fire and fear, as well as the contrast between fire and the 'cold' Lucy. Third, the use of the word 'breaker-in' is reminiscent of a forging of disguise in order to fit in somewhere you do not belong.

Through continuous provocation, M. Paul challenges Lucy to accept and express what she suppresses. Lucy goes from being someone who would do anything in her power to protect herself from feelings and thus inevitable disappointment, to allowing herself to feel and act on love:

I think I never felt jealousy till now. This was not like enduring endearments of Dr. John and Paulina, against which while I sealed my eyes and my ears, while I withdrew thence my thoughts, my sense of harmony still acknowledged in it a charm. This was an outrage. The love born of beauty was not mine: I had nothing in common with it: I could not dare to meddle with it, but another love, venturing diffidently into life after long acquaintance, furnace-tried by pain, stamped by constancy, consolidated by affection's pure and durable alloy, submitted by intellect to intellect's own tests, and finally wrought up, by his own process, to his own unflawed completeness, this Love that laughed at Passion, his fast frenzies and his hot and hurried extinction, in this Love I had a vested interest [...]. (469)

Lucy acknowledges that the love she speaks of is not the passionate love she imagined. Yet, for the first time, she is hopeful of lasting love. There is a sense of equality in her description: she and M. Paul are both flawed. Based not on passion, but rather companionship, compatibility and security, this love is real and constant. In this relationship, she does not have to put up a façade. Lucy and M. Paul are, according to Craik, ‘the oddest hero and heroine in the history of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel’ (170).

### 2.3 Double Selves

All of the arguments I have presented so far have one thing in common: doubleness, or duality. Janet Carlisle, for one, thinks that Lucy is one of the most doubled characters in literature (283). Lucy’s duality is expressed in several ways: she has a cold outer appearance, yet she is sensitive and full of feelings and sympathy for others. She wants to be loved, yet she creates a self-protective distance between herself and other people. She yearns for love and friendship, yet she finds companionship in her own thoughts. She is tough and self-reliant, yet full of doubt, anxiety and depression. She is self-defeating, yet she struggles for survival. She both gazes and is gazed at. She worries about what others think of her, yet she is peculiarly confident in herself.

Lucy describes her own doubleness as ‘serving two masters’ (*V* 258), feeling and reason:

This hag, this Reason, would not let me look up, or smile, or hope: she could not rest unless I were altogether crushed, cowed, broken-in, and broken-down. According to her, I was born only to work for a piece of bread, to await the pains of death, and steadily through all life to despond. Reason might be right; yet no wonder we are glad at times to defy her, to rush from under her rod and give a truant hour to Imagination – *her* soft, bright foe, *our* sweet Help, our divine Hope. We shall and must break bounds at intervals, despite the terrible revenge that awaits our return. Reason is vindictive as a devil: for me she was always envenomed as a stepmother. (233)

While Lucy appreciates that there needs to be a balance between feeling and reason, she finds that reason has the strongest hold of her, and she is reluctant to allow herself any glimpse of hope. Lucy moreover talks about holding two lives, that ‘of thought, and that of reality; and, provided the former was nourished with a sufficiency of the strange necromantic joys of fancy, the privileges of the latter might remain limited to daily bread, hourly work, and a roof of shelter’ (77).

Lucy neither adheres to female nor male standards. Her observation and interpretation



of Vashti emphasise the dichotomy that is Lucy herself: 'I found upon her something neither of woman nor of man: in each of her eyes sat a devil. These evil forces bore her through the tragedy, kept up her feeble strength – for she was but a frail creature [...] a mighty revelation' (262). The powerful impression is due to how Vashti, while performing 'for the world's gaze', is anything but a passive object. She demonstrates to Lucy the power of female passion and rage, and she stands in contrast to existing portraits of women who typically are worshipped by the gaze, such as Cleopatra (Lawrence 452). Ciolkowski takes it a step further in claiming that Vashti 'threatens to defraud Victorian fictions of masculinity and femininity and their absolute authority' because the 'totalizing system' cannot explain her form (224).

There are numerous additional examples throughout the novel in which this doubleness brings out Lucy's fluidity, or fragmentation, of identity. For instance, she strongly objects to M. Paul assigning her a male part in the vaudeville: 'I was to be the butterfly, talker, and traitor' (*V* 135). Forcing M. Paul to accept a compromise, she agrees to take a man's part, but she will not dress like one (140). He tells Lucy that she will spoil all, and it is tempting to think of this as a metaphor for 'spoiling' the ideal notion of gender roles by refusing to be one or the other. Strikingly, Lucy says that 'it must be arranged in my own way: nobody must meddle; the things must not be forced upon me' (140) – she acts to please herself (143).

However, Lucy grapples with her sexual identity, as seen in the instances where she puts on dresses of colour: especially the pink dress Mrs. Bretton gives her to wear to the theatre. Again she observes herself in the mirror, and although she feels 'fear' and 'trembling' (211) at the sight of herself, she admits that 'for the first, and perhaps only time in my life, I enjoyed the "giftie" of seeing myself as others see me' (213). The fact that M. Paul turns out to disapprove so strongly of the dress, gives Lucy, for the first time, an awareness of her sexual power.

Perhaps the instance in which Brontë's own self-deprecation comes through most clearly, is when Lucy allows herself to be vulnerable in admitting to M. Paul how insecure she is about her appearance. This proves that Lucy does care about the opinions of others. Lucy tells M. Paul that she is 'not pleasant to look at', and she explains to the reader how she 'could not help saying this; the words came unbidden: I never remember the time when I had not a haunting dread of what might be the degree of my outward deficiency; this dread pressed me at the moment with special force' (483). After he reassures her, she continues: 'Ever after that I knew what I was for *him*; and what I might be for the rest of the world, I

ceased painfully to care. Was it weak to lay so much stress on an opinion about appearance? I fear it was' (483-4). The last two sentences are eerily similar to what George Smith said about Brontë's anxiousness to be pretty (qtd. in Barker 660). Still, Brontë shows that unattractive women with unorthodox ideas about independence can be desired by men of character (Rabinowitz 77).

