

The issue of
englishness:
nationalism and
identification in
charlotte brontë's vi...



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853) explores repression and projection of identity through the voice of the suffering, confusing, and often unreliable Lucy Snowe. This novel emerged after Brontë's acclaimed *Jane Eyre*, exemplifying a newfound maturity as well as a more personal voice shown through an experimental and exploratory narrative. Using the fictional locale of *Villette* in the country *Labassecour* (modeled off of Brontë's experiences in Belgium), she creates an imaginative space where British nationalism and identity can be challenged and questioned, and she compares the educational and religious consequences of existing somewhere distinctively "not Britain." Constantly whirring in the periphery of the narrative are questions regarding Lucy's mysterious history, particularly as she takes the leap of faith of deciding to leave England for a different life. However, the stone-cold British nationalism does not quite dissipate so easily, and it remains one of the few distinguishing components of Lucy's identity—a false, inflated, and often subtle "moral" superiority. Brontë questions British nationalism, but she still uses the text to emphasize its overall importance to every sphere a person's life and identity rather than investigating its issues.

From the beginning, Lucy's sense of not belonging—even in England—evokes paranoia and suffering, which eventually serve as means for her to choose to leave England following Miss Marchmont's death. Despite clearly aligning herself with British nationalism later on, Lucy grapples with the death by challenging herself to reach for a different horizon. She starts by deciding to leave the country and travel to the London: A bold thought was sent to my mind; my mind was made strong to receive it. 'Leave this wilderness,' it was said to me, 'and go out hence.' 'Where?' was the query. I had not very far

to look: gazing from this country parish in the flat, rich middle of England—I mentally saw within reach what I had never beheld with my bodily eyes; I saw London (Brontë 49). She sees this formulation of thought in her mind as some intervention of divine providence for what will follow next in her life. However, upon arriving to London, she is enthralled with the bustle of the city and its stark contrast with the country, but she is quick to set her sights elsewhere, a more “ resolute, and daring—perhaps desperate—line of action” (Brontë 55). She goes as far to associate the nation as a whole with her trauma and suffering (though it is repressed from the reader): “ 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 far away from—home, I was going to say, but I had no home—from England, then, who would weep?” (Brontë 55). Lucy paints a dramatic but heartfelt picture of the lonely reality she faces upon Miss Marchmont’s death. Though Brontë uses *Villette* as an outlet for her own political and religious views, she does still recognize the stagnancy and suffering that Lucy would face by staying in England.

However, Britishness becomes much more evident in her character once she leaves the country and arrives in Labassecour. Specifically, Lucy’s attraction to John Graham Bretton lies in his British identity and handsome physical appearance, which she uses to forgive him for any unkind deed he does to her. When she first arrives in Labassecour, the English man who helps her (who later is revealed to be Dr. John) is an oasis amongst her disorientation and confusion. While it may seem standard for the traveler to be comforted by the familiar in a foreign place, Lucy’s reaction to finding help from an

English man is different: “ But I had heard the Fatherland accents; they rejoiced my heart...I saw that he was a young, distinguished, and handsome man; he might be a lord, for anything I knew: nature had made him good enough for a prince” (Brontë 69-70). Bretton is in every way Lucy’s “ savior,” when it just happens to be a stroke of luck and an act of intermitted kindness. While any weary, lost traveler would appreciate the help, she assigns his kindness and chivalry towards her to his Englishness. She asserts this as she continues: “ The remembrance of his countenance, which I am sure wore a light not unbenignant to the friendless—the sound in my ear of his voice, which spoke to a nature chivalric to the needy and feeble, as well as the youthful and fair—were a sort of cordial to me long after. He was true young English gentleman.” (Brontë 70). Furthermore, she puts Bretton on a pedestal in her mind where he can do little wrong when he later is often inconsiderate and even rude to her. This first encounter with Bretton serves as an assertion by Brontë that though Lucy has left England, her identity and attraction is rooted in her British nationality.

The conversation through Lucy’s narrative between English Protestantism and Catholicism is furthermore a central tension of the novel, specifically enacted through her relationship with Monsieur Paul. M. Paul is entirely incompatible with Lucy’s fantasies about England: he is a Labassecour nationalist, misogynist, and devout Catholic. Lucy shows what Catholicism represents to her while describing the refectory at Villette: “ This said ‘ lecture pieuse’ [religious instruction] was, I soon found, mainly designed as a wholesome mortification of the Intellect, a useful humiliation of the Reason” (Brontë 129). Though Lucy is characterized by her modest and quiet nature,

she spares little to assert her strong opinions against Catholicism early into the novel. This particular quality of hers is obviously related to her Britishness and Protestantism, which makes it so interesting that she forms a bond of any kind with M. Paul. Furthermore, these two separate realities almost unite, but do not consummate (or at least as it appears to the reader in the ambiguous ending). M. Paul and Lucy love each other, but do not have a chance to be together in their love for long and, to the reader's knowledge, never marry. Perhaps this lack of union shows the incompatible reality of the two worlds in Charlotte Brontë's eyes. Though Lucy does not think herself superior to M. Paul in the end, she is left alone with her British nationalism and identity.

While *Villette* may be a radical text in the sense that Lucy ultimately gains independence and autonomy, it still enforces standards of Britishness that are seen as superior to everything else, thus "othering" or demonizing other ideologies and methods as a result. It seems Lucy challenges British tradition by recognizing that she does not belong in the country following Miss Marchmont's death. However, her Britishness becomes more deeply entrenched into her psyche when she arrives into *Villette*, associating it with her standard of what is "correct." This enacts particular through her prolonged attraction to John Graham Bretton, despite his continual mistreatment of her and consistent preference for other women over Lucy. Her complicated relationship with Monsieur Paul thickens the divide between British mode of thought and everything else in Lucy's mind, while at the same time challenging her beliefs through her attraction to a man so distinctly not English. Lucy's identity is traced through the imaginative space

of Labassecour, forcing her to question her British nationalism and Protestant beliefs, but through Brontë's voice, British supremacy will never be exposed for the problem that it is.

Works Cited

Brontë, Charlotte. *Villette*. New York: The Penguin Group, 2004. Print.