

Search for the Possibility of a Woman's Independence: A Study of Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*

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Charlotte Brontë's last completed novel, *Villette*, shows most distinctively the author's conflict between the desire to write and Victorian feminine duties. Elaine Showalter remarks that "nineteenth-century women writers did not believe that literary talents took precedence over the normal obligations of womanhood" (61). In fact, women in the Victorian era were deprived of economic security and were imprisoned in the sphere of home and the ideal of femininity. The deviance from the feminine role as mother, daughter, or wife brought great anxiety to the society and even to the women themselves.¹ When Brontë sent a letter to Robert Southey with the intention of her poem's publication, he answered as follows: "Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life, and it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure will she have for it, even as an accomplishment and a recreation" (Gaskell, 123). The letter Brontë wrote in reply clearly betrays her ambivalent feeling toward the act of writing:

In that capacity [as a governess] I find enough to occupy my thoughts all day long, and my head and hands too, without having a moment's time for one dream of the imagination. In the evenings, I confess, I do think, but I never trouble any one else with my thoughts. I carefully avoid any appearance of pre-

occupation and eccentricity. . . . Following my father's advice. . . I have endeavoured not only attentively to observe all the duties a woman ought to fulfill, but to feel deeply interested in them. I don't always succeed, for sometimes when I'm teaching or sewing I would rather be reading or writing; but I try to deny myself. (Gaskell, 125)

The Victorian society expected middle-class women to get married, though they were hardly allowed any rights about their matrimony. Divorce from the wife's side was accepted under the far stricter stipulation than from the husband's, and there was no Married Women's Property Act until 1882.² The only decent way except marriage a Victorian middle-class woman could take was to be a governess, though it was a burdensome and distressful job. According to Showalter, "there is no doubt that from the beginning writing offered the best chances of remuneration" (48).³ For Charlotte Brontë, who experienced a job as a governess, writing must have offered a great opportunity to succeed in life by herself, and also to fill her desire of self-expression. At the same time, however, the act of writing for Victorian women meant a fatal deviance from femininity. Gilbert and Gubar point out that "[i]f becoming an author meant mistaking one's 'sex and way,' if it meant becoming an 'unsexed' or perversely sexed female, then it meant becoming a monster or freak" (34). Still, the desire to write, which is closely connected with the ambition to publish in the case of Charlotte Brontë, was so strong that the restraint forced by the society on "that single, absorbing, exquisite gratification" (Gaskell, 125) was almost unbearable. She confesses this irritation to her friend Ellen Nussey: "such a vehement impatience of restraint and steady work; such a strong wish for wings—wings such as wealth can furnish; such an urgent thirst to see, to know,

to learn; something internal seemed to expand bodily for a minute. I was collapsed, and I despaired. My dear, I would hardly make that confession to any one but yourself" (Gaskell, 164).

My main concern in this paper is how in *Villette* Brontë describes the possibility of women's independence in Victorian society. In the writing of this novel, the conflict between the successful author of *Jane Eyre*, Currer Bell, and the obedient daughter, Charlotte Brontë, yet comes to the surface. *Villette* describes the process of Lucy's social success from being a helpless orphan to being a school-mistress, which parallels with her change from a mere observer to the heroine of her own story, and it betrays various inconsistencies of the author. Diverse controversies have been held on the ambiguity of *Villette*.⁴ This novel employs the first person narrative, and the story of Lucy Snowe is told retrospectively by the narrator, older and more experienced Lucy Snowe: in other words, Lucy the narrator by degrees clarifies the concealed real nature of Lucy the character through the development of the plot.⁵ It is also significant that Lucy is even as a character further divided into the surface and the depth, and does not make what she knows and feels explicit to the other characters in the novel. Her persona and her repressed inner feelings are respectively called in the novel "Reason" and "Imagination," or "Feeling." This doubleness of Lucy's is designed by Brontë herself, and the purpose of the narrator in this novel is to search for her true identity as the plot goes on, by Lucy's getting out of the "proper" place that the patriarchal society expects of a helpless, plain woman to fill. Therefore, the change in Lucy's power of self-expression is an integral point in considering the narrator's establishment of her own identity in the novel.

The act of narrating what she thinks or feels by the narrator Lucy is

closely related with the act of writing an autobiographical novel by the author Charlotte Brontë. Therefore the ambiguity of *Villette* shows the conflict in Brontë as a Victorian woman writer. Although it is true that the plot traces the development and establishment of Lucy's identity, the ambiguous ending does not offer a clear description of her prosperous and successful figure as an independent woman. The dilemma of a female novelist shows itself especially as this ambiguous ending of *Villette*: in a sense, it is a rebellion against the tradition of literature, which is androcentric. Nevertheless, *Villette* still employs the traditional marriage plots, and its ending especially implies the author's anxiety about describing the firmly established independence of a woman, Lucy Snowe.

