

Circular Evolutions of Imaginative Maturation in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*

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Eleftheria Matsa

The Ohio State University

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Project Adviser: Dr. David Riede, Department of English

Introduction:

"Everything that [Brontë] wrote has the challenging quality of personal emotion or of passion, moving in a narrow range among very concrete things, and intimately fused throughout with the incidents and feelings of one small, intense experience."

~Mrs. Humphrey Ward on Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*

Paradoxically, female experience here consists of infinite yet rather limited moments of consciousness: infinite because Brontë stirred things up by means of "personal emotions" or "passions," limited because the external world that she disrupts and reorganizes as her experience has shrunk decisively.

~Anita Levy, discussing the above quote ¹

This thesis is primarily concerned with the evolution of imagination in Charlotte Brontë's two famous gothic novels, *Villette* and *Jane Eyre*. However, before delving into the extensive literary domain that these two works present, it may be useful to spend the next several pages discussing the author's own views about her writing, particularly through the lens proposed by Carol T. Christ in her essay titled *Imaginative constraint, feminine duty, and the form of Charlotte Brontë's fiction*. Christ examines Brontë's literary work as a fluid catalogue of self-imposed catharsis, in which Brontë successively evaluates and discards several ratios of "necessary self-denial," "realistic commitment," and suffocated imaginative aesthetic in her novels, which collectively mimic her own frustration with the stifling of the female voice in Victorian society². Moreover, Christ proposes that Brontë's novels are only successful when she makes the "conflict between the claims of imagination and the claims of realism the propelling conflict of her heroines personalities," thereby externalizing the debate that characterize[s] much of her own authorial energy and identity³.

¹ Levy, Anita. *Jane Eyre, the Woman Writer and the History of Experience*. *Modern Language Quarterly*, 56:1, 1995.

² Christ, Carol T. *Imaginative constraint, feminine duty, and the form of Charlotte Brontë's fiction*. *Women's Studies*, 1979, Vol 6. p. 289.

³ Christ, p. 289.

This dilemma may be inferred from several of her personal writings. Deeply torn by the dilemma of conforming to preexisting Victorian gender proscriptions versus expressing her own imaginative tendencies, Brontë alludes to her stories as creating an experimental and safely performative zone in which she can reconcile both competing interests. In one of her journal entries she discloses the extent of her inner turmoil, and reveals her innate compulsion to write:

I am just going to write because I cannot help it... What in all this is there to remind me of the divine, silent, unseen land of thought, dim now and indefinite as the dream of a dream, the shadow of a shade. There is a voice, there is an impulse that wakens up that dormant power which in its torpidity I sometimes think dead. That wind pouring in impetuous current through the air, sounding wildly unremittingly from hour to hour, deepening its tone as the night advances, coming not in gusts, but with a rapid gathering stormy swell... O it has wakened a feeling that I cannot satisfy—a thousand wishes rose at its call which must die with me for they will never be fulfilled. Now I should be agonised if I had not the dream to repose on—its existences, its forms its scenes to fill a little of the craving vacancy...⁴

Characterized by ungovernable and phantasmagoric intrusions into an otherwise boring world, Brontë's imaginative upheavals are likewise littered with colliding notions of nature, the divine, and the Gothic. Purposefully infusing her thoughts with the turbulent overtones that she claims alleviate the monotony of her everyday life, Brontë seems to hunger for something to destabilize the status quo. Unfortunately, the real world does not allow women the opportunity to express—much less act on—their “wild” and “unremitting” desires; therefore, she is forced to find respite in the unreal. Ultimately, it is her “dream” that alleviates her unbearable reality, and makes it possible for her to perform the expected outward role of submissive and circumspect womanhood.

However, despite the fact that Brontë has internally reconciled her need for imagination, and uses it to fill the interminable void that manifests if she denies her creativity, she is acutely aware of the dangerous incongruity that such desires pose to her social image. When her

⁴ Shorter, Clement. *The Brontës: Life and Letters*. (New York, 1908), v. 1, p. 128.

correspondent Robert Southey counsels her to avoid the dangers of a “distemperate mind,” she hastily pens⁵:

My father is a clergyman of limited though competent income, and I am the eldest of his children. He expended quite as much in my education as he could afford in justice to the rest. I thought it therefore my duty, when I left school, to become a governess. In that capacity I find enough to occupy my thoughts all day long, and my head and hands, too, without having a moment’s time for one dream of the imagination. In the evenings, I confess, I do think, but I never trouble anyone else with my thoughts. I carefully avoid any appearance of preoccupation and eccentricity which might lead those I live amongst to suspect the nature of my pursuits.⁶

Thus, Brontë claims not only to be aware of her central dilemma, but to have substantially resolved it. However, despite the conciliatory tone of her letter, which seeks to soothe her reader and abate his worries, in actuality she only discloses that she is living a carefully cultivated lie. Seeking refuge in performativity, she daily plays a subservient role while permitting her true desires to manifest “in the evenings.”

Intriguingly, both of the excerpts included herein present mindsets that are indisputably typical of Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe—literary constructs that Charlotte Brontë arguably created to voice her own dilemmas and discontent in a fantastical (and therefore publicly acceptable) forum. They too are frustrated governesses, desiring to imaginatively exult and expand, but stalled by their own self-awareness, their devout piety, and the requirements of existing social norms⁷. In varying degrees, they too are gripped with the discontented “dream” that Brontë experiences, and must find an acceptable means by which to mitigate and positively limit their creativity.

⁵ Shorter, Clement. *The Brontës: Life and Letters*. (New York, 1908), v. 1, p. 119.

⁶ *Ibid*, 129-130.

⁷ Interestingly, Brontë frees her characters of the filial duty she herself feels by orphaning them. This is probably because the absence of family ties allows her characters mobility, autonomy, and situational opportunity that they would not otherwise have.

By couching her very real complaints in the realm of the hypothetical, Brontë avoids retribution while managing the difficult issues surrounding her permitted identity as a woman. Christ suggests that Brontë achieves her greatest success when she forgoes her fundamental “allegiance to realism,” and that her novels *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* take their “energy and [sic] coherence from Brontë’s ability to express and in some manner resolve her aesthetic conflict through [the main characters’] struggles for self definition.⁸” Ultimately, this thesis will focus on *Jane Eyre* and *Lucy Snowe*’s internal storms and intense longings. Their quests for imaginative temperance and creative government will be the focus of many succeeding pages; however, it is important to keep in mind the authorial genesis and historical relevance of the themes at hand. In short, Jane and Lucy serve as highly developed alter-egos for Brontë herself, functioning in a microcosmic authorial consciousness established according to the framework of each novel. Thus, writing allows Brontë to performatively, and therefore safely, examine the freedom of engaging and acting upon her imaginative urges without the consequences of social retribution. As a result, writing provides a liminal space in which Brontë can simultaneously ease the demands of her own restless creativity and uphold the requirements of her class.

