

# Tensions in vilette



Tensions in Villette Villette is a narrative that seems constantly at war with itself, fraught with tensions of reason versus feeling, nature versus art and reality versus imagination, as I will attempt to illustrate. Lucy is anything but a one dimensional character and it throughout the novel, her emotional growth is charted. The important elements in the narrative seem to resist a one-sided reading. Read in context, perhaps Bronte recognizes that in the Victorian world, tensions of the aforementioned impinge upon and are all shaped by one another. [1]

Reason/ Feeling In chapter 23, Lucy Snowe penned two replies to Graham's letter, one under " the dry stinting check of Reason" and another " according to the full, liberal impulse of Feeling"(281). Lucy first began writing the letter meant for her own relief in which she poured out her " sincere heart" and " covered with the language of a strongly adherent affection, a rooted and active gratitude". Upon its completion, Reason scorned and caused her to rewrite the letter, this time for Graham's perusal, which became a " terse, curt missive of a page" (282).

Judging from the two responses to the same letter, one might think it was penned by two different people, thus indicating the precarious balancing act between reason and feeling, and the public and private self that Lucy tries to maintain. On the surface, Lucy seems innately calm, devoid of passion and presents herself as being emotionally independent, even at the start of the novel. Lucy narrates that " in the autumn of the year - I was staying at Bretton; my godmother having come in person to claim me of the kinsfolk with whom was at that time fixed my permanent residence"(8) and the kinsfolk that Lucy refers to are obviously her parents.

While no details are given, we can guess that Lucy's separation from her parents must have caused her much pain, and it destabilized her sense of what is "permanent" because Lucy finds herself having to move from Mrs Bretton's to Miss Marchmont's then upon meeting Ginevra and hearing about a possible job opening, to Villette. Perhaps then, through the estrangement from her parents and from Mrs Bretton, Lucy realized "there remained no possibility of dependence on others; to myself alone could I look.

I know not that I was of a self-reliant or active nature; but self-reliance and exertion were forced upon me by circumstances, as they are upon thousands besides"(40). Aside from becoming self-reliant in order to exert some sort of control over her life, Lucy also resolves to be emotionally self-reliant to prevent herself from becoming like Miss Marchmont whose life was frozen in place after the death of her husband. Yet despite Lucy's want of distancing herself, Lucy feels an amazing depth of feeling, she cannot stop herself from doing so. 2] "I suppose animals kept in cages, and so scantily fed as to be always upon the verge of famine, await their food as I awaited a letter. Oh! - to speak truth, and drop that tone of a false calm which long to sustain, outwears nature's endurance - I underwent in those seven weeks bitter fears and pains, strange inward trials, miserable defections of hope, intolerable encroachments of despair... The letter - the well-beloved letter - would not come; and it was all of sweetness in life I had to look for"(297).

Through this we can see that though Lucy moderates her outward responses, and tries desperately to suppress it, internally she is tortured by her emotions. We can conclude then, that although Lucy constantly berates herself for it and attempts to hide it, the private Lucy is an extremely

emotional and passionate one. We first glimpse this when Lucy plays the fop in the play. Lucy thinks that she will be terrible at it, yet she not only manages to find the courage to act without worrying she will be laughed at, Lucy is so passionate in the role that she changes the script.

Although everyone else seems to be fooled, M. Paul sees Lucy for the passionate creature she truly is. Through M. Paul, Lucy learns to give in to Feeling and stop letting Reason control her life. Nature/ Art The three couples in the story are all described differently and represent different values with regard to nature and art. Although we hear most about Lucy and M. Paul, what we are told about the other two pairs make Lucy's tale even more tragic, given that Lucy suffers the most by the end of the novel. Ginevra and Colonel de Hamal, who is tiny in stature and looks like a doll to Lucy, are conceived as almost pseudo art objects. Ginevra is depicted as a butterfly flitting through life, having neither sense nor substance and quite happily so. Most of what we hear about Ginevra is about her outward appearance, thus making her primarily an object of beauty. We hear about her blonde curls, rouge, pigtails and sashes, and her habit of often gazing at gaudy polished mirrors.

