I. Introduction

_Villette_ (1853), Charlotte Brontë’s final novel, confronts the same agonizing question as her other novels, namely the dilemma of how a powerless woman can struggle to realize self-independence and self-emancipation in the midst of a male-dominated society. But the writer’s solution to the question diverges from the traditional frames of her other stories and offers the reader new glimpses. As Judith Mitchell points out, _Villette_ finds a way for a female character to “negotiate a realistic pathway to both love and independence” without submission to the dominant hierarchy (69). The reviews and comments immediately after its publication were minor but relatively fair. Generally speaking, the main arguments of the criticisms were about the character and plot of Lucy Snowe. Meantime, the complaint of coarseness from Brontë’s friend Harriet Martineau, hurt her deeply. Martineau objected that the book is covered by “an atmosphere of pain” and what all the female characters think and deal with is nothing but love (quoted in Gérin 494). Why was _Villette_ so “disagreeable” in those reviewers’ eyes? Matthew Arnold sums up the reason as that “the writer’s mind contains nothing but hunger, rebellion and rage, and therefore that is all she can, in fact put into her book” (quoted in Allott 201). On the other hand, there were favorite reviews, for example, the critic of the Spectator considered the book a bitter complaint against the destiny of those women who were in need of work for their living (quoted in Allott 182).

_Villette_ did not receive much feminist critical attention until the publication of Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s _The Mad Woman in the Attic_ in 1979. Gilbert and Gubar regard it as Charlotte Brontë’s “most overtly and despairing feminist novel.” Since the 1980s, feminist criticisms have mainly focused on interpreting female desire, the relationship between power and love, and exchanging gender roles in the work. Actually, _Villette_ is not simply about a solution to the emancipation of a repressed single woman in a patriarchal society, but reflects a social problem about “redundant” women in the Victorian age. Brontë creates a fictional model of a spinster in nineteenth century England and finally comes up with emigration as a transition for the “excess”
woman to forge independent lives. Apparently, existing interpretations of *Villette* have neglected to situate the work in this specific historical context.

Mrs Oliphant, who frequently emphasized the difference between married and unmarried writers, argued that Brontë’s powerful work originated from her “intense yearning and frustration as a single woman” (quoted in Davis 245). It does not matter whether Mrs Oliphant’s argument is true or not, but the social problem of single women in the Victorian era was statistically true. Although Brontë claimed that *Villette* “touches on no matter of public interest,” she was acutely conscious that nineteenth-century English society had no obvious role or place for the unmarried female. In *Villette*, the author sets her novel in a foreign country and uses emigration as a means to transfer her heroine to the new place, which was crucial to resolve the problem of a single female in nineteenth century Britain. Female emigration in the Victorian period is regarded as a feminist movement by some modern historians. This is not to say that Brontë consciously designed a solution to the problem of the middle-class single woman, but later critics can hardly avoid engaging with contemporary issues and they are inevitably determined by the social circumstances and literature around them.

In this paper, I will analyze the text in the historical context of female emigration to show that *Villette* is the result of the social climate of calls for female emigration in the Victorian age. Through this analysis, I attempt to explore in what way the foreign country “Labassecour” differs from Lucy’s home, what the new place provides for the heroine and how she manages to overcome obstacles and realize her economic independence. In order to pursue such research, we must know more clearly Victorian attitudes toward middle-class women’s roles within the domestic sphere and their real position in the period during which Brontë was writing.

II. Historical Context

There was an imbalance of male and female in the population in the mid-Victorian period as the result of higher child mortality among boys and the emigration of men to America and the colonies. Statistics show that by 1851, two years before the publication of *Villette*, there were over a million unmarried women and about 400,000 “excess women” in Britain. The most significant point is that most of them were educated women and belonged to the upper class (Davis 246). Some Victorian commentators considered the disparity in population an urgent problem. For example, in 1862, in his essay “Why Are Women Redundant?” the liberal manufacturer W. R. Greg argued that single women remain “the problem to be solved, the evil and anomaly to be cured” (quoted in Poovey 2). Greg even presented a plan to “remove five hundred thousand women from the mother
country . . . to the colonies” (quoted in Poovey 5). The problem of single women in English society caused such public attention that they became the source material of literature and art. Richard Redgrave was one of the first and the most persistent in representing the plight of what Greg called the “redundant woman,” on the theme of which Redgrave’s first painting, The Reduced Gentleman’s Daughter, was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1840 (Roberts 57). All these facts authentically reflect women’s condition in the nineteenth century. That is to say, it was widely accepted by the Victorians that woman was dependent and subordinate to man.