Yet, Lucy is most explicitly criticised for her lack of femininity by M. Paul. She sarcastically comments that she 'was vaguely threatened with I know not what doom if I ever trespassed the limits proper to my sex, and conceived a contraband appetite for unfeminine knowledge' (*V* 356). Moreover, when he tells her that 'women of intellect' are 'a luckless accident, a thing for which there was neither place nor use in creation, wanted neither as a wife or worker', Lucy is not afraid to say that she does not care (359). However, while she in this instance is able to distance herself from opinions on what is deemed proper for women, she is still painfully aware of her sex. M. Paul unjustly gives her an exam she is unprepared for, and as it happens, the examiners are the same two men who followed her on her first night in Vilette. Lucy's emotional distress and her trauma are palpable: describing the emotion she feels as 'far more than grief', she points out that had she been a man, she 'could have challenged the pair on the spot'. She is ashamed of her own reaction, 'the distressed tremor' of her voice and the 'fit of choking tears', but she 'would rather have been scourged than betrayed' emotion (403).

The unresolved marriage plot is a major aspect of *Vilette's* ambiguity. Although Lucy finds love with M. Paul, and he provides her with the opportunity to assume power and shape her own life, it is a fact that her chance at independence is due to a man's generosity. Gilbert and Gubar explain that 'Lucy's ambivalence about love and men' is illuminated by her search for 'emotional and erotic involvement as the only available form of self-actualization in her world, yet she fears such involvement will lead either to submission or to destruction' (431). The fact that Lucy is willing to enter into a typical social and economic relationship reveals that no matter how self-reliant and detached she wants to be, she cannot deny that even she 'finds her sense of worth in the attentions of another' (Ciolkowski 229). Additionally, M. Paul helps Lucy love herself. As Nestor says, loving M. Paul 'is a gesture of self-love in so far as he represents those qualities in herself that she has refused to value' (93). And, in accepting the school, Lucy shows that she finally is able to let go of her idea of complete self-reliance.

The much-disputed ending allows Lucy to escape commitment, and one might wonder if the refusal to grant the reader closure is a part of something bigger. Could it symbolise the

continued negotiation of 'The Woman Question' and the fact that there still is a need for 'sustaining stories of survival' (Gilbert and Gubar 438)? Or, as Rabinowitz wonders, that if the reader does not 'have the courage to imagine or tolerate the harsh truth, we can improve things with hope' (76)? Nevertheless, Lucy is an example that the end of love is not the end of life (Nestor 95). She now has the strength of character not to be 'shipwrecked by the storm', as she was in her youth (Rabinowitz 79).

## 2.4 The Modern Lucy

Lucy is modern in two ways. First in the sense that she might be seen to be ahead of her time – a 'new woman' before the expression existed. Nestor claims that 'Brontë explores the indelible imprint of repression on the individual – the deeply internalized scarring that makes Lucy Snowe the difficult woman that she is' (85). If Lucy cannot be what society wants her to be, and since society does not let her be who she really is, Lucy's solution is to withdraw into herself, mastering the female art of self-suppression. None of Lucy's strategies provide her with roles she can fully adopt: her sense of self does not conform to the stereotypes made available by society. The less attractive features of her personality, which Brontë characterises as 'morbid and weak' (*Letters III* 80), can be seen as direct reflections of social pressures (Nestor 86).

Secondly, Lucy is modern because her situation continues to be relevant to women. Although it certainly is easier to be an independent woman today, Lucy's struggles are not limited to the Victorian period. While there have been major changes in the situation of women since Brontë's time, women nevertheless continue to be subject to discrimination and stereotypes. Despite the current focus on women's rights and the solidarity this has required, the effect social media have on women's internalised notion of having to appear a certain way, is arguably jeopardising the progress of feminism. When viewing *Villette* through a modern lens, the novel reveals that society in many ways is surprisingly stable in some of its fundamental structures and ideologies: identity, relationships, education, sexuality and gender roles are currently highly debated topics. Society preaches individuality and freedom, yet it appears that social media advocate conformity – for people to fit into the set image. Social media may be seen as our culture's worst enemy in that it has us focusing our attention on portraying curated versions of ourselves. It is still a fact that although women are encouraged to be independent and self-reliant, the expectation is also that women should fulfil their destiny as mothers and wives.

## 2.5 Concluding Remarks

Nestor suggests that Lucy's main achievement is how she has managed to clarify her own distortions through her own narrative (98). While she is outwardly affected by society, her inner complexity transcends context: she may act as a transformer, a role model and as a fellow 'sufferer' to modern readers. Lucy represents anyone who has experienced alienation, harassment, loneliness, depression, non-conformity, anxiety, unrequited love and a need for (self) love. Lucy also shows us that women can have more than one dimension. Although we know this today, and we are theoretically free to do and be whatever we want, we still struggle with conflicting emotions. Brontë is ruffling the notion of a set divide between subject and object, with Lucy breaking out of the fossilised position as an object. Lucy's process of gradually becoming a subject as she moves toward a sense of identity, symbolises a woman's journey of realising that she is her *own* person. Lucy's awareness and meta-thinking about her situation are what removes her from an all-consuming sense of being an object, yet they are equally what remind her of the fact that she, as a woman, is one. Worn down by feelings of inadequacy and self-constituted suppression, Lucy's self-protective façade illustrates what is encouraged in women, even to this day.

