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**A LIVING TOMB:  
AN INTERPRETATION OF *JANE EYRE* AND *VILLETTE***

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## INTRODUCTION

For me the universe is dumb,  
Stone-deaf, and blank, and wholly blind;  
Life I must bound, existence sum  
In the strait limits of one mind;

That mind my own. Oh! narrow cell;  
Dark - imageless - a living tomb!  
There must I sleep, there wake and dwell  
Content, - with palsy, pain, and gloom.

- Charlotte Bronte

Charlotte Bronte's novels represent both the position of women in Victorian society, and a subtle critique of that society. They expose class distinction and gender discrimination and ultimately the effect of these combined issues on women. The *act* of writing was in itself for Bronte an act of resistance, both literally and figuratively speaking. In 1836 she sent a selection of her poems to the then poet laureate, Robert Southey, to which he replied, "Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life, and it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure she will have for it" (Gardiner, 1992, p.58). More importantly, the act of writing as resistance was possibly the only manner (and at that by no means an easy one) in which a middle class nineteenth century woman, disempowered and rigidly constrained, could "legitimately" find a means of expression for herself in an otherwise restrictive society. Writing became an outlet for Bronte. Ironically, had Victorian society concerned itself more with the needs of women, Bronte may not have responded by writing as she did.

It can be argued that Bronte's novels exist on two levels, not separate but distinct from each other. The first level reveals a society with strong patriarchal convictions which rigidly imposes a number of restrictions on women. A more in-depth interpretation reveals the more subversive level at which Bronte thought and wrote. Within a text which deals with the position of middle class women from childhood to adulthood, lies a more subversive text where integral characters, technically

essential to the plot of the novel, double up and are revealed as alter egos or projections of the heroine. These alter egos portray and enact lives which women are denied by the strict code of Victorian conventions. The very use and purpose of these characters reinforce the evident lack of expression accorded to women. The projected images of these women also reveal the results of enforced Victorian socialisation gone wrong, and go some way toward explaining the compulsion of such a woman to internalise her *self*.

Of Bronte's four novels I have chosen to examine and interpret *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*. I believe that through an interpretation of her work one may construct an image of what life may have been like for a woman in Bronte's position, that is, Victorian middle class in nineteenth century England. I also believe that the then relatively new "middle" class had a direct bearing on a woman's practical and psychological situation. The cross section provided by *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* is interesting as the former was Bronte's first published novel in 1847 (although not the first she wrote), while the latter was her last. The structure of both remains intrinsically the same, however, the two novels show a distinct progression or rather *regression* in Bronte's spirit. But more than this, both novels reveal a society which oppressed women, condemning them to a stifling and barren existence devoid of an outlet for, or means of expression.

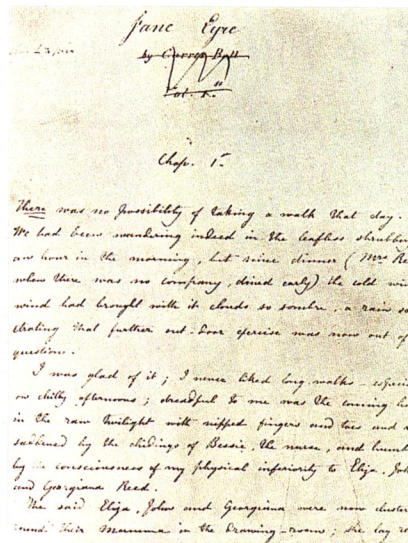


Fig. 1 - The first page of *Jane Eyre* handwritten by Charlotte Brontë.



## CHAPTER 1

*Jane Eyre* charts the life of a middle class Victorian woman in the mid-nineteenth century. As an orphaned child, Jane is abandoned to the mercy and charity of her late maternal uncle's wife, Mrs. Reed, a position which neither Jane nor Mrs. Reed find desirable or agreeable. When Jane proves herself to be insufferable to her aunt, she is abruptly sent away to a charity school, Lowood. Having spent eight years within the confines of this school, Jane moves on, and acquires a position as a governess at Thornfield Hall.

Arriving at her new home and workplace, she learns from Mrs. Fairfax, the housekeeper, that the estate belongs to a Mr. Rochester whose ward, Adele (allegedly his illegitimate daughter), is to become Jane's charge. The reader learns that Mr. Rochester seldom frequents Thornfield, preferring to travel around the continent in pursuit of pleasure. His unannounced arrival in the area, Millcote, facilitates a chance encounter with Jane on the road - she thinks of him as merely a passing stranger. On their proper introduction, an affection dawns on Jane's part for her master, which later develops into a love for him, which we eventually learn is not unrequited.

In the interim we have been introduced to a mystery at Thornfield, a mystery conveniently ignored by the rest of the household, who seem oblivious to the strange noises and occurrences emanating from the third storey attic. It is a mystery, Jane realises, from which she is purposely excluded. Her only clue is the strange, uninhibited servant Grace Poole who occupies that attic. Despite precautions taken to ensure that the secrecy of the mystery remains intact, Jane soon discovers that an "hysterical lunatic" is imprisoned in the attic room, with Grace Poole as her keeper. Simultaneously, Rochester and Jane openly acknowledge their feelings for one another and decide to get married. As the plot unfolds, a significant discovery is made: the raving lunatic, Bertha Mason, is revealed to be Rochester's wife. With the knowledge this discovery brings, Jane flees from Thornfield Hall and arrives through chance, destitute, at the door of the Rivers' household, where she is taken in and treated for exposure and mental trauma.

