Representations of Identity and Agency in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*

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<1>Published female writers in the Victorian era have been long regarded as successful for their ability to push their work forward amidst a patriarchal society. What is often overlooked, however, is the style of writing that women were expected to adhere to. The style and subjects that women were limited to consisted of excessive flowery language that focused around concerns of domesticity and romance. Such gendered expectations were pushed as women's "literary production had met with considerable resistance" by competitive male writers who dominated the writing sphere during this era (Corbett 4). Novels about these topics filled a genre that George Eliot describes as being of a "*mind-and-millinery* species," a term that she uses to denote low-brow novels that deal with materialistic issues pertaining to female readership. For women to be considered "serious" writers, their crafted narratives needed to be centered around issues outside of the domestic sphere such as social class and mobility to work towards a higher social station. Female writers who focused on these multi-layered topics, including esteemed novelists such as George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Charlotte Brontë, performed successfully in the literary market as a result and remain in current high regard.

<2>Several female writers who focused their efforts on domesticity are scarcely held in academic conversation today, thus prompting the question: how much authority did women truly possess over their writing? The issue of agency holds notably true for Charlotte Brontë, who was influenced to alter the ending of her novel *Villette* at the behest of her father and other critics for attempting to end the narrative on a dark and cryptic note. Although Brontë was forced to concede to these requests to publish her novel, she does retain her authority by ending the novel ambiguously. This is accomplished through Brontë's unreliable narrator and protagonist Lucy Snowe, who deliberately leaves concrete details out regarding the novel's resolution. By

implementing an unconventional narrator who challenges stereotypes about women, and a narrative voice that continually questions gendered constraints throughout the novel, Brontë succeeds at crafting subtle clues that critique Victorian patriarchal society. I will be arguing that Brontë effectively pushes against these gendered restraints as a result, and in doing so is able to maintain her own identity and authorial intent. This mode allows for *Villette* to stand on its own as a progressive representation of gendered agency and identity despite its open ending.

<3>*Villette's* focus on issues of gender, identity, and agency builds upon previous issues presented in Brontë's past works, *The Professor* and *Jane Eyre*. Brontë's earliest narrative, *The Professor*, introduced issues of social class through the story's protagonist, William Crimsworth; however, concerns of gender inequality were rarely mentioned due to its focus on a male protagonist working his way to a higher position in his career. Brontë reflected in her preface to *The Professor* that she wished to depict a "hero [who] should work his way through life" for she had found issues of social class relatable to male readers. Her breakthrough novel, *Jane Eyre*, signaled a change in style and subject as Brontë introduced a female protagonist and altered her subject matter to issues of matrimony. Such issues are presented through Rochester and Jane's relationship, most notably when Rochester questions Jane about the necessity of marriage, a matter that Jane challenges with an unconventional approach for the Victorian era: "'Sir,' I answered, 'a wanderer's repose or a sinner's reformation should never depend on a fellow-creature. Men and women die; philosophers falter in wisdom, and Christians in goodness; if anyone you know has suffered and erred, let him look higher than his equals for strength to amend, and solace to heal" (*Jane Eyre* 280). Jane's answer deviates greatly from common Victorian expectations, in which marriage would be the ideal goal for women. Her response is reflective of Brontë's critique of this standard as Jane voices that an individual's life choices should not be dependent on another. Jane's response is also stylized as philosophical in its prose as she refers to a higher "strength" outside of religion, thus referencing the importance of one's individual emotions and thoughts. Brontë's stance on this matter contributes a unique perspective on the presentation of identity, a subject that follows similar suit through her portrayal of Lucy Snowe in *Villette*, who finds work as a school teacher and rises to power and authority through her own merit.