### 3 *Villette* in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Storytelling has been a central part of human experience for thousands of years. Narratives provide a way of understanding the world around us, not to mention ourselves. Paul John Eakin, in *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (1999), argues that the self is defined by, and lives in terms of, relations with others. As humans, we have a need to connect and to be part of something larger than ourselves. Because social necessities, such as the sense of belonging, is part of our basic human needs, we want to understand, express and share our experience. Eakin furthermore refers to Wayne C. Booth, who maintains that in a culture that stresses ‘projects for improving character’ and ‘the search inward for the core of the real “me”’, perhaps we should look to literature for instruction (236-7). Not only is there immeasurable comfort in seeing oneself, or something akin to oneself, represented – literature may also encourage confrontation. While we realise that life is not a story in a literary sense, and a person is not a book, there is a certain assumption that the self can be represented in a text (Eakin 99).

In this chapter, I will explore how *Villette* still engages readers today. Ruth Parkin-Gounelas suggests that the novel is a site of female readers’ self-reparation: that when the female reader applies herself to the text, it can be seen as a search for nourishment or an interchange of two minds (99). In similar ways to how Lucy ‘has constructed her characters along lines dictated by personal need’, the dynamic between the novel and the reader decides whether Lucy is a heroine or anti-heroine (102). I want to look into how, or if, the novel offers something in particular to the contemporary female reader. To do this, I will be gathering information from reviews of *Villette* written in the past year. What can these reviews tell us about how the novel is being read today? First, however, I will present relevant theory and existing analyses of *Villette* as a site for reading the self. While my readings in this chapter will primarily be informed by Wolfgang Iser’s theories, I am also indebted to Janice Radway’s focus on the reading experience of the ‘common reader’.

#### 3.1 Reading the Self in *Villette*

Reader-response theory believes that a piece of writing cannot be understood in separation from its results, which is an emotional response in the reader (Tompkins ix). I particularly want to focus on Iser’s ideas about readers’ need to decipher, which gives us the possibility to

‘formulate ourselves and so discover what had previously seemed to elude our consciousness’ (68). Both he and Walker Gibson are of the opinion that the application of such insights is ‘therapeutic, leading to fuller knowledge of the self and even to self-creation’ (Tompkins xv). Eakin moreover explains identity formation as a process that cannot be inspected as it happens – it is only in retrospect that we notice how we have become our selves (x). As an autobiographer, Lucy is arguably coming to a realisation of an evolving self that is continually transforming. Her narrative can be seen as a shared coping mechanism – an interaction – both for her and the reader. *Villette* is therefore a patchwork of experiences and a site of self-other illumination (Morley 79): it is an example of how we tell stories in order to understand.

Just as Lucy is in the process of constructing her own character throughout her narrative, so the readers can be said to form themselves along with her. Karen Lawrence suggests that Lucy’s narrative technique, in which she ‘constructs herself as a sign worth interpreting for readers to be able to see significance where others see only a blank’, is used as a means with which to school her readers (453-4). And, by filling in these blanks, readers simultaneously project themselves into the text. The reader is then required to ‘reveal aspects of himself [sic] in order to experience a reality which is different from his [sic] own’ (Iser 57). Iser calls this ‘identification’, which is the process of absorbing the unfamiliar, and a strategy employed by the writer in order to stimulate attitudes in the reader (65).

Iser further believes that each ‘reader must act as a co-creator of the work by supplying the portion of it which is not written but only implied, meaning each reader fills in the unwritten portions of the text, its “gaps” or areas of “indeterminacy”, in his own way’ (55). This supports the idea that by applying ourselves to spaces in the text, we understand Lucy better and in our own way. Such a range of outcomes and interpretations thus proves the novel’s ‘inexhaustibility’ (Iser 55): it refers to the numerous different ways in which readers will interpret a text. Whether or not Lucy seeks to be understood, the readers inevitably understand her on their own terms, based on their own dispositions and preconceptions. Both Iser (56) and Richard Hutch (4) believe that the literary text acts as a mirror: others’ stories function as a mirror in that they reflect ‘oneself, characteristics shared, even peculiarities, of common humanity’.

In ‘The Reflecting Reader in *Villette*,’ Brenda Silver maintains that Lucy as a narrator employs techniques which require the reader to immerse themselves into a world as ‘complex and conflicted’ as her own (90). Reading *Villette*, then, is a ‘mutual act of creation’, and

Charlotte Brontë creates a new form of fiction for women as well as a new audience – one which must consider its different roles as ‘part critic, part confidante, part sounding board’ – and whose interpretation of Lucy’s narrative ‘will provide the recognition denied to women who do not follow traditional paths of development’ (92). Silver’s claim is similar to that of Gibson, who suggests that readers try on the different roles offered to them by the author (qtd. in Tompkins xi). On these conditions, what we see in the ‘mirror’ held up to us by the text, as well as our readiness to accept these roles, might decide the outcome of our individual reading experience of *Villette*.

Thus, Lucy’s presentation of a fleeting, inconsistent sense of self may prompt us to reflect on our own sense of identity and character. How do we narrate our own lives? How do we present ourselves? Eakin proposes that Lucy’s ‘non-linear, discontinuous’ way of writing can be seen as a hallmark of female autobiographies (48). Like Lucy, we too leave out parts of our story which do not match the way we would like to appear in certain situations. *Villette*’s puzzling narration and incoherent plot represent our lives; they make us reflect on our own behaviour, why we act like we do and why we are who we are. Lucy is attractively intricate in that she is trying to figure out who she is, while simultaneously being true to who she *actually* is: inconsistency is the only consistent aspect of her character. As Parkin-Gounelas points out, the attempt at arriving at a stable and coherent identity is doomed to fail (100), and I would add that instead of representing unreliability, inconsistency signals development and change. Lucy’s desire to appear inconsistent is in direct defiance of the notion of the ‘dead self’ which has been constructed for women like her (Gilbert and Gubar 17-9).

### **3.1.1 Vested Reading**

Janice Radway pioneered the term ‘appropriation’, in which the ordinary readers’ experience is taken seriously. She has conducted studies on how readers use literature as a means of empowerment, and her seminal 1980s survey on a group of women and their reading of romance novels was an ‘effort to reveal the complexity of the connection between this literary form and the lives of women’ (185). It remains a classic in the field of reception studies.