Having severed ties with Thornfield and Rochester, she embarks on a new life, under a pseudonym, with the Rivers family who seem to have adopted her as their sister. Like Jane they are middle class and must earn their living. St. John Rivers is a preacher who longs to broaden his horizons: he intends to become a missionary and emigrate to India. His sisters Diana and Mary become governesses. In his intensity and narrow mindedness, St. John believes that it is Jane's destiny to accompany him, as his wife, to India. After a struggle with herself Jane finally rejects his proposition. She prepares herself for the humble and lowly position as a teacher to the working class girls of the parish, condemned to what she feels will be a long, bleak and barren future.

At this stage St. John discovers Jane's true identity, and Jane is revealed as an heiress to her late paternal uncle in Madeira. She also discovers that she and the Rivers are cousins. With financial security and independence, she decides to seek out Rochester once more. During her search she discovers that Thornfield Hall has been burnt to the ground, its lunatic killed, and its owner blinded. With all obstacles swept away, Jane and Rochester are free to reunite.

The book is divided into three separate phases: Jane as a child at Gateshead and Lowood, Jane as a governess at Thornfield, and finally as a refugee at Marsh End<sup>1</sup>. At Gateshead, the home of her ward, the late Mr. Reed, she suffers from physical and mental neglect. The name, *Gateshead*, is suggestive of a prison, which the child certainly identifies it as. She is banished from the drawing room and the company of Mrs. Reed and her children because she cannot behave as a "normal child". "She really must exclude me from privileges intended for contented, happy little children" (Chapter 1). Later, as another punishment for an incident she did not provoke she is locked in the red room, an experience which for Jane is possibly the most terrifying

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<sup>1</sup>The literary critic, Terry Eagleton maintains that *Jane Eyre*, along with Bronte's other novels, is triadic in structure, consisting of a series of power struggles between "a protagonist, a 'Romantic radical' and an autocratic conservative", (Eagleton, 1975, p.74). However, he does acknowledge that this distinction is never straightforward or clear cut. Jane, even as a child, is almost certainly a protagonist, but she is also a radical. For further reading see the chapter, *The Structure of Charlotte Bronte's fiction*, in Terry Eagleton's *Myths of Power*.



she will ever endure. Such is the impression left from this incident, that the ordeal of the red room is referred to more than once later in the novel. As a physical prison, the red room is a microcosm of the outside world.

Jane's time spent at Lowood School is little better. Here, the director, Mr Brocklehurst, succeeds Mrs. Reed as a patriarchal tyrant, balanced by the saintly Miss Temple, who assumes the role of an ally. The nature of the characters intensify. Mr Brocklehurst is identified with the big bad wolf in the tale *Little Red Riding Hood* (Chapter 4). "What a great nose! and what a mouth! and what large prominent teeth!", and is considerably worse than Mrs Reed in the physical and mental deprivations he enforces on the "inmates" of the institution. Miss Temple as her name indicates, is a shrine of goodness; she is in fact almost too good to be true. Thus she conforms to the Victorian ideal of the "angel in the house"<sup>2</sup>, pure and submissive, and is most definitely under the patriarchal thumb. On one occasion she takes it on herself to feed the girls a somewhat more nourishing meal (frugal by most standards) than they are accustomed to, to atone for the usual inedible burnt offerings they are expected to eat. She is later publicly reproached for this (this dressing down, in other words, puts her in her proper place) by Brocklehurst, accused of, "pampering the body and obviating the aim of this institution" (Chapter 7). Aside from starving and neglecting the body, Brocklehurst's statement may also suggest that the institution's aim was to starve the soul. Thus Lowood, and its benefactor, act as socialising agents in Victorian society.

Helen Burns, a fellow pupil of Jane's, is another significant character at the charity school. Unlike Miss Temple, Helen is far from perfect, possessing many faults to which she readily admits, and for which she is often chastised. Her reaction to such harsh discipline is not one of indignation; instead she believes that one should submit to what she sees as being justifiable (Jane sees it as injustice), and accept it as one's destiny. She is a firm believer in turning the other cheek. Thus Jane is surrounded by role models in a socialising process. On the one hand there is Miss Temple who

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<sup>2</sup>For more information on *The Angel in the House*, see the chapter, *Professions for Women, Women and Writing* by Virginia Woolf in Mary Eagleton's *Feminist Literary Criticism*.

in conforming to society's requirements for a "good" woman, is expected to accept and submit to unjust exploitation and abuse. Alternatively there is Helen Burns who appears to be more human: but has not yet attained Miss Temple's level of saintliness. She also submits to what Jane sees as injustice and, the ultimate punishment for her sins, which is an early death caused by tuberculosis<sup>3</sup>. It is ironic that the successful fruits of the socialisation process show Jane that neither the saintly nature of Miss Temple, nor the submissive nature of Helen pays off: perhaps a middle ground should be aimed at.

