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CHARLOTTE BRONTË'S VILLETTE: THE CONFSSIONAL PERSPECTIVE

North Carolina.

by

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A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of the Graduate School at
University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

Greensboro
May, 1966

May 4, 1966
Date of Examination

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COCHRAN, JAMES F. Charlotte Brooks's *Flights*: The
Confessional Perspective. (Ed.) Directed by:
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COCHRAN, JANET F. Charlotte Brontë's Villette: The Confessional Perspective. (1966) Directed by: Randolph M. Bulgin. pp. 47.

The appearance of Charlotte Brontë's novel Villette in 1853 provoked a vigorous critical reaction, for the work marked a departure from the prevailing course of the novel in the mid-nineteenth century. The rise of industrialism and the moral convictions of a growing middle-class readership were helping to shape the novel into a panoramic social commentary. Dickens and Thackeray exemplify the novelists of the period whose works reflect a deep concern for the problems of a society in flux. Charlotte Brontë's concern is rather with the inner life of the individual. In Villette, the frank exploration of the emotional life of the heroine Lucy Snowe elicited attacks on the author's own moral philosophy. The fictional treatment of passion was a violation of conventional Victorian attitudes.

The background of social forces which characterizes much of Victorian fiction is absent in Villette, leaving the characters vividly revealed. The central character especially assumes a new degree of prominence, for every impression of external events in Villette is assimilated through the consciousness of the heroine. Character and action are blended in the novel to produce a purely subjective vision. The critical reaction to Villette has largely centered around the nature of its subjectivism. The early reviews examined the moral and ethical values of Charlotte Brontë. As the facts of her life became known,

critics attached autobiographical significance to virtually every aspect of the novel. In the twentieth century, with the advent of Freudian psychology, the principles of psychoanalysis were applied to Miss Brontë's life and to Villette. While each of these critical approaches possesses a certain validity, the novel must nevertheless be evaluated on the basis of its intrinsic merits.

Because the novel is bound by the intuitive perceptions of Lucy Snowe, it is essential to look first at her characterization. The author has made her heroine deliberately plain and colorless in appearance, in order to contrast her outer life with the passionate quality of her inner life. The conflict between the external and the internal life becomes a contest of reason (or restraint) and imagination (or direct emotional involvement). The secondary characters are portrayed in relation to one of the two rival spiritual claims. John Graham Bretton gradually reveals his commitment to reason and his want of genuine emotional depth. Paul Emanuel is unmistakably a volatile, passionate human being, whom Lucy Snowe initially fears, but later comes to love as her own capacity for feeling is released. Madame Beck perceives both sides of Lucy Snowe's nature, and the means she employs in attempting to thwart Lucy's happiness unfold a perversion of reason. Highly individualized characters contribute to the central effect of the novel.

The informing principle of Villette is the conflict between reason and imagination, within the consciousness of

Lucy Snowe. Thematic unity is achieved through the interplay of the two forces. The major part of the novel takes place in an atmosphere of dimness and suppression, with the symbolic use of moonlight employed throughout the novel to suggest imaginative power. Villette moves to a thematic climax in the confessional scene in which Lucy Snowe is forced to renounce repression for the full expression of feeling. The scene thus becomes a metaphor for the entire novel, for it is with Lucy Snowe's acceptance of the power of emotion in her love for Paul Emanuel that the conflict between the rational and non-rational elements of the inner life are ultimately resolved.

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STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

It is my purpose in this thesis to evaluate Charlotte Brontë's novel Villette within its historical context, and to discover and explore a valid critical approach to the work.

An examination of Villette within the scope of the Victorian novel at mid-nineteenth century offers a fascinating syncretic challenge. While Dickens, Thackeray, and many lesser novelists were depicting the vast panorama of emerging urban life and were deeply concerned with the materialism and social abuses of an industrialized England, Charlotte Brontë achieved literary prominence for altogether different reasons. I have attempted to show the complete divergence of her art from the prevailing course of the novel by analyzing her concern, not with society, but with the inner life of the individual: in Villette, she explores human emotions with a sincerity and frankness that was to jolt conventional Victorian standards and affect the subsequent course of the novel.

In my opinion, the narrow stage of Villette's action (paralleling an experience in Charlotte Brontë's life) and the author's penetrating insight into human nature deflected the natural course of critical evaluation. Miss Brontë's

intense subjectivism, measuring every aspect of life through the perceptions of the heroine Lucy Snowe, has led critics to probe deeply into the biography and psychological make-up of the author. These efforts possess a certain validity, but I do not feel that they can suffice as a means to a fair evaluation of the novel.

Ultimately, Villette must be judged on its own merits. And because of Miss Brontë's devotion to the subjective vision, I have chosen to approach the novel through a study of the techniques of characterization. Although there are faults of plotting in the novel, the thematic unity, which is illuminated and preserved through deft characterization, secures the place of Villette in the development of subjectivism in the novel.

CHAPTER I

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The literary anomaly generates a curious kind of excitement among professional critics and general readers alike. The finely-wrought sonnet appearing in an age generally negligent of rhyme or the skillful novel of manners confronting an era of super-realism cannot fail to attract attention. Perhaps this interest derives from a kind of inner rebellion against tidy generalizations having to do with "periods" of literature, the terse summaries of literary eras with which textbooks and survey studies abound.

In the middle years of the nineteenth century, the Victorian novel faced the prospect of just such a re-assessment when the work of Charlotte Brontë became known in the England of Dickens and Thackeray. The publication of Miss Brontë's last-written novel, Villette, in 1853, provoked a vigorous reaction from the critics, who found it difficult to relate her literary achievement to the prevailing trends in the novel.

The novel form had been bequeathed to the Victorians as a highly flexible prose fiction of very loose structure.

This literary inheritance contained elements of the descriptive techniques of Scott, the social satire of Fielding, and the psychological study of Richardson, but of Jane Austen's devotion to structure and acute moral discrimination there remained scarcely a trace. The social concern of Dickens and the urbane satire of Thackeray provided ample evidence that the Victorians inclined strongly toward the writing of novels with a purpose. These were novelists writing in and for an England newly awakened to a sense of history, stirred by the knowledge of the living conditions of its people. With the rapid expansion of the middle class, the by-product of surging industrialism, came a new audience for the novelist. With a deep concern for the social and economic ills of a society in flux and a desire to satisfy the keen appetite of the new readership, the Victorians drafted a vast panorama of the changing culture, always mindful of the conventional morality of the middle-class.

