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NEEDY NARRATOR AND SYMPATHETIC READER

The Critique of Gender Conventions and Narrator-Reader Tradition in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*

By Stephanie Lo

Abstract

This thesis addresses how Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* creates a sympathetic economy that challenges nineteenth-century English gender convention and first-person novelistic narrator-reader tradition. It posits that Brontë's social critique of gender convention in nineteenth-century England is related to her novelistic critique of narrator-reader tradition in first-person novels. In the same way that gender convention dictates the context in which social sympathy should be felt thereby perpetuating gendered power relationships, novelistic tradition also dictates the context in which readerly sympathy should be felt and also endorses a power relationship between narrator and reader. However, this thesis concludes that Brontë's creation of a contentious and oppositional narrator in *Villette* ultimately reverses this latter power relationship between narrator and reader.

I. Introduction

Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* creates a sympathetic economy that challenges nineteenth-century English gender conventions and first-person novelistic narrator-reader tradition. In the chapter "The Buried Life of Lucy Snowe" of their book *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar powerfully trace Lucy's journey from being a woman who is suppressed and suffering under a patriarchal social order to being a woman who achieves personal and professional independence. Gilbert and Gubar maintain that Lucy, while living in a male-dominant society, is unable to realize who she is as a woman:

...Lucy Snowe, *Villette*'s protagonist-narrator, older and wiser than any of Brontë's other heroines, is first to last a woman without—outside society, without parents or friends, without physical or mental attractions, without money or confidence or health—and her story is perhaps the most moving and terrifying account of female deprivation ever written (400).

Like Gilbert and Gubar's argument, my thesis will also address how Lucy, along with Paulina and Miss Marchmont, are all under the pressure to conform to the gender conventions of a patriarchal society and are thus forced to repress aspects of their true selves, such as their need for romantic love, sympathetic understanding, and autonomy from their caretakers and superiors.

Brontë exposes and critiques the gender conventions of her time by contrasting her protagonist's, Lucy's, observations of and relationships with characters in pairs: Paulina with Ginevra, Miss Marchmont with Madame Beck, and Dr. John with Monsieur Paul. Brontë uses Lucy's experiences with Paulina and Ginevra to show how sympathy can only be felt for those who are suffering or have suffered in a gendered way. In addition, expanding on Paulina's coldness towards sympathetic feelings and Ginevra's quenchless appetite for them, Brontë uses Lucy's acquaintances with Miss Marchmont and Madame Beck to show how the receipt of sympathy, even when it is deserved, is inconsequential compared to the struggle for independence. Lucy can sympathize with Paulina even when she is unreceptive of sympathy because Paulina struggles to accept her condition as a woman as it is defined by society. On the other hand, Lucy cannot sympathize with Ginevra even when she begs for sympathy because Ginevra embraces her social condition as a woman wholeheartedly. Lucy demonstrates how sympathy should be felt for those who resist, rather than validate, the sympathizer and gender conventions.

Lucy's unfulfilling life as Miss Marchmont's caretaker has a great deal of pathos, but it is this life that Lucy must break out of in order to achieve her own independence. Conversely, Lucy's life as a teacher in Madame Beck's school reveals at times, unsympathetic qualities about Lucy, such as her expressions of authority, caginess, and resentment, but it is this life that prepares Lucy for her autonomy in the midst of a society that demeans and oppresses her. Brontë uses Lucy's experiences with Miss Marchmont and Madame Beck to prove that a woman must reject sympathy (and her need for it) if it keeps her dependent and powerless.

As the protagonist of her novel transforms from a passive, silent sufferer to an active power-getter, Brontë uses Lucy's friendships with Dr. John and M. Paul to show how Lucy manages to become the woman she wants to be—one who is both sensitive and sympathetic like Miss Marchmont and self-directed like Madame Beck. Lucy's push-pull interactions with Dr. John and M. Paul give Lucy psychological balance because they teach her how to settle for less

and to demand more, which is, as Brontë frames it, a lesson in gender politics. In order to be able to accept Dr. John as her friend, Lucy must not expect Dr. John to meet masculine gender conventions and likewise, in order for M. Paul to be able to accept Lucy as his friend, he must not expect Lucy to meet feminine gender conventions. Here, Brontë demonstrates how sympathy is constructive only when men and women, in casting aside their faith in gender conventions, can begin to see and treat each other as equals. Thus, Brontë's critique of Victorian gender convention focuses on social notions of and approaches to receiving and giving sympathy to assert, ultimately, that the social perception and practice of sympathy need to be redefined such that men and women learn to stop trying to dominate each other.

In his essay "Narrator and Reader in Charlotte's Brontë's *Villette*," Gregory O'Dea synthesizes the conflicted dynamics between the difficult Lucy and the guileless reader by suggesting that a co-dependent relationship eventually develops between the two. He writes:

...Lucy has failed to assess herself honestly, while the reader is left disoriented, and alienated from the novel's protagonist. This is not, however, the end goal of Brontë's narrative experiment, for to construct a purely hostile and deceptive narrator would result only in the failure of the communicative novel form...the challenge to Brontë as an author lies in successfully manipulating her narrative structures so that distance and unity may occur simultaneously...For all of her disorienting actions, Lucy Snowe can remain a sympathetic character because at times the barriers erected between herself and the reader break down, leaving the latter inextricably bound and associated with Lucy. Because of this dual action on the reader, because of this combination of defensive animosity with sympathetic affinity, Lucy may in fact become 'a heroine in spite of herself' (Colby, "*Villette*" 413). These are the complex levels of narrative voice and reader reaction that Brontë's experiment is designed to achieve (51).

O'Dea assumes that even though Brontë conducts an "experiment" on narrative tradition with *Villette*, she ultimately still wishes to achieve some sort of "unity" between Lucy and the reader. O'Dea posits that Brontë manages to reconcile Lucy and the reader because although she is difficult, Lucy "remains a sympathetic character" and thus, the reader is inevitably drawn into having sympathetic feelings for her. Unlike O'Dea's optimistic conclusion, my thesis argues that Brontë, instead of wanting to reunite Lucy and the reader, in fact wants to estrange the two completely and prove that the first-person novel form can never truly be "communicative" or encourage a "sympathetic affinity" between narrator and reader.

Brontë's social critique of gender convention in nineteenth-century England supports her novelistic critique of narrator-reader tradition in first-person novels. On the most basic level, narrator-reader tradition encourages a kind of readerly sympathy that is problematic in the same way that the social sympathy that arises out of nineteenth-century gender convention is. Just as Victorian England has no sympathy for someone like Lucy under its gender conventions, the reader also fails to truly sympathize with Lucy under narrator-reader tradition—the role of the reader by its very nature has structural limitations that prevent him/her from truly engaging with the protagonist. On another level, Brontë suggests that gender convention is related to narrator-reader tradition because the narrator-reader relationships found in first-person narratives mirror the gendered power relationships that existed between men and women during the Victorian era. In the same way that gender convention dictates the context in which social

sympathy should be felt (when men and women are relatable or admirable in each other's eyes because they succeed in conforming to their social roles) thereby perpetuating gendered power relationships, novelistic tradition also dictates the context in which readerly sympathy should be felt and also endorses a power relationship between narrator and reader. In a first-person novel, the protagonist/narrator traditionally solicits the reader's sympathy and in return, the reader traditionally sympathizes with the protagonist/narrator. Thus, what happens in effect is that the narrator's need for sympathy and the reader's ability to satisfy that need establish between the narrator and reader a power relationship in which the narrator depends upon the reader. Brontë challenges the first-person novelistic narrator-reader tradition by having her narrator, Lucy, adopt a contentious and oppositional attitude towards the reader—an attitude that targets first, the reader's limitations in being able to truly sympathize with her, and second, the reader's power over her from being the one who imparts sympathy. Ultimately, as Brontë shows, Lucy's unconventional hostility and rebelliousness reverse the power relationship between the reader and herself.

II. Lovers and Heartbreakers: Women as Romantic Interests in *Villette*

Lucy's observations of and relationships with Paulina and Ginevra distinguish between deserving and undeserving subjects of sympathy by showing how the reticent need for sympathy is more genuine than the open plea for sympathy, which can be manipulative and groundless. Lucy praises Paulina for not drawing attention to her suffering when she arrives at Bretton separated from her father, noting, "other children in grief or pain cry aloud, without shame or restraint; but [Paulina] wept: the tiniest occasional sniff testified to her emotion" (Brontë, 9). In addition, Paulina repeatedly informs her maid that there is "no need" for her to be carried to bed, but, as Lucy observes, "her small step toiled wearily up the stair-case" (9). Although Paulina keeps quiet about her pain, weeping "under restraint quietly and cautiously" (9), it is all the more real for being quiet.