In Volume I, especially in chapters 1 to 3, the narrator centers on Polly Home in the story and makes Lucy withdraw into an observer's position. No information about her origin or background is offered and even her name is not presented to the reader in chapter 1. The narrator does not ever suggest what she felt at all and impresses the reader with the unemotional and calm character of Lucy: "I liked peace so well, and sought stimulus so little. . ." (6).⁶ Though Polly's arrival deprives her of the privilege as "[o]ne child in a household of grown people" (5), the fourteen-year-old girl did not show any feeling. The narrator puts the emphasis upon Lucy's detachment and objectivity, as in the scene where Lucy gazes at little Polly losing her father: "Mrs. Bretton, being a mother, shed a tear or two. Graham, who was writing, lifted up his eyes and gazed at her. I, Lucy Snowe, was calm" (26). At this point, she denies her feeling and imagination: "I, Lucy Snowe, plead guiltless of that curse, an overheated and discursive imagination" (14). Lucy even expostulates

Polly, who expresses her feeling too much and depends first upon her father and next upon Graham: "don't fret, and don't expect too much of him, or else he will feel you to be troublesome, and then it is all over" (39). It is Lucy's principle not to expect anything from others and not to establish relationships. The narrator thus reveals Lucy's view of life in narrating Polly's story as an on-looker.

After Lucy leaves Bretton, nothing is yet clear about her life, but the metaphorical statement about shipwreck alone indicates that she no longer belongs to either the Brettons or any other relatives: "I too well remember a time—a long time, of cold, of danger, of contention. . . . Of Mrs. Bretton I had long lost sight. . . . Thus, there remained no possibility of dependence on others; to myself alone could I look" (42-43). Out of necessity, she is employed as a companion of an invalid rich woman, Miss Marchmont, who gives her economic independence. Still Lucy tries to hide from society and is content with this life of security, and regards Miss Marchmont as a maternal figure. As all that Lucy wants is protection in a place like home, she is satisfied with this secluded life and denies her social ambitions: "self-reliance and exertion were *forced* upon me by circumstances. . . . I had wanted to compromise with Fate: to escape occasional great agonies by submitting to a whole life of privation and small pains" (43-46, my italics). It is notable that Lucy at this stage is deeply attracted to the femininity that marriage and maternity makes a woman bear. When she saw her married friend with a child, she admires the woman's transformation brought by her social position: "What a beautiful and kind-looking woman was the good-natured and comely, but unintellectual girl become! Wifehood and maternity had changed her thus . . ." (54). Here the narrator reveals her

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yearning for the "feminine" life in comparison with the intellectual and independent life.

Nonetheless, the author makes Lucy start on a journey for self-discovery. Lucy feels that her repressed inner ambition is released when she loses everything: "Who but a coward would pass his whole life in hamlets, and for ever abandon his faculties to the eating rust of obscurity?" (59). She betrays a new, strong nature that the narrator has not described until here. What makes her sail for Labassecour is her ambition and the desperate courage to think of "nothing to lose" (60). Outsider as she is even in English society, however, kinship and her commonsense assure her identity as a gentlewoman and help her to be a privileged observer in her own country. On reaching Labassecour, on the contrary, she feels as if she were exposed to "unnumbered threatening eyes" (70). In *Villette*, the capital of Labassecour, she turns out to be an absolute stranger, losing both belongings and language. Deprived of the means to show who she is, Lucy now becomes the object of scrutiny and spy of the inhabitants of the town, starting from M. Paul and Mme. Beck. In this situation, Lucy increasingly feels the need to attain the firm identity by herself.

Mme. Beck, the headmistress of a school for whom Lucy begins to work, plays an important role in Lucy's development. This older woman is a capable and calm proprietress of the school and Lucy by degrees comes to realize her own latent social ambition in confrontation with her. The narrator characterizes Mme. Beck as follows: "interest was the master-key of madame's nature—the mainspring of her motives—the alpha and omega of her life. I have seen her *feelings* appealed to, and I have smiled in half-pity, half-scorn at the appellants. None ever gained

her ear through that channel, or swayed her purpose by that means" (90). Actually, Lucy expresses both admiration and criticism concerning Mme. Beck.⁷ At first Lucy admires her as a model of a successful school proprietress. Observing her from the position of a nurse-governess, Lucy becomes aware of her own inner ambition:

[M]y work had neither charm for my taste, nor hold on my interest; but it seemed to me a great thing to be without heavy anxiety, and relieved from intimate trial; the negation of severe suffering was the nearest approach to happiness I expected to know. Besides, I seemed to hold two lives—the life of thought, and that of reality. (94)

Though the details of her "thought" are not yet demonstrated, Lucy notices at least the existence of her inner ambition. This recognition lets Lucy make a spontaneous step towards the advance of social status from a mere observer's to that of a participant in Mme. Beck's school. Mme. Beck spurs Lucy's latent competitive spirit to advance socially, though the narrator tells the readers that Lucy is seclusive and unambitious.

Mme. Beck effectively rules students and the staff of her school. She is always calm and repressive especially in the case of students' and staffs' love affairs. What is characteristic of her is repression of anything passionate. She inclines too much to Reason and never lets her feelings come on the surface. Mme. Beck is incorporated firmly inside the patriarchal society, and functions as a normative model of a female success, who invigilates other women not to be deviant from their proper place in the society. Lucy's realization of her latent feelings is caused by her observing Mme. Beck's calmness, which is different from her own: "Oh, my childhood! I had feelings: passive as I lived, little as I spoke, cold

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as I looked, when I thought of past days, I *could* feel. About the present, it was better to be stoical; about the future—such a future as mine—to be dead. And in catalepsy and a dead trance, I studiously held the quick of my nature” (134). Compared with Lucy at Bretton, who withdrew herself and even denied that she had feelings, she at this point admits her self-repression and expresses her ambition to go “upwards and onwards” (134). When Lucy realizes she has passionate nature inside, impassive Mme. Beck's espionage into Lucy's private relationship with Dr. John brings about her outburst of feelings: “it was the rock struck, and Meribah's waters gushing out. . . . I cried hot tears” (146). Lucy's detachment from Mme. Beck because of this repulsion makes the narrator hereafter observe Mme. Beck critically.