The contrast between Charlotte Brontë's Villette and the novel of social commentary is most clearly evident in the scope of philosophical intent. A glance at some of the major novels closely contemporaneous with Villette illustrates this discrepancy. Among the novels to appear were Dickens's Dombey and Son (1848) and Bleak House (1852), Thackeray's Pendennis (1849), and Charles Kingsley's Alton

Locke (1850). Dombey focuses on the effects of pride and cruelty in the Victorian family, while Bleak House explores the corruption and abuses of the legal system. Thackeray depicts the selfishness and hypocrisy of a wealthy playboy. The unspeakable conditions of the sweat shops prompted Kingley's Alton Locke.

Charlotte Brontë was removed from urbane society and social concerns through more than the two hundred miles separating Haworth from London. The world she creates is drawn from a personal vision; her concern is with the sometimes terrifying topography of the inner life. While her contemporaries were reporting from the scene (implicitly in Dickens, and overtly in Thackeray, in his authorial asides), Miss Brontë's heroine Lucy Snowe in Villette creates the scene, for the action and its implications extend no further than her intuitive perceptions. The author was aware that her writing differed from that of her contemporaries in this respect, for in 1852 she wrote to Mr. George Smith of Smith, Elder and Company (her publishers):

You will see that Villette touches on no matter of public interest. I cannot write books handling the topics of the day; it is no use trying. Nor can I write a book for its moral. Nor can I take up a philanthropic scheme, though I honor philanthropy. . . . to manage these matters rightly they must be long and practically studied--their bearings known

intimately, and their evils felt genuinely; they must not be taken up as business matter and a trading speculation.¹

The question of authorship "as a business matter" suggests another point of discrepancy between Miss Bronte and the prevailing authorial attitudes. Most of the major novels were then being published serially in magazines or separate pamphlets, and only upon completion appeared in the conventional three-volume form. Serial publication had the advantage of making possible wide and inexpensive circulation to the novel-hungry public. While it tended to encourage careful plotting within each installment, it also required a suspenseful ending to each number, whether or not suspense was appropriate at that point in plotting. In addition, as serialization traditionally involved nineteen installments, the practice often encouraged excessive lengthening of the novel, and made the author vulnerable to the tyranny of readers demanding a personally-satisfying destiny for a favorite heroine or despised villain. Condemning the "vicious influence of serial publication," Bradford Booth offers specific evidence of the evils of the system:

Dickens was bombarded with letters

¹Quoted in Mrs. Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell's Life of Charlotte Brontë (Haworth Edition), (New York, 1900), pp. 593-4.

calling on him to spare the life of little Nell, and he was persuaded to tack a happy ending on Great Expectations. Trollope fortunately refused insistent demands that he marry Lily Dale and Johnny Eames. Hardy ruined The Return of the Native by knuckling under to clubwomen who clamored for the sentimental gratification of a marriage, artistically incongruous, between Thomasin and Diggory Venn.²

There is no overstating Charlotte Brontë's determination to "take Nature and truth as my sole guides;"³ this avowal she applied specifically to her views on serialization in a letter to George Henry Lewes dated September 8, 1851:

I ought not to forget, and indeed have not forgotten, that your last propounds to this same Currer Bell [Miss Brontë's masculine pseudonym] a question about a "serial." My dear sir, give Currer Bell the experience of a Thackeray or the animal spirits of a Dickens, and then repeat the question. Even then he would answer, "I will publish no serial of which the last number is not written before the first comes out."⁴

Charlotte Brontë is implicitly stating a principle which pervades her attitude toward writing, and once more alienates her from those of her contemporaries who

²"Form and Technique in the Novel," in the Reinterpretation of Victorian Literature, ed. Joseph E. Baker (Princeton, New Jersey, 1950), p. 76.

³Letter to George Henry Lewes, November 6, 1847, quoted in Gaskell, p. 352.

⁴Quoted in Gaskell, pp. 554-5.

succumbed to the material rewards of serial publication: the novelist's first duty is to please himself; if he, in turn can please his readers, it is fortunate, but not mandatory. And one of the chief tasks she imposed upon herself was the striving for unity of effect in the novel--popular sentiment and prevailing standards of taste notwithstanding. In November of 1852, just prior to the publication of Villette, she makes a final declaration, in answer to a letter from Mr. William Smith Williams, who was for many years literary advisor to Smith, Elder and Company, and a regular correspondent of Miss Brontë's. Mr. Williams had raised several questions about readership appeal in the manuscript of Villette. Miss Brontë replied:

What climax there is does not come on till near the conclusion; and even then I doubt whether the regular novel-reader will consider the "agony piled sufficiently high" (as the Americans say), or the colours dashed onto the canvas with the proper amount of daring. Still, I fear, they must be satisfied with what is offered: my palette affords no brighter tints; were I to attempt to deepen the reds, or burnish the yellows, I should but botch."⁵

Miss Brontë is referring, in her letter to Williams, to matters of plotting, rather than to the tone or mood. The tonal palette, it must be noted, was sufficiently scarlet to elicit a strong response from the major contemporary critics of Miss Brontë's writing. She was

⁵Quoted in Gaskell, p. 596.

harshly censured for the frankness with which she described her heroine's emotional life. Here, in the view of many Victorian critics, she had unforgivably overstepped the bounds of propriety. The Victorian conception of feminine chastity and refinement dictated that the heroine have no passions--only virtues--until the hero had unmistakably declared himself. She might then acquiesce and even confess her affection obliquely, after which she was elevated from maidenly to domestic virtue. David Cecil says of the Victorians' attempt to conform to the readers' taste:

The male novelists--the women seem more robust about emotion--shrink from passion even in its respectable manifestations. It is often a major motive in their plots as it has been in all plots since stories first began; but they pat the beast gingerly with fingers protected by a thick glove of sentimental reverence, and then hastily pass on.⁶

There were, of course a few clear-cut instances of frankly fallen women, such as Dickens's Little Emily or Mrs. Gaskell's Ruth, in whom passion was acknowledged, but they were in no way judged by the same standard as "respectable" heroines.

Miss Brontë suffered her first harsh attacks on moral grounds after the publication of Jane Eyre. Her violation

⁶"Early Victorian Novelists: As They Look to the Reader," in Victorian Literature: Modern Essays in Criticism, ed. Austin Wright (New York, 1961), p.44.

of good taste as Ernest Dimnet describes it, was this:

She [Jane] might have been pardoned for listening to Rochester's audacious personal confessions, but could not be pardoned for allowing herself to love too readily, for admitting to Rochester that she loved him, in a word, for possessing a soul naively and naturally sentimental. It was the first time that in a work of this style, with claims to be poetical and idealistic, the cold majesty of the romantic heroine was thus degraded.⁷

The most infamous critical notice appeared in the Quarterly Review of December 1848, written by a Miss Elizabeth Rigby, later Lady Eastlake, who deems Jane "the personification of an undisciplined and unregenerate mind," and calls the book itself "an anti-Christian work."⁸ The charges levelled at Villette were virtually an echo of those directed at the earlier work--that the heroine revealed she had passions and personal convictions, thereby reflecting adversely on her feminine virtue, and thus upon the morals of the author as well. The suggestion of scandal assuredly helped to make both novels popular successes, but nevertheless grieved their author, who had written and earnestly believed (of Villette) that "Unless I am mistaken, the emotion of the book will be found to be kept throughout in

⁷The Brontë Sisters, trans. Louise Morgan Sill (New York, 1927), p. 146.