⁸ Christ, p. 293.

Jane Eyre:

“The reality-effect, however, is just that – an effect. These are but shadows of the things that have been. “

--Spirit, *A Christmas Carol*, Charles Dickens

An exploration into the complex underpinnings of an evolving mind, *Jane Eyre* is both a literal and metacognitive inquiry into the implications of imagination. Principally dealing with the title character’s stepwise assumption of identity, from a reticent orphan to a self-assured and socially empowered woman, Jane’s is first and foremost a quest for love and community. However, underlying her linear search for the elusive domestic cornerstones of “family” and “home” is a relentless struggle between reality and imagination. Characterized by two consecutive arcs of imaginative maturation, Jane is presented first as an innocent, reveling immoderately in the novelty of uncharted conceptual possibility, then socialized into a form of self-imposed repression, and finally reintroduced into a subdued, cultivated imaginative landscape. Ultimately, although other Victorian intellectuals considered love to be the civilizing aspect unifying “intelligence and instinct,” *Jane Eyre* asserts that imagination is yet another definitive inner governor that, able to traverse both extremes, must be similarly reconciled.⁹ As such, Jane’s recursive travails through the spectrum of imaginative frenzy and suppression are transformed by her romantic indulgence. When required, Jane and Mr. Rochester’s love for one another combines the wish-fulfillment of romantic desires with the realism of a practicable union, thereby effectively distilling imagination into its more productive, governable, and expansive components.

⁹ George Meredith’s “What Are We First?”

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"The governess lives at that ambiguous point in the social structure at which two worlds—an interior one of emotional hungering, and an external one of harshly mechanical necessity—meet and collide."

--Eagleton¹⁰

The reader's first introduction to Jane's emotional excesses is both visual and spatial: a "picture of passion," flailing like a "mad cat," she exhibits characteristics that appear at once bestial and anarchic.¹¹ However, the inwardly destructive potential of her imagination is not truly awakened until her trauma in the red-room, when Jane begins ruminating about the possibility of a visitation by Mr. Reed's ghost. Although she logically acknowledges that the "idea, consolatory in theory, would be terrible if realized," she exerts imperfect control over her mind, which nevertheless transfigures the gleam from a lantern into a terrifying specter.¹² Dissolving the boundaries between reality and imagination, Jane subconsciously permits the dreadful "idea" that plagues her to become palpable.

Consequently, Jane's fright in the red-room releases other aspects of imagination—she now easily traverses the margin between conception and enactment of an idea—and serves as the catalyst for her physical and mental liberation from Gateshead. When Jane confronts Mrs. Reed with the evidence of her injustice, her soul begins "to expand, to exult...as if an invisible bond had burst and [she] had struggled out into un hoped-for liberty."¹³ A figurative process of burgeoning, Jane's syntax mimics the climax of birth, in which the newborn is transferred from the confinement of the womb to the infinite expanse of the outside world. Having undergone an irreversible instant of learning, Jane realizes the magnitude of her own adult potential. This

¹⁰ Eagleton, *Jane Eyre: A Marxist Study*, in *Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1975), 30—1.

¹¹ *Jane Eyre*, p. 18, 15.

¹² *Jane Eyre*, p. 24.

¹³ *Jane Eyre*, p. 46.

completes the first phase of Jane's maturation: she has realized her ability to transform the impossible into the possible, to weaken Mrs. Reed, and establish her own dominance. Although Jane does not yet acknowledge her imagination as the incantatory intermediate between thought and action, she unknowingly exploits it. Going so far as to suppose herself a crusader against all injustice, she synthesizes a code of conduct compellingly similar to Hammurabi's Code:

If people were always kind and obedient to those who are cruel and unjust, the wicked people would have it all their own way: they would never feel afraid, and so they would never alter, but would grow worse and worse. When we are struck at without a reason, we should strike back again very hard...so as to teach the person who struck us never to do it again.¹⁴

The fact that one of the earliest laws of the ancient Near East is assimilated as Jane's foundational doctrine underscores the still-primitive nature of her thoughts, as well as the necessity for future growth. Her inability to imagine a more complex legal framework suggests that the timeline of the imagination is merely a microcosm of history itself, and that although its evolution is ongoing and cumulative, it experiences perpetual recursion, as humanity rediscovers its defining aspects on an individual basis.

However, Jane cannot "expand" indefinitely, nor can society condone her black-and-white brand of vigilante justice. In her attempts to befriend Helen Burns, Jane is met with the first character to be undeterred by her accounts of suffered wrongs. Inspired by Helen's "pure society," and discourse, which gives "a taste of far higher things," Jane is effectively exposed to a seemingly superior form of imagination, predicated upon forbearance and Christian charity.¹⁵ The enticement of Helen's company is alluded to by Jane's reference to "higher things"—Helen's seeming access to the ultimate "expanse" of heaven holds a compelling allure for a heroine ever intent on breaking out into limitless spaces. Ultimately, Jane emulates Helen by

¹⁴ *Jane Eyre*, p. 68.

¹⁵ *Jane Eyre*, p. 91.

beginning to “imbibe from [Miss Temple]...more harmonious thoughts [and] better regulated feelings...[giving] allegiance to duty and order” until “to the eyes of others, [and] usually even to [her] own, [she appears] a disciplined and subdued character.”¹⁶ Oblivious to the partial suffocation of her own imagination, Jane surrenders the liberty she has so struggled for by giving her loyalty to the socializing forces of “duty and order,” and choosing to govern her imagination by placing it within a Christian framework. Moreover, she falls prey to the progressive and insidious nature of performance, abandoning the child self willing to vocatively and capriciously thwart the potential for an offender’s repeated injustice, and simultaneously duplicating Miss Temple’s character so completely that even she is fooled by the impersonation.

Likewise, the text omits this stage of Jane’s maturation. If one keeps in mind that narrative is inherently a product of imagination, following Jane at points of heightened emotion, and conveniently skipping points at which her imagination is dormant, it follows logically that the reader is reintroduced at the point when Jane desires fresh stimulation.

It is this hindered imagination, therefore, which first comes into contact with Mr. Rochester. Operating under the vestiges of the “Lowood constraint,” Jane forces herself to suppress her burgeoning feelings for Rochester once she is apprised of his impending marriage to Blanche Ingram. Berating herself for “straying through imagination’s boundless and trackless waste,” she closets herself in the “safe fold of common sense.”¹⁷ Moreover, she describes herself as having “rejected the real, and rabidly devoured the ideal,” by “[surfeiting] herself on sweet lies.”¹⁸

It is important to note a few things about these statements. First of all, Jane, now accustomed to stricture, is both daunted and appalled by the conclusive extremes to which her

¹⁶ *Jane Eyre*, p. 98.