Another important figure who influences Lucy in the first half of the novel is Ginevra Fanshawe, who is an English student of Mme. Beck's pensionnat and Lucy's partner during the voyage. Though Ginevra is a frivolous, vain, and selfish girl, there exists a close relationship between her and Lucy. The narrator admires Ginevra's external feminine beauty: “Notwithstanding these foibles, and various others needless to mention—but by no means of a refined or elevating character—how pretty she was!” (105). Ginevra plays a role of a coquette who notices a real aspect of the patriarchal social system described by Erich Fromm: “The woman's attempt to be attractive is necessitated by her sexual role, and her vanity or concern with her attractiveness results from this” (107). The attractiveness Ginevra shows is her strategy to attain an advantageous marriage; for she does not have property nor power necessary for independent living. She is severely realistic. Her main concern is money and her choice of husband is based upon the man's social status:

"Remember, I am a countess now. . . . Bravo! Sounds rather better than Mrs. John Bretton, hein?" (594), she declares delightfully when she gets married with a "Colonel-Count" (183). Ginevra's observation is distinctive in her relation with "Isidore," one of her admirers, when she discloses his selfish attempt to reduce her into the ideal of femininity: "he [Isidore] expects something more of me than I find it convenient to be. He thinks I am perfect" (111).

"Isidore" soon clarifies his identity as the family doctor of Mme. Beck's pensionnat, Dr. John. As a matter of fact, he turns out to be "a true young English gentleman" (78) who helped Lucy with her trouble about luggage on the night she arrived at Villette. Moreover, "Isidore" is indeed Graham Bretton, Lucy's childhood friend, though the narrator does not confess her discovery even to the readers until much later, when Mrs. Bretton notices her identity. It is strange that Lucy retreats from a closer relationship with him at her first discovery, when Graham blames her for her inquisitive gaze upon him. The narrator explains the reason: "There is a perverse mood of the mind which is rather soothed than irritated by misconstruction; and in quarters where we can never be rightly known, we take pleasure, I think, in being consummately ignored" (121). In fact, what is significant is that, while Lucy at once perceives who Dr. John is, he does not even notice her presence, and that, because of his indifference, she decides to choose retreat as the narrator later admits: "Well I knew that to him it could make little difference, were I to come forward and announce 'This is Lucy Snowe!' So I kept back in my teacher's place" (220). In parallel with Lucy's concealment of her identity from Graham, the narrator neither unveils his identity nor exposes Lucy's inner passion to the readers. It means that the narrator

intends to present to the readers the impression that Lucy still represses what she feels. The narrator remarks: "To *say* anything on the subject [of Dr. John's identity], to *hint* at my discovery, had not suited my habits of thought, or assimilated with my system of feeling. On the contrary, I had preferred to keep the matter to myself. I liked entering his presence covered with a cloud he had not seen through . . ." (219). However, as Lucy's repressed feeling is gradually intensified, she can no longer endure being always disregarded and isolated. The affliction brought by indifference results in her awakening of her self-repression:

These struggles with the natural character, the strong native bent of the heart, may seem futile and fruitless, but in the end they do good. They tend, however slightly, to give the actions, the conduct, that turn which Reason approves, and which Feeling, perhaps, too often opposes: they certainly make a difference in the general tenor of a life, and enable it to be better regulated, more equable, quieter *on the surface*; and it is on the surface only the common gaze will fall. (225, my italics)

No matter how calm the surface appears, the inner feelings cannot be fully repressed. The narrator admits that the restrained feeling reveals itself in the shape of Lucy's mental depression. When Graham asks her about the cause of her illness, Lucy answers: "a feeling that would make its way, rush out, or kill me—like . . . the current which passes through the heart, and which, if aneurism or any other morbid cause obstructs its natural channels, impetuously seeks abnormal outlet" (231).

Although the narrator cautiously denies the existence of Lucy's love for Graham, the author frequently implies it through the behavior of Lucy the character. For example, she worships Ginevra because of Graham's

love for her: "Ginevra gradually became with me a sort of heroine" (196). It is symbolic that, as soon as Graham's love is removed from Ginevra, the narrator's estimation on her turns to be tiresome itself: "Small-beer as she was, she had turned insufferably acid" (338). When Ginevra scorns him, Lucy ardently vindicates and eulogizes him. Ginevra notices Lucy's passion, remarking "I wonder what always makes you so mighty testy à l'endroit du gros Jean?" (337). On the other hand, nevertheless, Graham never cares for a woman without family, property, and beauty. He regards Lucy only as "unobtrusive articles of furniture" (119) at first, and then as a mere patient or at most as a faithful confidante who delightfully shares what he feels. In fact, Graham, who tries to mould Ginevra's character upon ideal femininity and appreciates not only Polly's beauty but also her social status, can be characterized as a representative of English middle-class gentlemen:

Had he seen Paulina with the same youth, beauty, and grace, but on foot, alone, unguarded, and in simple attire, a dependent worker, a demi-grisette, he would have thought her a pretty little creature, . . . but it required other than this to conquer him as he was now vanquished. . . . there was about Dr. John all the man of the world: to satisfy himself did not suffice; society must approve. (463-4)