<4>*Jane Eyre* and *Villette* bring into question the nature of marriage and social restraints placed upon women, an area that has remained a consistent and vital subject of recent academic conversation. Sandro Jung has suggested that *Villette's* protagonist, Lucy Snowe, follows a "Descartian notion of self-reflexivity" which indicates Lucy's own critical awareness of herself and others

(Jung 161). Such a mode for this character allows for Brontë to structure her writing style and subject matter around critique of the Victorian social system. Recent scholars, however, have debated whether this mode of critique is intentional on Brontë's part due to the immense amount of personal tragedy she had experienced as she was writing *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*. Recent scholars such as Kristen Pond have argued that traumatic events, such as the loss of her sisters, influenced narrative choices in *Villette*, most notably through Lucy Snowe's unreliable narration and excessive silence as Brontë uses "silence as a proactive strategy of self-formation that reflects her own authorial situation" (Pond 772). Although this silence can be representative of Brontë's own displacement in the literary world as a female writer, too much attention is being drawn towards Brontë's own psychological trauma as an influence on her writing as opposed to a deliberate decision. Lucy Snowe's character is not necessarily a byproduct of personal trauma, but rather one formed from directed critique of the Victorian social sphere.

<5>Pond's theory of psychological influence has been echoed in prior scholarship, indicating that this speculation has been a recurring point of conversation. Critic Gretchen Braun has previously reported that "*Villette* is, at its elusive center, a narrative of psychic and social placelessness, and dislocation" thus indicating that the root of the novel's messages stem from psychological turmoil. Braun continues to state that *Villette's* narrative is "shaped by trauma," a factor that would inevitably deter authorial intent away from narrative (Braun 192). I argue that the shaping of *Villette's* narrative and its protagonist is not a consequence of trauma but rather a response to critical consideration. Although Lucy Snowe's narration is unreliable, it is implied to be done so deliberately through Lucy's playful language: "Religious reader, you will preach to me a long sermon about what I have just written, and so will you, moralist; and you, stern sage: you stoic, will frown; you, cynic, sneer; you, epicure, laugh. Well, each and all, take it your own way. I accept the sermon, frown, sneer, and laugh" (*Villette* 157). Lucy Snowe's repeated usage of "you" enacts an intentional address to the reader in a sarcastic tone. Such language suggests critical consideration of the audience reading *Villette* as well as an awareness of common Victorian stereotypes. This implies a potential motive behind the shaping of Lucy's cynical persona, making it crucial to deconstruct Brontë's unique style further so that her critique of the Victorian society can be better understood.

<6>As patriarchal dominance set the standard for strong writing, feminine writing was pushed outside of the literary field. As noted by Cheryl Wilson, feminine style was dictated less by what "women's writing should be," and more so out of "criticism of what it should not be" (Wilson 62). This distinction is significant as female writers were expected not to venture outside of the home, a space that they were socially

obligated to occupy as women. Wilson further defines the feminine writing style as a format that deals primarily with "domestic concerns," and "the particulars of dress," areas of the domestic sphere that women were expected to hold substantial knowledge about (Wilson 62). (1) Masculine styles in comparison held greater freedom in their ability to adventure outside of the home, a privilege that enabled them to address higher order social issues and conflicts. This gendered division of writing styles is implied by Wilson to be projected out of fear for the threat that female writers posed to the literary market as they had previously occupied half of the space. Male writers' attempts to restrict the female writing style were done so out of an effort to secure dominance in the field, leading to the establishment of several prominent male writers of the Victorian era.

<7>Male readers and publishers were common critics of women's writing style as were other female writers that had adopted more "masculine" styles of writing. George Eliot points out many of the issues contained in the conventional feminine style through her essay, "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists," a work that contested many of the gendered expectations that were placed on female writers. Eliot deems writings from female novelists that follow narratives of isolated home life and frivolity to be "pitiable" as they rarely showcase issues outside of "very lofty and fashionable society. We had imagined that destitute women turned novelists, as they turned governesses, because they had no other 'ladylike' means of getting their bread." Eliot's comment crucially points out the gender divide associated with writing, for such work was unsuitable for women as the task was being reserved for their husbands. This is further asserted through the superficial topics that women were expected to adopt in their writing, a convention that Eliot asserts only serves to "confirm the popular prejudice against the more solid education of women." By writing about the domestic sphere, female writers only succeeded in perpetuating the stereotypes that were associated with female experience, a tactic that further engrained these writers into their predisposed and limited writing style.