¹⁷ *Jane Eyre*, p. 182.

¹⁸ *Jane Eyre*, p. 183.

brief return to imagination has led her. As such, she feels the need to recoil entirely from the unprincipled identity that has emerged to ravage the stable life she has established.

Characterizing her imagination as “rabid” and “surfeiting,” further reveals it as a wholly instinctual and uncontrollable animal driven to excess, and therefore repulsive to the moderation of polite society.

However, Jane’s declarations during the proposal scene with Mr. Rochester strike quite a different chord. When she pleads with Rochester not to send her away, she proclaims:

I love [Thornfield] because I have lived in it a full and delightful life...I have not been trampled on. I have not been petrified. I have not been buried with inferior minds, and excluded from every glimpse of communion with what is bright and energetic, and high. I have talked, face to face, with what I reverence; with what I delight in,--with an *original, a vigorous, and expanded mind*.¹⁹

If we are to consider that Jane’s physical location mirrors and enacts her cognitive state, then the setting that she describes is one in which her imagination thrives. Her portrayal of company with Rochester as “original, vigorous, and expanded” is at once recognizable as a positive inversion of the denunciation “boundless and trackless.” Although each depicts a vast space, it is crucial to note that the former implies a space that, though “expanded,” retains a definitive shape, whereas the latter is entirely uncontrolled. As such, Mr. Rochester is the variable that introduces stricture, infusing a vital and civilizing influence that allows Jane’s unruly and disruptive mind to be tamed. Moreover, Rochester complicity in the formation of this revived imagination also dissolves its “trackless” aspect. Jane’s imagination has now been affected by another human, and is therefore established as a renewed, mutual, and constructive endeavor.

Furthermore, Jane also alludes to her conversations with Rochester as a replacement for the ones she used to have with Helen Burns. Claiming that they are “bright, energetic, and

¹⁹ *Jane Eyre*, p. 283 (emphasis added).

high,” Jane reveals that love has replaced Christianity at the pinnacle of her personal aspirations. Even more strikingly, Rochester becomes a source of reverence, supplanting God entirely as Jane’s inspiration and governance. Ultimately, Rochester serves as an amalgamation of all the examples of profitable community seen henceforth in the book. However, even more than the intellectual mentor, or steadfast nurturer, he is Jane’s romantic equal. The counterpart from which she most regrets being torn, Rochester becomes the determining factor from which Jane derives security and imaginative profit.

II.

“There was no harassing restraint, no repressing of glee and vivacity with him; for with him I was at perfect ease, because I knew I suited him; all I said or did seemed either to console or revive him. Delightful consciousness! It brought to life and light my whole nature: in his presence I thoroughly lived; and he lived in mine.”
--Jane, *Jane Eyre*²⁰

Naturally, Jane’s eventual estrangement from Mr. Rochester is the catalyst for her complete regression to social, as well as imaginative infancy, thus beginning her second arc of identifiable cognitive growth. On a basic level, Jane acknowledges that “not a tie holds [her] to human society...[and she has] no relative but the universal mother, nature.”²¹ Aligning herself with a return to innocence, Jane strips herself of all cultural ties, and petitions for nurture and revitalization. Consequently, she becomes a creature of nature, devolving to a primitive stage at which she is overwhelmed by her animal instincts for food and sleep. However, Jane does not anticipate that, bereft of love’s stabilizing influence, she will also be overtaken by unbounded imagination, and, when left to wander the moors, be forced to confront a physical manifestation

²⁰ *Jane Eyre*, p. 461.

²¹ *Jane Eyre*, p. 362.

of the “trackless waste” that has now expanded to fill her entire reality. Ultimately, Jane experiences her worst fear: an imagination in which she is completely helpless, alone and mired in an expanse of overextended liberty.

Once again, Jane is rescued by the tutelage of characters who she considers to be morally and socially elevated. Nursed by the loving Diana and Mary, Jane comes to worship them utterly. She confides:

There was a reviving pleasure in this intercourse, of a kind now tasted by me for the first time—the pleasure arising from perfect congeniality of tastes, sentiments, and principles. I liked to read what they liked to read: what they enjoyed delighted me; what they approved I revered.²²

However, it is important to note that Jane and her female cousins commune with each other on sympathetic and intellectual—but never religious—bases. Nevertheless, the verb “reverenced” is used yet again to denote Jane’s shifting pantheon, which readily admits exceptional mortals in addition to Christianity’s God.

Overt religion intercedes, then, with the influence of St. John Rivers. Although he tutors Jane in Hindostanee extremely late in the novel, he functions as a sort of second Lowood, more specifically subjugating and trivializing Jane by capitalizing on his dominance in the student – teacher dynamic. Acutely aware of his ever increasing authority, Jane states,

By degrees, [St. John] acquired a certain influence over me that took away my liberty of mind...I daily wished more to please him: but to do so, I felt daily more and more that I must disown half my nature, stifle half my faculties, wrest my tastes from their original bent, force myself to the adoption of pursuits for which I had no natural vocation.²³

Immediately recognizable as an unwilling transformation, and a betrayal of her inner self, she is nevertheless compelled to please and emulate St. John. Ultimately, St. John overwhelms Jane’s imagination, but she is unable to expel him like any common interloper. Demanding that Jane

²² *Jane Eyre*, p. 391.

²³ *Jane Eyre*, p. 444.

commit herself to the purely logical, religious, and elevated, St. John emerges as a striking foil to Rochester. Completely denying the autonomy of mind that she has since perfected twice during the course of the novel, as well as omitting romantic love from his calculations, he forcibly divorces Jane from the natural—and therefore from the “half of herself” that sympathizes with her inner devolved animal, and retains instinctual allegiance.

It is significant that Jane is only able to fully gain independence from St. John when she hears Mr. Rochester’s disembodied exclamation “Jane! Jane! Jane!”²⁴ The origin of this utterance is irrelevant; but, whether a psychological manifestation, heavenly direction, or spiritual interconnectedness, the fact that Jane hears *Rochester’s* voice, is essential. Only the revival of love is enough for St. John’s insistence to lose effect, and for his imposition of divine import upon his proposal to be revealed as fallacy.