Mrs. Bretton, his mother, is rated as "a middle-class English gentlewoman" (273) by the narrator as well. The Brettons never neglect respectability and moderation appropriate to their social status. Having been always exposed to ruthless surveillance at Mme. Beck's school, Lucy at first appreciates and enjoys association with them. Compared to Lucy's complete adaptation to their calmness and moderation when she

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was a child at Bretton, however, her present split between Reason and Feeling requires of her enormous effort to maintain such a moderate and respectable friendship. Lucy feels the need to keep proper distance from them: "Friends, not professing vehement attachment, not offering the tender solace of well-matched and congenial relationship; on whom, therefore, but moderate demand of affection was to be made, of whom but moderate expectation formed" (223). It is impossible for her to disclose her real anguish towards Mrs. Bretton: "I replied that . . . I had certainly suffered a good deal, especially in mind. Further, on this subject [of Lucy's mental illness], I did not consider it advisable to dwell, for the details of what I had undergone belonged to a portion of my existence in which I never expected my godmother to take a share" (226). She is almost extremely worried about what she calls her "culpable vehemence" (238) against Graham, when she is excited to criticize his partial love to Ginevra. Since Lucy feels that she becomes too excited to remain inside femininity, she suffers from a sense of guilt. After this experience, she cautions herself not to reveal what she feels: "But if I feel, may I *never* express?' *Never!* declared Reason" (287). A woman's excessively passionate exposure of her inner feeling means loss of moderation and also deviance from femininity, and therefore Lucy renews her cognition of its danger.

Simultaneously, however, it is significant that Lucy, when alone, considers "Reason" as "a stepmother" and "Imagination" as what her "secret and sworn allegiance" should be dedicated to (287). Feelings inside her gradually increase their importance. The process of her writing a letter to Graham betrays her suffering from the gap between the desire for expressing what she really thinks and the need for self-

repression. After expressing her passionate feeling in the first letter, she tears it up and writes another calmer one to send. At the pensionnat, her anxiety about revealing herself takes the shape of the phantom of the legendary nun as critics have suggested. Once she realizes her own split, the ghost of the nun appears at many crucial points, and the conflict results in the dominance of her inner desire. This is made clear when she goes to the theater with Graham. The actress called "Vashti" offers "a mighty revelation" (322) to Lucy, and makes her notice the Brettons' narrow social viewpoint.⁸ Graham "judged her [Vashti] as a woman, not an artist: it was a branding judgement" (325). He is bewildered and disgusted by the actress's deviance from ideal femininity, and his being "*unimpressible*" (324) irritates Lucy for the first time. Therefore, by the time Lucy decides to bury her love for Graham with his letters, she attains courage to confront herself with the ghost of the nun, or, in other words, with her own anxiety about deviating from the role society expects of her. Gradually, she begins to assert herself, which forms an aspect of Lucy's development. She begins to express what she feels, and even comes to criticize with indignation Graham's egotism based upon social value judgement:

"Could I manage to make you ever grateful?" said I. "NO, I *could not*." . . . I felt, too, an inward courage, warm and resistant. . . . With a now welcome force, I realized his entire misapprehension of my character and nature. He wanted always to give me a rôle 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. (395)

The love plot between Graham and Polly, who bears elegance, beauty,

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wealth, and also ideal femininity, is contrasted with the relationship between Paul and Lucy. Polly is, as her surname "Home" indicates, designed as an ideal Victorian domestic angel.⁹ Deprived of her mother and educated by her father since childhood, she is destined to have "no mind or life of her own" and to "live, move and have her own being in another" (30). She has everything that the society expects of a woman, and the marriage of this respectable couple is quite desirable from the social viewpoint. While Graham has a concern for her social status on the one hand, Polly asks Lucy, on the other, of his social condition before the acceptance of his love. Actually, in spite of the narrator's remark, "I liked her" (466), the depiction of Polly is not necessarily favourable. Polly as a child at Bretton carries the unchildlike eeriness, and, at *Villette*, she does not have an individual personality as an adult: "the child of seven was in the girl of seventeen" (352). This inconsistency of the narrator's evaluation on Polly results from the fact that the author herself perceives the limit of Polly's characterization as an ideal feminine figure¹⁰:

I greatly apprehend, however, that the weakest character in the book [meaning Paulina] is the one I aimed at making the most beautiful; and, 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. (Gaskell, 418)

Brontë knows the unreality of ideal femininity too well to create Polly otherwise. Though the author still could not help including a traditional, ideal angel in her novel, she makes Lucy deny Polly. Lucy's detachment from Polly is explicit when she recognizes that Graham does not fit her: "I was no bright lady's shadow—not Miss de Bassompierre's. Overcast enough it was my nature often to be; of a subdued habit I was: but the

dimness and depression must both be voluntary" (371-2). That is why Lucy feels fiercely repelled by Graham's view of her: "His 'quiet Lucy Snowe,' his 'inoffensive shadow,' I gave him back; not with scorn, but with extreme weariness" (394). The marriage between Graham and Polly is indeed held in line with a marriage plot of the conventional fairy tale.¹¹ Lucy thinks that she is under a different fate from theirs, and expects Paul to understand her latent feelings. Nonetheless, the narrator shows a kind of adoration for their fairy-tale marriage: "Is there, indeed, such happiness on earth? I asked, as I watched the father, the daughter, the future husband, now united—all blessed and blessing" (546). The conflict of the author is revealed here: Brontë does not fully criticize such a romantic marriage, though she dares not let her heroine obtain it.