Even though early in 1792 in Vindication of the Rights of Woman Mary Wollstonecraft claimed that women should not be viewed as ornaments to society or property to be traded in marriage, definitions of women’s social roles as “will of God,” “duty,” “the demands of motherhood,” and “home-queen” had not been changed by the mid-Victorian period. In the mid-1850s, Coventry Patmore idealized the character of Honoria as the “Angel in the House,” the description which was later regarded as the ideal image of woman (quoted in Poovey 8).

Without the guarantee of marriage, single women had to support themselves by going out to work which was considered to break the ideology of separate spheres for male and female. They were viewed not only as competing for work with men, but also a potential sexual threat to society, which provided a significant reason for Greg to advocate female emigration to the colonies (Poovey 4-5). Therefore, those redundant women were undoubtedly excluded by the social institution owing to the fact that they could not fulfill the marriage target in a period when marriage was the only acceptable and respectful situation for middle-class women. As a single woman from genteel background, the most likely option for employment was as a paid companion or governess (Gleadle 53). But an alternative to being a governess was not so agreeable because their status was still ambiguous at that time. Lack of marriage opportunities and work led surplus women to turn to emigration for searching an outlet. On the contrary, for social commentators like Greg, female emigration was an effective way to eliminate the “evil” on account of their opinion of redundant women’s threat to men’s opportunities and moral order (Poovey 4).

Between 1849 and 1862, there were some voluntary societies to aid single female emigrants of middle classes to the colonies, where they were thought to have better chances for marriage and employment (Peterson 16-17). For example, in 1849, the Governess Benevolent Institution turned to colonial emigration as one potential solution for educated single women (Midgley133). However, the actual condition of emigration for unmarried middle-class female was not always successful as the fictional Lucy Snowe in Labassecour. The main reason was held to be “the lack of proper selection,” “the unsuitability of those migrated” and the difficulty of accustoming themselves to the new
environment different from Britain (Carrothers 274). Nevertheless, under the influence of a broader enthusiasm for colonial emigration at this period, some feminists began to promote emigration for middle-class women. For instance, Martineau, had called for assistance to single educated women such as governesses to emigrate while writing a series on emigration to Australia for the Daily News in 1851 (Midgley 138).

Though Brontë was not active in social activities and denied that her work was concerned with any social problems, she could not conceal her interest in women’s difficulties when she expressed her wish to “say something about the condition of women question” in a letter to her publisher W. S. Williams. Moreover, her wide range of reading concerning social problems evinces this. She read not only some contemporary fictions such as Dickens’s David Copperfield and Bleak House, Thackeray’s Pendennis, Kingsley’s Alton Locke, and Mrs Gaskell’s Ruth, but a number of discussions and surveys of social issues, including Carlyle’s Critical and Miscellaneous Essays, Ruskin’s Stones of Venice, Elizabeth Whateley’s English Life, Social and Domestic (1847), John Stores Smith’s Social Aspects (1850) and so on. Meantime, Brontë was close friends with Mrs Gaskell and Harriet Martineau, so through visits and correspondence with them, she possibly exchanged her views and opinions on society with them while writing Villette.

Female emigration is not an unfamiliar topic for her because one of her best friends, Mary Taylor emigrated to New Zealand in 1845. Relating to Taylor’s emigration, Brontë has indicated her approval while saying “Mary Taylor finds herself free— and on that path for adventure and exertion to which she has so long been seeking admission,” and she further pointed out that “Sickness, Hardship, Danger are her fellow travelers” and “her inseparable companions.” According to Brontë,

“Mary has made up her mind she can not and will not be a governess, a teacher, a milliner, a bonnet-maker nor housemaid. She sees no means of obtaining employment she would like in England, so she is leaving it” (quoted in Barker 353).

Undoubtedly, Mary Taylor would rather take the adventure of emigration than passively accept conventional employments for female. Indeed, she lived a different life in Wellington, where she set up her own shop and earned enough money. In 1860, she returned to Britain and built a house for herself, remaining unmarried until her death in 1893. As Juliet Barker argues, she stuck to her “creed” and remained “unconventional to the end.”