Finally, Jane’s reconciliation with Rochester presents the complete unification of two bodies and minds. Serving as his eye and arm, Jane truly becomes the “bone of his bone, and flesh of his flesh.”²⁵ Additionally, she uses words to shape Rochester’s reality, thereby reciprocally transmitting images to fuel his imagination. Jane quite literally performs the same function she attributed earlier to Rochester—her influence is what expands his mind from a bleak waste sustained only by inner torment, to fruitful, hopeful bliss. Although their comfortable order has been inverted, and Jane now enacts the function of imaginative liberator, it is still necessary to note that supporting and cultivating Rochester’s imagination is what fulfills and gives stricture to Jane’s life.

Ultimately, *Jane Eyre* problematizes identity by presenting a character who answers injustice with volatility and laudability with abject worship. A highly reactionary and somewhat

²⁴ *Jane Eyre*, p. 467.

²⁵ *Jane Eyre*, p. 500.

easily influenced character, Jane's two progressions of imaginative release, prohibition, and moderated expanse are necessary for her to formulate a self adequately reconciled between the extremes of "instinct and intellect." Although the circumstances surrounding each maturation differ, it is important that Jane's imaginative pathways recur. In other words, Jane's imagination learns and grows, but—regardless of her age—her imagination must undergo an uninterrupted and necessarily cyclical evolutionary process. Underscoring the physical evolution of humanity as a whole, Jane makes mirror advancements in the microcosm of her mind. Most importantly, however, is the determinism of love in Jane's imaginative settlement. The ultimate civilizing force, love exists as a necessary cognitive editor and imaginative conciliator, thereby allowing both Jane and Mr. Rochester to develop into unified and expanded selves.

Villette:

"[Lucy] has never been truly recognized by any critic. [...] She represents a type of woman before unknown to the realms of novel-land."

-Susan M. Waring, 1866

Lucy Snowe is a protagonist haunted by the incongruities between imagination and reason. Predisposed to thrive in a realm in which she is both arbitress and editor of these two, inherently contradictory, spheres, she chooses to craft a narrative in which she preferentially favors the real over the ideal, and excises any information that compromises her emotional anonymity, or her self-image as a fully prudent, circumspect, and proper Protestant lady. The account that results is likewise characterized, particularly in its beginnings, by a frustratingly scarce and occasionally incomplete tale that relies heavily upon accounts of the dramas of other characters rather than Lucy's own perspectives. As such, Lucy willfully manufactures the initial narrative so that she is a centrifugal player, interacting crucially with each supporting character, and utilizing the trajectories of their more central stories to reflectively reveal aspects of her own personality.

As the story progresses, however, Lucy's imagination begins to increasingly collide with her carefully constructed reality. Her maturation during the course of the book is characterized by three distinct imaginative arcs. Each of these sequences is catalyzed by the intrusion of a particular emotional excess, the surfeit of which causes her to, however briefly, immoderately succumb to the lure of intemperate imagination. In an attempt to compensate, she subsequently reconstructs her psychological boundaries, undergoing a period of self-imposed normativity in which she either symbolically suppresses her desires, or replaces them with domestic pursuits. However, as the sources of her distress begin to increasingly reflect on the incongruities between her expanding desires and the limited social, romantic, and emotional requirements of her gender, she is forced to use the mitigating platform of the arts to safely explore alternatives to

conventional womanhood. Ultimately, Lucy uses the guise of performativity to safely fuse the realms of realism and imagination, and manufacture a liminal space in which she can safely reconcile social stricture, independent ambition, and romantic fulfillment.

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"I mean that I value vision, and I hate being struck stone blind."

--Lucy, Villette²⁶

The beginning of Lucy's narrative is characterized by a distinct lack of first-person exposition. Populated instead with accounts of the interaction between Mrs. Bretton, her willful son Graham, and the precocious Polly, Lucy's own character is nothing more than an elusive specter, observed to function only in the supporting roles of observer and outsider. However, even after she leaves the relative comfort of her godmother's home and is forced to endure an extended period of hardship and solitude, Lucy declines to share any personal information with the reader. Instead, she offers scant descriptions that rely on the reader's imagination, but preserve her own anonymity and the privacy of her thoughts. This phenomenon is exemplified when she writes glibly:

I will permit the reader to picture me, for the next eight years, as a bark slumbering through halcyon weather, in a harbour still as glass—the steersman stretched on the little deck, his face up to heaven, his eyes closed: buried, if you will, in a long prayer. A great many women and girls are supposed to pass their lives something in that fashion; why not I with the rest? ²⁷

This excerpt is crucial for the following reasons. Firstly, although Lucy's facetious comment presupposes that her perpetuation of such a narrative fiction (i.e. that of her tranquil

²⁶ *Villette*, p. 532. This particular quote is one of the great ironies of the novel. Chastising Paulina on her willingness to overlook Graham's faults, Lucy suggests that she herself is able to enjoy love without letting it blind her faculties. Nevertheless, the final cycle of imaginative maturation reveals that Lucy too falls victim to love's confusions.

²⁷ *Villette*, p. 42.

life up to this point) is for the benefit of the reader, it is evident that the anecdote has an alternate function: to preserve the option for Lucy to symbolically assimilate herself into the ranks of bourgeois femininity, cushioned from misfortune by wealth, repose, and Christian devotion. Secondly, it shows her comfort with editing her own story, both in the supposed interests of the reader, and also for the purpose of manufacturing her desired public image. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, it lends greater meaning to the measures that Lucy, somewhat jealous of the uncomplicated life that so many women are allowed to lead, takes to mitigate her own internal “storms” during the course of the novel. In other words, this is the first instance of a textual pattern in which she takes great pains to shroud herself in contrived simplicity with the assistance of blatant factual omission—particularly by dissociating herself from her insubordinate imagination—in order to present an austere and circumspect account.

However, despite Lucy’s best intentions, she is regardless overwhelmed by her emotions. The first instance of such an event occurs after Lucy has matriculated to the Rue Fossette and taken up her post as governess. Ruminating on her childhood, and her habit of pleading apathy, she exclaims fervently,

Oh, my childhood! I had feelings: passive as I lived, little as I spoke, cold as I looked, when I thought of past days I *could* feel. About the present, it was better to be stoical; about the future—such a future as mine—to be dead. And in catalepsy and dead trance I studiously held the quick of my nature...[until] One night a thunderstorm broke...[and] I was roughly roused and obliged to live...I did long, achingly, then and for four-and-twenty hours afterwards, for something to fetch me out of my present existence and lead me upwards and onwards.²⁸

This elemental upheaval is a violent externalization of Lucy’s suppressed discontent, in which her restlessness reaches such extremes that it completely overtakes her mental faculties and she is unable to maintain her catatonic indifference. Although her imagination does not retain full hold for more than a day, she is appalled by her loss of control, and denounces her

²⁸ *Villette*, p. 134.

transgressive longing for change as a “mutinous” and “miserable” rebellion against reason.²⁹

Drawing a parallel between her internal upheaval and the Biblical tale of Jael and Sisera, she describes her attempts to fatally murder her ambition with a proverbial nail to the temple. Although she fails in her ultimate objective, overall hegemony is regained, and her consciousness settles into a passive intermediary state, leaving the threat to slumber while she turns her attentions to the more pleasant figurative—and most importantly, domestically central—prospect of “Heber coming home.”