It is M. Paul that penetrates to Lucy's real nature at their first meeting: "You are one of those beings who must be *kept down*. I know you! I know you! Other people in this house see you pass, and think that a colourless shadow has gone by. As for me, I scrutinized your face once, and it sufficed" (191). Her first recognition of the possibility of self-actualization comes when Paul succeeds in persuading her against her reluctance to take part in the school-play, though she at this stage does not accept this self-recognition: "A keen relish for dramatic expression had revealed itself as part of my nature; to cherish and exercise this new-found faculty might gift me with a world of delight, but it would not do for a mere looker-on at life; the strength and longing must be put by" (174). As compared with Graham, who constrains Lucy to intensify her obsessive desire to repress her inner feeling, Paul impels her to express it. It is not until she is agonized by Graham's indifference that she can betray her hidden nature to Paul: "vous avez l'air bien triste, soumise,

rêveuse, mais vous ne l'êtes pas; c'est moi qui vous le dis: Sauvage! La flamme à l'âme, l'éclair aux yeux! 'Oui; j'ai la flamme à l'âme, et je dois l'avoir!' ¹² retorted I, turning in just wrath" (396). It should also be noted that, contrary to inconsiderable Graham, Paul can understand the fact that Lucy feels offended by his words, or even suffers from them:

"Then it was *my* words which wounded you? Consider them unsaid: permit my retraction; accord my pardon."

"I am not angry, monsieur."

"Then you are worse than angry—grieved. Forgive me, Miss Lucy." (399)

This is the point where Lucy confronts for the first time a person who shows some capability of accepting her. Therefore, she begins to give attention to Paul's personality. Paul has been described as "hideously plain," and "a harsh apparition" (159) so far, and the narrator has emphasized his irritable and tyrannical character. Now this revelation of Paul's sensitiveness arouses Lucy's interest. When she forgives his words, "[i]t [Lucy's forgiveness] changed it [Paul's visage] as from a mask to a face" (400). Hereafter Lucy comes to express her thought directly to Paul, and admits that "I could be passionate, too" (400). Although Paul is not as physically attractive nor as apparently gentlemanly as Graham is, he asserts there is affinity between Lucy and himself, and tries to be related with her: "I [Paul] was conscious of rapport between you [Lucy] and myself. . . . we are alike—there is affinity. . . . Yes, you were born under my star! Tremble! for where that is the case with mortals, the threads of their destinies are difficult to disentangle" (460). It is symbolic that, when they talk about their affinity with each other, both of them see the ghost of the nun. The important thing is that Lucy at last can

share her latent and repressed feeling with him, because they both have love of past days repressed and buried. She can show him her profound anxiety about revealing her true desire.

Their relationship evolves every time Paul stirs up her feelings, and her change takes place gradually through their intimacy. When she is at La Terrasse with the Brettons, she hesitates to wear a pink dress, which Mrs. Bretton chooses for her according to the convention of a middle-class young lady's costume. Lucy at that time prefers a gray or "dun-mist" (319) dress in order to efface and isolate herself. Such dim-colored dresses help her regard herself as a shadow: "In beholding this diaphanous and snowy mass [of schoolgirls], I well remember feeling myself to be a mere shadowy spot on a field of light" (161). On the contrary, she willingly chooses a pink dress on the day Paul has planned an excursion. As her change is obvious, Mme. Beck also notices it. This older woman, conspiring with Père Silas, tries to prevent Paul from forming a friendship with Lucy under the name of religious difference. With the intention to break up their intimacy, Mme. Beck sends Lucy on an errand to Mme. Walravens' house, where Père Silas tells her about Paul's lost lover, Justine Marie. A new aspect of Paul's character is revealed here: he is not only a fierce, repressive tyrant as having been described so far, but a passionate, sincere, self-sacrificing lover. Now that things have come to this pass, Paul begins to seem to be a "Christian hero" (499) for Lucy, whose romantic fidelity dramatically changes her estimation of him. The narrator hereafter regards Mme. Beck, who tries to interdict Paul from having intimacy with Lucy, as an explicit rival of her. Though Mme. Beck does not bear any passion, she also wants Paul as much as Lucy does, for the interest of her school: "She was my rival, heart and

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soul, though secretly, under the smoothest bearing, and utterly unknown to all save her and myself" (559). The final and definitive tactic to separate Lucy and Paul is devised by Mme. Beck, complicit with Mme. Walravens and Père Silas: Paul is sent overseas to look after the estate of Mme. Walravens.

Mme. Beck is indeed a calm and capable proprietress, and is the model for Lucy's social ambition. It is true that they have some affinities: they are both hidden observers, and are capable of superintending the school. However, there also exists difference between them. Mme. Beck takes the advantage of others through spying into their privacy, and Lucy further takes the advantage of Mme. Beck by intentionally letting the latter spy on her privacy. It enables the narrator to justify Lucy's spying into what Mme. Beck is doing, and to imply Lucy's moral predominance over Mme. Beck. Furthermore, Lucy by degrees desires not only to observe without being seen but also to be noticed by Paul. It causes her direct confrontation with Mme. Beck, who tries to force her to repress her feelings. Towards insistently rational Mme. Beck, Lucy explodes her feeling: "Leave me, however. *Leave me*, I say! . . . Dog in the manger! I said" (559). Mme. Beck, as the personification of Reason, gives a sedative to repress Lucy's feeling, but rouses it at the crucial point, on the contrary: it stimulates Lucy to go to the park where she sees Paul. Here the triumph of Imagination over Reason is clear, for it is the Imagination that stirs Lucy to meet Paul: "Imagination was roused from her rest, and she came forth impetuous and venturous" (562). Hereupon, Lucy can have courage to tear up the ghost of the nun, and finds that it is nothing but imaginary anxiety: "In a moment, without exclamation, I had rushed on the haunted couch; nothing leaped out, or sprung, or stirred; all the

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movement was mine, so was all the life, the reality, the substance, the force; as my instinct felt. I tore her up" (587). This demolition of her own anxiety over self-expression enables her to assert her own presence: "It kills me to be forgotten, monsieur" (601). Lucy no longer feels an obsessive need to repress herself inside the decent image that society allows to her, and is able to present her true desire to Paul.