⁸Mordell, Notorious Literary Attacks, (New York, 1926), p. 116.

tolerable subjection."⁹

Mrs. Gaskell, Charlotte Brontë's most noteworthy biographer, relates how her subject wrote to her friend Harriet Martineau, an ardent economist, moralist, and agnostic, asking her views on both Villette and the moral criticism of Jane Eyre. Miss Martineau's reply to Charlotte Brontë was succinct: "I do not like the love, either the kind or the degree of it; and its prevalence in the book, and effect on the action of it, help to explain the passages in the reviews which you consulted me about, and seem to afford some foundation for the criticisms they offered."¹⁰ The worst was yet to be, for Miss Martineau, to whom Miss Brontë had been devoted despite their divergent views, elaborated her disapproval in a review of Villette in the Daily News:

All the female characters, in all their thoughts and lives, are full on one thing, or are regarded by the reader in the light of that one thought--love. . . . It is not thus in real life. There are substantial, heartfelt interests for women of all ages, and, under ordinary circumstances, quite apart from love . . . of which we find no admission in this book; and to the absence of it may be attributed some of the criticism which the book will meet with from readers who are no prudes, but whose reason and taste

⁹Charlotte Brontë to William Smith Williams, November 6, 1852, quoted in Gaskell, p. 596.

¹⁰Quoted in Gaskell, p. 610.

will reject the assumption that events
and characters are to be regarded
through the medium of one passion only.¹¹

Disregarding for the moment Miss Martineau's militant feminism and the irresistible fact that Villette became an immediate success, this critique clearly illustrates the traditional Victorian attitude toward passion experienced by the heroines of novels.

Villette unquestionably does not belong to the prevailing course of the English novel in the middle years of the nineteenth century. Its closely circumscribed scope, its author's conception of the novel form, and its revolutionary approach to human passion--all clearly reveal the critical problem of relating it to the mainstream of the Victorian novel.

It must be noted that in one respect, at least, Villette does bear a certain vague kinship of form to the novels of such men as Dickens and Thackeray. It is a long novel with a sometimes loosely-articulated plot, involving unexpected shifts in character, strange coincidences, and a complex use of symbolism. These matters of form deserve examination in more detail, for in studying the Victorian novel, there is always the implicit question of whether

¹¹Quoted in Gaskell, pp. 610-11. It is worth noting that Miss Martineau also objected to Vanity Fair because of the moral disgust it occasioned. Autobiography, ed. Maria Weston Chapman (Boston, 1878), II, p. 60.

convolutions of plot, shifts in character, and incidents hinging on such devices as coincidence and symbolism, serve to enhance the quality of the novel or destroy its coherence as a work of art.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

The novel which Harriet Martineau had scored for the "King," "degrees," and "prevalence" of its emphasis on love and duty with Lucy Stone's serious and dispassionate reflections:

The always flowed smoothly for me as if Godmother's sled led not with tumultuous swiftness, but placidly, like the gliding of a full river through a plain. My visits to her resembled the sojourn of a Christian and hopeful beside a certain pleasant stream; . . . The share of variety there was not, nor the excitement of incidents; but I liked peace so well, and sought stimulus so little, that when the latter came I almost felt it a disturbance, and wished rather it had still held aloof.¹²

The quiet, with its opiate-like quality and its hint of escapism seems indeed remote from the world of Dickens and Thackeray. The effect is rather like a swift transition from crowded drawing rooms and busy London streets to what one critic has called "a kind of secular confessional,"¹³ within which is little visible

¹² Charlotte Brock's *Willa's*, in *Wills of the Sisters Brock* (New York: Brown, Bigelow and Company, n.d.), p. 8.

¹³ Bruce McCallough, *Representative English Novelists: Price to Control* (New York, 1901), p. 127.

CHAPTER II

CRITICAL RECEPTION

The novel which Harriet Martineau had scored for the "kind," "degree," and "prevalence" of its emphasis on love opens with Lucy Snowe's curiously subdued and dispassionate reflections:

Time always flowed smoothly for me at my godmother's side; not with tumultuous swiftness, but blandly, like the gliding of a full river through a plain. My visits to her resembled the sojourn of Christian and Hopeful beside a certain pleasant stream. . . . The charm of variety there was not, nor the excitement of incident; but I liked peace so well, and sought stimulus so little, that when the latter came I almost felt it a disturbance, and wished rather it had still held aloof.¹²

The quiet, with its opiate-like quality and its hint of premonition seems indeed remote from the world of Dickens and Thackeray. The effect is rather like a swift transition from crowded drawing rooms and busy London streets to what one critic has called "a kind of secular confessional,"¹³ within which there is little visible

¹²Charlotte Brontë, Villette, in Works of the Sisters Brontë (New York: Brown Bigelow and Company, n.d.), p.2.

¹³Bruce McCullough, Representative English Novelists: Defoe to Conrad (New York, 1946), p. 174.

activity. The lively panorama of the bustling social scene which serves as the backdrop behind the main action in Oliver Twist and Henry Esmond vanishes, leaving the fictional characters starkly revealed as never before. For this reason, Villette demands a fresh examination of possible critical approaches and the formation of new value judgments.

Like the earlier Jane Eyre, Villette is presented as autobiography. Charlotte Brontë did not introduce the use of the autobiographical method into the novel. The technique had been effectively employed in such works as Moll Flanders and David Copperfield. What she did introduce to the novel is an entirely new function of the central character. In the earlier autobiographical novels, the narrator serves as an observant reporter of external events which might have been very similarly witnessed and recorded by other eyes. David Copperfield experiences one adventure after another, making contact with society in many different ways, and being shaped, the reader surmises, by each external event. Lucy Snowe's contacts, on the other hand, scarcely extend beyond a school in Villette. Rather than the event shaping the character, the personality of the heroine leaves its indelible imprint upon the event. There can be no eyes but Lucy Snowe's from which to view the action, for the vista of the novel is not a pensionnat in the city of Villette, but rather Lucy Snowe's perception of the world.

Feeling, or the voice of the inner life, triumphs in Villette, while external action, which had generally prevailed in the novel, becomes a subordinate element. The heroine becomes what David Cecil calls "the historian of the private consciousness,"¹⁴ elevating the central character to unprecedented prominence. Everything in the novel is diffracted by Lucy Snowe's awareness of it--and each impression in turn affects her degree of pleasure or despair.