<8>The issue of "serious" topics being reserved for male writers presented limited recourse for female writers, as indicated by Jenny Coleman in her research: "they could either suppress their work entirely, publish it pseudonymously or anonymously, or modestly confess their female 'limitations,' and concentrate on the so-called lesser subjects reserved for ladies" (Coleman 1). The options that Coleman refers to are significant in that they all reference erasure of authorial identity to become successful in the literary marketplace. Such a restriction speaks to the term that Virginia Woolf dubs the "disconcerting double bind," a label that she associates with female writers. The "double bind" refers to the actualization of women's options for literary success, in which they could request mercy from the readership

for their femininity or they could claim to be "as good as a man" (Coleman 1). The association of positivity with masculinity implies that the only "good" writing during this era could be male writing, a standard that women desperately attempted to mirror. Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot adopted male pseudonyms so that they could avoid the scrutiny of publishers and a male readership. Although their true personas are masked, criticism of patriarchal society is present within their works. Eliot's novel, *Middlemarch*, carries a cynical regard for marriage and gender division, a matter that is aptly commented upon by Celia to her sister and the novel's protagonist Dorothea: "of course, men know best about everything, except what women know better" (*Middlemarch* 741). Eliot's writing reflects the ironic and cynical nature that is associated with the masculine style but also challenges the stereotype that men are the more knowledgeable sex. Subject matter such as this allows for Eliot to subtly retain her own authority within the novel despite her conformity to the male style. Brontë in turn follows a similar suit through her stylization of *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*.

<9>By adapting a new identity, female writers could avoid the limitations that were associated with feminine writing styles. To be considered a "serious" writer from this point, was to abandon any association with femininity, a matter that Brontë herself confesses to in one of her letters to Elizabeth Gaskell: "while we did not like to declare ourselves women, because—without at the time suspecting that our mode of writing and thinking was not what is called 'feminine,'—we had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice" (Gaskell 228-229). The tactic of adopting a male alias was utilized by all three of the Brontë sisters, as they were known in the literary world as Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell. Although these pseudonyms assisted in masking the Brontë's initial footing onto the literary stage, the other component that led to their success was accomplished through their writing. As Charlotte indicated in her letter to Gaskell, their writing was not considered "feminine," a comment that implies a differentiation in both subject matter and quality. The determination of "good" writing is further enhanced through Charlotte's commentary on Emily Brontë's writing style.

<10>Brontë's early attempts to appeal to a male audience, through an early draft of what would later become *Villette*, a manuscript titled *The Professor,* failed to reach publication; as a result, it was not formally released until after her death. Brontë's story closely parallels *Villette's* narrative setting of a school but differs through its implementation of a male protagonist—William Crimsworth. This predecessor to Lucy Snowe begins the story with no family lineage or social status and eventually finds work as a teacher at an all-girls school. *The Professor* focuses upon Crimsworth's rise in social class and authority, a central theme that differs vastly

from *Villette's* focus on gender roles and agency. Although Brontë's work appeals to class issues, her ingenuity comes across in critical reviews of her work. Crimsworth in particular was received harshly by critics who stated that he was "a clumsy, inept, and unconvincing portrayal of masculinity" (Pearson 83). One of the greatest concerns of Crimsworth's "unconvincing" performance was the way in which he was portrayed as a meek and subdued character.

<11>Crimsworth's ineptitude is captured through his actions with other characters: "'Good evening, Mr. Hunsden,' muttered I with a bow, and then, like a shy noodle as I was, I began moving away—and why? Simply because Mr. Hunsden was a manufacturer and a millowner, and I was only a clerk, and my instinct propelled me from my superior" (*The Professor* 21). Brontë's language is very decorative in this scene in which she compares Crimsworth's reticent personality to a "shy noodle." The subject of this scene also falls in line with a narrative cliché as Crimsworth compares himself hopelessly to Mr. Hunsden's high social status. The style and focus of this scene falls more in line with a "feminine" style of writing as opposed to being "masculine." Brontë's writing continues to follow this pattern throughout the novel, where Crimsworth ends up marrying and taking over the school he began working at. He is noted to obtain the most perfect home which is described as a "picturesque and not too spacious dwelling, with low and long windows, a trellised and leaf-veiled porch over the front door, just now, on this summer evening, looking like an arch of roses and ivy" (*The Professor* 47). Brontë's decorative language persists in the narrative's ending and concludes with the protagonist reaching the "ideal" Victorian goal of life in which he obtains the perfect house, career, and a wife. Although Brontë fabricated a male persona to cater to male interests, she did not portray a sense of realism and cynicism that is later captured in her successful works.