It was not the first time that Brontë touched upon the topic of female emigration in her work. In Shirley, the writer portrayed a minor character Rose Yorke as “a lonely emigrant in some region of the southern hemisphere” (Shirley 128). Comparing to the conventional Caroline’s passive
waiting for marriage, the young Rose was more active to find out a way as a single woman. Though she does not go deep into analyzing the character of Rose Yorke, Brontë briefly presents to us an epitome of a middle-class unmarried woman who attempts to change her destiny by emigrating. Brontë thus recognizes that emigration is a tendency for female to solve their problems both in marriage and economic independence even though the reality of emigration was not optimistic as she thought.

In *Villette*, Brontë amplifies the topic of female emigration and designs her heroine Lucy Snowe a way of “turning a new leaf” in a foreign country (*Villette* 43). When we examine the work, we can recognize that the geographical site plays a significant role in accomplishing Lucy’s independence. The realization of such independence is still controversial. Nevertheless, it is also important to investigate how the foreign country is different from Britain and what it offers Lucy to find her outlet.

### III. The Outlet of Lucy Snowe

Compared to other single middle-class women of the period in Britain, Lucy is portrayed as completely rootless in English society. At the beginning of the story, the heroine lives temporarily at her godmother Mrs Bretton’s house and there is so little description on her background and life that her existence seems to be that of “an outsider.” Lucy is fully aware that “there remained no possibility of dependence on others” (*Villette* 36) and she has to support herself, but there is no more choice for her to achieve this than to become a companion to an old woman, Miss Marchmont. As Kathryn Gleadle states, “single women from genteel backgrounds were extremely circumscribed” because they had to face the problem of social identity and preserve their dignity (53). However, this job does not provide permanent financial security for Lucy. After the death of her employer, Lucy has to “look out for a new place” (*Villette* 43). Her deprivation in Britain, described as “If I died far away from— home, I was going to say, but I had no home— from England, then who would weep?” (*Villette* 50), prompts her to sail to Villette. Gilbert and Gubar interpret this to show that Lucy has “to seek her identity on foreign soil because she is metaphorically a foreigner even in England” (405), which not only helps us to understand Brontë’s use of emigration but points out the purpose of Lucy’s emigration. It is clear that Lucy has no fixed identity in English society. She lacks all the attributes that would establish her social identity, such as money, title, lineage and physical beauty. Nonetheless, the foreign setting offers the opportunity for Lucy to exercise self-discovery and explore her own latent potential to overcome the dilemma imposed by British patriarchal culture.
1. The Difference between Labassecour and Lucy’s Home

It has been generally accepted that the foreign settings both in *The Professor* and *Villette* are associated with Brontë’s Brussels period, but in *Villette* the author did not use Belgium or Brussels directly as she did in *The Professor*. Instead, Belgium is fictionalized as Labassecour and the city of Villette is described as “the great capital of the great kingdom of Labassecour” (*Villette* 55). It seems exceptional that only in *Villette* does Brontë show a new departure in choosing names. She had expressed her concern about the name of her heroine in a letter to her publisher W. S. Smith:

I can hardly express what subtlety of thought made me decide upon giving her a cold name; but at first I called her “Lucy Snowe”, which Snowe I afterwards changed to “Frost.” Subsequently I rather regretted the change, and wished it “Snowe” again. If not too late I should like the alteration to be made now throughout the MS. A cold name she must have; partly, perhaps, on the “lucus a non lucendo” principle—partly on that of the “fitness of things,” for she has about her an external coldness.

Although she makes no explicit reference to fictionalized place names, it is possible to infer that the author attempted to conceal the autobiographical elements in the novel.

However, critics have tended to argue that the changed place names in *Villette* are important and contribute to the whole. Georgia S. Dunbar asserts, “the substitutes are an outlet for Charlotte Brontë’s scathing sarcasm” because “her dislike of Belgium, the Belgians, the French, and Roman Catholicism is epitomized in the place names” (78). For Brontë, her Belgian experience was a painful memory because she suffered from extreme loneliness and isolation, just as she depicted:

There are privation & humiliations to submit to—there is a monotony and uniformity of life—and above all there is a constant sense of solitude in the midst of members—the Protestant the Foreigner is a solitary being whether as teacher or pupil.