Colonel de Hamal is figured as a dandy, "so nicely curled, so booted, gloved and crafted" (163). At one point, Polly and Ginevra are even contrasted as works of art or figures in a painting- "nature having traced all these details slightly, and with a careless hand, in Miss Fanshawe's case; and in Miss de Bassompierre's, wrought them to a high and delicate finish" (346). On the other hand, Graham and Polly are depicted as nature cultivated by art[3],

something between nature and art that Robert Colby likens to sheltered greenhouse plants.

Dr John's features are said to be "though well cut they were not so chiselled, so frittered away as to lose in power and significance what they gained in unmeaning symmetry" (164), while Lucy says of Polly that "I who had known her as a child, knew or guessed by what a good and strong root her graces held to the firm soil of reality" (347). In this respect, Polly and Graham are not described to be as delicate as Ginevra and her Colonel, but neither are they described like Lucy and M. Paul whose relatively unattractive appearance are an indication of unrefined nature.

We are told that Lucy looks plain, but underneath is "fiery and rash" and given to unpredictable changes, while M. Paul is "a little hawk of a man" (237), a "savage-looking friend" (247) of Lucy's. Even the end of which they come to is poetically suitable- M. Paul perishing in waters and Lucy lamenting amidst the turbulence of nature's elements. Also, in the beginning of the novel, most of the scenes take place indoors- in lecture halls, concert halls, art galleries while towards the end of the novel, more scenes take place in the woods and gardens.

Art is posed against Nature, and it is significant that Lucy's love for M. Paul blooms in the natural environment. She hears stories from M. Paul who narrates with "diction simple in its strength, and strong in its simplicity... such a picture I have never looked on from artists' pencil." (421). Lucy stresses that the stories seem spontaneous, free from artifice. M. Paul leads Lucy from literature to art into nature, imitations of life into life itself.

Imagination/ Reality In the novel, there are also many allusions to literature especially in the earlier sections.

In many instances, Lucy retreats into her imagination which is fueled by the arts, therefore it is associated with passivity and escapism while nature with the active mind and reality. Lucy herself admits shortly after arriving in Villette, “ 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. (85) As Villette progresses though, Lucy learns to fuse these two separate worlds, the arts become less important to Lucy as she becomes more of a participant in life and less of a spectator. In this sense, Lucy’s mental and emotional changes are captured as she gains the courage to stop living vicariously through other people or literary characters, and starts actively pursuing what she wants. Throughout the novel, she glides through balls and concerts as a spectator, only participating when forced to which was how she ended up playing the fop in the play.

Although Lucy discovers she really enjoyed it, she “ took a firm resolution never to be drawn into a similar affair” (156). It is only towards her last few interactions with M. Paul that Lucy gains the courage to experience life for herself. Two changes may be seen to mark Lucy’s change from passivity to activity- the initiatives she takes to unite Polly and Graham, and her subsequent determination to manage her own school. Lucy is able to bridge imagination and reality through her narrative, memory is her catharsis.

She sets her turbulent feelings, feelings of deep joy and sorrow into the past at a distance and transforms it, the sign of reconciliation of passion with calm of mind. In this sense, by writing this narrative, Lucy is really observing herself in the process of composing and creating the characters of her life and herself, therefore perhaps explaining Lucy's fascination with the inner workings of the mind and the imagination. ----- [1] Patricia E.

Johnson. "This Heretic Narrative: The Strategy of the Split Narrative in Charlotte Bronte's *Villette*" in *Source: Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 30, No. 4, *Nineteenth Century* (Autumn, 1990), pp. 617-631

[2] John Hughes. "The Affective World of Charlotte Bronte's *Villette*" in *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 40, No. 4, *The Nineteenth*

*Century* (Autumn, 2000), pp. 711-726. [3] Robert A. Colby. "Villette and the Life of the Mind" in *PMLA*, Vol. 75, No. 4 (Sep. , 1960), pp. 410-419.