While Lucy respects Paulina's reluctance to appeal for sympathy, she resents Ginevra's open pleas for sympathy. Lucy recalls, "[Ginevra] was the child of pleasure. Work or suffering found her listless and dejected, powerless and repining" (142). And later, when Ginevra is a wife and mother, Lucy describes Ginevra's letters to her as such:

...the mama's letters became a perfect shout of affliction—never woman was so put upon by calamity: never human being stood in such need of sympathy. I was frightened at first, and wrote back pathetically; but I soon found out there was more cry than wool in the business, and relapsed into my natural cruel sensibility... Under every cloud, no matter what its nature, Ginevra, as of old, called out lustily for sympathy and aid. She had no notion of meeting any distress single-handed. In some shape, from some quarter or other, she was pretty sure to obtain her will, and so she got on—fighting the battle of life by proxy, and on the whole, suffering as little as any human being I have ever known. (477-478)

As a child, Ginevra complained; as a woman, she makes herself out to be an object of pity. Although Ginevra expresses a need for sympathy, she suffers from nothing; in fact, her need for sympathy is all the more unwarranted for being expressed. The difference between Paulina and Ginevra is that the former,

while making no appeal for sympathy, is deserving of it, and the latter, who never stops soliciting sympathy, is unworthy of any. Paulina and Ginevra are characters that operate by a counterintuitive logic, one that emphasizes the importance of seeing beyond the obvious and superficial.

In addition to distinguishing between those who deserve sympathy and those who do not, Lucy's evaluations of Paulina and Ginevra also suggest that the process of actually sympathizing with someone is a counterintuitive one. Lucy learns that to sympathize with someone who truly suffers is to sympathize with one who will not accept his/her situation; yet, Lucy's goal in sympathizing should not necessarily be to help the subject of her sympathy to come to accept his/her situation. While at Bretton, Paulina's emotional pain arises mainly from her structural powerlessness when it comes to dealing with her deep affection for Graham. Although Graham is capable of hurting Paulina by turning her away from his birthday party, Paulina is incapable of hurting Graham back in equal measure by rejecting him herself. As Lucy observes, "Of course [Graham] could not feel real anger on his side: the match was too unequal in every way; he tried soothing and coaxing. "Why was she angry? What had he done?" By-and-by tears answered him; he petted her and they were friends" (27). Graham and Paulina's "match" is "unequal" because Graham is "sixteen, and [Paulina] is only six" (33); in other words, Graham and Paulina cannot connect with each other as peers could because they are structurally alienated by their age difference. Graham only "soothes and coaxes" Paulina because she is a child, and as a child, Paulina, cannot possibly answer Graham's questions honestly. Paulina cannot profess the affection she feels for Graham and explain why his actions hurt her so—her age only permits her to express herself in tears. In the same vein, it is Paulina's status as a child, her structural inability, that makes her cry, that keeps her from being able to help herself.

Despite the fact that Paulina's unhappiness arises from different in age between Graham and herself, Lucy wrongly explains to Paulina that her suffering results from gender differences. Consider the following exchange between Lucy and Paulina:

"Paulina, you should not grieve that Graham does not care for you so much as you care for him. It must be so."

Her lifted and questioning eyes asked why.

"Because he is a boy and you are a girl; he is sixteen and you are only six; his nature is strong and gay, and yours is otherwise."

"But I love him so much; he should love me a little."

"He does. He is fond of you. You are his favourite."

"Am I Graham's favourite?"

"Yes, more than any little child I know."

The assurance soothed her; she smiled in her anguish.

"But," [Lucy] continued, "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."

"All over!" [Paulina] echoed softly, "then I'll be good. I'll try to be good, Lucy Snowe." (33)

When Lucy tries to console Paulina, her attempt reveals how nineteenth-century society pressures women into adopting feminine gender conventions, conventions that determine what it means to be a woman. Lucy teaches Paulina that she cannot change the fact that Graham loves her less than she loves him because it is a natural consequence of her life as a girl, rather than as a child.

Indeed to Lucy, it is really because “[Graham] is a boy and [Paulina] is a girl”—and because “[Graham’s] nature [as a boy] is strong and gay” while “Paulina’s [as a girl] is otherwise”—rather than because the former is sixteen and the latter is only six—that Paulina suffers so and Graham does not. Thus, while unrequited love is certainly a natural consequence of life, Lucy’s explanation to Paulina refers, in fact, to the naturalness of gender roles. To Lucy, Paulina suffers because she does not accept her condition as a woman—the condition that as a woman, she should not “expect” more than what she is given, even when that expectation is to be adequately loved, especially it seems, when it is to be adequately loved by men. Thus, Lucy believes that if Paulina does not want to suffer so, then she should accept that as a woman, she cannot expect men to give her sufficient love and respect. However, Brontë uses Lucy as a red herring to show that the protagonist herself has been so thoroughly conditioned by a patriarchal society that she is unaware of her own social suppression until many years and life experiences later. Because her protagonist matures psychologically as time passes, Brontë means for Lucy to be mistaken at this moment in time: Paulina should not accept her condition as a woman under the terms that Lucy presents it to her because it is not natural to her gender; rather, it is a product of society. Indeed, both Lucy and Paulina should not accept their conditions as women as defined by society because doing so only perpetuates the social oppression of women, which demands them to not be “troublesome” and to be “good,” and keeps them from challenging the patriarchal status quo. Furthermore, it is precisely because Paulina struggles with accepting her social condition as a woman, leading subsequently to her suffering, that makes her worthy of Lucy’s and the reader’s sympathy.

In contrast to Paulina, Ginevra fully embraces her social condition as a woman. In drawing a comparison between Lucy and herself, Ginevra reveals how satisfied she is with her life and how she thinks the opposite be must be true for Lucy:

...just listen to the difference of our positions, and then see how happy am I, and how miserable are you...In the first place: I am the daughter of a gentleman of family, and though my father is not rich, I have expectations from an uncle. Then, I am just eighteen, the finest age possible. I have had a continental education, and though I can’t spell, I have abundant accomplishments. I am pretty; you can’t deny that; I may have as many admirers as I choose. This very night I have been breaking the hearts of two gentlemen, and it is the dying look I had from one of them just now, which puts me in such spirits. I do so like to watch them turn red and pale, and scowl and dart fiery glances at each other, and languishing ones at me. There is me—happy ME; now for you, poor soul!

I suppose you are nobody’s daughter, since you took care of little children when you first came to Villette: you have no relations; you can’t call yourself young at twenty-three; you have no attractive accomplishments—no beauty. As to admirers, you hardly know what they are; you can’t even talk on the subject: you sit dumb when the other teachers quote their conquests. I believe you never were in love, and never will be; you don’t know the feeling; and so much the better, for though you might have your own heart broken, no living heart will you ever break. (145-6)

Ginevra may be happy, but her happiness is determined entirely by her concession to the patriarchal social order—by what men give her, whether it is status (from her father), money (from her uncle), or admiration (from her suitors). Ginevra conflates “accomplishments” with

beauty and the ability to attract men, demonstrating that she has no real understanding of what an accomplishment is; indeed, she fails at her one opportunity to truly achieve something by educating herself. Furthermore, Ginevra sees her opposite in Lucy: Lucy is miserable because she has no status, no “attractive accomplishments,” and no admirers. But according to Ginevra, the worst thing of all for Lucy is that she will never manage to break any man’s heart. What Ginevra loves most about herself and what makes her most happy is her power to “break the hearts of gentlemen,” not realizing that her ability to manipulate and to control depends entirely on her being intimate and complicit with a men’s world. Ginevra’s acceptance of her social condition as a woman—the idea that her beauty and seductiveness, to the degree that she has them, are her best assets because they allow her to play successfully to the fancies and preferences of men—allows her to be happy but also perpetuates a social world that subjects women to the desires and whims of men. Ginevra may indeed break the hearts of men but she does not act against them by doing so; she only further becomes the kind of woman they prefer. Because Ginevra does not struggle with what society wants her to be and to do, she does not suffer, and is thus, undeserving of Lucy and the reader’s sympathy.

By having Lucy compare and contrast Paulina and Ginevra, and her relationships with each of them, Brontë, on one level, presents a connection between the appeal for sympathy and the suffering behind such an appeal, showing ultimately that the reticent person genuinely suffers while the one who openly pleads for sympathy merely complains groundlessly. Brontë then draws a relationship between this connection (the presence or absence of the appeal for sympathy and of suffering) and women’s acceptance of social gender conventions. Specifically, those women who make no appeal for sympathy and who truly suffer do so because they do not accept their condition as women as it is defined by society, while those who do appeal for sympathy do not truly suffer because they can easily embrace their social condition as women. By drawing such a relationship, Brontë creates a sympathetic economy wherein sympathy is felt only for those who resist the sympathizer and gender convention, and not for those who instead validate both the role of the sympathizer and gender convention. While Paulina and Ginevra represent Brontë’s sympathetic economy thematically, Lucy, as narrator, and the reader will come to embody Brontë’s system of sympathy formally.