Such isolation derives from her Protestant background; as Enid L. Duthie claims, Brontë’s “conviction of English superiority to the foreigner” and her prejudices toward “Catholicism” were obstacles to “friendly relationships” with others (30-1). Her dislike for Belgium possibly influenced her choice of place names. “Labassecour,” literally “farmyard,” is far from matching the concept of a “great kingdom.” Possibly, the “great kingdom” could be supposed to be the author’s sarcasm. When Lucy sees the King and the Queen at a concert, she feels “half cheated, half pleased” because the royal couple are “only a middle-aged soldier and a rather young lady,” and she further describes the King as a “nervous” and “melancholy” man (*Villette* 213). Such representations of the King and the Queen, far from majesty, imply the author’s disapproval of monarchy.

Meanwhile, the meaning of Villette is “small town” in French, which contradicts the description
in the novel that “Villette is a cosmopolitan city” (Villette 82). Besides, “the Rue Fossette,” the site of Madame Beck’s Pensionnat, means “little ditch.” In his The Foreign Vision of Charlotte Brontë (1975), Enid L. Duthie argues that the use of the diminutive is ironical and the fictitious place names “can imply a degree of affection, and irony and affection are not always incompatible” (89). Nevertheless, the fact that the novel’s title is named after the place Villette shows the foreign setting is necessary to the development of the theme. In addition, the substitution of fictional for real place names helps to underline the significance of Lucy’s venture into the unknown.

According to Heather Glen, “Unlike the worlds of either of Brontë’s two previous first-person novels (refers to The Professor and Jane Eyre), Villette’s is one of leisure, of plenitude, comfort and ease” (206). This can be witnessed in Lucy’s first impression about the country, “Equality is much practiced in Labassecour; though not republican in form, it is nearly so in substance” (Villette 82). Certainly, what Jane Eyre experienced in Lowood does not happen in Madame Beck’s Pensionnat. Lucy makes an agreeable appraisal of the school.

“Nothing could be better than all her arrangements for the physical well-being of her scholars. No minds were overtasked; the lessons were well distributed and made incomparably easy to the learner; there was a liberty of amusement, and a provision for exercise which kept the girls healthy; the food was abundant and good; neither pale nor puny faces were anywhere to be seen in the Rue Fossette. She [Madame Beck] never grudged a holiday; she allowed plenty of time for sleeping, dressing, washing, eating; her method in all these matters was easy, liberal, salutary, and rational.” (Villette 73)

Such approving descriptions show that “the life, movement, and variety” of the “flourishing educational establishment” made it “a complete and most charming contrast to many English institutions of the same kind” (Villette 75). Therefore, Lucy believes that “many an austere English school-mistress would do vastly well to imitate it if exacting English parents would let them” (Villette 73). Apart from the school, she also presents the prosperity of Villette as “one blaze, one broad illumination,” and she thinks “the whole world seems abroad; moonlight and heaven are banished; the town, by her own flambeaux, beholds her own splendor— gay dresses, grand equipages, fine horses and gallant riders throng the bright streets” (Villette 452).

Yet the world of the pleasant and prosperous is not the whole world of Villette. Duthie argues, “By far the most serious barrier to Brontë’s complete understanding of the continental milieu was undoubtedly her prejudice and suspicion where religious beliefs and practices different from her own were concerned” (115). Duthie’s words suggest that the writer has strong consciousness of religious distinction between Britain and other countries. Apparently, the novel depicts a Protestant
in Catholic society. More specifically, *Villette* was written in a period when the conflict between Protestant and Catholic was intensifying. In Diana Peschier’s opinion, “Brontë recognized that she had to take advantage of the hold which ideas such as anti-Catholicism and styles like the Gothic had over the public imagination.” Thus, it is unavoidable that the author displays the conflict between Victorian Protestantism and the Catholicism of Labassecour. The so-called anti-Catholic passages offended some of the readers, and some critics have identified *Villette* as an intensely anti-Catholic work. As Peschier observes, Brontë was surprised and hurt by criticisms of her depiction of Catholicism in *Villette*, particularly upset by her friend Martineau’s review of the book, which observed that “Currer Bell goes out her way to express a passionate hatred of Romanism” (139). Gilbert and Gubar mention that “nothing is more irritating to some readers than the anti-papist prejudice of *Villette*” (414). Robert Bernard Martin considers Brontë’s anti-Catholicism as “axiomatic” and employs it as the basis of his critique in exploring rational thinking and emotionalism in her work (148). On the other hand, Rosemary Clark-Beattie acknowledges that *Villette* differs strikingly from the “standard run of mid-century anti-Catholic literature” (821). In addition, she argues that Lucy “adopts the more common position that Protestantism is morally superior to Catholicism” (825).

