

How is happiness conveyed in Jane Austen's Emma and Charlotte Brontë's Villetta?

[Experience](#), [Happiness](#)



The nineteenth century was an era of great discovery, invention and social change as a result of political unrest in the previous years. The American Revolution which culminated in the United States Declaration of Independence, led to a change in political thought, bringing ideas of 'Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness' (1776: line 4), though how much this extended to women is debateable. Published thirty-seven years apart, *Emma* and *Villette* tell the stories of two girls trying to find happiness in difficult societies.

The two lead characters are very different; *Emma* is a respected, wealthy and attractive young woman yet rather spoilt, whereas *Lucy Snowe* is passive and secretive, with no significant amount of money or family connections. Living in the same century, therefore, it would seem safe to assume that the girls would find happiness in the same things; good company, money and a happy marriage. As Philip Davis argues, Victorian novels (though *Emma* predates Victoria's reign by approximately twenty years) were concerned only with 'Humanity, Duty, Vocation, Work, Marriage [and] Family' (2002: 2).

However, this is not the case for either of the girls. *Lucy* finds comfort in solitude and some of the passages in Brontë's novel where she is most at ease are those in which she is alone. If not alone, *Lucy* prefers the company of just one or two trusted friends, but even this is problematical, as she often hides her feelings from the reader. *Emma* on the other hand, appears to take pleasure in helping others to be happy; often to their detriment! What can be

said, nonetheless, is that both novels convey moral journeys towards a greater understanding of self and society.

By looking at a few specific incidents in each novel, the methods with which the authors explore the feeling of happiness can be uncovered. Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her (Emma p. 5). The opening sentence of Jane Austen's novel manages to summarise Emma's situation and history in a few simple words.

The reader is already informed by the omniscient narrator that this central character is content and privileged in every aspect that a young lady could wish for. In comparison, *Villette* has a very different approach. For example, it is not until the second chapter that we find out the name of the protagonist and narrator, Lucy Snowe. Interesting to note also that the first two chapters are names of characters, 'Bretton' and 'Paulina', as if the narrator is happy to talk about them, but reluctant to talk about herself.

We hear about the people surrounding the narrator, events in the past but very little physical or characteristic detail. We are given few clues as to how Lucy feels or thinks about these events; 'well I liked the visit' (*Villette* p. 1) is the only indication of preference or opinion. Even by the end of the novel we do not know where her 'home' was, and Lucy is constantly evasive about places and locations. The reader is left to speculate why this is; because of unhappiness there and desire to forget it? Or perhaps she is ashamed?

It is almost as if she does not trust the reader and as a result becomes difficult to like. Most readers will assume that this past, of which Lucy is so vague, holds bad memories or experiences which set the tone of her character from the start. As a narrator, Lucy is unreliable and the revelation that Dr. John and Graham Bretton are, in fact, the same people, is the prime example of this. 'I first recognized him on that occasion, noted several chapters back, when my unguardedly-fixed attention had drawn me on the mortification of an implied rebuke' (Villette p. 70-1). Only when the reader will find out for themselves, does Lucy tell us that she knew all along. 'I had preferred to keep the matter to myself' she reasons, 'I liked entering his presence covered with a cloud he had not seen through' (Villette p. 171). This motif of hiding, or being screened, recurs throughout the novel. Lucy is often seen observing or people watching, preferring to be out of the limelight. However, this changes when she is recruited to be in M. Paul's play after one of the lead characters falls ill.

Nevertheless, she puts on a performance, a mask, and is not herself. The clothes she wears are men's and by speaking another person's lines, Lucy distances herself from that which makes her feel so uncomfortable, her own feelings. It seems as if she is afraid to admit to herself how she feels. By suppressing her emotions and living an almost muted life, Lucy denies herself happiness. This alienation is heightened by her being in Belgium, where she does not speak French initially, by being a Protestant in a Catholic society and through the atmosphere of the Mme.

Beck's school. Despite working very closely with the headmistress, Lucy still finds her searching through her belongings one evening, showing a lack of trust between the characters. Lucy's narrative style shows a lot about her unhappiness as a character and surprisingly Emma shares some of these traits. Emma is told through a third-person omniscient narrator, whereas Lucy tells us the story through her own, if somewhat limited perspective.