<12>One of the elements most lacking from *The Professor* was Brontë's avoidance of directly addressing gendered issues, an element that later surfaces in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*. Critic Helen H. Davis argues that Brontë did include a subtle side story of female empowerment through the implementation of Crimsworth's love interest, Frances; however, her presence within the narrative is not given significant focus. Davis states that "rather than using direct narration by a woman, as in her later novels *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, Brontë inserts a story of female empowerment surreptitiously to expose what Susan S. Lanser would call the 'fiction of authority' in Crimsworth's narration" (Davis 193). The story of "female empowerment" that Davis speaks of is established through Frances' position as a working woman who eventually succeeds at moving up the social ladder to a position of high authority where she is in charge of the school at the end of the narrative. Her success is masked

by Crimsworth's as they marry and take over the school together. The inclusion of this side story was not strong enough to satisfy publishers as the narrative remained unpublished during Brontë's lifetime. Elizabeth Gaskell also notes a lack of connections may have been a contributing factor in *The Professor's* constant rejection as Brontë was just beginning to establish literary footing.

<13>Brontë's construction of *Villette* allows for a greater placement of authorial intent as Brontë voices her perspective from a female protagonist who critiques Victorian patriarchal society. Lucy Snowe, unlike Crimsworth, carries a greater connection to Brontë and becomes representative of her lived experiences as a school teacher. Elements of her teaching experiences, and her failed romantic relationship, are positioned vicariously through Lucy's experiences, granting the novel greater complexity and focus on higher order issues that are desired in a "masculine" writing style. Lucy is presented throughout the novel as an unreliable narrator, and the beginning of the novel does not provide a great deal of context about her. She is stated to be "a narrative observer" (Haller 152). Lucy's lack of centralism is established in *Villette's* opening pages where more information is learned about the environment surrounding her as opposed to Lucy herself: "My godmother lived in a handsome house in the clean and ancient town of Bretton. Her husband's family had been residents there for generations, and bore, indeed, the name of their birthplace—Bretton of Bretton" (Brontë 4). *Villette's* opening lines provides the reader with greater context concerning the residents of the Bretton household than about Lucy's own backstory. Lucy is nearly absent in the first section, "finding value in retreat," a writing decision that foreshadows her own uncertainty (Cohn 844). Lucy's silence becomes more noticeable as her reliability as a narrator is brought into question.

<14>As Lucy gradually emerges as the narrator of *Villette*, the reader becomes privy to Lucy's selected sharing of information. Writer Anna Gibson describes Lucy as a narrator who "reveals the truth to us in the time and place at which, as a character, she finds she must acknowledge" (Gibson 217-218). Lucy gains authority in this respect as her version of *Villette's* narrative is the only version that the reader will receive. As Lucy holds a meeting with the school's headmistress, Madame Beck, she deliberately withholds information from the reader, stating: "The polite tact of the reader will please leave out of account a brief, secret consultation on this point in Madame's own chamber" (*Villette* 128). The details of this secret meeting are kept from the reader; Brontë's style of writing is positioned from a unique fourth person perspective, a point of view that indicates awareness of the reader and subjects outside of the general scope of the narrative. Lucy is aware of her narrational situation and addresses herself as such to the reader. Her unpredictability in this regard becomes a crucial attribute as she can hold her own "secret place" that not

even the reader can trespass on (May 46). There are moments in which this secrecy is lifted as "she sometimes seems to invite the very kind of intrusion she normally struggles against" but this is a decision that is ultimately made on Brontë's own grounds (May 53). Such selectivity proves effective in evading certain details or clichés of "feminine" writing that would be otherwise undesired.