As a teacher in Madame Beck’s Pensionnat, Lucy finds crucial differences between the Catholic girls of Labassecour and the well-behaved girls of Protestant England.

“What an English girl of not more than average capacity and docility, would quietly take a theme and bend herself to the task of comprehension and mastery, a Labassecourienne would laugh in your face, and throw it back to you with the phrase, – ‘Dieu que c’est difficile! Je n’en veux pas. Cela m’ennuie trop’ (means Heavens, this is difficult! I don’t want to do it. It is too boring)” (*Villette* 83).

The description above shows that Lucy appears to prefer the latter seeing that she is brought up as an English lady under the influence of a patriarchal institution, as Clark-Beattie asserts, Lucy is “the genuine lady” with “refined manners” and “self-sufficiency” (832).

In fact, as a form of social power, both Protestantism and Catholicism restrict female’s behavior in a similar way (Clark-Beatie 829). Thus, it is unavoidable that the social displacement will make Lucy suffer more alienation and repression than she had experienced in England. In Clark-Beatie’s interpretation, “Lucy’s travel to a foreign country means she enters in a culture distinguishable from her own mainly in the way it understands the individual’s relation to social authority,” and there is thus more difference between Protestant and Catholic culture (821-822). Evidently, the difference is a great threat to the union of the heroine Lucy and the hero Paul due to the fact that
Paul is an ultra-Catholic figure in the book. But M. Paul seems to take on many Christ-like attributes. At the end of the story, through a love letter, Paul encourages Lucy to “remain a Protestant” and said, “My little English Puritan, I love Protestantism in you. I own its severe charm. There is something in its ritual I cannot receive myself, but it is the sole creed for ‘Lucy’”; Lucy reconfirms by saying “he freely left me my pure faith. He did not tease nor tempt” (Villette 494). Paul’s tolerance of Lucy’s Protestantism removes the barrier to the lovers. Therefore, Clark-Beattie summarizes the novel’s plot as “Lucy is no martyr to the institutional tyranny of the Catholic Church” (846).

On the contrary, the foreign place releases Lucy from English social expectations for single women and enables her to behave in a confident and determined way. Despite her overtly negative feelings toward Catholicism, the staunchly Protestant Lucy Snowe appears to have a paradoxical attraction to some aspects of the Catholic faith when she admits that “whatever Romanism may be, there are good Romanists” (396). In addition, Lucy has confessed, “The secret of my success did not lie so much in myself, in any endowment, any power of mine, as in a new state of circumstances, a wonderfully changed life, a relieved heart” (Villette 494).

Brontë’s religious references and inclinations in Villette are unmistakable, and they appear to be more than a simple superficial tolerance toward the Catholic faith on the part of the author; she was seemingly drawn to and fascinated by some aspects of the Roman Catholic Church. Even Martin has to admit that there are certain elements of Catholicism that Brontë finds attractive (162). As Peschier concludes,

In the light of the reading of the mass of anti-Catholic literature of the period, Brontë employed the current, emotive, and anti-Catholic issues and perceptions not as facts and opinions, but thematically, as a metaphor through which to convey the plight of the lonely spinster. (161)

Thus, it is not important to judge whether Brontë is anti-Catholic or not. Instead, it is of great significance to notice that the representations of Catholicism in Villette serve to express the suffocating atmosphere of a society as “a useful device” (Peschier 139).

2. Challenge and Struggle

Villette is such a different place from Lucy’s home that she has to face a variety of dilemmas, including alienation, surveillance, repression and unrequited love. However, she is not defeated, conversely, she manages to adapt herself to the new environment by means of invisibility, and finally she wins her Platonic love with Paul Emanuel.
Upon her arrival, language frustrates Lucy at first and she finds herself immediately alienated because she “could say nothing whatever; not possessing a phrase of speaking French” (Villette 61). Even worse, she does not have any acquaintance, which makes her travel more like an adventure. Although an English gentleman who is later recognized as Graham Bretton, the son of her godmother, assists Lucy with her luggage and writes her the address of an inn, she has to probe through the darkness to the inn. On the way, Lucy is pursued by two male wanderers. In a panic, Lucy lost her way to the inn, but “fate” brings her to Pensionnat Beck (Villette 64). Although Madame Beck has Lucy in her care, she examines all Lucy’s property secretly after she falls asleep. This behavior makes Lucy feel “very un-English” and she realizes that she is truly “in a foreign land” (Villette 70). This is only the beginning of the test of alienation for Lucy.