It is interesting how Bronte manages the transition from Lowood to Thornfield. "I desired liberty; for liberty I gasped" (Chapter 10) is a recurrent desire of Jane's throughout the novel. What kind of liberty did Jane desire? Given her position in the social strata it is likely that Jane longed for not only social and financial freedom, but also emotional and psychological freedom, a freedom denied her because of her gender. "A kind fairy, in my absence, had surely dropped the required suggestion on my pillow" (Chapter 10)<sup>4</sup>. What follows is Jane's decision to advertise in a local newspaper for a position as a governess. The manner in which Jane attributes this decisiveness and worldly knowledge to a fairy, i.e. anyone other than her conscious self, is both interesting and informative. The autonomy of decision making experienced by Jane does not concur with Victorian ideas concerning female intellectual or emotional independence. It is safe to deduce that Bronte, in writing, was not aiming to satisfy socially sensitive readers and their sense of propriety. Nevertheless, I would suggest that knowing the content (regarding female independence) of her novels would make for controversy, even outrage. Bronte may

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<sup>3</sup>This is fitting, perhaps, when one considers that consumption was associated with the feminine, as being weak.

<sup>4</sup>Similarly in *Villette*, Lucy Snowe, made redundant on the death of her employer, Miss Marchmont, experiences a similar dilemma about her future:

A bold thought was sent to my mind; my mind was made strong to receive it. 'Leave this wilderness', it said to me, and go out hence. 'Where?' was the query. I had not very far to look; gazing from this country parish in that flat, rich middle of England - I mentally saw within reach what I had never yet beheld with my bodily eyes: I saw London (Chapter 5, *Villette*).

For a further comparison of Lucy Snowe and Jane Eyre, see my chapters 3, and 4 on *Villette*.



have been trying to soften the blow by attributing these unconventional impulses to another, unconscious being<sup>5</sup>.

The contradiction and ambivalence evident within Jane, the naive ignorant school girl, suddenly acquiring the practical knowledge of how to further her career is prevalent in many guises throughout all Brontë's novels. A common factor between all of Brontë's protagonist heroines (hero in the case of William Crimsworth) is that they all belong to the same class, a class that was relatively new and still finding its feet.

The nineteenth century saw the emergence of a large middle class, a class whose status was above that of the working class, but below that of the upper class. Thus displaced, the middle class were forced to earn their living. The range of financially rewarding positions for women which fulfilled the requirements of respectability was limited - the attractions of such positions fewer still. The position of the governess was one such option open to middle class women. A member of the upper class at the time said, "The real definition of a governess...is a being who is our equal in birth, manners and education, but our inferior in worldly wealth." (Gardiner, 1992, p.60)<sup>6</sup>. The status of the governess is inevitably an ambivalent one. While she was rated above the general servants of a household, she was also excluded from the family, and often humiliated into her "proper" place. She was in effect displaced, or trapped in limbo, a term which could be applied to much of the nineteenth century middle class, particularly women.

The seeming freedom associated with independence was deceptive and more often gave rise to feelings of entrapment. The limited choice of lifestyles available to women in particular, for example, governess, teacher, missionary, companion, etc.,

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<sup>5</sup>This is more relevant to *Jane Eyre* than *Villette*, as *Jane Eyre* was Brontë's first published novel. *Villette* was published six years later when Brontë, as an experienced and established author, had accumulated many more traumatic and emotional experiences from which to draw. In many ways *Villette* is more direct than *Jane Eyre*, in that the feelings and passion portrayed seem much more intense. Alternatively, the uncertainty of the characters and the lack of practical experience their consciousness displays may reflect Brontë's own uncertainty and fear, perhaps, about what she was writing and why she was writing it.

<sup>6</sup>For further information on the governess in nineteenth century England, see *The Governess and Jane Eyre*, in Mary Poovey's *Uneven Developments*.

offered a bleak and barren future, where (amongst other things) the prospect of meeting a partner, who would be socially suitable, available and desirable, were slim. The frustrations inevitable with these constrictions are often alluded to, either directly or indirectly by Bronte in all of her novels.

In *Jane Eyre*, for example, Jane suffers the degradation of Rochester toying with her already sensitive emotions in front of Blanche Ingram and Rochester's other guests. Blanche Ingram is all that plain Jane is not; she is beautiful and rich. Rochester virtually parades her in front of Jane, allowing her to conclude that Blanche is to be his prospective bride. The class system and gender discrimination at that time condoned and enabled Rochester to exploit his social status and power in this fashion. Aside from this, conventional society would have ruled in Blanche Ingram's favour, rejecting Jane for her lowly status. Jane is aware of this but privately defies it in moments of passion. The awkward position of the governess and the subsequent uncomfortable inarticulation with the gentry is exemplified here. Jane does not quite belong "below stairs" with the servants while her master is entertaining guests, but she readily recognises the inevitable personal discomfort she would suffer should she keep company with the guests socially. Assuming that she will be excused from this, she is informed by Mrs. Fairfax that Mr. Rochester expressly desires her presence - "If she objects tell her it is my particular wish; and if she resists, say I shall come and fetch her in case of contumacy" (Chapter 17). This reflects the ambiguity of the role of governess and suggests that her duties were defined at the sole discretion of her employer, a potentially compromising position. Rochester's methods in forcing Jane to realise and acknowledge her feelings for him are cruel and selfish<sup>7</sup>, and in the worst possible taste, for Jane is subjected to the worst kind of cold scrutiny by his guests, especially Blanche.