While the majority of the women in her study agreed that romance reading could change their perceptions of themselves (101), very few of them were able to articulate exactly how.

Nevertheless, they believed that their self-perception had been favourably transformed (102).

As part of her conclusion, Radway noted that these readers’ ways of reading were a ‘minimal but nonetheless legitimate form of protest’ against their reality and responsibilities as wives

and mothers, and against the effects of patriarchy (222). The women displayed an unwillingness to read ‘depressing stuff’ (98) when they already had so much responsibility, which is why they preferred romantic novels with happy endings.

As we will see from the reviews in the next section, a lot of readers, most of them women, comment on Lucy’s relatability. Could it be that women’s preferences when it comes to reading have changed over the past thirty years? It is perhaps worth considering that the modern world has created a need for literature conveying realistic stories we can relate to, in addition to these ideal fictional worlds to which we can escape. For, compared to the romance novels, *Villette* is ‘a destruction of the romantic fantasy’ – a story ‘grown into another reality’ (Silver 110-1).

Rebecca Gould takes the notion of the individual reader’s experience a step further. Based on Iser and Radway’s work, among others, Gould proposes the term ‘vested reading’ as a kind of reading which is grounded in the reader’s life experience (415-6). She further argues that reading is ‘an attempt to read the self into the book one holds in one’s hand’. On the same note, Rachel Morley supports the notion that vested reading ‘can help its readers to live and to make meaning out of life’, thus ‘to understand and transform the self’ (79). Therefore, as opposed to institutionalised literary studies, in which texts are read for their complexity, location in history and so forth, vested reading focuses on the narrative function and its ability to stimulate changes in the ordinary readers’ lives (Gould 417).

It was my own experience of vested reading which made me choose *Villette* as the topic for this thesis in the first place. I find there to be something particularly soothing in knowing that I resonate deeply with Brontë, who died more than 150 years ago. *Villette* provides, without a doubt, the most intense reading experience I have ever had. Brontë gives me relief in knowing that I am not alone; that whatever I am feeling or going through, someone else has gone before me. She gives me peace of mind whenever I struggle with who I am, in the sense that someone not only has shared my experience, but also managed to articulate it.

### **3.2 Modern Reader Response**

I have now argued, based on reader-response theory and interpretations of how Lucy may function as a mirror, that what the readers make of the novel to a large extent depends on themselves. In this section, I will be looking at common readers’ responses to *Villette*. As of April 4 2019, there were 54,289 ratings and 3,255 reviews of the novel on goodreads.com, the



world's largest site for readers and book recommendations. The first rating dates back to 2003, while the first review was written in 2007. Since I have had to limit my scope, I decided to read through the 300 most recent reviews, written within the last year. The vast majority of reviews were submitted by women. This could suggest that women are drawn to *Villette* more than men. It could also, however, be due to the simple fact that most goodreads.com users are women, or that there have not been as many male readers within the last year. Additionally, not everyone who has read *Villette* will of course end up writing a review. Therefore, my selection should not be considered fully representative. Nevertheless, out of these reviews, I have included passages from those that I found particularly interesting, and that may help shed light on the questions I am attempting to answer: How is the novel read today? What does the novel mean to modern readers? Why is it still judged to be relevant?

Filtering through the reviews, I found two main types of responses. First, there are readers who identify as closely with Lucy as I do, and for that reason love *Villette*. Other readers find the novel unpleasant to read *because* they are able to relate to Lucy. Second, many readers interpret the novel from a contextual perspective, pointing out how Lucy is ahead of her time and thus acknowledging her impact on both contemporary and modern readers. Some readers also see Lucy as a depiction of Brontë herself. There are, in addition to this, a third and fourth group that I have chosen to include: male reader reviews and negative reviews. It should be noted that in categories one, two and four, all reviews are written by women. Also, any misspellings of the novel's title or of Brontë's surname have been silently amended.

### 3.2.1 Identification

Arwa (April 4 2019) says *Villette* 'really hit home' to the extent that she is unsure whether she will be able to do the novel justice: 'Lucy Snowe resonated on a completely different level [...] mind boggling'. Likewise, Hannah Smith (March 31 2019) claims that leaving an 'overly-sentimental line about how every now and then a book comes along and reminds you why reading is such a solace' does not 'seem to cover it here'. She explains how she was only able to identify 'feelings so deep within' once Brontë had laid them out for her. This was so much so that *Villette* felt 'something like home': 'I've never related to a character like this, I've never felt so thoroughly and concretely understood'.

Lydia Anvar (March 8 2019) comments on the fascinating experience of feeling understood by a novel published two centuries ago, and she explains how

this book was such a sweet comfort and friend for me through the hardest time of my life. Despite dated Victorian ideals, Brontë describes Lucy's depression in a real, tangible way. Who would've thought that a book published in England in 1853 would make someone in Kentucky in 2019 feel so known and so understood? How can something written about something so painful and scary still be considered beautiful? [...] this book was honestly such a blessing to me during a lonely time in my life [...].

Similarly, Debashri (February 27 2019) notes her astonishment at the fact that 'a writer in the 1800s could make books' that leave you 'wrung out for having gone through such a ride'. Hannah (February 25 2019) says that she relates to Lucy 'on a deep psychological level', while Jessie Wittman (February 2019) claims that Lucy 'with her pain and her small pleasures will stick with me forever'. Also Victoria (May 29 2018) finds Brontë's 'ability to describe the most subtle and complicated feelings or dilemmas exactly spot on – so that I find myself thinking “yes, I've felt that way too”'.