III. “My Dear Girl:” Women as Mothers, Daughters, and Mistresses in *Villette*

Unlike the thematic coupling of Paulina and Ginevra which clearly positions Paulina and Ginevra as moral opposites, Lucy’s observations of and relationships with Miss Marchmont and Madame Beck draw a more ambiguous distinction between the two main “sympathizers” in the novel. Miss Marchmont and Madame Beck certainly contrast in that the first is like a caregiver who is loved for her kindheartedness while the latter is strictly a guardian who is almost feared for her heartlessness. However, whereas Lucy comes to admire Paulina and scorn Ginevra, she responds in a much different way to Miss Marchmont and Madame Beck. Indeed, Lucy comes to love Miss Marchmont, but she admires and even aspires to some degree to be like Madame Beck.

Like Paulina, Miss Marchmont is an invalid and structurally powerless:

Miss Marchmont was a woman of fortune, and lived in a handsome residence; but she was a rheumatic cripple, impotent, foot and hand, and had been so for twenty

years. She always sat up-stairs: her drawing room adjoined her bedroom. I had often heard of Miss Marchmont, and of her peculiarities, but till now had never seen her...It seemed that a maid, or rather companion, who had waited on her for some years, was about to be married; and she, hearing of my bereaved lot, had sent for me, with the idea that I might supply this person's place. (36)

Although Miss Marchmont is "a woman of fortune," she is structurally alienated from the outside world because of her illness. While able-bodied women like Miss Marchmont's past maid are able to work or get married—to do what makes them happy—Miss Marchmont is structurally unable to participate in either work or domestic life.

Miss Marchmont, old, unmarried, and childless, especially fails at society's domestic roles for woman, given that she is neither wife nor mother, until she meets Lucy. Although Miss Marchmont begins her relationship with Lucy as Lucy's mistress, she eventually becomes more like a mother to Lucy, addressing her as her "dear girl" (40) and her "child" (42). Lucy notes Miss Marchmont's motherliness in the way her mistress treats her:

Even when she scolded me—which she did, now and then, very tartly—it was in such a way as did not humiliate, and left no sting; it was rather like an irascible mother rating her daughter, than a harsh mistress lecturing a dependent... (37)

Not only does Miss Marchmont become a mother figure to Lucy, thereby living up to society's expectations of her, but Lucy also comes to love Miss Marchmont as a daughter would and finally finds her own place in society too. Lucy basks in the comfort of having a place to call home: "I too, retired to my crib in a closet within [Miss Marchmont's] room" (42).

In fact, during the time they spend together, Miss Marchmont and Lucy experience happiness only because Miss Marchmont is given the chance to be a caring maternal figure to Lucy and Lucy is given the chance to be the dutiful daughter that her mistress never had—their relationship depends on how much they both need each other in order to fulfill their roles as women as determined by society. Without someone to provide affection for and to love, Miss Marchmont and Lucy would have no purpose in life according to social expectations that women need only be dutiful daughters, wives, and mothers. Indeed, Lucy comes to consider her duty of caring for Miss Marchmont as the reason for her existence:

Two hot, close rooms thus became my world; and a crippled old woman, my mistress, my friend, my all. Her service was my duty—her pain, my suffering—her relief, my hope—her anger, my punishment—her regard, my reward. (37)

Lucy's dedication to Miss Marchmont is selfless, but it is also more self-serving than it first appears to be. Lucy's attachment to her mistress reveals how women in the nineteenth-century would willingly limit themselves within the domestic to avoid venturing out into the outside world—a world which Lucy "was almost content to forget" (37). Lucy admits to how she does not wish for more out of life and of herself:

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...I had wanted to compromise with Fate: to escape occasional great agonies by submitting to a whole life of privation and small pains. Fate would not so be pacified; nor would Providence sanction this shrinking sloth and cowardly indolence. (38)

In weakness and in fear, Lucy accepts a small, neglected life of domesticity as her lot; she accepts her condition as a destitute woman as it is defined by society even when she is aware that her passivity—her “shrinking sloth and cowardly indolence”—is not admirable. Lucy, in making do with what has been dealt her and in not wanting to challenge herself to fight for something better, allows for the existence of the social conventions that keep her impoverished.

Although Miss Marchmont does not reciprocate Lucy’s feelings to quite the same degree, she too once felt for someone, just as Lucy does now for her, with much the same fervor. Miss Marchmont recalls the time when she was in love with a man named Frank and how being in love with him meant everything to her:

I possess just now the hours, the thoughts, the hopes of my youth. I renew the love of my life—its only love—almost its only affection... While I loved, and while I was loved, what an existence I enjoyed! What a glorious year I can recall—how bright it comes back to me!...Through that year my heart lived with Frank’s heart. (39)

In seeing the “love of her life,” Frank, as “its only love,” Miss Marchmont reveals how limited a woman’s world was during the nineteenth-century. As a woman, Miss Marchmont has little power to better her situation or to make choices that will lead her to happiness—the only apparent choice that a woman can make in the nineteenth-century for a chance at happiness is to accept a hand in marriage when the opportunity presents itself. Miss Marchmont considers her “glory” days to be the year when she loved Frank, or in other words, the year when she had expected to get married. When Frank passes away before their marriage, Miss Marchmont’s chances at happiness became severely limited, and when she later became an unmarriageable “rheumatic cripple, impotent, foot and hand” (36), those chances, disappeared entirely—“[Miss Marchmont has] suffered since [Frank’s death]” (41). Because she is unmarried and thus, seems to have no chance at happiness, Miss Marchmont resigns herself to being a benefactress who dedicates her life to making others happy:

We should acknowledge God merciful, but not always for us comprehensible. We should accept our own lot whatever it may be, and try to render happy that of others. Should we not? Well, to-morrow I will begin by trying to make you happy. I will endeavor to do something for you, Lucy: something that will benefit you when I am dead. My head aches now with talking too much; still I am happy. (42)

When Miss Marchmont “accepts her lot” or her status as an old maid, she accepts her condition as a woman as it is defined by society; paradoxically, as soon as she does this, her suffering lessens and she feels happier. Miss Marchmont’s acceptance of her condition as an old maid allows her to focus in on her role as a benefactress and ultimately, as a mother figure to Lucy. Thus, although Miss Marchmont cannot be a wife, she has found a way to be a provider/mother which gives her enough of a sense of self-worth to make her happy. However, the difference between Miss Marchmont and Lucy is that when Miss Marchmont chooses to accept her social condition as a woman, she does so only because she is structurally powerless to resist her condition, while when Lucy chooses to accept her social condition as a woman, she does so only because she does not want to suffer as greatly as she otherwise would had she instead rejected her social condition and strove to live a self-determined life. Like Ginevra’s open appeals for sympathy, Lucy’s choice to wallow in her pitiful circumstances when she is not a child, like Paulina, or an invalid, like Miss Marchmont, makes her undeserving of sympathy.

Although Miss Marchmont and Lucy's mother-daughter relationship is a loving one and a source of happiness for both women, it has a drawback: the two women become dependent on each other as a result of it. Their dependency is literalized by Miss Marchmont being a cripple and Lucy's need for charity. When Miss Marchmont dies, Lucy is hardly more empowered to live independently than she was before she knew Miss Marchmont:

My mistress being dead, and I once more alone, I had to look out for a new place... I felt [embarrassment] with some acuteness on a certain day, of which the corresponding one in the next week was to see my departure from my present abode, while with another I was not provided. (43)

Therefore, Miss Marchmont and Lucy's relationship demonstrates that as long as women accept their condition as it is defined by society—in this case, accept the notion that a woman's only purpose in life is to fulfill a domestic role—they can never become self-sufficient individuals. Lucy shows that when women are confined to act only within the domestic, they never truly come to possess the knowledge and skills that are of value to society at large.

In contrast to the maternal Miss Marchmont, Madame Beck, although she has three young children, treats motherhood as just one role among the many she fills. In fact, the more Lucy gets to know Madame, the less motherly she seems to Lucy. When Lucy first meets Madame, she sees “no ghost [that] stood beside [her], nor anything of spectral aspect; merely a motherly, dumpy little woman, in a large shawl, a wrapping-gown, and a clean, trim night-cap (65);” yet in the same evening when Lucy catches Madame Beck looking through her clothing and possessions, she is struck by Madame's nonhuman “face of stone (for of stone in its present night-aspect it looked: it had been human and as, [she] said before, motherly, in the salon)” (70). Also in contrast to Miss Marchmont who took Lucy's personal circumstances into consideration when she offered to leave open her position for Lucy for three months, Madame is not interested in Lucy's personal situation. As Lucy notes, “[Madame] asked my name, my age; she sat and looked at me—not pityingly, not with interest: never a gleam of sympathy, or a shade of compassions, crossed her countenance during the interview” (66). Instead, Madame is only interested in what Lucy can do as an employee, which she reasonably has some doubts about since Lucy “tells a tale full of integrity, but gives no reference” (67). Thus, as Monsieur Paul suggests, for Madame, a person of only practical concerns, to take a chance on Lucy and to hire her is already a sympathetic gesture: “Engage her. If good predominates in that nature, the action will bring its own reward; if evil—eh bien! ma cousine, ce sera toujours une bonne oeuvre (well, cousin, it will always be an act of charity)” (67). Lucy is certainly grateful for Madame's “bonne oeuvre:” “And Madame did engage me that very night—by God's blessing I was spared the necessity of passing forth again into the lonesome, dreary, hostile street” (67).