It is fascinating that Lucy aligns herself with the dual identity of the empowered wife, who is responsible for both slaying the commander of the infidel army and also for maintaining the image of expectant domesticity. An easily liminal figure, Jael presides over a tenuous boundary in which action is not only accepted, but praiseworthy under extreme provocation. Clearly, Lucy finds her imagination’s rebellion to be one of these severe situations; however, when she fails in fully reasserting her psychological dominance, it is significant that she reverts to a traditional female role from which, due to its social normativity, she derives comfort. As such, her foray into the realm of gender role transgression is brief, once again predicated on her singular ability to manage her reality and deftly ignore the growing threat of her own mutinous imagination.

Subsequently, Lucy attempts to enforce a period of extreme normativity, in which she immerses herself in her role as governess and teacher. However, despite her best intentions, Lucy is unable to hold herself entirely apart from her peers, as she has managed to do henceforth throughout the novel. Seeking to alleviate some of the loneliness and helplessness that prompted her first imaginative turmoil, Lucy tries to forge amicable connections with her fellow teachers. However, this attempt at ordinariness remains unfulfilled. She admits judiciously, “...I must not

²⁹ *Villette*, p. 135.

complain. I lived in a house full of robust life; I might have had companions, and I chose solitude.”³⁰ Even her eagerness to become Dr. John’s confidant and co-conspirator is thwarted by Mme. Beck, who, while “on duty,” interrupts before Lucy can obtain the name of that singular female whom she is to guard on Dr. John’s behalf. As such, Lucy remains mired in the real, and is unable to traverse the boundary to even the small ideal of friendship.

The lone opportunity that she has to enter the realm of the ideal without fear of retribution is in the fête day vaudeville, in which M. Paul insists that Lucy take on the role of the fop. First of all, it is important that Lucy takes on this role under duress—at this point in time, she is unable to independently traverse the boundaries between the real and the ideal, and requires an intermediary to make the transition possible. Lucy, “without being allowed time or power to deliberate” is likewise shut in the attic which harbors the genesis of much of her imaginative distress during the course of the novel (the elusive spectre, the Nun), and made to transform herself.³¹

Secondly, although she is initially reluctant to take on the role, she edits her portrayal in much the same way that she edits her own narrative. Decisively asserting control over the method by which she will represent the fop on stage, she refuses to betray her essential femininity. She observes resolutely, “I had consented to take a man’s name and part; as to his dress—*halte là!* No. I would keep my own dress; come what might.”³² As such, Lucy manufactures an unusual costume, in which her only male adornments are the vest, collar, cravat, and paletôt. Arguably, it is the peripheral costume that allows her to ascertain the mirrored love story behind the vaudeville itself (that of Ginevra Fanshawe and Dr. John,) and “recklessly

³⁰ *Villette*, p. 155.

³¹ *Villette*, p. 157.

³² *Villette*, p. 171.

[alter] the spirit of the *rôle*” to accordingly satirize their ill-suited courtship.³³ Moreover, she admits hesitantly,

What I felt that night, and what I did, I no more expected to feel and do, than to be lifted in a trance to the seventh heaven. Cold, reluctant, apprehensive, I had accepted a part to please another: ere long, warming, becoming interested, taking courage, I acted to please myself. (p. 174)

This passage demonstrates the mitigating aspects of the theatre. Forced to undergo a creative process in which she takes a foreign and distasteful framework (recall that she terms the fop the “butterfly, talker, and traitor,”) and modifies it until she can act it to her satisfaction, Lucy successfully traverses between gender roles while altering each to suit her fancy. Thus, it is reasonable to claim that Lucy expends her creative energy in a suitable framework, and dispels a great deal of her internal frustration and discontent. She does so by fundamentally undercutting established social delineations of gender and gender-linked propriety, thus alleviating the self-repression brought on by her desire for anonymity and role conformity.

Furthermore, the stage is a practicable example of a mitigating forum that allows Lucy to bridge the gap between reality and imagination when she is forced to take a logical and, by definition, unimpeachable article (the written word) and modify it according to her own design and vision.

Finally, it is crucial that it is in fact *her* vision of the character. In other words, there is a definitive transformation between the Lucy that takes an action “to please another,” and the Lucy that acts to “please herself.” Although Lucy demurs that she will “never be drawn into a similar affair,” she admits that “a keen relish for dramatic expression had revealed itself as part of [her] nature.”³⁴ Despite qualifying that she will suppress the impulse because “it would not do for a mere looker on at life” to express such dramatic tendencies, this interlude shows that she is

³³ *Villette*, p. 174.

³⁴ *Villette*, p. 174.

capable of decisively breaking free of her passivity and, more importantly, that her imagination can be safely explored in certain safe, and governable venues.

II.

These struggles with the natural character, the strong native bent of the heart, may seem futile and fruitless, but in the end they do good. They tend, however slightly, to give the actions, the conduct, that turn which Reason approves, and which Feeling, perhaps, too often opposes: They certainly make a difference in the general tenor of a life, and enable it to be better regulated, more equable, quieter on the surface; and it is on the surface only the common gaze will fall. As to what lies below, leave that with God.

--Lucy, *Villette*³⁵

Lucy's next imaginative arc is once again predicated by her overwhelming discontent. This time, her self-repression and loneliness result in an acute mental and physical breakdown; and, the tangible storm that accompanies her "peculiarly agonizing depression" manifests with even more ferocity than its predecessor.³⁶ Once again, the storm causes her to seek solace in the outdoors, until she cannot suppress "the wild longing to breathe [the] October wind on the little hill far without the city walls."³⁷ It is understandable that in such an anarchic state of consciousness, she pursues oneness with nature, as the burgeoning requirements of her ever-insistent imagination eschew the landscape of social stricture.

It is significant then, that she suppresses the impulse to abandon the city, and instead valiantly attempts to mitigate the inconsistencies between her unfettered imagination and established socio-realistic boundaries by engaging in Catholic confession. Disappointingly, however, religion proves an imperfect mediator. Although Lucy departs from the church feeling

³⁵ *Villette*, p. 224. Note the similarity of this quote to Charlotte Brontë's own missive to Robert Southey. In each, both author and character counsel their reader to maintain an outward fiction for the sake of society, while pursuing their own desires privately.