Surveillance is the second dilemma that Lucy is forced to face. Sally Shuttleworth claims, “The text of Villette is dominated by the practice of surveillance” (219). It is clear that the device of “the Protestant in Catholic society” highlights the degree of surveillance and control that Lucy will experience in Villette due to the differences between the Protestant and Catholic view of the unmarried woman: in England, the isolation of a single woman is generally considered to be “normal” even though “pitiable,” whereas in Catholic Belgium she is thought to be “dangerous” and needing to “be tamed,” “converted,” and even “placed in a convent” (Peschier 140).

On her arrival at Pensionnat Beck, M. Paul reads Lucy’s countenance and fixes his gaze on her through his spectacles. For Lucy, his expression implies that he meant to see through her and “a veil would be no veil for him” (Villette 66). Paul keeps scrutinizing Lucy until he suggests that Madame Beck engage Lucy. Soon after, Lucy realizes herself “an object of study” because Madame Beck runs her school according to “the watchwords,” “Surveillance” and “espionage” while Lucy is frequently under her eyes (Villette 72). Shuttleworth argues, “Each observer tries to read her inner self through the interpretation of outer signs” (220). However, Lucy is well aware of the supervision and she is not complete passive. Instead, she observes others especially Madame Beck as well. It is obvious that Lucy appreciates better the institution of Roman Catholicism and its hierarchy; just as Nancy Cervetti notes, “she [Lucy] can read her surroundings and criticize—sometimes bitterly, sometimes humorously” (72).

Although Lucy is ready and brave enough to challenge the adverse circumstances, she can not endure the repression from Madame Beck. Gilbert and Gubar argue that “Madame Beck is a symbol of repression, the projection and embodiment of Lucy’s commitment to self-control” (408). As a subject of surveillance, Lucy is not only under Madame Beck’s censorious eyes, but is also deliberately punished by her. During “a long vocation,” Madame Beck confines Lucy to the Pensionnat
“similar to the physical solitary confinement used in prisons and mental asylums” (Peschier 154). As a result of her extreme loneliness, Lucy is unable to sleep at night and feels ill. She is in such a “hopeless” condition that she even turns for help to the Catholic Church where she collapses (Villette 156).

In addition, Madame Beck is jealous of Lucy’s acquaintance with Dr. John (Graham Bretton). She steals her letters from Dr. John and then replaces them in perfect order. Lucy ironically describes the letters being lost and found again as “they had only been on a short visit to madame’s chamber; having passed their examination, they came back duly and truly…” (Villette 292). Eventually Lucy must leave her job because Madame Beck’s controlling nature becomes increasingly intolerable. Madame Beck attempts to destroy the love between Lucy and Paul by openly preventing Lucy from speaking to Paul. What’s more, she even sedates Lucy in order to control her. Peschier argues that “it is Madame Beck’s envy that finally awakens Lucy to her true character” (155). Lucy conquers Madame Beck’s repression and surveillance because she adapts well to the new circumstance as her anomalous position allows her to define herself against the culture in which she is such a conspicuous alien.

Making herself invisible is one of Lucy’s means of gaining power to overcome her sense of alienation. Asked to play a part in a vaudeville, she recoils from “the public display” (Villette 134); at a concert she keeps “rather in the shade and out sight, not wishing to be immediately recognized,” aware that she sits where she “must inevitably be seen” (Villette 215). Paradoxically, her lack of physical attractiveness makes her more conspicuous because she is “an unwelcome blank on those bright occasions when beauty should shine” (Villette 131). Even those who appear to be closest to her do not seem to really know Lucy at all.

Ginevra has always questioned about Lucy’s identity, and she repeatedly inquires of Lucy “Who are you, Miss Snowe?” (Villette 307). Lucy answers in an ironical way, that she might be “a personage in disguise” (Villette 308). In his introduction to Villette, Tim Dolin attributes the reason for Lucy’s “personage in disguise” to the fact that “she [Lucy] is someone worth noticing who is invisible, someone worth getting to know who is impenetrable, and someone worth loving who is unlikeable” (Introduction to Villette xxviii).