Although Miss Marchmont and Madame both save Lucy from total destitution by employing her, Miss Marchmont considers it to be a greater act of charity to endow Lucy with a sum of money (she will “endeavor to benefit” (42) Lucy), while Madame Beck considers her employment of Lucy as an act that is already charitable enough. Miss Marchmont and Madame's different notions of what charity is reflect their different views on the role of women in society. Miss Marchmont's notion of charity shows that she takes for granted Lucy's state as a dependent and even keeps Lucy in that state by being her benefactress. On the other hand, Madame does not help anyone who, in her eyes, is not willing to help him/herself:

She was a charitable woman, and did a great deal of good. There was never a mistress whose rule was milder. I was told that she never once remonstrated with the intolerable Mrs. Sweetney, despite her tipsiness, disorder, and general neglect; yet Mrs. Sweetney had to go, the moment her departure became convenient. I was told, too, that neither masters nor teachers were found fault with in that establishment; yet both masters and teachers were often changed: they vanished and others filled their places, none could well explain how. (72)

To Madame, charity is the same thing as an offer of employment; consequently, Madame's giving of charity only lasts as long as the recipient of her charity fulfills his/her employment obligations; thus, whomever Madame helps must be, to some degree, self-helping. In fact, Madame has high standards for what qualifies as self-help because they are uncompromisingly equal to what she wants as an employer out of an employee; to Madame, someone's desire to help him/herself translates into how desirable he/she is as an employee to her. If, as in the case of Mrs. Sweetney and other teachers, someone is given an opportunity by Madame but is not in a least bit self-helping or not to an extent that is to Madame's satisfaction, then he/she will soon become undesirable as an employee and will be cut-off from Madame's good-will. Madame introduces to Lucy an approach to giving charity in which those deserving of help are those who are willing to help themselves and on whom such help would not be wasted. These individuals use the help they receive in the best possible way: by striving towards sustained employment and eventual self-sufficiency—the state in which they would no longer need such charity. Thus, Madame's charity-giving, sustained only as long as its receivers are self-helping and employable, cautions its receivers against becoming dependents of others.

Although Madame's approach to giving charity is the opposite to that of Miss Marchmont, Lucy comes to admire Madame's practical and unsentimental sense of good-will:

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. On the contrary, to attempt to touch her heart was the surest way to rouse her antipathy, and to make of her a secret foe. It proved to her that she had no heart to be touched: it reminded her where she was impotent and dead. Never was the distinction between charity and mercy better exemplified than in her. While devoid of sympathy, she had a sufficiency of rational benevolence: she would give in the readiest manner to people she had never seen—rather, however, to classes than to individuals. “Pour les pauvres,” she opened her purse freely—against the poor man, as a rule, she kept it closed. (74)

Because Madame will not heed anybody's voice or will save from her own, she is nobody's fool, no one's woman. Madame fights against being defined as a traditional woman; she is not determined by whether or not she has “feelings,” nor by whether or not she has a “heart to be touched,” nor by how “sympathetic” or “merciful” she can be. Moreover, Madame is no one's benefactress or mother figure; she remains unattached to those to whom she gives, giving mainly to those “she has never seen” or to the “poor as a class.” Thus, Madame Beck rejects traditional roles for women. Although Lucy at first reacts ambivalently towards Madame's unrelenting character, “smil[ing] in half-pity, half-scorn” at the “appellants,” she comes to admire Madame for her trailblazing identity, even somewhat attributing to her headmistress a fearsome mythological status: “no private sorrow touched her: no force or mass of suffering

concentrated in one heart had power to pierce hers. Not the agony in Gethsemane, not the death on Calvary, could have wrung from her one tear” (74). Lucy’s reverence for Madame shows that she does not see herself and Madame as equals, or in other words, that she is far from being the woman that Madame is.

Both Madame’s qualified practice of philanthropy and her rejection of gender roles are demonstrated by how she influences Lucy. Madame can and does use her charity as leverage to get Lucy to work for her to the best that Lucy’s abilities allow. Lucy senses that Madame is unsatisfied with her doing the work that she was initially hired to do, which is to take care of Madame’s children: “I found myself an object of study: [Madame] held me under her eye; she seemed turning me round in her thoughts—measuring my fitness for a purpose, weighing my value in a plan” (76). Madame’s suspicions that Lucy has yet to reach her full potential are accurate; under Madame’s employment, Lucy admits to falling back into her usual state of dependence:

...with my usual base habit of cowardice, I shrunk into my sloth like a snail into its shell, and alleged incapacity and impracticality as a pretext to escape action. If left to myself, I should infallibly have let this chance slip. Inadventurous, unstirred by impulses of practical ambition, I was capable of sitting twenty years teaching infants the hornbook, turning silk dresses, and making children’s frocks. Not that true contentment dignified this infatuated resignation: my work had neither charm for my taste, nor hold on my interest; but it seemed to be 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; and, provided the former was nourished with a sufficiency of the strange necromantic joys of fancy, the privileges of the latter might remain limited to daily bread, hourly work, and a roof of shelter. (76-7)

Again, Lucy’s “sloth” and “cowardice,” and her not wanting more out of her life and of herself for the “next twenty years,” reflect her acceptance of her condition as a woman as it is defined by society—the occupation of tending only to the frivolous and the unimportant in work and in mind (“strange necromantic joys of fancy”), while leaving others, or as it is implied, men, to have more “practical ambitions of learning and developing skills that are in fact valuable to society at large. And once more, because of her compliance to her social condition as a woman, Lucy does not suffer, or at least, chooses to suffer less than she otherwise would (“the negation of severe suffering was the nearest approach to happiness I expected to know”) had she instead chose to do the admirable: to take the opportunity, to not “infallibly...let this chance slip.” Thus, sympathy for Lucy under these circumstances is again somewhat unwarranted.

Fortunately, Madame prevents Lucy from “letting her chance slip” (76) by pushing her out of her “shell” (76) of a domestic role and into the social world of the classroom: “[Madame], without more ado, made me relinquish thimble and needle; my hand was taken in hers, and I was conducted down stairs. I was flushed, and tremulous from head to foot; tell it not in Gath, I believe I was crying” (77). Between woman and woman, Lucy has no problem with displaying her weakness and fear or appearing as an object of pity. However, when Madame fails to respond

with motherly tenderness, and responds instead with something quite the opposite, Lucy is provoked to rise to Madame's challenge:

I might have...gone back to nursery obscurity, and there, perhaps, mouldered for the rest of my life; but, looking up at Madame, I saw in her countenance a something that made me think twice ere I decided. At that instant, she did not wear a woman's aspect, but rather a man's. Power of a particular kind strongly limned itself in all her traits, and that power was not my kind of power: neither sympathy, nor congeniality, nor submission, were the emotions it awakened. I stood—not soothed, nor won, nor overwhelmed. It seemed as if a challenge of strength between opposing gifts was given, and I suddenly felt all the dishonor of my diffidence—all the pusillanimity of my slackness to aspire. (77-8)

Suddenly, Lucy is no longer talking with Madame, a woman; instead, she is face to face with a "man's aspect." Now, between herself and this resemblance of a man, Lucy feels her second-class status as a woman. Lucy has the "power" of a woman—the power to "awaken sympathy, congeniality, and submission"—but Madame has the power of a man, and Lucy realizes that, in a "challenge of strength between opposing gifts," her power as a woman is unworthy against Madame's. For the first time, Lucy recognizes the "dishonor" in accepting her condition as a woman as it is defined by society—the condition that women are weak with "diffidence" and "pusillanimity." Lucy, who once found Madame's "face of stone" (70) unfamiliar and bewildering, now understands the power, especially as to how it compares to her own, that lies behind such a face. And in grasping the disparity between Madame's, or a man's, power and her own, a woman's, Lucy is compelled to confront it. Consider Lucy and Madame's exchange when Madame doubts Lucy's ability to teach in a classroom:

"But," pursued Madame, cooling as I warmed, and continuing the hard look, from very antipathy to which I drew strength and determination, "can you face the classes, or are you over-excited?"

She sneered slightly in saying this—nervous excitability was not much to Madame's taste.