Some readers, however, relate to Lucy so intensely that reading *Villette* is, as Richa (January 19 2019) points out, 'too close for comfort'. She finds the novel 'extremely brooding and too inward looking', and she 'had to take multiple and long breaks' to maintain her 'sanity and mood', being a 'depressive loner' herself. Maryam (July 6 2018) also thinks that *Villette* is an uncomfortable experience in its dealings with 'fear of abandonment and heartbreak' and 'struggle with mental illness'. It is, however, a novel she 'won't stop thinking about'. On the same note, Leia Lanstov (January 15 2019) says that 'there are times that makes me wonder if Mrs. Brontë is drilling my head and pouring my thoughts...and I don't like it'. Her belief that 'nobody likes to see themselves mirrored in others' is intriguing and in conflict with some other readers' experiences. Rather than being comforted by witnessing her own feelings expressed by another, this reader sees it as an uncomfortable invasion.

Lauren (August 26 2018) experiences Lucy's 'hard grip' on her face as 'uncomfortable', but at the same time 'intimate' and 'damn effective'. While admitting that Lucy is not likeable, she is nevertheless interesting. 'I know her,' Lauren adds, 'and you could know her too, but the only way to do it is to read the book'. She ends by saying that she feels 'like I left some of myself in these pages'. Cinzia (January 24 2019) claims, in a similar fashion, that while she 'couldn't stand Lucy', 'she probably was the one who looked like me the most'. Moreover, Zahra (August 24 2018) writes that it suddenly hit her, years after first having read the novel, that 'I AM LUCY SNOWE'. She continues: 'Her life feels so disturbingly identical to mine [...] you too will relate to the protagonist if you are going through simple miseries of adult life'. 'Well Charlotte....you broke me....,' says Josie (June 2

2018) – ‘she just punches you right in the gut with the realness and truth you could feel echoing up throughout the story’. Lastly, Beste (May 29 2018) thinks the novel is a masterpiece, but that the ‘whole read’ – the ending especially – left her feeling ‘suffocated, breathless and tearfully [sic] most of the time’.

This group of readers agree that Lucy’s circumstances present parallels to what it is like to be a woman today. Many readers value the torment Lucy inflicted on them because ultimately they had a positive experience of this powerful encounter. These readers’ experiences support Rita Felski’s claim that it is particularly moving for women to discover the words of other women, and that it is, in some cases, ‘a powerful shock of recognition, a sense of delight and gratitude that crucial yet unnoticed aspects of women’s lives have finally been recorded’ (39). On the other hand, exactly *because* certain aspects of women to this day to a large extent remain unrecorded, readers are forced to face their own pain in ways they are unaccustomed to. What is particularly interesting, is that for some of these readers, seeing themselves mirrored was not remedied by a feeling of a shared experience. They found that facing Lucy was an unwelcome discomfort bringing forth aspects of their own character which they were not in a position to appreciate, supporting Beverly Forsyth’s suggestion that Lucy embodies ‘pain in the form of a woman’ (17).

### 3.2.2 Contextualisations

Readers who look at *Villette* from a contextual/feminist perspective seem to experience the novel as both uplifting and painful. Sharon (March 9 2019) comments on Lucy as ‘a woman ahead of her time but stifled by the limitations Victorian rules imposed on her’. Sharon is also, compared to a lot of readers, happy with the novel’s ending: ‘It was heartening to know that, in the end, circumstances coalesced to allow her to gain independence’ and ‘realize her dream of running her own school’.

Sage (March 9 2019) thinks that Brontë, as an autobiographer of sorts, is being too hard on herself: ‘the protagonist and narrator is so self-deprecating that I found it exhausting at times’. She furthermore notes that she wishes that Brontë’s situation would have been ‘different for her if she were alive today’, while acknowledging that because ‘her books continue to resonate with young women today’, this suggests that it would not, after all, have been that different. This reader thus seems to say that there are underlying aspects to the experience of being a woman which remain the same, and *because* of the relatability of the characters, she is ‘really sad for woman-kind’.

Likewise, Bookish Ally (March 12 2019) says that ‘if I ever had a romantic notion in my heart about being a woman during the time of the Brontë sisters, let this book be my punishment [...] Lucy Snowe overthinks so much your brain will start to harden’. Kathleen Moriarty (June 28 2018) agrees, and she notes that Lucy’s struggles lead to the reader’s understanding of ‘how social constructs (orthodoxy) repress individual desires which has [sic] a detrimental affect [sic] on a persons [sic] mental and physical well being [sic]’. Madalena (November 26 2018) reflects that while she comes from ‘a different era and background’ than Lucy, and Lucy’s ‘values and manners’ are different from hers, she could see something of herself in her: ‘Her loneliness and her struggle to find her place were relatable to me and the way Brontë handled her possible depression, felt as respectful as can be, in a time when mental illnesses were unknown and untreated.’

The next three readers comment on Lucy’s modernity. Jess (August 21 2018) says that

*Villette* is at its heart a story about how to be an independent chick in a world that doesn’t necessarily want you. [...] To a modern reader, it becomes painfully apparent that Lucy Snowe suffers from clinical depression, or what she perfectly describes as a “sorrowful indifference to existence”. Although this unique insight into a Victorian perspective of neurosis is especially interesting, Brontë’s presentation of the experience is startlingly modern and thoroughly moving in itself.

Laurie (January 10 2019) sums *Villette* up as Brontë choosing ‘honesty over superficiality giving Lucy Snowe strength, instead of helplessness modeling a heroine that speaks to and gives hope not only to women in Brontë’s time, but to the situation of many women today’.

Kelly ... (July 23 2018) adds that

Lucy Snowe is someone I could know, and like, today. She is strong and feminist. She has goals that are separate from the man in her life. She loves her man, and yet she seems happiest and most fulfilled during the years he is away. She is independent enough that it seems she would be fine if he were not to be in her future. She is wonderfully strong and yet she is far from perfect. There were times when I found her whiny and bratty, and I liked that about her. I like flawed, real characters.