<15>*Villette's* narrative teases and inevitably defeats the marriage plot line through the failed pairing of Lucy with childhood friend Graham Bretton. Brontë's narrative decision contests the popular female writing convention that matrimony was a goal for female characters and the pinnacle of every novel. The relationship between Lucy and Graham does not work out perfectly as commonly depicted in feminine novels; their relationship is realistically skewed as Lucy's feelings for Graham are one-sided. She vents her frustrations halfway through the novel when she characterizes romantic feelings as a "mortal absurdity" that she refuses to act upon (*Villette* 254). Nancy Mayer also comments that this causes the "narrative arc" of Lucy's story to fragment because "the real story of her life is in the moments of high emotion she works so hard to repress" (Mayer 84). By refusing to entertain her personal romantic pursuits, Brontë's own disdain for romance is reflected, a tone that suggests her critique of Victorian social expectations. Graham's character is also positioned as the "ideal" Victorian bachelor for he is a distinguished English gentleman, childhood friend of Lucy Snowe, and doctor. Such a strong candidate would typically be matched with the female protagonist in a "feminine" romance novel. Brontë counters this stereotype by making Graham's disinterest in Lucy consistent throughout the novel: "Graham could devote to others the most grave and earnest, the manliest interest, he had no more than light raillery for Lucy" (*Villette* 315). The potential romance is halted on both sides due to Lucy's unwillingness to act and Graham's preoccupation with other women. Brontë tactfully pairs Graham instead with Polly, a character who acts as a damsel in need of saving as she collapses during a show and is rescued by Graham. Their relationship serves as a point of reference for the stereotypical romance that "serious" writers wish to avoid and one that Brontë quickly evades by leaving them abruptly out of Lucy's autobiography towards the end of *Villette*.

<16>Brontë's unconventional decision to separate Lucy from Graham was met with criticism from the publisher and critics. These personages voiced their discontent with the pair's separation, an authorial decision that Brontë swiftly defended: "Lucy must not marry Dr. John; he is far too youthful, handsome, bright-spirited, and sweet-tempered…If Lucy marries anybody, it must be the Professor—a man in whom there is much to forgive, much to 'put up with'" (Gaskell 413-414). Lucy's anticipated pairing is instead repositioned with fellow teacher M. Paul, a male

character that is described to be the opposite of the chivalrous Graham. M. Paul's character is portrayed to be more realistic as he continually challenges and frustrates Lucy. His crude nature is commented upon by Lucy, "never have I heard English women handled as M. Paul that morning handled them: he spared nothing—neither their minds, morals, manners, nor personal appearance…. He was spiteful, acrid, savage; and, as a natural consequence, detestably ugly" (*Villette* 340-341). The decision to match Lucy with a character that is "spiteful," "acrid," and "savage" is made with a great deal of deliberation. Brontë chose M. Paul, the hot-tempered and misogynistic instructor, because of his complicated personality. Justification for Lucy's infatuation with M. Paul can be found through her "underlying love for him" which may be due in part to M. Paul's "intellectual gifts and his forceful personality" (Graeme 45). It is more probable, however, that this unlikely relationship was stylistically chosen by Brontë intentionally, who states in a letter to Gaskell: "my palette affords no brighter tints; were I to attempt to deepen the reds, or burnish the yellows, I should but botch" (Gaskell 414). The "brighter tints" that Brontë alludes to are the expectations that are commonly associated with female writing, a characteristic that refers to the "sunny" or light dispositions that are frequently contained in feminine narratives. Taking this frame into consideration, the darker tints that Brontë desires to deepen in her writing reference her own desire to deviate from these common writing conventions, thus reinforcing the notion that the narrative choices depicted in *Villette* are operating against patriarchal writing standards.

<17>Lucy's identity as a woman is criticized early in the novel as she is forced to perform in a play by M. Paul and is expected to cross-dress as a man to fulfill the part. This narrative decision is echoed from Brontë's previous work, *Jane Eyre*, where Rochester masquerades as a gypsy woman despite his cynical attitude. ([2]) Unlike Rochester who must ironically step down from his privileged station as a man, Lucy rejects M. Paul's request, stating "To be dressed like a man did not please and would not please. I had consented to take a man's name and part; as to his dress—*halte là!* No. I would keep my own dress; come what might. M. Paul might storm, might rage: I would keep my own dress. I said so, with a voice as resolute in intent, as it was low, and perhaps unsteady, in utterance" (*Villette* 139). The style of Brontë's language is defiant in this scene as Lucy stands resolute in her "no" to appease the wishes of her male superiors. Lucy's garb is representative of her identity, a persona that she is unwilling to sacrifice and desires to maintain via her authorial presence. Lucy is willing to consent to adopting "a man's name and part," a direct reference to Lucy stepping beyond her expected social station by working as an independent school teacher. Brontë also utilizes this moment to critique the gendered presence of the stage, a place that denied respectability to female

performers. Lucy effectively challenges these gendered expectations and preserves her own agency as a woman by maintaining her own dress, a signifier of her identity as a woman.