"I am no more excited than this stone," I said, tapping the flag with my toe: "or than you," I added, returning her look. (78)

Madame's "coolness" and condescension incite Lucy to attempt to do what Madame thinks she cannot do because of who she is by nature. In being ridiculed by Madame for her feminine "nervous excitability," Lucy wishes to show Madame that her being a woman does not make her any less capable of applying herself in the classroom or the social world. Lucy strives to match Madame's "hard look," or facet of a man, with an inner state of "strength," "determination," and non-excitability, with her own "stone"-like demeanor, and with words which call Madame out for underestimating her awareness of and boldness to act as Madame does, against what is normally expected of her because she is a woman. Lucy wants to prove that her own natural ability and intelligence as a woman invalidates the existence of a patriarchal status quo. Lucy fights against this status quo by disciplining "three titled belles [who] in the first row [of the classroom] had sat down predetermined that a *bonne d'enfants* should not give them lessons in English" (79). Lucy, by cutting "Mesdemoiselles Blanche, Virginie, and Angelique" (79) down

to size, symbolically overturns feminine gender conventions that on the one hand, dictate scorn for women in public roles and that on the other, expect women to embody idealized notions of femininity. For her audacity and nerve, her first refusal to accept her condition as a woman as it is defined by society, Lucy is rewarded by a step towards full independence: “From that day I ceased to be nursery-governance, and became English teacher. Madame raised my salary; but she got thrice the work out of me she had extracted from Mr. Wilson, at half the expense” (81).

In conclusion, Lucy’s time with Miss Marchmont show that although a woman who accepts her social condition as a woman is able to sympathize with other women, her sympathy is not constructive. Miss Marchmont’s sympathy leads to her giving perpetual charity without an ulterior motive, which only encourages the receiver of her charity to become a dependent and to make of herself as little as society expects from her. In contrast, Lucy’s time with Madame Beck show that although a woman who rejects her social as a woman may not be able to sympathize, her lack of sympathy is in fact constructive. Madame Beck’s lack of sympathy leads to her giving conditional, non-perpetual “charity,” which teaches whoever receives such charity that she must work towards becoming self-sufficient and that she cannot settle with being who society expects her to be.

Through Lucy’s observations of and relationships with Miss Marchmont and Madame Beck, Brontë again makes a logical connection between sympathy felt and women’s acceptance of their condition as it is defined by society. While with the thematic pairing of Paulina and Ginevra Brontë distinguishes between those deserving and those undeserving of sympathy, here, Brontë emphasizes that for women, being a worthy subject of sympathy is not the end goal. Instead, the end goal as always, is to resist one’s social condition as a woman. To Brontë, sympathy may or may not be a means to an end, but whether it is or not, is not important; only the end matters. By emphasizing the end over the means to such an end, Brontë asks women to discard their need for sympathy in order to be self-determining. Indeed, it is such a need for love and support that keeps women from being independent and from being the ones who determine the course of their own lives. As in the cases of Paulina and Ginevra, Brontë shows, paradoxically, that when Lucy most pitifully depends on others for help—when she accepts her social condition—she is unworthy of sympathy, while the moment that she chooses to be independent and self-determining without care or concern for who is behind her—when she resists her social condition—she can be worthy of sympathy in moments of suffering. The reason for this contradiction is that when Lucy chooses the latter rather than the former, she opens herself up to challenge and adversity for the worthy cause of fighting for herself, for the happiness she deserves, and for the power that she as a woman inherently has.

IV. Forgive Me, My Friend: Intersexual Friendship in *Villette*

While Lucy’s experiences with Miss Marchmont and Madame Beck respectively suggest that she has both an inclination to be a servile dependent and the potential to be a ruthless independent, her subsequent observations of and relationships with Dr. John and Monsieur Paul show instead Lucy’s strongest desire to be her own woman, someone who is entirely original and unique from her two mistresses. As Lucy makes the transition from Miss Marchmont’s world of passive, silent suffering to Madame Beck’s world of active power-getting, which are both

alienating states of being, Lucy struggles to embody an identifiable, relatable medium. Ultimately, Lucy's associations with Dr. John and M. Paul show that she succeeds in becoming self-directed in thought, feeling, and action and being deferent to the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others. In other words, Lucy, a woman, is able to self-actualize in the company of men, in a patriarchal nineteenth-century Victorian society.

In her "quarrel" (191) with Dr. John, Lucy demonstrates her need to be a balanced human being. Lucy cannot be submissive when her own needs require her to be assertive, but she also refuses to be hard when she feels that it is in her power to yield to another. When Lucy is forced to listen to Dr. John's adulation of Ginevra and his belief that she feels the same way towards Ginevra as he does, Lucy tries to contain her own opinion on the matter, "A disclaimer of the sentiments attributed to me burned on my lips, but I extinguished the flame. I submitted to be looked upon as the... pining confidante of the distinguished Miss Fanshawe: but, reader, it was a hard submission" (189). Ultimately however, Lucy finds it impossible to stifle her opinion:

My patience really gave way, and without notice: all at once. I suppose illness and weakness had worn it and made it brittle.

"Dr. Bretton," I broke out, "there is no delusion like your own. On all points but one you are a man, frank, healthful, right-thinking, clear-sighted: on this exceptional point you are but a slave. I declare, where Miss Fanshawe is concerned, you merit no respect; nor have you mine."

I got up, and left the room very much excited. (189)

Lucy's criticism of Dr. John de-genders herself and Dr. John because it raises Lucy to Dr. John's level as a man and it brings Dr. John down to her level as a woman. While Lucy loses her feminine virtues of "submissiveness" and "patience" on one hand, she gains masculine virtues on the other. Specifically, Lucy's direct, fearless manner in "breaking out" and "declaring" to Dr. John, her sudden spring into action and feeling of "excitement" from walking out on him, and finally, her discernment which allows her to see that even someone as admirable as Dr. John must "merit" respect, all demonstrate that Lucy is like the "frank, healthful, right-thinking, [and] clear-sighted" man she believes Dr. John often is.

At the same time Lucy departs from feminine gender conventions, she also establishes Dr. John's own failing to meet masculine gender conventions because of his status as a "slave," submissive and subject, to Ginevra (189). Lucy believes that "on all points but [this] one [Dr. John] is a man;" thus, Dr. John just falls short of being everything Lucy expects "a man" to be (189). Furthermore, Lucy is disappointed, even angered, by the realization that Dr. John is not the ideal man she hoped he was. In Lucy's eyes, Dr. John's imperfection de-sexualizes him. Lucy no longer sees Dr. John as an unattainable dreamboat; she no longer sees such a great distinction between herself and Dr. John in terms of their sexual power.

When Lucy sees Dr. John in a de-gendered way, she is able to see how they are different from each other in ways other than their gender and sexuality. Lucy realizes that the fundamental difference between them lies within the disparity in their powers of insight: she is insightful; Dr. John is not. When Lucy sees that she has hurt Dr. John with her words, she makes an evaluation of his character:

He was not made of common clay, not put together out of vulgar materials... Indeed, till some over-sharp contact with his nerves had betrayed, by its effect, their acute

sensibility... [they] must be ignored; and the more especially because the sympathetic faculty was not prominent in him: to feel, and to seize quickly another's feelings, are separate properties; a few constructions possess both, some neither. Dr. John had the one gift in exquisite perfection; and because I have admitted that he was not endowed with the other in equal degree, the reader will considerably refrain from passing to an extreme, and pronouncing him unsympathizing, unfeeling: on the contrary, he was a kind, generous man. Make your need known, his hand was open. Put your grief into words, he turned no deaf ear. Expect refinements of perception, miracles of intuition, and realize disappointment. (190)

Although Dr. John is very sensitive, he is not very sophisticated in his sense of sympathy—he only feels sympathy for the obviously needy. Lucy suggests that it is better to be unaware of Dr. John's sensitivity because an awareness of such may prevent one from expressing one's honest opinions to the doctor in fear of hurting his feelings. Moreover, Lucy maintains that it is necessary to be able to be direct with Dr. John because the doctor does not possess the "sympathetic faculty," which Lucy defines as the power of insight into the thoughts and feelings of others, to a "prominent" degree. As Lucy later discovers, if she does explain herself to Dr. John when the situation demands, she risks being continually misunderstood by the doctor. In recognizing Dr. John for who he really is, as someone who has many virtues but who is also flawed, Lucy is able, after rebuking him, to sympathize with him—she "seize[s] quickly [Dr. John's] feelings" noting that "there was no bad feeling, no malice, no rancor, no littleness in his countenance...even in its depression" (190), and also feels compassionately for the doctor professing that seeing him "sad and quiet" "moved" her to "insupportable regret" (191).