Blanche's treatment of Jane is distant, condescending and rude, and exemplifies much of the gentry's reaction to the governess. She refers to Jane, in her presence, as if she

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<sup>7</sup>Rochester feeds Jane's feelings for him with constant attention. While disguised as a gypsy he tells Jane of his forthcoming union with Blanche Ingram. His aim, he later admits, is to inspire jealousy and a subsequent acknowledgement of her feelings, in Jane.



is invisible. "Why I suppose you have a governess for her [Adele]: I saw a person with her just now- is she gone? Oh no! There she is still behind the window curtain." (Chapter 17). Later, Blanche asks Rochester, "Does that person want you?" (Chapter 21). In this way Blanche depersonalises Jane. She then goes on to say, "You pay her of course" (Chapter 17). This reference to money in relation to Jane, serves to identify Jane as a commodity who may be bought and sold at a price. Money and the discussion thereof was generally considered indelicate in polite society. However, even though it is Blanche who has introduced the distasteful topic, the degradation is Jane's with whom payment has been associated. Obviously payment and the female body also has less "respectable" connotations. This new "slight" on Jane's character further lowers the status of the governess and helps to retain the social barriers. After humiliating Jane into her appropriate place, Blanche further indicts her, dismissing governesses as "detestable" and "ridiculous" (Chapter 17). However instead of accepting the position to which society has condemned her, as perhaps Helen Burns might have done, Jane privately challenges society and defies its verdict, rejecting Blanche Ingram on the grounds that, "she was a mark beneath jealousy... too inferior to excite that feeling" (Chapter 17) - strong convictions for a woman in Jane's position.

By this time Jane has fallen for Rochester; in her own words, "I have told you, reader, that I had learnt to love Mr. Rochester: I could not unlove him now..." (Chapter 18). Jane, like Bronte's other protagonist heroine, Lucy Snowe, is attracted to Rochester because she feels an affinity with him. Both are orphans. Jane is an outcast from society, similarly Rochester is a younger son betrayed by father and brother<sup>8</sup>, "he is not of their kind, I believe he is of mine; - I am sure he is, - I feel akin to him, but more than that, when I say I am of his kind, I do not mean that I have his force to influence and his spell to attract: I mean only that I have certain tastes and feelings in common with him" (Chapter 17). Jane longs to emulate Rochester; when she says she lacks his ability to attract and influence, one senses that she is dolefully envious.

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<sup>8</sup>Rochester's father and brother encouraged his marriage to Bertha Mason, because of the sizeable dowry which would accompany her, concealing from him their knowledge of the Mason family's history of madness.

The third phase of the novel is centred around Marsh End and the Rivers household. The fact that Jane is rescued from what is portrayed as inevitable death (physical, spiritual, and moral) reflects a glimmer of optimism on Brontë's part. That Jane's rescuers are revealed to be relations creates a type of homely refuge for the heroine from the tortures she seeks to escape. St. John Rivers is the most significant member of the Rivers family in that he presents a strong contrast to Rochester. Like Rochester he is passionate, but his passion is ultimately hollow and barren in its all-consuming requirement of self-sacrifice. In offering her a life in India as a missionary's wife, St. John represents one of the few choices open to women in Jane's position. In his loveless proposition, St. John asks Jane to be nothing more than an appendage, one who will fulfil the stifling position of a fellow labourer.

## CHAPTER 2

The use of the red room is probably the most literal and blatant image Bronte employs within her subversive text.

The red room was a spare chamber, very seldom slept in...A bed supported on the massive pillars of mahogany hung with curtains of deep red damask, stood out like a tabernacle in the centre, the two large windows, with their blinds almost drawn down, were half shrouded in festoons and falls of similar drapery; the carpet was red; the table at the foot of the bed was covered with a crimson cloth...This room was chill, because it seldom had a fire; it was silent, because remote from the nursery and kitchens; solemn, because it was known to be so seldom entered...Mrs. Reed herself, at far intervals, visited it to review the contents of a certain secret drawer in the wardrobe, where were stored divers parchments, her jewel-casket, and a miniature of her dead husband. (Chapter 2)

I would suggest that the red room is symbolic of female sexuality; it also may be connected with the female body, its secret drawers and jewel-casket. The bloody room may have connotations with the menstrual cycle: Mrs. Reed visits it at *far* intervals. The large and imposing bed is the centre of female sexuality: it is compared to a tabernacle, a shrine for something sacred. The windows connecting this room to the outside world are half shrouded, they veil female sexuality in secrecy. Jane feels that the room is haunted. On the surface it seems that this room could be haunted by its last occupant, her late uncle<sup>1</sup>, but it is more probable that Jane is haunted by the knowledge of her unconscious self. She has been imprisoned in this chamber after an unruly, unprovoked assault on her by John Reed, which she avenges, and for which she is blamed and punished. Defending herself from the onslaught of John Reed, she is described by him as a "mad cat" (Chapter 1), and a "bad animal" (Chapter 2). These descriptions reflect the animalistic instinct associated with undisciplined female sexuality, and moral insanity<sup>2</sup>. With the onset of panic and subsequent hysteria, Jane finds herself looking at her double in a large mirror, "All looked...darker in that

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<sup>1</sup>The red room was Jane's uncle Reed's death chamber.

<sup>2</sup>For further reading, see the chapter, *Feminine Heroines* in Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own*.



visionary hollow" (Chapter 2). In her double she sees her darker side, she then describes feeling oppressed and suffocated before she succumbs to her unconscious and passes out. Knowing that she is expected to suppress instincts of this nature, Jane is frightened when confronted with their existence and the onset of adolescence and imminent womanhood. Significantly placed at the beginning of the novel, the red room acts as a prelude to another red room, another secret chamber, which houses another double.