<18>Lucy's agency becomes more clearly vocalized later in the novel during a scene that discusses her background with Polly and her father. Polly's father, Mr. Home, inquires after Lucy's profession, which she proudly confesses: "'I am a teacher,' I said, and was rather glad of the opportunity of saying this. For a little while I had been feeling as if placed in a false position" (*Villette* 284-285). Although Lucy is given the opportunity to speak out about her independence, she is met with Mr. Home's apologetic response: "his misconceptions of my character often made him smile; but he saw my walk in life lay rather on the shady side of the hill; he gave me credit for doing my endeavor to keep the course honestly straight; he would have helped me if he could" (*Villette* 285). Mr. Home's reaction is characterized as being sympathetic though it is projecting a Victorian stereotype that women's work outside of the home is a "shameful" act. Mr. Home's disappointment is shared by the Brettons who focus solely on the hardship that they assume Lucy faces; all the while blind to the reality of her "passionate nature and the strain of her habitual repression" (Mayer 88). Lucy voices her awareness of Mr. Home's disapproval as she claims, "he saw my walk in life lay rather on the shady side of the hill," thus indicating the negative placement of the independent female worker. Lucy's pride as a worker defies these patriarchal concerns and supplies a critique of Victorian society.

<19>Changes to *Villette's* ending were suggested by Brontë's father, who was concerned about the presentation of a bleak conclusion. *Villette's* original ending intended to direct efforts at securing Lucy's independence through M. Paul's death. Brontë desired to have Lucy's contested love interest die at sea and to have Lucy succeed in ruling her new school as headmistress. Brontë's father disagreed and was "anxious that her new tale should end well, as he disliked novels which left a melancholy impression upon the mind; and he requested her to make her hero and heroine (like the hero and heroine in fairy-tales) 'marry, and live happily ever after'" (Gaskell 414). Brontë's father's concern is reflective of the standard for female writers in which their novels as described by Eliot are anticipated to "expound the writer's religious, philosophical, or moral theories." Such categories dictate that a woman's writing should cater to lighter topics and tone.

<20>Brontë's publisher, Mr. Smith, also implies that his organization was seeking a novel with a "moral lesson" included, but Brontë states in her letter that she cannot "write a book for its moral. Nor can I take up a philanthropic scheme, though I honor philanthropy; and voluntarily and sincerely veil my face before such a mighty

subject as that handled in Mrs. Beecher Stowe's work 'Uncle Tom's Cabin'" (Gaskell 412-413). The publisher voiced their expectations of seeing a more positive message to satisfy readers, much to the dissatisfaction of Brontë. Although Brontë refrained from moving to an emotional or "moral" message, she did inevitably consent to her father's wishes by shrouding *Villette's* ending in ambiguity. Despite the ending's deviation from Brontë's original intent, she does retain a mode of authority within the novel by leaving M. Paul's fate up to the reader's interpretation.

<21>Lucy's unreliability as a narrator functions as an instrumental component to securing *Villette's* open ending. The final chapter is carried by Lucy's retelling of M. Paul's journey at sea, a story that is marked by Lucy's sarcasm and cheek: "M. Emanuel was away three years. Reader, they were the three happiest years of my life. Do you scout the paradox? Listen" (*Villette* 493). Brontë's own rebellion against a "fairy tale" ending is echoed through Lucy's blissful attitude that reflects that M. Paul's absence "were the happiest years of my life." The deliberate placement of this line is emphasized in Lucy's taunts to the reader: "do you scout the paradox?" The paradox that Lucy alerts us to is an allusion to Victorian social expectations, by taking an "anti" position towards this social convention and asserting a foot forward towards her independence as a woman. *Villette's* ending begins to leave the interpretation of this comment up to the reader, ultimately giving "the reader imaginative license" (Tressler 16). Brontë masterfully navigates her own path through Lucy's snark and unpredictability, a facet of her personality that has become familiar to the reader throughout the narrative's course. This tactic allows Brontë to subtly appease the expectations of her male readership while still maintaining personal authority through her vague details.