Ultimately, Lucy's sympathy for Dr. John makes her wish that they were friends again. To re-establish their friendship, Lucy pleads to Dr. John to "just say, 'Lucy, I forgive you!'" for his doing so would "ease [her] of the heart-ache" (191). Just as she was direct about criticizing Dr. John for not living up to her standards of the quintessential man, she is similarly open to casting aside her belief in masculine gender conventions in favor of Dr. John's friendship. For being able to see Dr. John in a de-sexualized way, Lucy is rewarded:

He showed the fineness of his nature by being kinder to me after that misunderstanding than before. Nay, the very incident which, by my theory must in some degree estrange me and him, changed, indeed, somewhat our relations; but not in the sense I painfully anticipated. An invisible but a cold something, very slight, very transparent, but very chill: a sort of screen of ice had hitherto, all through our lives, glazed the medium through which we exchanged intercourse. Those few warm words, though only warm with anger, breathed on that frail frost-work of reserve; about this time, it gave note of dissolution. I think from that day, so long as we continued friends, he never in discourse stood on topic of ceremony with me. (192)

The "screen of ice" that kept Lucy and Dr. John from intimate association was a feeling of unease between them, created by their expectations on each other to meet socially determined gender conventions. Lucy and Dr. John are separated by Lucy's lack of feminine allure and Dr. John's seeming embodiment of masculine desirability: so long as Lucy could only see Dr. John as male perfection, she would always feel uncomfortable around him, burdened by a sense of her own hopeless inferiority; likewise, so long as Dr. John could only see Lucy as a woman who offered

no romantic (or professional) possibilities, he had no incentive to warm up to her (especially lest his attention should give her the wrong impression). After their altercation however, an event which de-genders Lucy and Dr. John in each other's eyes, Lucy recognizes Dr. John's flawed character and Dr. John realizes that Lucy does have something to offer to him: her honest and shrewd judgment. Together, the changes in how Lucy and Dr. John see each other lead to the "dissolution" of the "very slight, very transparent, but very chill" gender barrier between them which finally enables Lucy and Dr. John to find friendship and affinity with one another.

Lucy's "quarrel" with Dr. John's (191) and all that follows—the de-gendering of Lucy and Dr. John, their increased recognition of each other, and finally, their sympathetic feelings for one another—are mirrored in her "quarrel" (320) with Monsieur Paul which occurs later in the novel. Lucy and M. Paul's argument arises when Lucy is, once again, misunderstood by Dr. John. When Dr. John entreats Lucy to inform Paulina that he remembers her from Bretton so as to gain her favor, to, as he puts it, "make [him] forever grateful" (317), Lucy's emotions again turn fiery:

"Could I manage to make you ever grateful?" said I. "NO, I could not." And I felt my fingers work and my hands interlock: I felt, too, an inward courage, warm and resistant. In this matter I was not disposed to gratify Dr. John: not at all. With a 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. Leaning towards me coaxingly, he said, softly, "Do content me, Lucy."

And I would have contented, or, at least, I would clearly have enlightened him, and taught him well never again to expect of me the part of officious soubrette in a love drama; when following his soft, eager murmur, meeting almost his pleading, mellow—"Do content me, Lucy!"—a sharp hiss pierced my ear on the other side.

"Petite chatte, doucerette, coquette!" sibilated the sudden boa constrictor; "vous avez l'air bien triste, soumise, rêveuse, mais vous ne l'êtes pas; c'est moi qui vous le dis: Sauvage! La flame à l'âme, l'éclair aux yeux!"

"Oui; j'ai la flame à l'âme, et je dois l'avoir!" retorted I, turning in just wrath; but Professor Emanuel had hissed his insult and was gone. (317-18)

Lucy's frustration at Dr. John for making such a shameful request of her—for misunderstanding her for who she really is—indeed emphasizes what she had observed earlier about the doctor: how little he possesses, if at all, the "sympathy faculty" (190). Dr. John, in "[wanting] always to give [Lucy] a role not [hers]" shows that he is only able to see Lucy in terms of how she embodies traditional female gender roles: Dr. John either rejects Lucy as a potential romantic partner or regards her as an "officious soubrette." Lucy's assertion that "nature and [she] [oppose Dr. John]" reveals how she is able to distinguish between the woman she knows herself to be and the woman that Dr. John and society see her as. Unlike her younger self who counseled Paulina into accepting gender conventions as the natural consequences of male and female sex differences—that is, as the natural consequences of life—Lucy now appears to understand that a woman's true "nature" (which is indeed as natural to her as "[her] eyes, or face, or gestures") is not simply or even at all what society defines it to be; instead, it is something much more intelligent, self-directed, and dignified than what others are accustomed to think.

This time, before Lucy has the chance to unleash her searing criticism of Dr. John for regarding her as simple and impressionable, she is confronted with M. Paul's misunderstanding of her. In contrast to how Lucy misrecognizes Dr. John as the ideal man, M. Paul misrecognizes Lucy as a hussy, a brazen, immoral woman; however, both misrecognize the person they judge in a hyper-sexualized way. Indeed, the parallel between Lucy and M. Paul is extensive: while Lucy praised Dr. John for his possession of classic male virtues—for his being “frank, healthful, right-thinking, clear-sighted”—before dismissing him as a “slave” (189), M. Paul also attributes to Lucy classic female virtues—he approves of her being “sad, submissive, dreamy”—before he condemns her as a “coquette” and “savage.” Accordingly, just as Lucy could only see Dr. John clearly after he is de-sexualized in her eyes, M. Paul can also only see Lucy's true self after she is de-sexualized—deemed an un-loose woman—in his eyes. Lucy describes how M. Paul's manner towards her undergoes a transformation after learning the truth about her:

...as I was leaving the room, he stepped up and inquired whether I had any one to attend me to the Rue Fossette. The professor now spoke politely, and even deferentially, and he looked apologetic and repentant; but I could not recognize his civility at a word, nor meet his contrition with crude, premature oblivion. Never hitherto had I felt seriously disposed to resent his brusqueries, or freeze before his fierceness; what he said tonight, however, I considered unwarranted: my extreme disapprobation of the proceeding must be marked, however slightly. (319)

In recognizing her for who she really is, M. Paul feels compassionately for, or sympathizes with, Lucy, thus leading to his “repentance.” However, Lucy cannot quite so easily forgive M. Paul, unlike Dr. John who easily forgave her; Lucy's criticism of Dr. John, though harsh, was accurate while M. Paul's censure was severe and mistaken. In an inverted fashion to how she and Dr. John were separated by the icy gender barrier of formality and convention so long as the two judged each other according to social standards of femininity and masculinity, Lucy imposes a kind of pseudo-boundary, “a neat, frosty, falsehood” (320), to divide herself and M. Paul after he judges and ceases to judge her by her level of conformity to her gender roles. To counter her efforts to separate them, Mr. Paul shows that just as much as he defamed Lucy, he can offer her the highest of his regards. To show his respect for Lucy, M. Paul retracts his words to her: “Consider [my words] unsaid: permit my retraction; accord my pardon,” and proceeds to ask Lucy for her forgiveness and, what's more, her friendship—to say to him “in a voice natural to [her], and not in [an] alien tone, ‘Mon ami, je vous pardonne.’” (320). Indeed, M. Paul insists that Lucy address him as her friend: “I will have no monsieur: speak the other word, or I shall not believe you sincere: another effort—mon ami, or else in English,—my friend!” (320). By tossing aside as unimportant his own words, and by attributing much significance to those of Lucy's—in needing to have her “word,” her promise to feel at peace—M. Paul abandons his belief in masculine and feminine gender conventions. M. Paul's relinquishment of his status and privilege as a man to Lucy, leads to the disintegration of the real gender barrier that violently divided Lucy and him in the first place, a gender barrier that resulted from M. Paul's quickness to judge a woman, by his sensitivity to her ability to fulfill social standards of femininity. Finally, the breaking down of this gender barrier between Lucy and M. Paul allows them to find friendship and affinity with one another.

Brontë shows through Lucy's altercations with Dr. John and M. Paul that the social sexualization of men and women are detrimental to both sexes. Lucy may have regarded Dr. John

as the ideal man and M. Paul may have scorned Lucy for an immoral woman, but both Dr. John and Lucy suffer as a result of these mistaken views. Rather than focus on how the double standards of nineteenth-century gender conventions enforce unequal power relationships between men and women to the apparent benefit of men, Brontë emphasizes how both sexes would be better off not being subject to live under these gender conventions and the gender inequalities they perpetuate. The social sexualization of men and women encourages the sexes to hold impossible visions of each other (Lucy envisions Dr. John as an idol and M. Paul, being strongly adverse to a woman's immorality, defaults to envisioning Lucy as almost a nun) preventing them from truly recognizing and understanding one another. When their fantasies of each other fail to materialize, as is bound to happen, men and women are left treating each other unsympathetically, unkindly. Here, Brontë posits that these offenders are obliged to recognize the injury that they have caused and to feel remorse for the ones that they have injured; men should sympathize with women and women with men at the expense of their deeply cherished hopes for the existence of perfect human goodness in each other. Thus, sympathy could lead to the eradication of sexualized views of men and women and this de-sexualization of the sexes helps them find psychological affinity with each other. To Brontë, sympathy is constructive only when it is the gateway to gender equality. Lucy's friendships with Dr. John and M. Paul place her as an equal to the men and allow her to become her own woman in a patriarchal nineteenth-century Victorian society—someone who is distinct from both her mistresses, because while she is self-directed and capable like Madame Beck, she also maintains her conscience as Miss Marchmont did.