Austen's narrator gives us a wider outlook on the events at Highbury, although the free-indirect style means that the narrator's opinions are sometimes blurred with those of the characters and there is some mimicry of Emma's thoughts and tone. She is a more open character, whom the narrator can easily display to the reader, and her feelings are more easily accessible, on first impression. As Emma is already 'handsome, clever and rich' (Emma p. 1), her happiness is taken for granted, but looking a little deeper it is evident that she is not fully content.

The novel is based around a series of shocks for Emma; Miss Taylor's marriage, Mr. Elton's proposal, Frank and Jane's engagement, and she seems in a constant struggle to maintain a certain decorum and propriety. It is ironic that Jane Austen's novels are so often seen as portrayals of a stagnant society, when Highbury is full of entrances and exits; Mrs. Elton, Frank Churchill, Jane Fairfax and Harriet. The proximity to London, peculiarly, does not seem to have an effect on the community. Emma's constant need to help others could be interpreted as dissatisfaction within herself.

Instead of realising her feelings for Mr. Knightly at the beginning of the novel, as so easily could have occurred, Emma goes through systematic pairing up of her acquaintances, to try and arrange as many couples as possible. It is only when Harriet confides in her regarding her own feelings for Knightly that Emma is forced to identify and realise her attachment to him. Because she demands a kind of variety and excitement life cannot supply, Emma allows her fancy and imagination to shape and distort her perception of reality [... What Emma constantly desires and frequently demands is not simply that her world admire her; it must also be as rich and vital and beautiful as she feels herself potentially to be [...]

The crux of the matter, then, is the peculiar way in which Emma's life depends upon and is dedicated to richness and beauty in human experience. (Minter 1966 : 51) Minter argues that Emma relies on this constant application of herself to try and adapt her surroundings to suit her. In doing this, Emma is attempting to create an environment in which she is truly comfortable; not a trait one would associate with a young lady of 'happy disposition' (Emma p.), but more with slightly nervous and compulsive behaviour. It is as if Emma must have control of the events around her to feel content. This shows a certain extent of self-consciousness and dissatisfaction, reflected most clearly in her thoughts of Jane Fairfax: Why she did not like Jane Fairfax might be a difficult question to answer; Mr Knightly had once told her it was because she saw in her the really accomplished young woman, which she wanted to be thought herself. (Emma p. 125)

View in this manner, Emma becomes, in essence, a structured action in which Jane Austen renders both the nobility and the dangers, the significance and the consequences of Emma's endeavour to force an aesthetic ideal upon her world' (Minter 1966 : 51). As a character, Lucy Snowe is built up in a different way by Charlotte Bronte than Emma is by Jane Austen. By looking at their happiest and lowest points in each text, the reader has an insight into their extremes of emotion, and how these are created by the authors. Lucy characterises her weakest moments by images of storms and tempests.

This occurs several times throughout the novel and blurs the situations which Lucy does not want the reader to know or understand fully, perhaps because she does not understand herself. This is first seen upon Lucy's departure from Bretton; 'I must have somehow fallen overboard, or that there must have been wreck at last' (Villette p. 30). It is not certain whether Lucy actually embarks on a boat journey or whether she just uses this as an extended metaphor. Bronte adds the scream of the Banshee to symbolise the coming of bad news; Miss Marchmont dies and leaves Lucy with little money.

However, the worst for Lucy personally is arguably the fall 'headlong down an abyss' (Villette p. 160) after her visit to the church. She has been ill for a long while and her soul leaves her body 'hoping to leave for rest (Villette p. 160). The reunion of the two is a particularly painful image, 'a sort of racking struggle', 'with pain, with reluctance' (Villette p. 161). Villette's final chapter is the most ambiguous sequence of the whole text, in which Lucy almost

leaves the conclusion of the novel down to the reader. 'Reader, they were the three happiest years of my life.

Do you scout the paradox? Listen' (Villette p. 488), she appeals to us. Whether M. Paul is killed in a tempest on his return is not overtly stated, though the image of the storm again would imply that he does. If the past three years 'were' the happiest, then it follows that these are now unhappy times. As with the beginning of the novel, Lucy finishes by telling us what happened to other characters, but not herself; 'Madame Beck prospered all the days of her life; so did Pi?? re Silas; Madame Walravens fulfilled her ninetieth year before she died.