In the chapter titled "Faubourg Clotilde," the readers are at last told that Lucy gains Paul's love. The aspect of Lucy shown in this chapter is far from that of the calm looker-on which the narrator has defined herself to be. She almost worships Paul as a romantic hero. In fact, significantly, in accordance with her situational change from being an observer to being the object to be looked at, Lucy comes to care for her appearance, just like other female characters for whom she has felt contempt throughout the story:

"Ah! I am not pleasant to look at—?"

I could not help saying this; the words came unbidden: I never remember the time when I had not a haunting dread of what might be the degree of my outward deficiency; this dread pressed me at the moment with special force. . . .

"Do I displease your eyes much?" I took courage to urge: the point had its vital import for me.

He stopped, and gave me a short, strong answer—an answer which silenced, subdued, yet profoundly satisfied. (602-3)

It seems in this chapter that what Lucy is aiming to get is only Paul's love, and that her self-realization will be achieved through marrying him. She determines to work for his school, and promises to be his "faithful steward": "He was my king; royal for me had been that hand's bountry; to

offer homage was both a joy and a duty" (607). She suffers even from jealousy towards Paul's ward. The greatest difference between Mme. Beck and Lucy lies here. On one hand, Mme. Beck does not need others' love, and her happy family life is never described in the novel. On the other hand, Lucy always seeks for love, which is as important to her as the social ambition:

Courage, Lucy Snowe! With self-denial and economy now, and steady exertion by-and-by, and object in life need not fail you. Venture not to complain that such an object is too selfish, too limited, and lacks interest; be content to labour for independence until you have proved, by winning that prize, your right to look higher. But afterwards, is there nothing more for me in life—no true home—nothing to be dearer to me than myself, and by its paramount preciousness, to draw from me better things than I care to culture for myself only? (453)

It seems as if the ultimate purpose of life for Lucy were to obtain a man's love and family life.

Nevertheless, the ordinary, happy matrimony never comes to Lucy, as it does to Polly and Ginevra. In fact, Brontë's most serious inconsistency lies here. While the author makes Lucy desperately yearn for Paul's love, she never lets Paul come back to her heroine in the novel. The marriage with Paul would cost Lucy the independence, because the conventional and male-centered way of thinking is characteristic to Paul. He cannot stand equality with, or resistance from, women, and prevents an unmarried girl like Lucy from looking at such a sensual painting titled "Cleopatra." When he is confronted with Mme. Beck's man-like hardness, he orders: "be gentle, be pitying, *be a woman*" (601, my italics).

Paul's view of ideal women is as follows: "A 'woman of intellect,' it appeared, was a sort of 'lusus naturae,' a luckless accident, a thing for which there was neither place nor use in creation, wanted neither as wife nor worker. . . . He believed in his soul that lovely, placid, and passive feminine mediocrity was the only pillow on which manly thought and sense could find rest for its aching temples" (445). Despite that Lucy assuredly gains independence as a schoolmistress, her identity is prepared, educated and formed by a man, Paul Emanuel. The relationship of Paul and Lucy is that of master and student, so that it stays safely within the Victorian norm. Lucy does not rebuke Paul's androcentrism outwardly. When Paul declares it, she becomes self-abnegating: "I was vaguely threatened with, I know not what doom, if I ever trespassed the limits proper to my sex, and conceived a contraband appetite for unfeminine knowledge. Alas! I had no such appetite" (441). However, at the same time, the narrator shows her disapproval against it as well:

Yet, when M. Paul sneered at me, I wanted to possess them [noble hunger for science in the abstract] more fully; his injustice stirred in me ambitious wishes—it imparted a strong stimulus—it gave wings to aspiration. . . . Whatever my powers—feminine or the contrary—God had given them, and I felt resolute to be ashamed of no faculty of His bestowal. (441-2)

Significantly, indeed the problem of "femininity" is yet ambivalent for Lucy. On one hand, she despises male-centered descriptions of women such as in "Cleopatra" and "La vie d'une femme." Neither Ginevra's coquettishness nor Polly's self-sacrifice obtains her sympathy.¹³ On the other hand, she still sticks to the ideal of "femininity." When she plays

the role of a man in the school-play, she firmly refuses to abandon feminine appearance, and wears a masculine costume over her own feminine one. In the Victorian era, in which sexual roles were distinctively divided, transvestism was a fatal taboo, and that is why Lucy clings to the feminine costume. This oscillation of Lucy's that lasts until the end produces the ambiguity of the ending.