As Lucy embarks from London, the midnight journey by rowboat to the vessel which will carry her toward Villette becomes a plunging descent into her own consciousness:

Down the sable flood we glided, I thought of the Styx, and of Charon rowing some solitary soul to the land of Shades. Amidst the strange scene, with a chilly wind blowing in my face and midnight clouds dropping rain above my head; with two rude rowers for companions, whose insane oaths still tortured my ear, I asked myself if I was wretched or terrified.¹⁵

On the trip by diligence to Villette, she delights in "the artist's faculty of making the most of present pleasure," yet her description of the landscape persistently foreshadows the barren isolation that awaits her:

Somewhat bare, flat, and treeless was the

¹⁴Early Victorian Novelists (New York, 1935), p. 121.

¹³Villette, p. 55.

route along which our journey lay; and slimy canals crept like half-torpid green snakes, beside the road. . . .The sky, too, was monotonously gray; the atmosphere was stagnant and humid. . . .¹⁶

Her anticipation of what lies ahead at the end of her journey is darkly overridden by

the secret but ceaseless consciousness of anxiety lying in wait on enjoyment, like a tiger crouched in a jungle. The breathing of that beast of prey was in my ear always . . . I knew he waited only for sundown to bound ravenous from his ambush.¹⁷

Thus to an astonishing degree, the tonal quality of the novel is established before the major action of the novel ever gets underway.¹⁸ The achievement far exceeds mere irresponsible scene-setting which the authors of the Gothic novels had carried to the ultimate extreme--for to an even greater degree, what has actually been established is the unique quality of Lucy Snowe's perception and her ability to assimilate emotionally every external impression. Character and action are inextricably

¹⁶Ibid., p. 67.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Dickens uses a similar device in the well-known opening paragraphs of Bleak House and at the beginning of Chapter 3 of Little Dorrit in describing London--but with an altogether different intent and effect. This imagery bears a specific, pictorial quality designed to convey the social commentary of an omniscient observer.

blended to produce a totally subjective vision in the novel.

This new subjectivism caught the attention of the early reviewers of the novel and has continued to serve as the chief interest of critics of Villette until the present day. The nature of the critical reaction can be traced in three general phases. The immediate response to the novel sought meaning (and inevitably, moral value) in the personal philosophy of the author, centering upon her as an isolated voice proclaiming woman's right to love freely and to think independently. Very soon, as the biographical facts of Miss Brontë's life began to trickle out, the scope of critical attention expanded, examining the relationship of the novel to the author's environment--the Yorkshire life of her childhood, the Brussels school, the members of the Brontë family, school friends, chance acquaintances--in short, to any person or place that had touched Charlotte Brontë's life. Finally, with the advent of Freudian psychology, the circle widened still further, as criticism attempted to universalize elements of Miss Brontë's literary achievement through psychoanalytical principles.

In order to understand the impact made by the introduction of subjectivism into the novel, it is helpful to examine one or two representative voices from each of the three approaches to the work. Miss Martineau's

indictment in the Daily News perfectly exemplifies the early condemnation of Villette for what was deemed unnecessary emotional frankness.¹⁹ At the same time, the novel drew an unfavorable response (again, in the form of a personal attack on its author) from the principle organs of the High Church party--The Guardian, The English Churchman, and The Christian Remembrancer (whose reviewer branded the author of the offending work "as alien, it might seem, from society, and amenable to none of its laws"), censuring her for putting anti-Catholic sentiments into the head of Lucy Snowe.²⁰ Many of the early reviews, however, were far more tolerant, and specifically commended the novel for its emotional honesty. A joint review of Mrs. Gaskell's Ruth and Villette in the liberal Westminster Review (which may very well have been written by George Eliot, then associated with the Review), is representative of the general reception of the novel in 1853. The article defends the dictum of George Sand that "art can prove nothing, nor should it be expected to prove anything." The value of the novel, the reviewer declares, is not as an appeal to the moral sense, but as the rare "utterance

¹⁹Miss Martineau was hardly a stranger to unorthodox views presented by a woman, as her Letters on the Laws of Man's Social Nature had caused considerable scandal in 1851; but her militant brand of intellect was repelled by feminine emotion as a subject.

²⁰Gaskell, pp. 617-18.

of an original mind," in which

we read the actual thoughts and feelings of a strong, struggling soul; we hear the cry of pain from one who has loved passionately, and who has sorrowed sorely. Indeed, no more distinct characteristic of Currer Bell's genius can be named than the depth of her capacity for all passionate emotions.²¹

It is interesting to note that even the farseeing critic of the Westminster Review of 1853 felt it necessary to remark upon the moral forthrightness in Villette, so vehemently had orthodox writers attacked it for immorality. The peculiar emphasis upon the moral character of the English novel is deeply rooted in its time and becomes comprehensible only as it is related to the self-conscious moral notions of the 1850's. The breakdown of village life and the swift urbanization that was destroying the old patriarchal family unit was also drawing women into work outside the home--thus into "unfeminine" professional and social situations. Such an arrangement invited vigorous controversy in a society pervaded with the values of the expanding middle class. In this moral climate, the Yorkshire clergyman's daughter deserted her parsonage duties to become a teacher on the Continent and wrote a novel, presumably about her experiences. When it was discovered that the heroine of the novel professed both

²¹Anon. review, (April, 1853), p. 254.

romantic love and a distaste for the Church of Rome, the author became a natural measuring-stick for mid-Victorian morality.

What was for a time mere conjecture about the author of Villette gradually gave way to factual accounts of her life, and more specifically, of her stay in Brussels during 1842-3, where she had gone as a student and remained as a teacher. It was this knowledge that produced the most exhaustive body of criticism on the book, which debates the amount of autobiographical material that actually informs the novel Villette. A keen interest in the lives of authors existed at the time of Villette's publication. The vogue extended beyond the shores of England. In the same year that Charlotte Brontë was working diligently at Haworth to finish writing the novel, Baudelaire found it necessary to justify the French emphasis on biography in literary criticism: "It is a very great and a very useful pleasure to compare the traits of a great man with his work. Biographies--notes on the manners, habits, and physical appearance of artists and writers have always aroused a very legitimate curiosity," and biography further serves "to verify, so to speak, the mysterious adventures of the brain."²² The French viewpoint is interesting here because it happened to coincide with a similar emphasis in England;

²²Lois Boe Hyslop and Francis E. Hyslop, Jr., ed. and trans. Baudelaire As A Literary Critic, (Univ. Park, Penn., 1964), p. 89.

but more than that, the continental fascination with the "manners" and "habits" of authors probably helped to account for Miss Brontë's reluctance to have the novel translated into French.²³ Many characters in the novel had been quickly identified with actual persons in Brussels some of whom were still alive at the time of Villette's publication.