At Lowood the "bad animal" within Jane remains dormant. Brocklehurst's socialisation is temporarily successful, suppressing Jane's unseemly nature; his aim, "is to mortify in these girls the lusts of the flesh" (Chapter 5). With the removal of role models - Helen Burns is dead, Miss Temple marries and leaves - Jane departs for Thornfield Hall where her suppressed unconscious again rises to the fore, this time in the form of Bertha Mason, Rochester's wife.

Bertha is a raving lunatic, who is imprisoned in an attic room in the third storey of Thornfield Hall, a domain which Jane compares to Bluebeard's Castle, "narrow, low, and dim, with only one little black window at the far end, and looking, with its rows of small black doors all shut, like a corridor in some Bluebeard's castle" (Chapter 11). Mad Bertha symbolises Jane's hidden sexual desires and frustrations, the attic is the realm of Jane's unconscious. Bertha, this perversity of nature must be locked away, until such time as she can be fully repressed or resolved just as Mrs. Reed would release Jane from the Red Room only, "on condition of perfect submission" (Chapter 2).

Bertha is physically portrayed as a monster of huge and hideous proportions: she equals Rochester in size, she has a dark swarthy complexion, her face is purple and bloated, while her eyes are red-rimmed. The description of Bertha suggests two things, on the one hand, there is the possibility that she is an exaggerated projection of Rochester, as a symbol of terrifying and powerful male sexuality. On the other, the description draws on Bertha's creole background (she is from the West Indies) and supports the notion of the connection between the colonial "other" and sexual

perversity. Rochester's description of their married life reinforces the sense that Bertha possesses a voracious, insatiable sexual appetite, "Bertha Mason ... dragged me through all the hideous and degrading agonies which must attend to a man bound to a wife at once intemperate and unchaste" (Chapter 27). In her book, *A Literature Of Their Own*, Elaine Showalter says that, "Sexual appetite was considered one of the chief symptoms of moral insanity" (Showalter, 1993, p.120)<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, we may deduce that the source of Bertha's madness lies in her sexual appetite.

Before the exposure of Bertha and her relationship to Rochester, Jane admits to being drawn inadvertently to the attic region, suggesting in fact that Bertha is the alter ego of Jane, "my sole relief was to walk along the corridor of the third storey ... and allow my mind's eye to dwell on whatever bright visions rose before it" (Chapter 12), and,

When thus alone, I not unfrequently heard Grace Poole's laugh: the same peal, the same low, slow ha! ha! which, when first heard, had thrilled me: I heard, too, her eccentric murmurs; stranger than her laugh (Chapter 12),

murmurs in Jane's subconscious. It is worth noting that the attic region was just below the battlements, a place Jane associated with the feeling of, and the desire for freedom (Chapter 12).

Bertha's attack on Rochester, by setting fire to his bed, comes at a time when Jane is beginning to realise the ensuing attraction between Rochester and herself. By igniting the bed, and its occupant within, Jane's subconscious, in the form of Bertha, is trying to purge the source of her renewed subversive inclinations. The frequency of Bertha's attacks, and the regularity of the intervals in between suggest a connection with the menstrual cycle. Rochester says that, "she had lucid intervals of days - sometimes weeks", followed by "outbreaks of...violent and unreasonable temper" (Chapter 27). Rochester also describes a night in the West Indies when, during one

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<sup>3</sup>See the chapter, *Feminine Heroines* in Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own*.



of Bertha's "fits", "the moon was setting on the waves, broad and red", it had a "bloody glance" (Chapter 27). On the night of Bertha's attack on Jane, the moon is "blood-red and half-overcast" (Chapter 25)<sup>4</sup>. The fact that Bertha's attacks occur in the dead of night, "Yes, that was ever the hour of fatality at Thornfield" (Chapter 36), is perhaps a more literal parallel to Jane's dark inner self. Bertha's penultimate attack is two nights before Jane's wedding. The renting of the bridal veil (bought by Rochester) is symbolic of Jane's sudden resistance to becoming Jane Rochester, "Soon to be Jane Rochester" says Rochester, "The feeling, the announcement sent through me, was ... something that smote and stunned: it was, I think, almost fear" (Chapter 24). By tearing the veil, Bertha is performing what Jane would like to do. The connection between Bertha Mason and the red room at Gateshead is reinforced that night when Jane describes being aware that, "her lurid visage flamed over mine, and I lost consciousness; for the second time in my life ... I became insensible from terror" (Chapter 25). Just as Jane collapsed in the red room, facing her image in the mirror, so too she is unable to cope when confronted face to face with her extended image, Bertha, a double, who in Victorian society must be denied existence. In order to put off the wedding day, Jane now needs an obstacle. It is appropriate and significant then that Bertha should aid her rescue. Jane's subsequent flight from Thornfield is an attempt to flee from the tormentors of her unconscious.

Jane has always struggled to keep her emotions in check, to keep the "bad animal" at bay, at least in public. Strong religious convictions regarding propriety in the eyes of God ensure a rigid practice of puritanical self-discipline, a throwback to the Brocklehurst era. "Ere long, I had reason to congratulate myself on the course of wholesome discipline to which I had thus forced my feelings to submit" (Chapter 16). Jane is attracted to Rochester because he exemplifies what she longs to be but cannot be. Sex, station and propriety dictate that Jane should not display any symptoms not appropriate to her role as a woman and a governess, yet her natural inclinations do not always coincide with this dictum. A chance meeting with her employer sets, "every nerve I have . . . unstrung: for a moment I am beyond my own mastery"

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<sup>4</sup>The menstrual cycle was seen as a means of controlling female sexuality, for further reading on the subject, see the chapter, *Feminine Heroines* in Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own*.