V. Conflation of Gender and Narrator-Reader Roles in *Villette*

In *Villette*, Brontë shows that true and insightful, as opposed to superficial and misguided, feelings of sympathy are always at risk of being foiled by artificial constructions such as the open appeal for sympathy, the undue retreat into passive suffering, and finally, the social sexualization of men and women. But Brontë suggests that there is one more factitious structure that stunts deep and perceptive feelings of sympathy: the first-person novelistic relationship between narrator and reader. In *Villette*, Lucy's conflation of the reader with Victorian England is marked by the fact that she does not address the reader until she decides to leave her hometown for London, and soon after, for a foreign country. Thus, the absence of England is compensated by the presence of the reader; in short, Lucy carries the baggage of her homeland in the form of the reader and the reader subsequently becomes a part of Lucy's social exclusion. Lucy maintains an imagined sense of the reader's disapproval and unacceptance of her, which she retaliates against by constantly harassing the reader. Lucy's hostility towards the reader is most intense during the period between her trip to London in search of work, which is also when she first addresses the reader, and her employment by Madame Beck in the town of Villette. Throughout the course of her journey, Lucy repetitively nags at the reader. She assumes that the reader lacks faith in her, and doubts her ability to manage travelling abroad on her own, despite the fact that she herself feels confident about the undertaking: "In going to London, I ran less risk and evinced less enterprise than the reader may think" (45); "Before you pronounce on the rashness of the proceeding, reader, look back to the point whence I started; consider the desert I had left, note how little I periled: mine was the game where the player cannot lose and may win" (60). Lucy

also expresses her jadedness with the reader and the world around her: “My reader, I know, is one who would not thank me for an elaborate reproduction of poetic first impressions” (45); “Cancel the whole of [what I just said], if you please, reader—or rather let it stand, and draw thence a moral—an alliterative, text-hand copy—“Day-dreams are delusions of the demon” (57). Instead of sharing her grievances with the reader and thus soliciting sympathy, Lucy treats the reader as one of her afflictions, as a critic and harsh realist whom she resents deeply enough to withhold any need for sympathy from.

Lucy’s actions to spite the reader may seem excessive and unjustified, but they are not without purpose. Lucy’s hostility exposes that the novelistic concept of readerly sympathy is fundamentally flawed. Just as Victorian England with its all gender conventions cannot offer Lucy—a woman who has no money, connections, and beauty—much in life, the reader also cannot offer Lucy enough. By using Lucy to bring out the reader’s limitations at truly not being a part of Lucy’s social exclusion, Brontë emphasizes a patriarchal society’s limitations at offering full inclusion to women like Lucy. Despite her presumptuousness about making her way through the world once she leaves her hometown for London, Lucy breaks down the moment she settles in an old inn on the city’s outskirts for the night:

I kept up well till I had partaken of some refreshment, warmed myself by a fire, and was fairly shut into my own room; but, as I sat down by the bed and rested my head and arms on the pillow, a terrible oppression overcame me. All at once my position rose on me like a ghost. Anomalous, desolate, almost blank of hope, it stood. What was I doing here alone in great London? What should I do on the morrow? What prospects had I in life? What friends had I on earth? Whence did I come? Whither should I go? What should I do? (47)

On the surface, Lucy’s rhetorical questions seem only to be a critique of Victorian society since they draw attention to her social condition as a woman, without assets of any kind, living in such a society. However, Lucy’s questions are also a critique of the reader. Even though Lucy writes in retrospect, her writing expresses an almost immediate inconsolable sense of isolation and loneliness to the reader; it is as though the reader is present and looking on while Lucy asks herself: “What should I do on the morrow? ...Whence did I come? Whither should I go? What should I do?” Because the reader can never have any real correspondence with Lucy, her questions dramatize how the reader’s role is structurally passive. When Lucy decides to leave London for the foreign country of Labassecour, the reader’s lack of involvement in her life is again implied:

My state of mind, and all accompanying circumstances, were just now such as most to favour the adoption of a new, resolute, and daring—perhaps desperate—line of action. I had nothing to lose. Unutterable loathing of a desolate existence past forbade return. If I failed in what I now designed to undertake, who, save myself, would suffer? If I died away from—home, I was going to say, but I had no home—from England, then, who would weep? (49-50)

Once more, Lucy’s rhetorical questions critique both Victorian England and the reader: while the first has pushed Lucy to her most extreme means, the latter is structurally useless to help her. Although Lucy blames Victorian England for a “desolate existence past,” she blames not so much Victorian England as she does the reader for not caring more about her and her future

endeavors. Again, Lucy's questions pose an almost immediate inconsolable sense of isolation and loneliness—the reader is the one whom she asks: “If I failed in what I now designed to undertake, who, save myself, would suffer? If I died away from...England, then, who would weep?” Rendered structurally passive, the reader cannot engage with Lucy and prove to her that he/she would “suffer” and “weep” for Lucy. Thus, the reader is unable to truly be a part of Lucy's world and truly not be a part of her social exclusion; he/she belongs to a world that cannot “suffer” or “weep” for Lucy—a world that, like Victorian England, cannot truly sympathize with Lucy or women like her.

Brontë's narrator, who is at once hostile and demanding of an intimate closeness that the reader cannot give, challenges novelistic narrator-reader tradition—a tradition in which the narrator demonstrates her need for the reader's sympathy, readily leading the reader to believe that he/she is the narrator's trusted confidante—by characterizing the reader as both unwanted and inadequate. To Brontë, the novelistic narrator-reader tradition is an artificial construction that not only makes the reader think that he/she sympathizes with the narrator when he/she really does not, but that also places the narrator, the one who traditionally needs sympathy, in a subject position, and the reader, the traditional giver of sympathy, in a position of power. Thus, the novelistic narrator-reader tradition resembles the social sexualization of men and women; the first creates narrator-reader power relations while the latter creates intersexual power relations.

Because Brontë analogizes the novelistic power relationship between narrator and reader in *Villette* with the gendered power relationships between men and women in the Victorian era, the powerless narrator is aligned with the social position of women like Lucy, while the powerful reader is associated with the social positions of individuals who fit the mold of the normative world or the institution of patriarchy. During the school year's summer vacation, a time when she is relieved of her teaching duties, Lucy suffers from an emotional breakdown. At one of her weakest moments, Lucy sees herself being judged by patriarchal eyes:

The hopes which are dear to youth, which bear it up and lead it on, I knew not and dared not know. If they knocked at my heart sometimes, an inhospitable bar to admission must be inwardly drawn. When they turned away thus rejected, tears sad enough sometimes flowed; but it could not be helped: I dared not give such guests lodging. So mortally did I fear the sin and weakness of presumption.

Religious reader, you will preach to me a long sermon about what I have just written, and so will you, moralist; and you, stern sage; you, stoic, will frown; you, cynic, sneer; you, epicure, laugh. Well, each and all, take it your own way. I accept the sermon, frown, sneer and laugh; perhaps you are all right: and perhaps, circumstanced like me, you would have been, like me, wrong. (156-7)

When Lucy addresses the “religious reader,” “moralist,” “stern sage,” “stoic,” “cynic,” and “epicure,” she is undeniably addressing members of the patriarchal social order who essentially disapprove of, scorn, and mock her for her abject condition. However, Lucy's despondency becomes an act of defiance: although she claims that society may be “right” to judge her if even she does not have much faith in herself, she also surprisingly reveals that she was “wrong” to feel that way about herself—wrong to be a part of her own social exclusion, “barring admission” to her most “dear hopes;” wrong to accept her social condition as a woman.

If Lucy understands that she—hostile, bitter, and hopelessly unhappy—is a product of a society that she is not strong enough to stand against, then she must also know that there is something wrong with this society that leads to her total state of deprivation. Lucy expounds on how society is incapable of feeling true sympathy:

The world can understand well enough the process of perishing for want of food: perhaps few persons can enter into or follow out that of going mad from solitary confinement. They see the long-buried prisoner disinterred, a maniac or an idiot!—how his senses left him—how his nerves first inflamed, underwent nameless agony, and then sunk to palsy—is a subject too intricate for examination, too abstract for popular comprehension...long, long may the minds to whom such themes are no mystery—by whom their bearings are sympathetically seized—be few in number, and rare of rencounter. Long may it be generally thought that physical privations alone merit compassion, and that the rest is a figment. When the world was younger and haler than now, moral trials were a deeper mystery still: perhaps in all the land of Israel there was but one Saul—certainly but one David to soothe or comprehend him. (273-4)

In this abstract passage about social ignorance, Lucy really expresses how society fails to recognize her and her suffering. To Lucy, the social practice of sympathy is problematic because while it can “understand” “physical privations,” it cannot do the same for emotional pain, which is what Lucy suffers from. And what society cannot understand, Lucy suggests, it detests and shuns, like the “maniac or idiot.” Society cannot understand Lucy’s emotional pain because it is a product of its own doing, its own gender conventions, which it endorses as natural aspects of life. Ultimately, society cannot feel “compassion” for or sympathize with someone, Lucy, who is against it. But the one thing that makes Lucy most hopeless is not how society or how the “world” “generally” continues to view and judge her, but rather, is the fact that there are so few individuals who can understand “a subject too intricate for examination, too abstract for popular comprehension,” the fact that for Lucy at least, there will probably be only “one David to soothe or comprehend [her]”—this “one David” being M. Paul.