³⁶ *Villette*, p. 197.

³⁷ *Villette*, p. 202.

that “Reason could [now] cope” with the heightened demands of her imagination, her reason is unable to timely regain control, and she collapses at the height of her distress.

The novel at this time enters something of a paradisiacal episode, in which Lucy awakens to find herself in a “polished...and pretty” world exactly similar to that of “Bretton and [her] fourteenth year.”³⁸ An obvious reversion to the safety and security of her childhood—vastly dissimilar from the “thin, haggard, and hollow-eyed” orphan who embarked for France earlier in the novel—Lucy begins to achieve renewed bodily and mental health.³⁹

However, having failed to restrain her imagination before her collapse, Lucy remains in a slightly vulnerable and definitively altered state, and is susceptible to her usual enigmatic emotional excesses. Lucy’s stay, therefore, at La Terrasse, becomes something of a foray into a proverbial fairyland, in which she has achieved perfect filial harmony. Likewise, this intermediary stage in her imaginative cycle can be aligned with a period of normativity, in which she attempts to immerse herself within the family unit and surfeit herself of the companionship, amity, and affection she has been deprived of at the Rue Fossette.

Moreover, as the mythos of the Brettons’ patronage continues and she attends various concerts and functions, Lucy emerges as a character who has access to the bourgeois realm that she has henceforth been denied due to a lack of social station. (It should be noted that Lucy still requires something of an impetus in order to camouflage herself convincingly as a member of the bourgeoisie, and Mrs. Bretton must coerce her by subterfuge into wearing proper clothing. Nevertheless, Lucy’s pink dress functions in much the same way as her fop costume, giving her the courage to investigate a new social platform while being concealed by the appropriate guise).

³⁸ *Villette*, p. 211-212.

³⁹ *Villette*, p. 52.

During this time, her sensibilities expand accordingly, and her imagination goes unchecked in several respects. Her interactions with performance escalate, and she is forced to qualify her notions of femininity in response to two extreme performative portrayals.

The first incident that presents Lucy with an unusual and culturally threatening image of femininity is during her interlude at the museum. While perusing the exhibit, Lucy admits to being openly drawn only to pictures that possess “Nature’s power,” thereby alluding to the fact that the museum is a forum for the Imagination. Interestingly, she is particularly intrigued by a painting of Cleopatra. A perfect picture of excess in every way, Lucy describes Cleopatra as having “a wealth of muscle, an affluence of flesh,” in addition to being surrounded by an “abundance of material” and a profusion of various vessels and jewels.⁴⁰ Disenchanted with the gluttonous image of a female indisposed to do independent work, Lucy haughtily chooses to turn her attention towards other works of art. This painting, however, represents an extreme of courtly femininity, in which the queen glories in an excess of materialism, and does not deign to help others, despite her obvious physical ability. Lucy, who has been schooled by hardship to reject the nonindustrious woman, refuses this interpretation as one that is displeasing and immoral, and thus dominant in the wrong respects.

Thus, the insatiable Cleopatra represents an extreme misappropriation of power, and Lucy’s disapproval reveals her desire for independence and action rather than fruitless repose. This sentiment is reaffirmed in the following sequence, when M. Paul disapprovingly uproots Lucy from her bench observing the Cleopatra, denounces her “astounding insular audacity” as one befitting a “garçon,” and deposits her in front of a demure panel portraying the “flat, dead, pale, and formal” visages of socially acceptable femininity.⁴¹ This series of paintings, depicting

⁴⁰ *Villette*, p. 250.

⁴¹ *Villette*, p. 251-252.

the maiden, wife, mother, and crone, elicit Lucy's even fiercer ire. She denounces them heartily as "hypocrit[ical]...exasperating...unwholesome...[and] grim," and bemoans that she could not bear to live with such "ill-humored, bloodless, brainless nonentities!"⁴² Despite the fact that the domestic ideal of womanhood is iconically broken into these four subcategories, she is repulsed by their figurative inaction (doubled by the static nature of the painting itself), and thus reveals her dissatisfaction with the norm and her eagerness to establish new definitions of womanhood. Moreover, it is critical that she calls these figures "brainless," as she therefore explicitly acknowledges that anyone following this preset arc of womanhood has relinquished her autonomy and consented to a life dictated by others. As such, M. Paul's attempt to tutor Lucy in proper feminine behavior is unsuccessful, as she can no more bear this extreme of truncated, unfulfilled, and lifeless womanhood than she could Cleopatra's excesses.

However, Lucy is presented with an intermediary, and far preferable option in the form of Vashti, whom she observes at a play she later attends with Graham Bretton. Once again, the theatre allows Lucy a liminal space for imaginative burgeoning. Although this time she observes the performance rather than participating in it, she is overcome by the raw power and intensity of Vashti's display. Absorbed by the depicted character, but likewise by the mastery of the actress herself, Lucy marvels,

To her, what hurts becomes immediately embodied: she looks on it as a thing that can be attacked, worried down, torn in shreds. Scarcely a substance herself, she grapples to conflict with abstractions. Before calamity she is a tigress; she rends her woes, shivers them in convulsed abhorrence. Pain, for her, has no result in good; tears water no harvest of wisdom; on sickness, on death itself she looks with the eye of a rebel. Wicked, perhaps she is, but also she is strong; and her strength has conquered Beauty, has overcome Grace, and bound both at her side, captives peerlessly fair, and docile...⁴³

⁴² *Villette*, p. 252-253.

⁴³ *Villette*, p. 322-323.

Ultimately, Vashti manifests as an almost superhuman entity, who is immune to emotional weaknesses and physical decay. Furthermore, her strength lends her the ability to assimilate already existing features of womanhood—i.e. grace and beauty—into her arsenal by an unusual method. Thus, the actress emerges as something “neither of woman nor of man,” but as a superior being that is unbound by gender proscriptions, and empowered to the point of immortality.⁴⁴ Clearly applauding Vashti’s assertiveness, Lucy challenges the artist of the Cleopatra to “sit down and study this different vision...seek here the mighty brawn, the muscle, the abounding blood, the full-fed flesh he worshipped.”⁴⁵ Unlike the abhorrent still-lives Lucy observed at the museum, Vashti is alive and dynamic, and thereby an appropriate model for improved womanhood.