(Chapter 22). One senses, however, a degree of excitement at being beyond one's own mastery.

The diametric opposite of Rochester, St. John Rivers embodies the self-possession that Jane desires. Referring to Jane's previous life (the details undisclosed as yet), he encourages her to, "resist, firmly, every temptation" (Chapter 31). The struggle presented between Rivers and Rochester is the struggle of the choice between reason and passion, one she almost submits to, firstly when she is tempted to join Rochester as his mistress, and secondly when she agrees to accompany St. John to India as companion, not wife, thus in some way retaining her sense of self. "I will give the missionary my energies - it is all he wants - *but not myself*; that would only be adding the husk and shell to the kernel. For them he has no use: I retain them" (Chapter 34, *italics mine*).

Rivers, as an example of indifferent patriarchy at its best, will not accept Jane's compromise. It is this blatant disregard for Jane which finally enables her to overcome her struggle, she condemns his shallow thoughtlessness declaring that, "God did not give me my life to throw away; and to do as you wish me would" (Chapter 35). As soon as she has made the important realisation that complete self-discipline does not prove a satisfying means to an end, her mind reopens itself to Rochester, "I heard a voice somewhere cry - Jane! Jane! Jane! ... it was the voice of Edward Fairfax Rochester" (Chapter 35). As before, Bronte attributes this voice to an unknown supernatural force: Jane cannot be accused of being the initiator of renewed negotiations with Rochester. With the rejection of the self-sacrificing discipline Rivers offers and the legacy from her late uncle in Madeira, Jane is free to approach Thornfield with new dignity. The fire which destroyed Thornfield Hall and Bertha Mason has rid, or purged Jane of her tormented or frustrated subconscious desires. In blinding Rochester, the fire has in some way feminised him by rendering him a dependant. This may have lowered his social status as a male, and thwarted his patriarchal claim on Jane, which before terrified her, "when once I have seized you...I'll...attach you to a chain" (Chapter 24). For the first time, Rochester is now truly dependent on Jane, rather than Jane being dependent on Rochester, thus

rendering them both on a more equal footing than before. The seeming fairy-tale ending, thus presents a compromise in Jane's favour. Disabled and humbled as he is, Rochester cannot afford to challenge or reject that compromise as Rivers did.

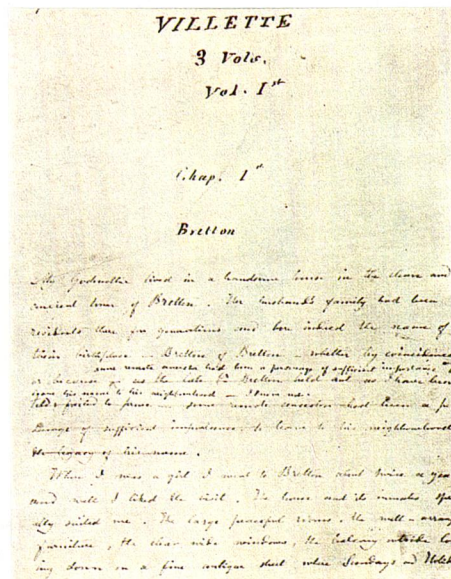


Fig. 2 - The opening page of Charlotte Brontë's manuscript of *Villette*.



### CHAPTER 3

Having established herself as an author, after *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley*, Bronte moved on to her fourth novel *Villette*, written during 1851-52. While *Jane Eyre* appears so radical in its treatment of women's place in society, the novel's romantic and fairy-tale qualities then enabled, "the novelist to conceal even from herself her deepening pessimism about women's place in man's society" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984, p.399). *Shirley*, while still concerning itself with the position of women, did so with much less force and energy, attempting to weave women's interest with social history. *Villette*, then, is a bolder novel. Literally, much of the fourth novel is a mirror of Bronte's life and her own experiences. The tone is much darker and bleaker than its predecessors, and at times full of despair. By 1851, all Bronte's remaining siblings had died in a relatively short space of time (nine months to be exact), and the effect this had on the author herself, and any subsequent work, must be considered. *Villette*, in reality is Brussels, where in 1842 Charlotte and Emily Bronte spent nine months studying at the Pensionnat Heger. After the death and burial of their aunt Elizabeth Branwell in England, Charlotte returned to Brussels alone for a year. Monsieur Heger<sup>1</sup> was the inspiration for Monsieur Paul. *Villette* is the observation of Lucy Snowe's journey to reconciling her many selves or identities, both social and psychological. Like Jane, Lucy must overcome obstacles and struggles within herself before she can become inured to herself. As in *Jane Eyre*, Bronte uses many seemingly independent characters to mirror the many sides of Lucy's tortured existence and to help her in the realisation of important and significant decisions, ultimately Lucy's rejection of burying herself, or her unconscious desires, alive.

The reader's introduction to the heroine, Lucy Snowe, is in her godmother, Mrs. Bretton's house. Simultaneously we are introduced to Mrs. Bretton and her son, Graham Bretton, and another house guest, Polly. Although it is not explicitly clear, we know that Lucy is not an orphan at this stage, but becomes one years after her

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<sup>1</sup>The school which Charlotte and Emily Bronte attended in Brussels was run by Mme. Heger. Her husband, Monsieur Heger, taught both sisters, and became the character on whom Charlotte based Monsieur Paul in *Villette*.

sojourn at Bretton, long after she has lost touch with the Brettons. It seems that Lucy's financial situation requires assistance; consequently she seeks a position which will enable her to sustain herself. Lucy then accepts Miss Marchmont's (an elderly spinster) offer to become her paid companion.