On the topic of Lucy as a flawed character, Diana (July 23 2018) thinks that she is ‘a fully realized, introverted, and complex female main character who possesses flaws and intricacies that I could relate to’. Similarly, Debbie Morrison (August 1 2019) claims that she is

puzzled by some Goodreads reviewers [who] appear not to like Lucy or the book, one review in particular says “Lucy Snowe hates you...It makes it a hard read” (Goodreads reviewer Ginny). I’m not sure why this is. Perhaps because Lucy doesn’t fit the norms of female protagonists, even by today’s standards. She’s tough, she’s scrappy, and though most people love an underdog, some

readers find her unappealing. I don't. Brontë's depiction of Lucy Snowe (who is said to be based on Charlotte Brontë herself), is a reflection of what many women went through—the struggles, the pain of living in a society that is not supportive of independent women. Some women aren't as strong as Lucy, don't have the resilience, the insight—but that's why the book is so important. It's a model; it's inspirational; it's a must read.

Moreover, Sony (July 19 2018) is of the opinion that *Villette* is 'written so well that one can actually feel what the protagonist Lucy is going through'. Jasmine (January 18 2019) declares that she thinks that she has not 'cared for a character as much as I care for Lucy Snowe in a long time', and Highlyeccentric (June 26 2018) admits that she was 'torn between a desire to give Lucy Snowe a stern talking to for her poor life choices, and a desire to convince her to run away with *me*, that we might be anti-social together'. She furthermore describes 'the depictions of Lucy's social insecurity' as 'very well sketched, shall we say?'. Similarly, Manon (April 28 2018) acknowledges that the novel will speak to 'those who have an introverted nature and who have felt or been seen as strange to a certain degree in their life', and that 'for those who feel a lot but maybe don't dare express it so often, or those who know loneliness or solitude both as good friends and bitter enemies, this book will probably create overwhelming echoes of your heart and mind'. Explicitly commenting on how *Villette* has affected her life, Sophie De Abreu (June 18 2018) writes that Lucy's situation 'gives me hope that some of my passions may be possible in the near future', as she herself lost the love of her life, and dreams of becoming an English teacher.

Meenal Manolika (March 13 2019) found *Villette* 'a difficult read but worth it': 'For a Charlotte Brontë fan, reading *Villette* is like taking a slow walk with a candle down the dark labyrinths of the psyche of a thinking woman living in a society that views her as an oddity. Likewise, Meredith (January 2 2019) reckons the novel provides 'one of the most honest looks at what it is like to be a woman alone in the world, what it is like to see others find their happy ending with apparent ease while struggling to keep oneself together with a road far less easy'. Amanda (October 30 2018) thinks Brontë 'so piercingly portrays the sting of unrequited love, the desolation of loneliness, and the apathy of depression'. Furthermore, she notes that

Lucy Snowe is incredibly ahead of her time. She works for everything she has. For almost the entirety of the book she eschews any aid or protection from men—radical in the 1850s. Lucy isn't entirely likeable, either. Brontë rejects the convention of a perfect, or even amiable protagonist, and fearlessly creates a character with faults, fears, and despair.

Girl with her Head in a Book (June 26 2018) is another reader who feels for Brontë if Lucy in fact is a representation of the author herself: ‘Charlotte Brontë wanted us to see Lucy, the representative of the legions of similarly superfluous women.’ She ends her review by proposing that ‘*Villette* is a book that states that life is tough and sometimes it does not let up but before we get too depressed, let us remember Lucy, the cold-eyed lady at the core who will not allow the world to destroy her’. Alex Roma (May 30 2018) humorously says that ‘I think I want to shove Brontë in the face of the next person who tells me that Hemingway or some Hemingway-esque writer “understands the human condition better than anyone else”’. Lastly, Adriana (May 28 2018) boldly characterises Lucy as someone who

spits in the face of convention, narrates unreliably for 600+ pages [...] maintains her own counsel, and ultimately is the strongest testament to the power of the individual woman: emotionally mature, employed, independent, and entirely complete – on her own.

What these readers have in common is how they take into consideration the historical context, reading the novel from a feminist point of view. They find that Lucy represents ‘women of yesterday and today’ (Forsyth 23), and that she gives them perspectives on the current state of womanhood. Some even explicitly state that Lucy is an inspiration to them, and that she is a role model to women. Thus, this type of feminist reading makes the novel a site of female bonding, suggesting the power of female literature, written by and for women. These readers’ very awareness of the joys and sorrows of the female condition is indicative of its importance for the 21<sup>st</sup>-century woman reader.

### **3.2.3 Male Responses**

Although there are far fewer male reviewers, at least in this particular selection, many favour the novel. Mike Zickar (July 31 2018) agrees with other readers in that *Villette* is ‘way ahead of its time’ in its depiction of ‘attempts to fit into a world where women were defined by men courting them’. He adds that Lucy and Brontë demonstrate ‘that feminism wasn’t created in the 1960s’. Jordan P. (December 25 2018) finds that Lucy and M. Paul ‘make for a novel which is far more entertaining than it has a right to be [...] the most unforgettable which is of course Lucy Snowe herself’. Julian Tooke (July 28 2018) experiences the novel as ‘deeply moving, psychologically acute, beautifully plotted and absolutely relevant almost 200 years after it was written’. Shanky (January 30 2019) notes that ‘sometimes, simple stories like these touch your heart so much and make you so emotional that you don’t even realize’. Gregory (August 19) interestingly recognises the ‘authenticity of the human [...] my own –

experience’, and he compares trying to describe *Villette* with that of ‘addressing the question of what it means to be oneself’. Tim Rideout (November 10 2018) chimes in:

This novel has overwhelmed me. It is without a doubt a masterpiece. I cannot recall reading a finer portrayal of a character’s interiority. Charlotte Brontë’s protagonist, Lucy Snowe, represents one of the greatest characters in nineteenth-century literature: complex, modern and with unprecedented (for the time) agency and independence.