Farewell' (Villette p. 491). With a similar style of description and attitude, it is as if Lucy Snowe has come full circle; she is just as happy at the end of the novel, as at the start, or there seems no noticeable difference. Victor Hugo wrote in *Les Misérables* that 'life's greatest happiness is to be convinced we are loved' (1862) and it is this sentiment that gives Lucy the highest moment in *Villette*. She says that her love for M. Paul 'gave me such pleasure as, certainly, I had ever felt' (Villette p. 403). Emma's happiest moment comes with similar thoughts on Mr.

Knightley, but also a revelation about herself and her own actions; 'How long had Mr. Knightley been so dear to her, as every feeling now declared him now to be? When had his influence, such influence begun? ' (Emma p. 312). This sequence comes with a long set of rhetorical questions in which Emma begins to see her flaws; perhaps this is the ultimate happiness for her?

Mahatma Ghandi is often famously quoted as saying, 'Happiness is when what you think, what you say and what you do are in harmony'¹ and this can be seen clearly in the closing chapters of Emma.

Finally Emma is settled in herself; knows how she feels, is able to talk openly and does, of course, eventually marry Mr. Knightley. What totally different feelings did Emma take back into the house from what she had brought out! - she had then been only daring to hope for a little respite of suffering; - now in an exquisite flutter of happiness - and such happiness, moreover, as she believed must still be greater when the flutter should have passed away. (Emma p. 328) Emma's reaction is markedly different from Lucy's. Her language is more descriptive and appears fast, almost as if she cannot keep up with what her mind is thinking.

The narrator here sounds just like the character of Emma, speaking rapidly with the use of many exclamation marks. Lucy falters, questions M. Paul's affections and seems unsure of the situation. 'I was content', she states (Villette p. 403) compared to Emma's 'state of spirits' (Emma p. 328).

Emma's unfeeling comments to Miss Bates at the picnic however, paint her in a very different light; "' Ah! Ma'am, but there may be a difficulty. Pardon me - but you will be limited as to a number - only three at once'" (Emma p. 280).

This can be seen as Emma's most unkind and lowest moment in the text, 'she had never been so depressed' (Emma p. 284) it is a necessary addition that makes her realise how badly she has behaved, although requiring a little

help from Mr. Knightley. Throughout *Emma* and *Villette*, Austen and Brontë shape their main characters with the use of these dramatic highs and lows, which alter their perceptions and also the reader's perceptions of them. By using specifically chosen language, the feelings and emotions of Lucy Snowe and Emma Woodhouse are made apparent and so the reader can share in their delight and depression.

Jane Austen's novel appears overall a happier text, despite the continual failings of Emma's matchmaking, and ends positively with both Emma and Harriet getting married, and Harriet discovering her parentage. Although their marriages are well paired, with men who will complete them, the reader cannot help questioning whether marriage and money will always create 'perfect happiness' (*Emma* p. 367). *Villette* on the other hand, ends just as mournfully as it begins, with very little defined ending.

It could be argued that Lucy Snowe finds an inner peace with herself, after enjoying three happy years, despite not having Mr. Paul with her. Perhaps knowing she is loved is enough, and so with this and the solitary life which has given her comfort throughout the novel, Lucy can be settled. With her flourishing school as financial security, Lucy does not require anything more; she has stability and security, that which she has lacked from a young age. Though the storm imagery, if consistent with the rest of Brontë's novel, indicates further change, we are not given any clues as to how this will transpire.

With so many novels of this era, both *Emma* and *Villette* look at the difficulty of a woman finding true happiness in such a patriarchal society. Kate Millett argued that *Villette* was 'too subversive to be popular' (1977: 140), accurate considering the conformity of many novels of the time. *Emma*, for example, still allows a happy ending and a marriage, despite the main character's actions throughout. In creating this alternative style, Charlotte Bronte shows happiness through a perhaps more realistic perspective, rather than Austen's romanticised, 'happily-ever-after' story.