<22>Lucy's teasing of the reader is further enhanced through her distant admiration of M. Paul following her prior joy over his departure. She proceeds to nearly contradict herself as she prepares a garden in anticipation of his return: "I have cultivated out of love for him (I was naturally no florist) the plants he preferred, and some of them are yet in bloom. I thought I loved him when he went away; I love him now in another degree; he is more my own" (*Villette* 495). In this scene, Lucy plays the role of the patient partner who is excited to reunite with and "serve" her male superior. Such devotion is thrown off by her last comment in which she loves M. Paul in "another degree," a detail that hints that their "love" could be of a different kind. By placing these paradoxical statements close together, Lucy leaves a false and disorienting trail for the reader to follow. This confusion is further complicated through Lucy's depiction of M. Paul's boat at sea: "That storm frenzied for seven days. It did not cease till the Atlantic was strewn with wrecks: it did not lull till the deeps had gorged their full of sustenance. Not till the destroying angel of tempest

had achieved his perfect work, would he fold the wings whose waft was thunder—the tremor of whose plumes was storm" (*Villette* 495). Lucy Snowe's account of M. Paul's fate still remains uncertain but leans closer towards an unhappy reality through Brontë's aggressive language. Details concerning the severity of the storm as a "destroying angel of tempest" imply his death. This symbolism is further enhanced through the storm's endless tirade of "seven days," and the immense "tremor" of thunder that threatened to destroy M. Paul's ship like no other.

<23>Lucy's final comment on M. Paul's fate establishes even more contradictions and speculation from the reader: "Here pause: pause at once. There is enough said. Trouble no quiet, kind heart; leave sunny imaginations hope. Let it be theirs to conceive the delight of joy born again fresh out of great terror, the rapture of rescue from peril, the wondrous reprieve from dread, the fruition of return… Let them picture a union and a happy succeeding life" (*Villette* 496). Brontë's critique of Victorian society is expressed through the usage of "them," a directive address that is implied to be aimed at male critics specifically. This is felt largely through Lucy's statement: "let them picture a union and a happy succeeding life," as a reference to the engendered wishes of Brontë's father and contending critics. The negativity associated with this "happiness" is also directed through Lucy's line, "let it be theirs to conceive the delight of joy born again fresh out of great terror," a perspective that categorizes matrimony as a point of "joy" for male readers while it is derived "out of great terror" for women. The terror that Lucy alludes to implies the limitations placed upon women as they were confined to the domestic sphere. A sense of "joy" is maintained for the male reader as patriarchal power is ultimately maintained. Comments such as these prompt critique of Victorian society, a tactic that Brontë carefully waives through her protagonist's vagueness. Brontë's ending is still open enough that it can prompt open interpretation of M. Paul's fate, a choice that holds potential to satisfy a greater variety of readers, as well as Brontë's concerned father.

<24>Brontë effectively utilizes Lucy Snowe's unconventionality as a protagonist to instill elements of agency and authority throughout her novel. The possibility of matrimony is left present to appeal to Victorian social expectations but does so mockingly. Brontë's critique of marital expectations is significant in that it calls attention to the pressures and restraints that were placed upon female writers in Victorian society as they were restricted by style, subject and perspective. Although personal and psychological suffering has been speculated to influence Brontë's tone and narrative decisions, it is crucial to revisit the historical circumstances surrounding *Villette's* creation as its ending was crafted to be ambiguous due to patriarchal influence. By better understanding the ways in which female writers framed their craft, a new perspective can be gained concerning societal influence

and critique. In doing so, new value can be retrieved from the intricate frameworks that writers like Brontë have composed.

Notes

(1)According to Cheryl Wilson, writing styles that lacked familiarity with domestic life and dress were assumed to be written by men; this further supported the notion that women should direct their focus to writing about domestic life as it is a part of their field of expertise; see p. 62 of *Placing the Margins*.(^)

(2)Rochester disguises himself as a gypsy fortune teller and prompts Jane with a series of revelations of personal information to unearth her true feelings. It is a scene that represents Rochester's inability to approach Jane as himself; see p. 212 in *Jane Eyre*.(^)

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