On Miss Marchmont's death, Lucy must again seek a means of earning her living. She travels to London, where she decides to make her future abroad. She books passage on a ship sailing for Belgium. During her sea voyage, a fellow passenger Ginevra Fanshawe, tells Lucy of a school for which she is bound. Thus on her arrival in Ostend, without friends to turn to for assistance or advice, Lucy decides to attempt to find this school in Villette (Brussels) and offer her services for employment. She is successful on both counts and is immediately employed by the directress, Madame Beck, first as a children's nurse and later as an English teacher.

During her stay at the Rue Fossette, Lucy re-encounters Mrs. Bretton, and her son, Dr. John Graham Bretton, and later her childhood room-mate at Bretton, Polly. Lucy gives an explicit account of her life and the lives of those around her while she remains as a teacher in Mme. Beck's school. An important character, Monsieur Paul, is also a teacher at the school: it is for him whom Lucy finally acknowledges her regard which subsequently develops into what might be termed as "love". Despite the resistance of Mme. Beck and others to a union between Lucy and Paul, Paul eventually installs Lucy in a small school of which she is to be mistress, until his return from the West Indies. Unlike *Jane Eyre*, the ending of *Villette* is less fairy tale-like. During Paul's sea voyage home to Villette and Lucy, a storm brews and blows for weeks. Although Bronte leaves the reader guessing at the end of the novel as to the fate of Paul, the tone suggests that he definitely does not survive.

Bronte presents her protagonist heroine to us as an alien in the Bretton household, although Lucy's existence here is less unhappy than Jane's in the Reed household. She observes life coolly from a reserved distance and it seems as if she does not participate in domestic life. Thus in dissociating herself from the Brettons and their house guest, Polly, she renders herself an alien. Bronte uses Polly, Lucy's room-



mate, as the first of many characters who shows her what she could be should she choose to engage in life rather than withdraw from it. Eagleton expresses Lucy's reaction to Polly as, "a subconscious tactical conversion of suppressed jealousy to mature condescension" (Eagleton, 1975, p.63). Lucy resents Polly because she is envious of her: Polly enacts what Lucy longs to be but is afraid to emulate. She rarely hides her contempt for Polly, "her imperfect articulation was the least precocious thing she had about her" (Chapter 3), and she tells us that Polly must "live, move and have her being in another" (Chapter 3). Lucy's condescension towards Polly is matched by the child's cool disdain which she in turn bestows on Lucy, "she was ... especially whimsical with me" (Chapter 3). The antagonism between the two reflects the inarticulation of repression with freed imagination. As the chapter on childhood days at Bretton is closed, the gap between Lucy and Polly is bridged for one night. As Lucy takes Polly under her wing, and into her bed, she worriedly reflects on the small child's future, and wonders how one so vulnerable will cope with the forthcoming obstacles life will hurl at her. In reflecting on Polly's future, however, Lucy is really reflecting on her own.

Mrs Bretton, as head of her house, is the first in a series of deceptive matriarchies in *Villette*. Miss Marchmont is the second. Devoid of family<sup>2</sup> and financial means of sustenance, Lucy seeks a position. By accepting Miss Marchmont's offer to become her companion, she also hopes to, "compromise with Fate: to escape occasional great agonies by submitting to a whole life of privation and small pains" (Chapter 4). Miss Marchmont provides a role model to Lucy, she is the example of self-sacrifice even though she admits, "I am not a good woman" (Chapter 4). With the death of her fiancé, thirty years since, Miss Marchmont preserving her chastity like a nun, sacrificed her potential happiness when she decided by example of her life to become a shrine to Frank's (her lover) memory. Her subsequent confinement, solitude, and perhaps unhappiness, is then, self-imposed. Incarcerated in her handsome house, she is also, significantly, a cripple. This suggests that her physical disabilities mask an emotional cripple. Miss Marchmont serves as a projected image of the result of

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<sup>2</sup>Brontë's references to Lucy's family are allusive - unlike Jane it is clear that Lucy is not an orphan at the beginning of the novel, but that she becomes an orphan is clear, if somewhat oblique, in chapter 4.

compromising with fate, a warning to Lucy. On the night before her death she tells Lucy, "Well, tomorrow I will begin by trying to make you happy. I will endeavour to do something for you Lucy" (Chapter 4). In dying before she can amend her will, it appears Lucy has been the victim of cruel misfortune but, in reality, Miss Marchmont gives Lucy something perhaps more important than the legacy of money. By her death, Miss Marchmont releases Lucy from her self-imposed vow of compromising with fate and the destiny she has set for herself - in effect Miss Marchmont's death gives Lucy a second chance.

Once again homeless and destitute Lucy must find a means of earning her living. Like Jane, Lucy makes a decision about her future, which Bronte attributes to something outside Lucy's capable consciousness, "A bold thought was sent to my mind... 'Leave this wilderness'... I saw London" (Chapter 5). Since Lucy is not responsible for this suggestion, she is absolved from unjust accusations of social advancement inappropriate to her sex. On her first night in London, Lucy is overcome by her aloneness, "a terrible oppression overcame me. All at once my position rose on me like a ghost" (Chapter 5). She spends a restless night haunted by what she has made of herself. She has backed herself into a corner. Again, "A strong vague", origin unknown "persuasion that it was better to go forward ... and that I *could* go forward" (Chapter 5) placates her. In this acknowledgement, Lucy has taken the first step on her journey of self-discovery, and, ultimately, self-approval.