Although Victorian biography was conventionally a discreet two-volume "life-and-letters" affair and the "authorized" biographer was a member of the subject's family or a person chosen and studiously controlled by the family, the paradoxical nature of Charlotte Brontë's physical existence and the life of her novels seemed to tantalize reviewers. Hugh Walker testifies to the irresistible urge to relate fact to fiction when he writes as late as 1913 that "The Brontës belong to that class of novels whom it is impossible to understand except through the medium of biography."²⁴ Elaborating on Charlotte, he precisely equates her novels with her school experiences as follows: Cowan

²³In view of the moral indignation which had arisen in England, she naturally feared the attempt to draw direct analogies to the Brontë-Héger relationship, and to the character of Madame Héger when the novel was put into the hands of Belgian and French readers. However, her literary reception in both countries proved to be most hospitable. For reference to specific French reviews, see the Introduction to Dimnet, The Bronte Sisters.

²⁴The Literature of the Victorian Era. (Cambridge, 1913, p. 710.

Bridge-Jane Eyre, Roe Head-Shirley, and Brussels-both The Professor and Villette. Since Miss Brontë attended no other schools, he therefore dismisses the probability that she would have produced additional novels, having exhausted her meagre experience. Others objected to what Mr. Walker matter-of-factly designates as literal transcription. The Cambridge History of English Literature observes in referring to Villette that "We have an uneasy feeling that we are looking into other peoples' houses."²⁵ With the qualification that the finest portions are the most literal, the resolute judgment nevertheless remains that "As novel readers, we do not expect to be reading a diary."²⁶ This line of attack, whether made calmly or resentfully, seems artificial and even illegitimate on two counts. First of all, it pre-supposes a detailed explication and comparison of the text with the biographical study,²⁷ at best a severely limited approach to literary appraisal. Next, in taking the position that "Had Miss Brontë been a greater novelist than she was, Villette would not have the

²⁵A. W. Ward and A. R. Waller, ed., (New York, 1917), XIII, p. 454.

²⁶Ibid., p. 455.

²⁷One writer has researched every topical reference in Villette and related each to an experience Charlotte Brontë might have had in the Brussels of 1842-3. See Gustave Charlier, "The Brussels Life in Villette," Contemporary Review, CXLIV, (November, 1933), p. 568-74.

biographical interest it has," as does Augustine Birrell,²⁸ the ability of an author to breathe life into a character or an emotion is equated with the impossible achievement of reconstructing life with photographic exactness.

Fortunately, other critical eyes have taken a broader view of the autobiographical import of the novel. Clement K. Shorter, one of the most prolific and devoted of Charlotte Brontë's critics, affirms that the Brussels experience was the turning point in the author's emotional life and marked the awakening of her intellectual powers (by Monsieur Héger). Yet he feels that entirely too much critical energy has been expended on an analysis of the Brontë-Héger relationship with the assumption that the Lucy Snowe-Paul Emanuel relationship represents its exact counterpart in fictional guise.²⁹ Ernest Dimnet also minimizes the importance of the autobiographical data in the novel, in that "the novel is so full of details that do not not fit in with reality that we cannot make use of those that do. Charlotte took the framework and the character of her book from her Brussels memories, but, for the rest, she allowed herself all the liberty of which she was capable."³⁰

²⁸Life of Charlotte Brontë, (London, 1887), p. 79.

²⁹Charlotte Brontë and Her Sisters, (New York, 1905), pp. 57, 198-9, et passim.

³⁰Ibid., p. 95

By implying the author's inability to liberate herself emotionally from the past, Mr. Dimnet perhaps unknowingly presaged a kind of interpretation that chose Charlotte Brontë for its own in the twentieth century--the interpretation of literature through psychoanalytical principles. A number of writers have elected this technique in discussing Charlotte Brontë,³¹ but the definitive work on the subject was done by Lucille Dooley in the American Journal of Psychology for July, 1920.³² The article systematically examines the major psychological influences in Charlotte Brontë's life (chiefly, the early death of her mother, the personality of her father, and the cause and effect of repression in her physical and emotional life). These influences are applied to her literary works, with the greatest emphasis on Villette; for the author contends that while Lucy Snowe is not the whole of Charlotte Brontë, she bears a profound emotional kinship to her in a way that Jane Eyre did not.³³

The recurrent theme of psychological criticism is that the impetus which produced Villette is rooted in a specific

³¹See especially Rosamund Langbridge, Charlotte Brontë: A Psychological Study (New York, 1929), and Herbert Read, The Nature of Literature (New York, 1956).

³²"Psychoanalysis of Charlotte Brontë, as a Type of the Woman of Genius," XXXI, pp. 221-72.

³³Ibid., p. 260.

lifelong conflict within its author. Miss Dooley describes it as

a complex of ambivalent feeling toward a strong, stern, powerful, benevolent, adored father, who is loved and feared alternately, and also, simultaneously. . . . the father-personality was the dominant figure in Charlotte Brontë's emotional life. The one great adult love of her life--the passion for her teacher, M. Héger--was the natural outgrowth of this. The love grounded in an unconscious infantile bond to the parent goes out only to the person who, like the parent, is inaccessible.³⁴

A careful analysis of this concept establishes the whole case for what might possibly be revealed through psychoanalysis. The tracing of Lucy Snowe's unexplained feeling of ambivalence toward all men is not difficult to do; and beyond question, the qualities attributed to Charlotte Brontë's father are precisely those which trouble Lucy about Paul Emanuel. On the other hand, the relationship of Paulina Home and her father seems idealized. By arresting the father-daughter relationship in an early stage, it appears quite properly warm, intimate, and free from conflict as long as the child remains safely a child in the relationship. For when the child becomes a woman, the intimate nature of the bond (or of the desire for the bond) must be consciously repressed if it cannot adapt to a mature relationship to the father, hence toward all men.

³⁴Ibid., p. 223.

It is this repression which might be said to account for the voluntary self-denial and tendency toward withdrawal in the character of Lucy Snowe. What cannot be expressed must be renounced; as the true father is unaccessible therefore the counterpart of later life (Monsieur Héger) and the fictional heroes (John Graham Bretton and Paul Emanuel) must be marked by inaccessibility.³⁵

John Graham Bretton is fated to be unattainable, for he is one of "Nature's Elect." And in the end, the love between Lucy and Paul may be mutually acknowledged, but it cannot be allowed full realization through his return. The art of the novel becomes in these terms the means to catharsis for the central conflict of the author's life. The expression of the conflict in artistic terms becomes therefore a triumph over neurosis.