Once again, however, a male figure intervenes with stern criticism. In “a few terse phrases,” Graham Bretton proclaims that “he judged [Vashti] as a woman, not an artist: it was a branding judgment.”⁴⁶ Thus, Graham only sees the actress as inadequate, dangerous, and subversive, and—solely because of her gender—not as an individual who deserves his respect. Thus, his lack of concern for Vashti’s abilities brings the female plight to the forefront of Lucy’s mind, and the evening is seared into her mind with a bitter “deep-red cross.”⁴⁷

Ultimately, both the interludes at the museum and theatre demonstrate the tensions between male and female gender roles and the imaginative repression against which Lucy must struggle. However, it seems logical that, despite the denunciations of the male figures around her, Lucy imagines expanded and unrestrained female capability to be within her purview—a legitimate possibility that she can judge and co-opt at will. Through the lens of performativity,

⁴⁴ *Villette*, p. 322.

⁴⁵ *Villette*, p. 322.

⁴⁶ *Villette*, p. 325.

⁴⁷ *Villette*, p. 325.

she is able to view the extremes of womanhood (powerful, gluttonous, and demure) and select which aspects she wishes to emulate before applying those lessons to her own life. Once again, she is able to use liminal spheres to safely examine unconventional gender possibilities while retaining the outward image of precise social conformity.

Additionally, it is important to acknowledge the havoc that unchecked imagination wreaks upon Lucy's romantic ambition. Believing herself (particularly when she and Graham are exchanging regular correspondence) to be capable of receiving Graham's love and affections, Lucy allows herself to sample the final extreme of her imagination. Excited to the point that she adopts "a new creed... a belief in happiness," his letters become "juice of a divine vintage," that fuel her growing infatuation.⁴⁸ However, although there are a number of weeks during which her beloved's letters and visits come regularly, the reader knows them to be no more than a friendly gesture, and Graham's romantic attentions are soon preoccupied by the youthful Paulina de Bassompierre. Inevitably, Lucy sinks into depression and disappointment, and the spell initiated by La Terrasse is finally broken. However, although Lucy is denied her romantic ideal, it is important to note that her imaginative excesses during this period allow her to experience unique alternatives to the social and gender definitions that plague her throughout the course of the novel.

Ultimately, even Lucy's rejection allows her to achieve a measure of autonomy, when later in the book the reader observes her refuse Graham for the first time. That is to say, when Graham asks Lucy to serve as messenger and stealthily communicate his love to the as-yet unaware Paulina, Lucy vehemently refuses. Although she has henceforth been pliant to Graham's every whim and turn of mood, she finally finds her dissenting voice. "NO, *I could not*," she proclaims decisively, and with this declaration feels "an inward courage, warm and

⁴⁸ *Villette*, p. 316.

resistant.”⁴⁹ Observing that Graham always seeks to give her “a role not [hers,]” Lucy rejects this opportunity for performative experience, at it is one that Graham has limited and predetermined. Now that she has witnessed Vashti’s autonomy, Lucy also seeks to actively eliminate what pains her, and is able to refuse the demand of a male authority figure. Thus, Lucy’s reversion to reality is nevertheless characterized by the lessons of her imaginative interlude, and she able to achieve creative temperance. Likewise, her basic reality shifts, and she is able to conceive of having a more active voice.

III.

“Hundreds of the prayers with which we weary Heaven, bring to the suppliant no fulfillment. Once haply in life, one golden gift falls prone in the lap—one boon full and bright, perfect from Fruition’s mint.”

--Lucy, Vilette⁵⁰

Finally, the last arc of Lucy’s imaginative maturation is characterized by her burgeoning love for the frustrating and enigmatic Monsieur Paul. Despite having again fallen victim to her emotions, Lucy does her best to suppress her imagination, shrouding her feelings in secrecy and only alluding to their relationship in “brotherly and sisterly” terms.⁵¹ Clearly having learned from her disastrous and one-sided infatuation with Graham Bretton, Lucy only halfway acknowledges her emotions by structuring them as hypotheticals and abstractions that bear no possibility of fulfillment. Even when M. Paul appears to have forgotten one of their weekly lessons, Lucy remains mute, refusing even to demand her right to this small notice. She equivocates blandly: “Left alone, I was passive; repulsed, I withdrew; forgotten—my lips would not utter, nor my eyes dart a reminder.”⁵² As such, Lucy manifests—at least for a time—a

⁴⁹ *Vilette*, p. 395.

⁵⁰ *Vilette*, p. 598.

⁵¹ *Vilette*, p. 513.

⁵² *Vilette*, p. 514.

passive and submissive character mirroring the museum's pale and lifeless shades of misdirected womanhood. However, it is important to note that even in her silence, Lucy exhibits a degree of autonomy, as she insists that she be pursued by her love interest, rather than demeaning herself to initiate contact.

Moreover, Lucy is by no means modeling herself upon the images of which M. Paul seemed to so wholeheartedly approve. Rather, Lucy's interactions with M. Paul throughout the course of the novel are characterized by a sinusoidal pattern of affection and frustration; submission and confrontation; amity and temper, that only in the final third of the manuscript seeks linearity in love. Therefore, it requires a dramatic challenge to the status quo for Lucy to dispense with this established pattern.

This catalyst occurs when Mme. Beck announces M. Paul's permanent departure from the Rue Fossette. Only having just admitted to herself the possibility of M. Paul "becoming more than friend or brother," Lucy becomes increasingly agitated by the thought of never seeing him again.⁵³ An internal storm begins to build, and she describes her "heart [trembling] in its place" and her "blood [being] troubled in its current."⁵⁴ Mme. Beck, perhaps noticing the frenzied danger of Lucy's activated imagination, seeks to distract Lucy and prevent her from seeing M. Paul when he arrives to bid the other students and teachers goodbye. Thwarted by Mme. Beck's conniving, Lucy is dumbfounded by "a grief inexpressible over a loss unendurable." She helplessly beseeches the reader, asking "What should I do; when all my life's hope was thus torn by the roots out of my riven, outraged heart."⁵⁵ A clear—and somewhat shocking—departure from the hesitance of several pages prior, the reader observes Lucy's

⁵³ *Villette*, p. 553.

⁵⁴ *Villette*, p. 554.

⁵⁵ *Villette*, p. 556.

sudden abandonment of reason, her admission that she is hopelessly in love, and her wholehearted submersion into the realm of imaginative possibility.

In other words, Lucy is transformed by this instant of disgrace and denial, and becomes restless to the point at which “no yoke could now be borne—no curb obeyed.” Entirely insubordinate to Madame Beck’s subsequent dictates that she retire to bed, Lucy resists, preferring to remain “untamed, tortured, [and] pacing a solitary room in an unalterable passion of silent desolation.”⁵⁶ However, the fact that Lucy engages in such a deliberately recursive and blatantly frustrated action reveals that although she has allowed imagination to overcome reason, she is still bound by the walls of the Rue Fossette, and cannot yet premeditate taking action to deliberately undo the stability of her current environment.