M. Paul is the antithesis to the reader. While the reader is a conceptual representation of England and its patriarchal social order, M. Paul is a real figure who seemingly overturns any male-dominant social construct. In the novel, Lucy refuses to take Justine Marie as one of her future students out of jealousy for, as she wrongly assumes, the girl’s betrothal to M. Paul. In doing so, she demonstrates how, unlike England, which unjustly made her feel excluded and unwanted, M. Paul completely accepts and loves her even when she deserves his censure:

Warm, jealous, and haughty, I knew not till now that my nature had such a mood; [M. Paul] gathered me near his heart. I was full of faults; he took them and me all home. For the moment of utmost mutiny, he reserved the one deep spell of peace. These words caressed my ear:— “Lucy take my love. One day share my life. Be my dearest, first on earth.” (491)

Having had “no home” (50) there, Lucy felt compelled to leave England, but now, with M. Paul, she finally feels a sense of belonging, that here, in Villette, she at long last has a “home.” Moreover, the “home” that welcomes Lucy is not one that is under patriarchal control: M. Paul designates Lucy as his “dearest, first on earth” suggesting that he places Lucy before everything

else, including, indeed, himself. M. Paul confers upon Lucy a position of power—the position of being the head of her own house and school.

When Lucy left England, she had nothing to lose, but now, even as M. Paul leaves Villette, he gives Lucy a reason to stay:

The secret of my success did not lie so much in myself, in any endowment, any power of mine, as in a new state of circumstances, a wonderfully changed life, a relieved heart. The spring which moved my energies lay far away beyond seas, in an Indian isle. At parting, I had been left a legacy; such a thought for the present, such a hope for the future, such a motive for a persevering, a laborious, an enterprising, a patient and a brave course—I could not flag. Few things shook me now; few things had importance to vex, intimidate, or depress me: most things pleased—mere trifles had a charm. (494)

Lucy becomes successful not because she capitalizes on her abilities like Madame Beck, but because, through no doing of her own, her life is now being led under a “new state of circumstances,” becoming what Lucy sees as a “wonderfully changed life.” More specifically, Lucy is able to lead a life which allows her to be her own woman and in which she is loved. All through her life Lucy struggled with what she wanted most (for example, whether or not she wanted to retreat from society to control and manipulate it) because everything that was offered her could not really make her happy. Even when Lucy achieves a medium station in life, in terms of profession (being a teacher) and personal gratification (having friends), she realizes that that is not enough to make her happy. Lucy needs more than what society offers her and what she herself manages to achieve in order to be happy; Lucy needs love and the evidence of love, which is according to her an impossible demand to make on anything and anyone—except M. Paul. M. Paul offers his love to Lucy, yet without compromising her need to be her own woman; indeed, he is even the “motive” for Lucy to be the best woman that she can be: “persevering,” “laborious,” “enterprising,” “patient,” and “brave.” Thus, M. Paul is an amalgam of Miss Marchmont and Madame Beck for he gives Lucy tough love—in the combination of an inheritance and vocation. While M. Paul takes care of Lucy by giving her own home and school, he also asks of her to take care of herself by giving her a career. The security of being loved coupled with the encouragement to grow as a person, cultivate Lucy into a happy, confident, independent woman. Having M. Paul’s love, Lucy, for the first time in her life, cannot be annoyed, bitter, or resentful—she loses her hostile, confrontational edge towards the environment and people around her. M. Paul’s charming effect on Lucy suggests that the kind of sympathy that Lucy wants and has desired through the course of her life, is more akin to love itself, to full intellectual engagement and emotional support, than to friendship, or a sense of affinity or equality. But just as Lucy cannot expect love from anything or anyone, she also cannot expect this kind of sympathy from society or from the reader.

Despite his being apart from her, M. Paul is still able to engage with and show his love for Lucy by writing to her:

By every vessel he wrote; he wrote as he gave and as he loved, in full-handed, full hearted plentitude. He wrote because he liked to write; he did not abridge, because he cared not to abridge. He sat down, he took pen and paper, because he loved Lucy and had much to say to her; because he was faithful and thoughtful, because

he was tender and true. There was no sham and no cheat, and no hollow unreal in him. Apology never dropped her slippery oil on his lips—never proffered, by his pen, her coward feints and paltry nullities: he would give neither a stone, nor an excuse—neither a scorpion, nor a disappointment; his letters were the real food that nourished, living water that refreshed.

And was I grateful? God knows! I believe that scarce a living being so remembered, so sustained, dealt with in kind so constant, honourable and noble, could be otherwise than grateful to the death. (494)

M. Paul's active correspondence with Lucy contrasts starkly with the reader's passive receptivity, and this contrast is emphasized by Lucy's roles as both character and narrator in *Villette*. M. Paul's painstaking efforts to write back home to Lucy from abroad mirror Lucy's own efforts to record a narrative for the English reader, who is, presumptively, back in England. The mutually loving relationship that exists between M. Paul and Lucy is disturbingly translated into a push-pull power relationship between Lucy and the reader: whereas M. Paul writes to Lucy because he cares about her, Lucy criticizes the reader for her hopeless effort to attain a kind of sympathy she will never get. Unlike M. Paul who writes to Lucy because he is "tender and true," Lucy addresses the reader in her narrative because she is jaded and resentful—she wants to constantly remind the reader of his limitations in being sympathetic to her condition. In contrast to a truly sympathetic figure like M. Paul, the reader is a "sham," a "cheat," a "hollow unreal." The narrator-reader relationship is an artificial construction and the reader, customarily portrayed as being real, human, and sympathetic, is the most fictitious aspect of it all. It would even appear that Lucy, as a narrator, is the more present and substantial figure in this relationship because while she is able to express how much M. Paul's letters mean to her, the reader can do no such thing in regards to Lucy's narrative throughout her entire telling of it. Ultimately, Lucy's interchange between character and narrator highlights the division between the world she belongs to, which is M. Paul's world, and the world she remains structurally shut out of, which is the reader's world, the normative world.

However, when M. Paul dies in a shipwreck on his voyage back to Villette, Lucy's exclusion from society is inverted into her own choice to self-isolate:

Peace be still! Oh! a thousand weepers, praying in agony on waiting shores, listened for that voice, but it was not uttered—not uttered till, when the hush came, some could not feel it: till, when the sun returned, his light was night to some!

Here pause: pause at once. There is enough said. Trouble no quiet, kind heart; leave sunny imaginations hope. Let it be theirs to conceive the delight of joy born again fresh out of great terror, the rapture of rescue from peril, the wondrous reprieve from dread, the fruition of return. Let them picture union and a happy succeeding life.

Madame Beck prospered all the days of her life; so did Pere Silas; Madame Walravens fulfilled her ninetieth year before she died. Farewell. (495-6)

Brontë must have seen M. Paul's death as necessary in order to establish Lucy's independence. On the one hand, there is the possibility that M. Paul's return to Villette, marriage with Lucy, and settlement into married life will risk his ability to provide tough love to Lucy: as Lucy's husband, M. Paul may regress into being overly indulgent with Lucy, like Miss Marchmont or into being the head of the household, like Madame Beck, thereby threatening Lucy's independence. On the other hand, M. Paul's death allows Lucy to prove that she can cope with

tragedy and become stronger as a result of it as opposed to being devastated by it as she was when tragedy took her family away from her early in life. Ultimately, Lucy prevails over this test of her independence so thoroughly that she usurps the reader's position of power. When none of her homeland would weep for her at her passing, Lucy weeps for M. Paul and she is alone in her grief. Lucy avoids telling the reader the miserable truth as a concession to him/her and his/her structural limitations—the reader is not only structurally unable to truly sympathize with characters in a novel, but is also conditioned to be receptive only to happy endings. In not letting the reader share her suffering, Lucy shows that she is strong on her own and that she no longer needs the reader's sympathy. Furthermore, although she once could not let go of the reader's shortcomings to meet her needs, Lucy now, faced with M. Paul's death, seems to have completely accepted the separation between herself and the reader. Lucy loses all sense of awareness of her reader in that instead of addressing the individual reader-companion, Lucy's thoughts are on the emotional well-being of a multitude of readers (whom she refers to as "them"). Thus, Lucy establishes her autonomy by singling herself out from her many readers. While the reader depends on Lucy for a happy ending, Lucy breaks apart from the reader and her characteristic dependence is passed on to the reader him/herself. Although M. Paul is dead, the confident, independent spirit he fostered in Lucy lives on, and Lucy, with this timeless possession, is able to, like Madame Beck, Pere Silas, and Madame Walravens, live through the days of her life, but without losing sight of the nobler values in life.

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