It is proper to say that "[t]he ambiguous ending of *Villette* reflects Lucy's ambivalence, her love for Paul and her recognition that it is only in his absence that she can exert herself fully to exercise her own powers" (Gilbert and Gubar, 438). As far as Paul is with her, Lucy is never released from the image of the ideal woman, for he is a typical male tyrant who represses and controls women. In order to liberate herself in a real sense, it is necessary for the narrator to eliminate Paul, the ruler, after Lucy has got both social and emotional security. Lucy must succeed in life for herself, not for Paul, in order to attain her own identity. Marriage, which offered Victorian women the ultimate social, economical, and psychological stability, also meant the total subjugation to their husbands.¹⁴ Lucy remarks: "M. Emanuel was away three years. Reader, they were the three happiest years of my life" (614). Without Paul, Lucy can enjoy her independence. However, even in such a situation, what encourages and stirs her up is the letters from Paul, and by means of epistle, he superintends Lucy even during his absence. Therefore, it is not until Paul dies that Lucy becomes really independent.

The fate of Paul Emanuel and Lucy Snowe is not directly stated: the narrator does not describe what really occurred. According to Gaskell, Brontë could not help writing this ambiguous ending because her father expected his daughter's story to end happily. Still Brontë did not end her

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story with the marriage of Paul and Lucy. What was important for the author is not marriage but the independent life of the protagonist. However, Brontë did neither fully describe the successful life of an independent woman. Mme. Beck, who does not rely on men, is described negatively. In fact, as the narrator frequently refers to Mme. Beck's "man's [aspect]" (95), she survives in the patriarchal society by being incorporated in and supporting it. In other words, she is not an ideal model of a female social success to Lucy, for the role she plays is to repress other women including Lucy inside the ideal of femininity. Therefore, Lucy cannot become another Mme. Beck. Simultaneously, however, Lucy is not allowed to obtain independence in a way that would pose a menace to society. Here is clear the constraint of Victorian society upon the author. Virginia Woolf asserts that it is absolutely necessary that women must kill the phantom of the domestic angel in order to write something. Especially for Victorian women writers, the reaction of men was a matter of great importance; for it was men that published, criticized, and purchased their books.¹⁵ In *Villette*, the traditional romantic marriage plot is prepared between Graham and Polly, and Lucy is also expected to be married with Paul. As M. Jacobus designates, "it [*Villette*] never questions the enshrining of marriage within Victorian sexual ideology, nor pursues its economic and social consequences for women" (46-7). Despite the anticipation of Lucy and Paul's marriage, the narrator ultimately clarifies nothing. The conflict Charlotte Brontë suffers is explicit in the letter to Gaskell:

A thought strikes me. Do you, who have so many friends, —so large a circle of acquaintance, —find it easy, when you sit down

to write, to isolate yourself from all those ties, and their sweet associations, so as to be your *own woman*, uninfluenced or swayed by the consciousness of how your work may affect other minds; what blame or what sympathy it may call forth? Does no luminous cloud ever come between you and the severe Truth, as you know it in your own secret and clear-seeing soul? In a word, are you never tempted to make your characters more amiable than the Life, by the inclination to assimilate your thoughts to the thoughts of those who always *feel* kindly, but sometimes fail to *see* justly? (Gaskell, 436)

When a woman wrote something in the Victorian society, it was regarded as the act of deviance from femininity. Brontë was distressed by the conflict between her desire for creative activity and Victorian conception of women's place. The ambiguous ending of *Villette* is inevitable for her heroine to obtain independence equal to men, without losing her femininity. A single woman as she is, the society allows Lucy's independence so far as she ostensibly chastely waits for, and works for, her lost lover. In addition, the setting of this novel, *Villette*, is a fictitious as well as a foreign town. Here we can see another example of Brontë's conflict: she realized the difficulty of female independence in the real world. Charlotte Brontë could not ultimately kill her angel. It is true that Brontë tried to create in her novel an independent woman whose identity is not defined inside the androcentric ideology of femininity. In this sense, the ambiguous ending that disappoints her father's and society's expectations reveals the author's challenge to and rebellion against the patriarchal society. At the same time, however, many biographers assert that Brontë's primal concern throughout her life was her father and love for an authoritative man like M. Heger, who became the prototype of

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Paul Emanuel. It is because the author could not overcome this conflict that *Villette* offers various inconsistencies. *Villette* is, thus, a novel that represents a serious conflict of the Victorian woman writer.

Notes

1. Janet Horowitz Murry's argument is helpful in examining the role played by the Industrial Revolution, the expansion of the middle-class, and the Evangelical Movement in restraining women. Lucia Zedner also points out that the social unrest brought by the Industrial Revolution made Victorians put trust in the stability of family, and that the concept of the ideal woman occupied the central importance in the social morality. She describes the strictness of the ideal with relation to female crime:

Such descriptions [of some newspapers' articles about female crime] illustrate the tendency to assess female crime not according to the act committed or to the damage done but according to how far a woman's behaviour contravened the norms of femininity. Deviance from femininity alone, then, was grounds for suspicion and condemnation. (28)

- Nina Auerbach states that "all women were exhorted to be . . . enveloped in family life and seeking no identity beyond the roles of daughter, wife and mother" (68-69). These arguments explain the women writers' anxiety in deviating the proper roles of women.
2. Kate Millette's designation is as follows: "the Married Woman's Property Act, touching upon a whole series of civil rights, was first introduced in 1856, enacted in 1870, amended in 1874, and consolidated in the Act of 1882, then added to and enlarged upon on various occasions up to 1908. In both countries [meaning England and the United States] even an approach to a sensible divorce law was not made until very late" (66-67).
 3. Shizuko Kawamoto asserts that the number of women by far exceeded that of men since the 1840s, and that the only way for "excess" women to keep their decency was to work as governess, in spite of its miserable condition. Showalter writes as follows: "A governess, who held virtually the only other kind of job open to untrained middle-class women, earned only between 20

and 45 pounds a year plus board. The copyright sale of even a mediocre novel by an unknown author was likely to equal the yearly wage of a governess. The copyright of the average three-decker sold for 100pounds" (48).

