

Burial, death, and resurrection in villette



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Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* revolves around the myriad cycles and seasons of life. Lucy Snowe traverses from place to place, witnessing different stages of life and yearning for her own fulfillment of elusive experiences. Lucy's introspections focus particularly on death, even comparing people to and calling upon Death as a personified being (lending the novel a significant Gothic undertone). There are four instances in the novel in which Lucy wrestles with the notion of death and burial, and importantly, the resurrection of elements that have seemingly passed away from the realm of the living: Miss Marchmont's death, Lucy's experiences in Madame Beck's garden, and the implied death of Paul Emmanuel.

Early in the novel, Miss Marchmont's death functions as a sort of ouroboros; only through death will she be reunited with her great love Frank, and thus resurrected by that return to him. The reader is given the sense that once Miss Marchmont dies, she will truly begin to live, and that her true death occurred thirty years before along with Frank's. This paradox gives the sense that death is a positive rather than a negative experience. Her yearning for this reunion borders on blasphemy, as she tells Lucy, "You see I still think of Frank more than of God..."; however, there is also a sense that the love is sacred, and gives more joy and fulfillment to Miss Marchmont than religious piety.

Another scene curiously concerned with death describes Lucy's love of the garden behind Madame Beck's house, which is mythologized by the site where a young nun was purportedly buried alive for her sins. Even centuries later, the nun's "shadow it was that tremblers had feared...", serving as a testament to her enduring feminine power; she is long since dead, but some

part of her spirit- even a fabled part- remains alive. The language describing the garden with the “ Methuselah of a pear-tree” and its accompanying horrific grave paradoxically overflows with imagery of fertility, vitality, and marriage, though one would expect it to be cold, unsettling, and dead. The moment is also paradoxical in terms of how Lucy feels when she is in the space; though she enjoys the space, she does so alone: “ On summer morning I used to rise early, to enjoy them alone; on summer evenings, to linger solitary...”. The repetition of her isolation, confined to the beginning and end of the days due to the school children, underscores her own incongruity with the garden itself. The plants grow out of a cursed earth, yet “ hung their clusters in loving profusion about the favored spot where jasmine and ivy met and married them”. The effortless joy of the natural world contrasts Lucy’s interior loneliness; she is a living, breathing human, more so than both the nun’s corpse and the garden’s abundant flora, yet experiences deep isolation not unlike other Brontë heroines.

Later in the novel, Lucy returns to the same spot to bury something that is arguably also “ alive”: her “ most sacred” letters. Lucy creates a sort of reliquary, preserving the precious documents and sealing them in a glass bottle. She then returns to the “ Methuselah” pear tree to “ hide a treasure... also to bury a grief”, interring the documents in the earth. The return of the man-made and the emotionally significant to the natural world, at the same place where the nun was buried alive, serves as a type of emotional reincarnation or ouroboros for Lucy. Afterwards, she “ felt, not happy...but strong with reinforced strength”. Though the burial of the letters is a loss of that particular time in her life, and causes Lucy to grieve, she also emerges

stronger from the event, with her sacred texts safe from invasive eyes. The garden's power to absorb Lucy's burden makes it serve as a sacred burial ground, as well as an incarnation of the Biblical Eden; the sinning nun could be likened to Eve, and the garden itself to the abundant paradisaical natural world she was expelled from.

Arguably the most significant death in the novel- that of Paul Emmanuel, Lucy's love- is left ambiguous to the reader. The very end of the novel implies that he died in a shipwreck, though this is never explicitly written. This omission implies one of two things: that Lucy has made peace with her loss and her grief at the time of writing the text, or that death itself is meaningless. Her love for him transcends the realm of death, and, like Miss Marchmont's love for Frank, has the ability to be resurrected upon her own death. In this way, the novel addresses the complex and deeply psychological nature of death, as well as Lucy's ability, like a snake consuming its own tail, to be reborn from pain and suffering.