As a result, the final impetus to Lucy’s unleashed and anarchic imagination presents itself in the form of an ill-fated drug, ironically administered to “calm” her nerves. At once, Lucy becomes “alive to new thought,” and her imagination is “roused from its rest [and comes] forth impetuous and venturous.”⁵⁷ Now having completely succumbed to the boundless opportunity of intemperate imagination, Lucy quits the school and joins Villette’s most powerful citizens in an intemperate and somewhat pagan festival. Although she does not directly partake of the festivities, she dons her final costume (a straw hat and concealing shawl) and conducts a form of unusual surveillance upon her friends and her enemies alike.

Ultimately, Lucy primarily focuses her intelligence-gathering upon the “secret junta” composed of Mme. Beck, Pere Silas, Josef Emanuel, and Mme. Walravens, which has been covertly manipulating M. Paul during the course of the entire novel. Importantly, she only musters enough courage to infiltrate their ranks when faced with the possibility of losing M. Paul

⁵⁶ *Villette*, p. 560-561.

⁵⁷ *Villette*, p. 562.

forever. Therefore, Lucy uses love to mitigate her fear of emotional externalization and imaginative intemperance. Even though this is not the first time that Lucy has lost imaginative control during the course of the novel, it *is* the first time that she has reasserted dominance over the situation, turned it to her advantage, and returned to the real world without any spiritual or emotional damage. As a result, she becomes something of a Vashti, anarchic in her release, but able to positively manage the myriad threats that assail her. Lucy is thereby able to strike a tentative truce between reality and imagination. She uses the necessity of her threatened love to manage her unruly imagination, and also appeases her reason by gathering useful information that she can use to exhibit power over her oppressors.

However, this is not a state she can easily maintain without the assistance of her anger, jealousy, and Mme. Beck's ill-intentioned drug. The morning finds Lucy "brought back captive to the rack of suspense," waiting eagerly for news of M. Paul.⁵⁸ Thankfully, M. Paul returns to visit her soon, and gives Lucy the joint platform of fruitful occupation and willing romance upon which to reconcile imagination and reason. Revealing that he had spent the past three weeks preparing a school and home for her use, M. Paul proposes hopefully, "You shall live here and have a school; you shall employ yourself while I am away; you shall think of me sometimes; you shall mind your health and happiness for my sake, and when I come back...take my love. One day share my life. Be my dearest, first on earth."⁵⁹ Lucy, exulting in her new role as independent schoolmistress and beloved, recalls with wonder the unlikelihood of their union:

Once—unknown and unloved, I held him harsh and strange; the low stature, the wiry make, the angles, the darkness, the manner displeased me. Now, penetrated with his influence, and living by his affection, having his worth by intellect, and his goodness by heart—I preferred him before all humanity. We parted: he gave me his pledge, and then his farewell. We parted: the next day—he sailed.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ *Villette*, p. 597.

⁵⁹ *Villette*, pg. 607, 612. The quote given fuses M. Paul's lines from two separate pages in an attempt at continuity.

⁶⁰ *Villette*, pg. 613.

Ultimately, the above excerpt alludes to Lucy's imaginative growth during the course of the novel. The "angles and darkness" that she describes are not only meant to refer to M. Paul's physical features, but also the subversive and threatening aspects of her own unruly and untamed imagination. However, as the passage suggests, love civilizes them both, turning two imperfect individuals into a cohesive and mutually fulfilling pair. Moreover, Lucy is offered the opportunity to have the benefit of domesticity without its immediate demands. Able to eagerly anticipate M. Paul's return, Lucy thus experiences something akin to an extended courtship, in which she can revel in the experience of being in love without being subjugated by the factuality of marriage. Even more significantly, she is able to undertake independent employment and procure her own income. Thus, Lucy is economically, occupationally, and intellectually active, all of which are made possible and socially acceptable because she is engaged and therefore under the named purview of a male administrator.

As such, *Villette* presents a character who begins the novel unwilling to share even the most basic personal emotions, but ends it divulging the extremity and all-encompassing nature of her romance. Despite the fact that she has often been frustrated by the concept of a freed imagination, going so far as to sabotage her own emotions in order to avoid losing control, her imaginative evolution is characterized by her stepwise progression towards realistic and creative unity. By undergoing each cycle of imaginative excess, forced normativity, and performative traversal, Lucy is tutored in how to reconcile and balance each conflicting aspect of her personality. Once again, love emerges as a perfect mediator, allowing both Lucy and M. Paul to expand and improve within the framework of their relationship, while maintaining necessary social proscriptions.

Conclusion:

Overall, the Victorian era was marked by the entry of evolutionary theory into the popular mindset. Although hotly debated, the challenge to creationism drastically affected how individuals viewed themselves and their legacies. Authors such as George Meredith even went so far as to take up the dispute in their literary works. For example, Meredith implicitly addressed the notion in his poem, “What Are We First?” which not only titularly begs the question of mankind’s origins, but also examines the civilizing factors that distinguish humans from mere animals. Therefore, primarily because of human conceit, evolution functions not simply a matter of physical improvement, but also in measure of intellectual and imaginative advancement. Likewise, it seems particularly interesting to consider certain works of literature—in this case *Villette* and *Jane Eyre*—with an eye towards how the authors deal with their characters’ evolutionary arcs.

This thesis has considered in detail the ways in which each character attempts to navigate the difficult realms of realistic fact and imaginative possibility. Each possessing a uniquely rebellious streak, Jane and Lucy are simultaneously unhappy with the status quo of their gender, but fear social retribution and engage in reactionary imaginative self-repression so as not to invalidate their femininity in the public eye. In an attempt to reconcile the aspects of their personalities that conflict with social proscriptions, they each undergo several processes of cyclical personal growth. Likewise, they use a combination of performativity and romantic love in order to mitigate and cultivate their imaginations to a state that is both socially, and personally acceptable. Reminiscent of something akin to trial and error, these cyclical processes recur several times throughout the novel, while the character undergoes an overarching linear trend of stepwise improvement.

Ultimately, it is interesting to consider these trends from a perspective simultaneously literary and scientific. Perhaps these works pose a commentary on human evolution, as they seem to indicate that mankind, unlike animals, must undergo deliberate and forced action in order to acquire any measure of self-improvement. Requiring a very rigorous tutoring process, man is incapable of making a single improvement that will be automatically carried on to his offspring. Rather, imaginative evolution is also a microcosmic event that occurs on an individual basis as well as species wide. Thus, these novels use Lucy and Jane as models to teach the reader that regardless of social status, gender, or life events, the experience of gender marginalization, realistic suffocation, and overwhelming imaginative yearning, is universal.

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