Lucy not only makes herself invisible, but also tries to conceal her love for Graham Bretton. Thus, he fails to recognize her overt passion for him. Lucy’s love for Graham is a repetition of Caroline Helstone’s love for Robert Moore in Shirley, but Brontë gives Lucy the courage not to submit to powerless waiting. Lucy is not defeated or destroyed by her unrequited love. She puts her love for Graham to an end through the symbolic act of burying those letters from him.
Although Graham possesses physical beauty, his “actual character” lacks the “depth, height, compass, and endurance” (Villette 247). For example, he pursues the frivolous and self-indulgent Ginevra blindly and is severely frustrated and depressed by the refusal of Ginevra in the end. Then, he turns to Polly because of his appreciation of her beauty even though she is totally childish and dependent.

Though Lucy shows her fondness toward Polly, it is obvious that she intends to expose Polly’s submission through consistently underlining her subservient behavior as a woman. As a child, during the absence of her father, Polly transfers her passion for her father to Graham. As Lucy observes, Polly nestles up to Graham and seems to “feel by his feelings, to exist in his existence” (Villette 25). Thus, it is not surprising that the relationship later appears to be the conventional domination of Graham over Polly and the submission of Polly to Graham. It is possible for Lucy to realize that she will never inspire Graham’s appreciation for her, and she enables herself to face the reality, which releases her from the pain and gives her another chance to love.

On the other hand, the mutual affection between Lucy and Paul is proved to be superior. Judith Mitchell argues that Lucy and Paul’s love is a real achievement for Charlotte Brontë, which “follows a tortuous progression, but represents a real advance in Brontë’s feminism” (70). Lucy’s relationship with Paul grows slowly from being friends to becoming lovers. Lucy never feels uneasy when staying with Paul, thus, as Mitchell mentions, “With Paul Emanuel, Lucy never has to perform the delicate balancing act between reserve and enthusiasm that characterizes Polly’s response to Graham” (75). Neither Paul nor Lucy possesses physical beauty, and therefore they can face each other as equal subjects. Although their relationship suffers a setback when they frequently disagree with each other, it eventually develops into trust, respect and affection as Lucy describes:

The jar was over; the mutual understanding was settling and fixing; feelings of union and hope made themselves profoundly felt in the heart; affection and deep esteem and drawing trust had each fastened its bond. (Villette 441)

However, such “Platonic mutual regard” can not exclude the factors of domination or submission (Mitchell 76). Although the union of Paul and Lucy is preferable both for the readers and Brontë, the author chooses an open ending with the absence of Paul and possibly intends to end the story with the death of Paul. Paul takes a voyage to “Guadaloupe” in the West Indies looking forward to “release from liabilities and a clear course” (Villette 484), which results from colonization the same with Lucy’s emigration. It conforms to the popular nineteenth-century idea of traveling to the colonies. The matter comes to show how Villette touches on “public interest”, though the author has denied vehemently. Nevertheless, the author was fully aware that the existence of Paul will
influence the economic independence of Lucy. Additionally, only in his absence can Lucy exert herself fully to exercise her own power. On the ambiguous ending, Gilbert and Gubar further point out, “It also reflects Brontë’s determination to avoid the tyrannical fictions that have traditionally victimized women” (438).

3. Achievements

Having left England “intent on extending her knowledge” (Villette 80), Lucy learns far more than the math, French, German and composition at the Pensionnat; more importantly, she gains courage and strength to achieve her goals and love as well. Without possessing physical beauty like Polly Home and Ginevra Fanshawe, Lucy reveals that she is not only morally and intellectually more superior to them, but she also explicitly struggles to define herself against the repressive models of her society. In her words, “I am a rising character: once an old lady’s companion, then a nursery-governess, now a school-teacher” (Villette 309).

Nevertheless, Lucy never stops her endeavor because she has her own dream, that is, to establish her own school. Before leaving for the West Indies for three years, Paul helps Lucy to realize the dream, leaving her a cozy house where she can open her school. He also asks Lucy to “take his love, one day share his life and be his dearest, first on earth,” which shows Paul’s strong love for Lucy (Villette 491). During his three-year absence, he regularly writes to Lucy: “By every vessel he wrote; he wrote as he gave and as he loved, in full-handed, full-hearted plenitude” (Villette 494). Paul’s love makes Lucy a much more strong-minded and confident woman: “Few things shook me now; few things had importance to vex, intimidate, or depress me: most things pleased—mere trifles had a charm” (Villette 494). With her hard work and the help of an unexpected amount of money from Mr. Marchmount, the cousin and heir of Lucy’s mistress in England, Lucy enlarges her school into a pensionnat and makes it prosper. As a result, Lucy’s emigration to Villette makes herself successfully “escape her insignificance within English society” (Clark-Beattie 825).