Psychology offers a fascinating vantage point from which to view literature, especially in the case of Charlotte Brontë, whose life abounds with the circumstances dear to Freudian interpreters. Still, the technique of psychoanalysis is at best selective, for not even a small

³⁵In a letter to George Smith on November 3, 1852, Miss Brontë is quite positive about the destiny of John Graham Bretton: "Lucy must not marry Dr. John; he is far too youthful, handsome, bright-spirited, and sweet-tempered; he is a 'curled darling' of Nature and of Fortune and must draw a prize in life's lottery. Quoted in Gaskell, pp. 595-596.

segment of the subject's life can be fully reconstructed. When the individual is subjected to analysis across a distance of more than half a century (as is the case with Charlotte Brontë), and what is revealed is then applied, however carefully, to a work of fiction, the degree of remoteness from actuality becomes excessive. Fact becomes supplemented by inference; eventually both succumb to pure conjecture. For example, there is a substantial divergence in the recorded details of the Rev. Patrick Brontë's character,³⁶ a vital factor in the interpretation. In order to defend the basic premise (that the contribution of Villette is the extended fictional revelation of the Electra-complex), the temptation to select and emphasize only data contributing to the defense becomes overwhelming.

After looking briefly at the kinds of criticism which Villette has elicited, it is noteworthy that even in their individual differences, the central concern has always been the same. It is the exploration of the inner life of Villette's heroine to which critics have sharply reacted for more than a century. The intense subjectivism which Charlotte Brontë brought to the English novel made

³⁶cf. Miss Langbridge's portrayal ("to his doors must be laid the ruined health and fortunes of all his children . . . the morbidity and sadness of their lives and works"), (Psych. Study, p. 5), with Ernest Dimnet's "silent and dreamy" "peacefully egoistic" recluse who felt great pride in his children, although he showed little warmth toward them. (Brontë Sisters, Chapter II).

Villette the natural prey of strongly moralistic, biographical or psychological criticism. But to evaluate the novel fairly, it must be judged as a work of art, independent of externals, for its intrinsic meaning. The essential question must still be answered: Just how effectively has the artist taken up the raw materials of experience and transformed them into an orderly and unified interpretation of life? The interpretation within the pages of Villette must be viewed through Lucy Snowe and extended to the periphery of the novel. The most meaningful approach to the book's evaluation should be then a study of Charlotte Brontë's techniques of characterization, beginning with the heroine.

CHAPTER III

CHARACTERIZATION

Charlotte Brontë gave her heroine the name of Lucy Frost in the manuscript of Villette which she sent to her publishers. Later she wrote to W. S. Williams, requesting that "Frost" be changed to her original choice of "Snowe": "A cold name she must have: partly . . . on the principle of the 'fitness of things,' for she has about her an external coldness."³⁷ Clearly, the austere plainness of Lucy Snowe was part of a deliberately unconventional conception of the heroine. In reply to a comment Williams had made, Miss Brontë admitted that Lucy Snowe "is both morbid and weak at times; her character sets up no pretensions to unmingled strength, and anybody living her life would necessarily become morbid."³⁸

If external coldness and morbidity are rather remarkable attributes for the heroine of a novel, they render concrete Charlotte Brontë's profound knowledge of her material. For it is precisely these qualities that present the dual vision of character that the author imparts to the reader.

³⁷Quoted in Gaskell, p. 595.

³⁸Ibid., p. 596.

As seen by the outside world, Lucy Snowe can appear only as a plain, colorless schoolteacher, sometimes prudish, and often succumbing to self-effacement and periods of depression. The realm in which she moves is drab, uneventful, and closely circumscribed. The subjective vision, which always dominates but does not dispel the outer view, reflects a distinctly different image. Lucy Snowe emerges as a deeply passionate woman who is caught up in perpetual conflict. At one moment she flees in terror from feeling by retreating into the anonymity of the secluded allée defendue; at the next, she cries out soundlessly during a thunderstorm for deliverance from her solitary existence. The conflict of the external and the internal life becomes for Lucy Snowe a contest of reason (which is identified with restraint and vicarious attendance on experience) and imagination (which is equated with direct, emotional involvement).

Reason recognizes the tranquil, undemanding life at Bretton as an infinitely appealing refuge "where Sundays and holidays always seem to abide." Lucy derives a quiet pleasure from the activities of the Bretton circle, for there she is calmly accepted, and never forced to play an active role. The loss of Bretton is a loss of the totally vicarious existence. The death of Miss Marchmont, the elderly woman to whom she subsequently became a companion, forces her to a full and desperate realization:

I would have crawled on with her for twenty years, if for twenty years longer her life of endurance had been protracted. But another decree was written. It seemed I must be stimulated into action. I must be goaded, driven, stung, forced to energy. . . . I had wanted to compromise with Fate: to escape occasional great agonies by submitting to a whole life of privation and small pains. Fate would not be so pacified; nor would providence sanction this shrinking sloth and cowardly indolence.³⁹

Lucy's awareness of the unquenchable inner life grows slowly. It is only after she has accepted Madame Beck's offer to become a teacher of English in the pensionnat that she consciously tastes her first knowledge of the exercise of will:

It was pleasant. I felt I was getting on; not lying the stagnant prey of mould and rust, but polishing my faculties and whetting them to a keen edge with constant use. Experience of a certain kind lay before me on no narrow scale.⁴⁰

These early chapters, which ostensibly serve to position Lucy Snowe for the balance of the novel, have a structural and thematic function of greater significance. They establish the general movement of the novel at a pace consistent with the growth of Lucy Snowe's capacity for

³⁹Villette, p. 39.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 93.

feeling. The Lucy Snowe who stands wordlessly aside, observing the womanly attentions of little Polly Home to Graham Bretton, is scarcely the same Lucy Snowe who summarily locks an impudent pensionnat pupil in a closet.

The interplay between the extremes of reason and imagination forms the basis for all characterization in the novel. The secondary characters are portrayed as Lucy Snowe discerns their relative sensitivity to the rival claims of the spirit. As in the case of the heroine, the distinction is clearly marked in other characters between real and apparent values--subjective knowledge is always waiting to supplant external appearance. The shift rests upon dramatic irony, in which the reader participates. Lucy Snowe's interpretation of other characters undergoes gradual revision as the novel progresses--and the reader understands that the full significance of the change is actually in the quality of Lucy's perception.

John Graham Bretton reappears, for example, in the novel as "Dr. John" of Villette. He is to Lucy a reassuring face from a vanished past, but when she sees him as a young doctor and is struck by his handsome appearance, he becomes something more. She comes to view him as an incomparable objet d'art, silently rejoicing in his beauty as she would in that of a fine sculpture: "His profile was clear, fine, and expressive. . . . it had a most pleasant character, and so had his mouth; his chin was full, cleft, Grecian and

perfect."⁴¹ Through her conversations with him at the pensionnat, his attentions to her at La Terrasse after her collapse in the street, and his letters during her intense loneliness after her return to the pensionnat, she conceives a less aesthetic and more romantic ideal, rooted in emotional dependence upon his kindness and concern. For a time, she gratefully accepts and treasures the slightest attention, and even the most impersonal courtesy.