While *Villette* certainly speaks to women about their situation, the male readers’ responses suggest that the novel also comments on our shared humanity. Although few of them comment on direct relatability, these readers reinforce the fact that Lucy is a modern woman and that her situation is anything but dated. While I am pleasantly surprised to find such opinions among *Villette*’s male readership, Felski proposes that ‘gender is one important axis of meaning around which men and women organize the way they read, but it is not the one that always predominates’ (51). Perhaps, then, *Villette* also expands the way in which men encounter the female sphere, as ‘by seeing through the eyes of others who are unlike ourselves, by feeling their pain and experiencing their joys, we come to recognize our common humanity’ (Felski 50). These responses show that one does not have to be a woman to be able to take something away from *Villette*.

### 3.2.4 Negative Responses

This group of readers has different opinions as to why they did not enjoy *Villette*. Jill Duford Peterson (March 26 2019) thinks that Lucy is ‘an unreliable and boring narrator, not to mention an incredibly spineless woman’, and Marjorie (February 2019) calls Lucy a ‘human doormat’. Lynne (March 2 2019) states that she hates ‘all of the characters’ and that the novel is ‘an unrelenting gloom-fest’. Lucy is ‘dull and apathetic,’ and ‘never stops talking about how worthless and useless she is’. All in all, she finds it ‘depressing and irritating to read’. Chrissie (January 27 2019) concurs by saying that ‘this book needs to be prescribed some antidepressants’ and that ‘Lucy lives the life she deserves’. Amy Westgarth (December 18 2018) bluntly admits that she is not interested in ‘deep’ reading – she reads fiction ‘for a good story, not to try to decipher hidden meanings’.

Compared to most other reviews, whether inherently positive or negative, Liv Danger’s (May 20 2018) take on *Villette* stands out. Although she in many ways has a similar life to Lucy in battling depression, she has never ‘been such a downer as Lucy Snowe’, and she does not think that Lucy is ‘a very solid presentation of our sex’. She seems to resist the

text, condemning it because it does not match her notion of what depression feels like. She furthermore thinks Lucy is ‘dull’ and needs to ‘grow a pair’. Tamara (May 17 2018) acknowledges that the characters are ‘complex and fascinating,’ but she refuses to give in to Brontë’s request ‘to excuse and love a character who is so repulsive’. She points out that she felt ‘sick’ ‘thinking about how many real-life relationships mirror this kind of psychological abuse and manipulation’ as that of Lucy and M. Paul.

These responses align with those of Radway’s romance novel readers who did not want to read about reality. Rather than finding Lucy inspiring, these readers think that the novel is too depressing. This suggests that *Villette* perhaps mirrors their own lives more than they are willing to admit. Moreover, because Brontë’s representation of women as passive and self-pitying are in conflict with these particular readers’ 21<sup>st</sup>-century ideas about what women are like, they seem reluctant to apply themselves to the text. I believe that this, along with an inability to find the consistency Iser believes is needed to be able to read and enjoy a book (59), determine the outcome of these women’s reading experiences.

### 3.2.5 Other Opinions

Now that I have looked into the reviews I found most interesting and relevant, I would briefly like to comment on the opinions which seemed to occur most frequently throughout the 300 reviews. A lot of the reviews are as ambiguous as the novel itself, and thus reminiscent of the early criticism of *Villette* as discussed in Chapter One. While many readers think *Villette* is Brontë’s best work and a masterpiece, others find it boring and not even comparable to *Jane Eyre*. Just like the Victorian critics, many readers dislike the ending, and they generally find it a difficult book to get through. What this means for *Villette*, being a highly inconsistent novel on multiple levels, is that for some readers the inconsistency paradoxically will appear as consistency, whereas for others it will not. Readers agree that the plot consists of highly unlikely coincidences, and *Villette*’s low scores are mainly due to readers finding the novel too long or disliking the characters – Lucy especially. Interestingly, some readers identify with Lucy without liking her. Others love Lucy for her complexity and strength of character, and many point to Brontë’s insightful depiction of loneliness, depression and inner battles. One reader, Cinzia (January 24 2019) even enthusiastically claims that *Villette* ‘is literally EVERYTHING’.

Several readers have predicted that they will appreciate the novel more on a second reading and/or when they are older. Other readers mention that they had to put the book away



and resume reading when they were in the right state of mind. This may imply that readers themselves see *Villette* as a novel that requires them to be ready, or prepared, for it. Some also say that they are happy that they read the book, but simultaneously glad that they are finished with it. Moreover, even readers who do not like the novel seem to be curious as to how a second reading will affect their opinion. Brook Louis's (February 6 2019) review does a great job of summarising the conflicting feelings which may arise when reading *Villette*:

This is a beautiful, truly terribly beautiful, book. My first Brontë reading left me frustrated, happy, sad, angry, and in love. Indeed, I, in my own annoyance, fell in love with Lucy. Yes it took awhile [sic] —September to February—as I had to put the book down several times because of its moments of depression or forced dryness. But her prose kept me coming back, for it is at times spellbinding, and her proto-psychological self-examination left me reeling for answers; which, our author rarely provides. This book is/can be long. It's [sic] French, when untranslated like in my edition, leaves much out. But it is a work of art as it made me feel emotion and passion—good and bad—even when Lucy suppressed her own feelings due to cultural and social pressures. Lucy's conclusion will leave you wondering and wandering for more; both in this book and in life. I'm eternally grateful to Brontë in [sic] sharing this story.

Despite finding the book a demanding read, a lot of readers nevertheless could not help but go back to it. Whether they love it or hate it, there is consensus that *Villette* is a demanding text because of what it requires of the reader – and what it might give back.

### 3.3 Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, I have found that although the reviews I have included only provide a small sample of the total feedback on *Villette*, they give an indication of the effect the novel has on the female reader. The fact that they can, and to varying degrees will, see themselves in Lucy, is undisputed at this point. It is more a question of how this feeling of understanding is experienced. The tendency is that the readers who expressed a strong identification with or empathy for Lucy, appear to be women in their twenties – around the same age as Lucy. As predicted, and while there are variations within this group, female readers are those who relate to her on a deeper level: they recognise Lucy's experience as a woman as similar to their own – either finding comfort in the revelation that many have gone before them, or becoming afflicted by the mirror that is held up to them. Felski suggests that for some, 'an encounter with a female text is like having an intimate and pleasurable conversation with another woman' (39). Readers like myself, who identify with Lucy and find consolation in that

experience of sameness, can even be said to have used *Villette* as a site of self-reparation.