4. Most of the critics regard this ambiguity as a feminist strategy and they mostly discuss the ending and Lucy's letter-writing scene. For instance, Robyn R. Warhol remarks, "that power [to withhold information]—arguably a feminist, as opposed to 'masculinist,' form of power—arises from her keeping the ending open, unresolved, double" (870). According to Patricia E. Johnson, who defines the adjective "heretic" as "able to choose" (618), the ambiguous ending is a feminist strategy that refuses to be categorized in the patriarchal ends: "Lucy gives her readers the continuing freedom to maintain her choices, thereby offering them participant in her heresy" (629). The arguments offered by Mary Jacobus, Margaret L. Shaw, and Karen Lawrence about Lucy's letter-writing and the actress Vashti as well are remarkable in interpreting the narrator Lucy's unreliability as Brontë's feminist strategy.
5. To avoid the confusion, this paper will use "Lucy" for Lucy the character and "the narrator" for Lucy the narrator throughout.
6. Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*. ed. Margaret Smith and Herbert Rosengarten. (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1984) Page references shown in this paper refer to this edition throughout.
7. Terry Eagleton argues as follows: "If the reader is at a loss to know what to make of Madame Beck, the novel itself seems equally mystified. That bemusement has its root in Lucy's own vacillating response to her superior—vacillating because Madame Beck is at once her oppressor and an image of the icy rational power she herself wants to possess" (65-66). Though it is true that Mme. Beck is the model of Lucy's social ambition, the narrator's estimation of her moves from approval to criticism. It means that she changes her estimation of Mme. Beck in concordance with her process from attachment for to detachment from her.
8. When Lucy is impressed by Vashti's performance, she rejects at the same time the one-sided categorization of women by the male-centered society. She is reminded of and refuses the paintings named "Cleopatra" and "La vie d'une femme": the former describes a woman as a mere sexual object, and the latter is an embodiment of ideology of femininity. In this context, it is important that the narrator calls the actress "Vashti," not by her true name. According

to P. E. Johnson, "[i]n *The Book of Esther* Queen Vashti is a feminist rebel contained within a patriarchal text" (626). Vashti is the exiled queen due to her rejection of King Ahasuerus' order. What she rebels against is to become a possession of, or a mere object to be looked at by, the king who wants to display his possessing such a beautiful woman.

9. Virginia Woolf defines "the domestic angel" as follows:

I should need to do battle with a certain phantom. And the phantom was a woman, and when I came to know her better I called her after the heroine of a famous poem, *The Angel in the House*. . . . She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. . . . in short, she was so constituted that *she never had a mind or a wish of her own*, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. (285, my italics)

10. It is noteworthy that readers in the Victorian era highly appreciated Paulina's characterization as Brontë primarily intended:

The criticisms, on the whole, were minor but justified. There were complaints about the transfer of interest from Paulina—a character whom, despite Charlotte's reservations, most critics seemed to think was one of the most attractive and successful in the book—to Lucy; and some reviewers were disgruntled by the lack of plot, though even the most hostile admitted the veracity and excellence of her characters. (Barker, 718)

11. Kate Millet indicates as follows: "Every Victorian novel is expected to end in a happy marriage; those written by women are required to. Brontë pretends to compromise; convention is appeased by the pasteboard wedding of Paulina Mary and Prince John; cheated in Lucy's escape" (146).

12. "you look like very sad, submissive and dreamy, but you are not thus. It is I that tell you so: you savage! the flame in your soul, and lightning in your eyes!" "Yes, I have the flame in my soul, and I must have it!" (my translation)

13. The ghost of the nun symbolizes the single possibility of socially acceptable life for an unmarried woman, because it is "a life of service, self-abnegation, and chastity" (Gilbert and Gubar, 426). Lucy breaks up the male-centered categorization of the unmarried woman as well as her own anxiety by tearing up the phantom.

14. As to single women, Charlotte Brontë, who expected herself to be one, wrote as follows:

[I]t seems that even "a lone woman" can be happy, as well as cherished wives and proud mothers. I am glad of that. I speculate much on the existence of unmarried and never-to-be-married women now-a-days; and I have already got to the point of considering that there is no more respectable character on this earth than an unmarried woman, who makes her own way through life quietly, perseveringly, without support of husband or brother. (Gaskell, 233)

Brontë did not expect the matrimony, though she in her real life enjoyed and clung to it.

15. It is well-known that Charlotte Brontë made the following suggestion that they used male pseudonyms in their publications to her sisters:

Averse to personal publicity, we veiled our own names under those of Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell; the ambiguous choice being dictated by a sort of conscientious scruple at assuming Christian names positively masculine, while we did not like to declare ourselves women, because—without at that 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. ("Biographical Notice," 362)

Having been advised by Southey about the impertinency of women's writing, Charlotte dared not publish under her own name. Simultaneously, the fact that she could not choose an entirely masculine pseudonym also indicates her desperate adherence to femininity.

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