The reassessment of character is, as it must be for Lucy Snowe, always difficult. In her view of John Bretton, it occurs at a performance by the actress Vashti. Lucy is quite shaken by the dramatic power of the tragedy, but more deeply by the actress's total abandonment to violent and conflicting emotions. John Bretton's reaction, which Lucy Snowe carefully observes, is rather one of intense curiosity at the spectacle. Once again, illumination is rude and perhaps regretful:

His natural attitude was not the meditative nor his natural mood the sentimental; impressionable he was as dimpling water, but, almost as water, unimpressible: the breeze, the sun moved him--metal could not grave, nor fire brand.

Dr. John could think and think well, but he was rather a man of action than of thought: he could feel, and feel vividly in his way, but his heart had no chord for enthusiasm . . . for what belonged to storm, what was wild and intense,

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 109-110.

dangerous, sudden, and flaming, he had no sympathy, and held with it no communion.⁴²

Lucy Snowe, in the growing acceptance of the power of imagination and the depth of her own capacity for passion is proportionately aware of the dearth of the same qualities beneath the "comely courage and cordial calm" of Dr. John Graham Bretton. Ultimately, she comes to a full recognition that he has been as blind to her inner nature as she once was to his. The woman whom he envisions as "a being inoffensive as a shadow" can free herself at last:

With now welcome force, I realized 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, or face, or gestures; though, I doubt not, all spoke.⁴³

John Graham Bretton is essentially the same graceful, handsome schoolboy of Bretton days--seeing what he chooses to see, showing kindness whenever it pleases his generally good-hearted nature. And what he is, Lucy is certain, he will always remain.

From his earliest entrance in the novel, Monsieur Paul Emanuel is a character imbued with vigorous life. Where the author has erected complex façades for other-- Lucy's sombre plainness, John Bretton's extraordinary good

⁴²Ibid., p. 308

⁴³Ibid., p. 379.

looks, and Paulina Home's precocious charm--Monsieur Paul is thrust into the novel, his whole nature revealed for anyone who chooses to look. From his scowling, impulsive judgment that Madame Beck should employ Lucy on her first night in Villette, he appears to be neither more nor less than the volatile, passionate man of intuition that he is.

In contrast to her early blindness to the truth of John Bretton's nature, Lucy senses altogether accurately the vitality and emotional depth of the dark, wiry little professor and instinctively withdraws to her fortress of reason. The imagery she employs in describing him is highly significant: "Some crisis of irritability was covering his human visage with the mask of an intelligent tiger" . . . "his black whiskers curled like those of a wrathful cat" . . . "Never was such a little hawk of a man" . . . "this salamander--for whom no room ever seemed too hot" . . . All this perfectly betrays her awareness of his furious animal energy and the unfathomable attraction-repulsion she consequently feels--and fears.

But Monsieur Paul is never one to brook opposition. His demand that Lucy take a part in a school play is virtually an abduction, and soon afterward he clarifies his course of action in unmistakable terms:

"You are one of those beings who ought to 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 scrutinized your face once, and if sufficed."

"You are satisfied that you understand me?"

Without answering directly, he went on, "Were you not gratified when you succeeded in that vaudeville? I watched you and saw a passionate ardour for triumph in your physiognomy. What fire shot into the glance! Not mere light, but flame: je me tiens pour averti."⁴⁴

He is demonstrably the foil and opposite of John Bretton in more than physical appearance. Dr. Bretton's "quiet Lucy Snowe" whom he treats with unerring kindness and courtesy is Monsieur Paul's "Petite chatte, doucerette, coquette!" whom he taunts unmercifully and courts with tenderness only when she is reduced to tears or retreats into prim aloofness.

It is, of course, the high-spirited imagination and the penetrating accuracy of his instincts that arouses such strongly conflicting reactions within Lucy Snowe. She cannot help shrinking from the bold and vivid imagery of his insight: "You remind me, then, of a young she wild creature, new caught, untamed, viewing with a mixture of fire and fear the first entrance of the breaker-in."⁴⁵

It is through his whimsical display of just the qualities of feeling she had fled--his repeated

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 181.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 274.

demonstration of her ability to bestow pleasure that she is eventually able to accept fully the satisfaction (and ultimately the price) of direct, emotional involvement:

I grew quite happy--strangely happy--in making him secure, content, tranquil. Yesterday, I could not have believed that earth held, or life afforded, moments like the few I was now passing. Countless times it had been my lot to watch apprehended sorrow close darkly in; but to see un hoped for happiness take form, find place, and grow more real as the seconds sped was indeed a new experience.⁴⁶

It is the shrewd Madame Beck, directress of the pensionnat, who perceives Lucy Snowe's emotional spectrum with more exactness than does either John Bretton or Paul Emanuel. Madame Beck is a dedicated surveillante; her method is espionage. She is possessed of the ease of rationalization that is the special property of the super-pragmatist: no keyhole is too insignificant, no private drawer too remote to be visited with the justification of keeping the pupils in decent subjection, the school in smooth running order.

Lucy Snowe and Madame Beck achieve a silent mutual recognition early in their relationship, with the tacit understanding that this insight is not to be acknowledged on either side. An ill-timed sneeze from behind a door and the scarcely discernible disturbance of Lucy's precious

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 488.

letters soon betray the directress's keen interest in the relationship between her English teacher and Dr. John; later it becomes apparent that Madame observes (or has reported to her) virtually every encounter between Lucy and Paul Emanuel. Lucy, in turn, makes her own discoveries. Madame, with her self-possessed sensuality of "usefulness," has been attracted to both men, so that the unwitting intervention of Mademoiselle Lucy poses both a professional and personal threat:

In the course of living with her, I had slowly learned that, unless with an inferior, she must ever be a rival. She was my rival, heart and soul, though secretly, under the smoothest bearing, and utterly unknown to all save her and myself.⁴⁷

Madame Beck, solicitously offering Lucy a sleeping draught to render impotent her despair over Monsieur Paul's absence, is a fascinating perversion of reason, seeking to negate the power of imaginative feeling.

The major figures in the novel are thus arranged in an intricate relationship to the central theme. The gradual arousal of Lucy Snowe's repressed desire to participate in life through direct emotional knowledge is the thread which runs through the novel from beginning to end; as a result virtually all characterization reverts finally to Lucy's consciousness.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 536.