IV. Conclusion

Villette depicts the fulfillment of a single middle-class English woman by emigrating to a foreign country. While middle-class single females were firmly confined to social-regulated domestic responsibility, Charlotte Brontë makes her heroine Lucy emigrate to a foreign place, where she enters into the labor market, finally succeeding in gaining economic independence. In this paper, I have not intended to argue that emigration can realize female independence. Instead, I think emigration provides redundant women with some possibilities to realize their independence. The
author just recognizes the possibility and enables her protagonist Lucy to gain independence. But Lucy’s economic independence is controversial. Although Lucy achieves a more stable position in Villette, it is significant to recognize that, finally, Lucy’s identity is still ambivalent. The problematic ending leaves Lucy in an undecided state. If Lucy had married Paul, she would not have been just a wife and mother, but she would be confined with domesticity. Thus, it is impossible for her to write the story openly because her domestic role as a wife and mother will not permit her to do this; if Paul does not survive at sea, Lucy is doomed to be a spinster. From this point of view, Patricia Menon argues that Charlotte Brontë failed to bring together “love” and “independence” at the end of the novel while the open ending indicates that Brontë was unable to imagine what would happen in the future (125).

But with her realization of the plight of the single women in Victorian Britain as well as her personal experience as an unmarried woman until the age of 38, the author effects a breakthrough to utilize emigration as an outlet for a redundant woman in Villette. The alienation and depression Lucy suffers not only reflect a social problem of female redundancy, but a “psychological” state of difference. Sally Shuttleworth confirms this point, “Brontë employs both the social implications of contemporary psychological theory, and its inner consequences” in creating her heroine, Lucy (242). For Lucy, her “most genuine trial” is that she has to “grop[e] her way alone” because she comes into a world “where there are no adequate figures to imitate” (Millett 259). Thus, it is natural that Lucy becomes a pioneer without precedents. Millett’s interpretation shows the originality and uniqueness of the figure while indicating that Villette is a pioneer work.

At the same time, Villette also realizes the author’s way out from the situation where the female artist is confined by male conventions in a patriarchal society. In A Literature of Their Own, Elaine Showalter defines Charlotte Brontë in the “Feminine phase” in which “women writers imitated dominant male artistic norms and aesthetic standards” (28-29). But unique Lucy seems to have transcended her into the “Feminist phase”, as Shuttleworth explains, “Villette marks the culmination of Brontë’s struggle against the authority of the real” (243).

All in all, Villette shows Brontë’s evolution from pursuing romantic stereotypes of female happiness to facing up to her particular destiny due to the fact that there is no romantic ending and the author does not push her protagonist Lucy Snowe into the marriage market. Additionally, it is of great significance that she relates her work to contemporary social issues: emigration and colonization whether she does so consciously or not. Therefore, Villette, as “a radical feminist text” (Millette 43), is suitable to be relocated in the mainstream of Victorian literary production to explore Brontë’s double quest for literary theme and for female emancipation from patriarchal
repression.

[NOTES]


(2) Letter to George Smith, 30 October 1852; *Letters* iii, p. 75.

(3) Richard Redgrave was a frequent exhibitor between 1825 and 1883, and an important official in the government art schools. See details in Helene E. Roberts, pp. 45-76; also in Martin A. Danahay’s “Gendering Work in the 1840s” in *Gender at Work in Victorian Culture: Literature, Art and Masculinity* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), pp. 49-65.

(4) Letter to W. S. Williams, 12 May 1848; *Letters* ii, p. 66.


(6) Letter to Ellen Nussey, 2 April 1845; *Letters* i, p. 388.


(8) Andrea O’Reilly Herrera argues that Lucy’s “foreignness” is two fold, for she is an “exotic, alien, outsider” both in her native country and abroad; see details in her “Imagining a Self between a Husband or a Wall: Charlotte Brontë’s Villette” in *The Foreign Woman in British Literature: Exotics, Aliens, and Outsiders*, ed. Marilyn Button and Toni Reed (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1999), pp. 67-77.

(9) Letter to W. S. Williams, 6 November 1852; *Letters* iii, p. 80.

(10) Letter to Ellen Nussey, ?April 1843; *Letters* i, p. 315.


(12) Rosemary Clark-Beattie considers “Lucy’s problems are simply psychological”; see her “Fables of Rebellion: Anti-Catholicism and the Structure of Villette”, *ELH*, 53.4 (1986); p. 843.

[WORKS CITED]