Moreover, readers agree that *Villette* is not a novel of escapism; in fact, it is quite the opposite. It requires the reader to reach into the depths of their own being. Readers' experiences and opinions vary massively, and *Villette* can only provide so much in itself – the rest is up to the reader. As Iser puts it: the stars in a literary text are fixed, and the lines that join them are variable (57). The simple fact that so many people take the time and make the effort to write a review, whether positive or negative, implies that the novel engaged them in some way – and that they want to share their experience and discuss it with others. Iser further claims that 'in the literary text we have the strange situation that the reader cannot know what his [sic] participation actually entails' – 'we have undergone an experience, and now we want to know consciously what we have experienced' (64). CBell (June 4 2018) perfectly captures this notion of intangibility:

After completing the novel a few days ago, I've had time to reflect. The effect its [sic] had on me, mostly intangible [sic] is difficult to describe. It's akin to viewing a long-deep-in-thought movie which makes you ponder on for days until you finally get it and feel good that you understood the director's take.

Finally, while *Villette* provides support to women, it also reveals something about the *human* condition. In the words of Craik, Lucy's crises 'reveal the force of involuntary impulses that are neither intellectual nor rational, but have far more power than impulse or emotion. They render universal a private conflict, and reduce the egotism of a self-centred one' (196).

Coming to terms with who we are is not gendered. As a result, whether readers like Lucy or not, she does *something* to them. As Belinda (February 16 2019) writes: 'Read [*Villette*] and weep, or simply blow a whole lot of air out of your nostrils.'

# Conclusion

My main purpose in this thesis has been to show how *Villette* surpasses its original context in terms of its feminism, and how the novel's demand for vested reading makes it anything but an outdated work of fiction. I have found that others *have* shared my reading experience: *Villette* offers a female perspective that women in particular can relate to – be it Mrs. Holland in 1853 (Barker 862), Virginia Woolf in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Woolf 159), or me in 2019. Both Charlotte Brontë's life and *Villette* testify that women's search for identity remains fundamentally unchanged: *Villette* reveals that 'The Woman Question', although it has taken new forms, is just as important and disputed today as it was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The discoveries I have made in this study of *Villette*, have provided new insights into how the novel has been read, and how it continues to be read.

For one, there have been remarkably few changes in the opinion of *Villette* since its publication. Modern readers seemingly remain as divided as the main readings of Victorian critics, and the autobiographical readings of the late-Victorian critics have continued to a large extent: modern readers and critics read Lucy as a partial projection of Brontë herself. What has changed, however, is our horizon of expectation. Due to the progress of feminism and the situation of women, Lucy's particular form of womanhood is no longer seen as illegitimate. Now, there *is* room for women like her. Nor is *Villette* the subject of sexually biased criticism anymore: rather, we analyse the novel in terms of what it reveals about the situation of 19<sup>th</sup>-century women. However, some modern readers have issues, similar to those of Harriet Martineau, with Lucy as a spokeswoman for the feminine sex. This is a reminder that not all women, of course, are the same, nor will they be in agreement about everything. Moreover, we must keep in mind that the Victorian reception is not necessarily representative. While some critics did in fact appreciate and predict the impact *Villette* had on the female reader, what did the common reader at the time think? As Mrs. Holland's response indicates, there *was* a female audience whose reading experiences gave them a sense of consolation (Barker 862).

Feminist critics link feminism in literature to the real world because of its ability to go outside of the text and have an impact on people's lives and actions. I have argued, and discovered, that *Villette* does this by providing readers with a place of sameness: Lucy's inconsistencies and conflicting expectations, feelings and actions, are something readers can

relate to in their own battle for self-definition in a world where we continue to forge ourselves to adhere to society's expectations. *Villette* demonstrates how meaningful reading can be to those who are open to confrontation and change through literature. The novel provides us with something readers can identify with, and it challenges us to think new thoughts, and to identify problems while simultaneously acknowledging that Lucy's ambitions and resistance prove that there is, in fact, possibility for change. *Villette* is part of the rewriting of what constitutes womanhood: it is an ambiguous, open portrait of the realities of being a woman.

Lucy's search for identity is not that different from today's challenge of figuring out who we are in our current culture where there have been and still are norms and expectations tied to gender: social media and mental illness are two major topics connected with the notion of identity. In Brontë's time, comparison among women was likely to be less explicit in genteel society, whereas today it is out in the open and acknowledged as a problem. The contradiction is, of course, that we know that what we see on social media is never the whole truth. Despite this, it is used as a measuring tool in which we share carefully fashioned narratives of ourselves. While this is a matter of degree, the demand for affirmation through frequent updates on social media platforms confirms the value we put on the other's gaze: women especially have interiorised the process of being surveyed by others. Thus, we are manipulating ourselves into objects, hoping to have our self-worth validated. The double standard is far from gone: today, we all seem to be characters in disguise.

Brontë has put this struggle into words in a messy, desperate and heartbreakingly realistic manner: Lucy reminds us that the writing of one's experience is painful (Lawrence 456). Moreover, Miriam Allott maintains that Brontë 'is foremost among those who have suffered unresolved emotional conflicts', and 'have felt passionately the necessity of consolation' (*A Casebook* 31). By daring to share her own experience, Brontë managed to reach out to others who feel the same way. I am certain that she would have been touched knowing that her ability to influence people has not diminished. Brontë was certainly wrong in saying that *Villette* 'touches on no matter of public interest' and that she was unable to write about the topics of the day (*Letters III* 75). Not only did she engage her contemporaries - she was able to write about subjects which continue to affect the 21<sup>st</sup>-century woman reader.

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