The one false note in the characterization within Villette lies in the person of Paulina Home de Bassompierre. The busy precocity of the child Polly at Bretton is perhaps understandable, but "the little countess" who reappears later in Villette never fully engages the reader's interest or sympathy. A number of critics have found fault with Charlotte Brontë's treatment of the aristocracy in Jane Eyre; perhaps there is in Villette also an overstraining (after the fashion of the "silver fork novel") for the effect of "breeding" and "culture," Paulina Home speaks in a stilted, unmusical manner that conveys neither of these estimable qualities. "There, papa," she declares on one occasion at La Terrasse, offering her father a bit of food, "remember you are only waited upon with this assiduity on condition of being persuadable and reconciling yourself to La Terrasse for the day."⁴⁸

The picture of her sitting between her father and Dr. Bretton, "plaiting together the grey lock and the golden wave," binding it with a curl from her own hair, and placing that amulet in a locket "over her heart" evokes a preciosity--a heavy-handed use of symbolism that is altogether alien to the novel.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 338.

⁴⁹ Miss Brontë herself apparently felt misgivings about the character of Paulina Home. On December 6, 1852, she wrote to George Smith: "The weakest character in the book [P H] is the one I aimed at making the most beautiful; and,

The figures of Lucy Snowe, Paul Emanuel, and Madame Beck are irrefutable testimony to Charlotte Brontë's ability to delineate fictional characters and engender in them a convincing vitality. Whatever part autobiographical impressions and psychological influences may play in their creation--and elements of both are undeniably present--⁵⁰these considerations are secondary to the power of the characters in *Villette* to linger in the mind of the reader long after the novel is concluded.

if this be the case, the fault lies in its wanting the germ of the real--in its being purely imaginary. I felt that this character lacked substance; I fear that the reader will feel the same." Gaskell, p. 600.

⁵⁰The reader will note the absence of any discussion of the material in Fannie Elizabeth Batchford's The Brontë's Web of Childhood (New York, 1941), which treats the relationship of the Brontë juvenilia to the mature novels. Although certain intriguing similarities to Villette can be traced in the plots and characters of the Angrian saga, these likenesses do not seem pertinent to the historical and literary evaluation of Villette.

CHAPTER IV

EVALUATION

The true estimation of a novel does not lie in a strict accounting of its strengths and weaknesses and in a balancing of one against the other. The novel, by its very nature, is frequently a vast and somewhat unwieldy form; so that a fairer evaluation rests upon discovering the secret of its power, and determining whether this informing principle is strong enough to sustain the lesser, and possibly weaker, elements.

The guiding principle which informs Villette is the long and difficult struggle of a drab, sensitive girl toward self-realization. Lucy Snowe is an introspective orphan in whom repression is opposed by the demands of a deeply responsive nature. Nearly every component of the novel contributes toward the illumination of this conflict. The early sun-drenched Bretton scenes, which form a kind of preface to the novel, depict a sterile kind of contentment for the heroine, significant chiefly for the contrast afforded to the later scenes.

The greater part of the action takes place in "the dim lower quarter" of the city of Villette, where light never seems to penetrate the sombre, conspiratorial atmosphere of

the pensionnat. The number of characters within these confining walls, is small so that the figure of Lucy Snowe, and those few persons who truly touch her life, are viewed with heightened intensity.

Most of the pivotal scenes of the novel occur at night, and in all of them the presence of the moon or of moonlight lends a strange cast of illusion to familiar things. Lucy Snowe ponders the future of sleeping Polly Home "by the fitful gleam of moonlight." In the garden of the pensionnat, just before the ghostly nun appears, "the moon, so dim hitherto, seemed to shine out somewhat brighter . . ." In the Faubourg Clotilde during Lucy and Paul's brief hours there, "Above the poplars, the laurels, the cypresses, and the roses, looked up a moon so lovely and so halcyon, the heart trembled under her smile." The moon imagery throughout the novel symbolizes a cosmic externalization of private emotion. It frequently suggests an approaching revelation of the freedom of imagination, of the potential power of emotional release.

In this context, the elements of the novel unite to produce a sustained effect of incredible tension--forces not understood but intuitively felt are barely contained below the surface. The atmosphere of suppression leaves little room or need for the pictorial in the novel; Lucy Snowe's concern is with the nature of things, rather than

with the quality of external appearance, and it is across the path of her vision that the metaphor of fear, hostility, love, and jealousy must pass. Very soon the narrow scene of the pensionnat becomes full of movement. The cat-like tread of Madame Beck, the calm, sure step of Dr. John Bretton, the eruption of Monsieur Paul Emanuel through the classroom door--all assail the barriers to feeling which Lucy Snowe has erected. Lucy's past life of conscious withdrawal does not prepare her for such shifting emotional terrain. She dreams symbolically and prophetically of a cup being forced to her lips, and soon after in a fevered state of loneliness, makes her way to the solemn quiet of a confessional. Ignorant of Catholic ritual, she nevertheless persuades the priest to hear her confession of acute loneliness and conflicting emotions.

The act of confession is for Lucy Snowe the last resort of a tortured mind. A militant Protestant, she is nevertheless irresistibly drawn to a vision of redemption through catharsis. The accumulation of repressed emotion triumphs over the ambivalence of her nature.

The confessional scene is climactic in Villette, for in a very real sense it becomes a comprehensive metaphor for the entire novel. The atmosphere of the pensionnat possesses the dim, expectant quiet of the confessional, while the only release lies in the abandonment of restraint, the willingness to express without reservation the

spontaneous emotional response.

Lucy attempts to give of herself to John Bretton, only to discover that her chosen idol is incapable of receiving her offering. Lucy's rejection of his coolly rational approach to life--the only possible approach for one of "Nature's Elect" untroubled by passion--is artistically right; the symbolic "burial" of hope is the only logical outcome. It is from the moment of Paul Emanuel's speech in the Hôtel Crécy, when Lucy Snowe fully recognizes the fiery depths and great tenderness of the professor of rhetoric, that the pace of the novel quickens. The scene of the novel at this point shifts from the outer to the inner life. That Monsieur Paul is drowned at sea is important dramatically, but not thematically. For he has been the triumphant agent of the release of romantic passion in Lucy Snowe. From the moment in the allée when he takes her hand, the old life of self-denial is shed. The voice from the dark confessional, silent for so long, speaks at last, and is heard.

It is possible to point out certain structural deficiencies in the novel. There are unexplained shifts and contrivances of plotting which cannot escape notice: the inconsistency of the character of Paulina Home as a child and as an adult, for example, or the reliance on pure coincidence to advance the action. But these apparent

examples of an artistic naiveté cannot shake the power of the book. Villette stands as a supreme illustration of a new kind of subjectivism in the novel. It explores with artistic power and integrity the perennial conflict between the rational and non-rational within the human consciousness.

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