Lucy's journey from London to *Villette* (Brussels) is full of literal imagery<sup>3</sup>, too detailed to discuss here. One of the more important factors arising from the sea voyage is the introduction of Ginevra Fanshawe to the plot. Ginevra asks Lucy, "Where are you going?", to which Lucy replies, "I have not the least idea" (Chapter 6)<sup>4</sup>. During her stay at the Rue Fossette, Ginevra, as another ego of Lucy, will

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<sup>3</sup>For example, as Lucy is rowed toward her berth on *The Vivid*, she is reminded of the river, the *Styx*, across which *Charon* ferried the departed.

<sup>4</sup>Taken at a deeper level, this seemingly short and insignificant exchange between Lucy and Ginevra may inform the reader of more than the literal destination of Lucy. I would suggest that Ginevra's question and Lucy's answer refer to the metaphoric journey Lucy is about to embark.



assimilate and reinterpret Polly's role, as one who will show Lucy what she could be. Less significantly, although technically essential to the plot, Ginevra offers Lucy straws to catch by way of telling her about Madame Beck's Pensionnat de Desmoiselles. With nowhere to go, by coincidence it seems, Lucy is drawn to Madame Beck's establishment, "Providence said, stop here; this is *your* inn" (Chapter 7), she is drawn here because Madame Beck's house is the house of Lucy's haunted unconscious.

Lucy's attitude towards her employer is thoroughly ambiguous. She is scornful and indignant towards Mme. Beck's spying techniques, using words such as "surveillance" and "espionage" in connection with the directress, but then speaks of Beck's interference in terms of duty, rendering the actions justifiable. Mme. Beck embodies the repression Lucy seeks to self-impose. Later in the novel, as it becomes clear that Lucy is attracted to Dr. John, so too is Mme. Beck. Both, in the end, are rejected by him. In her rejection Mme. Beck shows herself to be a master of self-discipline, completely repressing her emotions. By way of applauding her, Lucy is reassuring and encouraging herself to continue to strive towards complete self-discipline. Later when the attraction between Lucy and Paul materialises, Beck provides herself as an obstacle to their union and happiness (just as Bertha did in *Jane Eyre*) causing Lucy to wonder whether Mme. Beck is not attracted to Paul herself. Lucy subsequently theorises that if Beck cannot have Paul herself, then neither should she. This notion has an uncanny resemblance to the manner in which Lucy herself treats the attraction between Dr. John and Ginevra.

Ginevra Fanshawe, as foresaid, in some way resumes the part played by Polly in the Bretton days. Ginevra enacts the would-be pleasure seeking side of Lucy and constantly taunts and nags her, to the extent that Lucy has, "sometimes to put an artful pin in my girdle by way of *protection* against her elbow" (Chapter 28, italics mine). Although from their first meeting, Lucy has had to tell Ginevra to, "hold her tongue" (Chapter 6), and finds her attentions increasingly irritating, she finds herself continually drawn to Ginevra's side. In their confrontations Lucy always performs the



part of reason<sup>5</sup>. Ginevra shows Lucy what she could be, what she is missing out on.

At Mme. Beck's fete Lucy is forced by Paul to participate in a play. Uncomfortable at the prospect, because no role epitomises Lucy and her predicament, she must make a given role her own. She does this in several ways. As the role is that of an empty-headed male suitor, she is required to dress in male costume, which she refuses to do, preferring, instead, to wear a token of the male costume<sup>6</sup>. In doing so, she is empowered, but makes the distinction that the *power* entrusted to men, by society, is enviable, but *not* men themselves. Thus empowered, and under the protection of the play, Lucy is free to reveal her feelings. In wooing Ginevra, she is acknowledging and admiring society's opinion of beauty while also releasing her resentment towards the girl, enacting her thoughts that, "The world, I soon learned, held a different estimate: and I make no doubt, the world is very right in its view, yet believe also that I am not quite wrong in mine" (Chapter 27). In her passionate performance Lucy is also wooing Ginevra away from Dr. John (in the audience). Here, her intention is double-edged. By wooing Ginevra away from him, she leaves the way clear for Dr. John to appreciate her own charms, but on his subsequent rejection of them, she is wooing Ginevra away from him, to spite him. If Lucy cannot have Dr. John, then neither should Ginevra.

Alienated in a foreign country, equally without friends, Lucy is forced to spend the long autumn holiday alone, but for the company of a deformed cretin. This poor twisted creature serves as a projected image of Lucy - of what she has the potential to become because of her internalised torture. In acknowledging her self-imposed, but inevitable burial alive, she endures a taxing physical illness, no doubt induced by a mental breakdown. Haunted by surreal hallucinations, she is finally driven from the house which has become, "crushing as the slab of a tomb" (Chapter 15). The refuge Lucy seeks this time, is to be found in the confessional box of a Catholic church.

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<sup>5</sup>This is a reversal of the situation between Jane and Helen in *Jane Eyre*, where Helen acts as the part of reason in Jane's unconscious.

<sup>6</sup>This reverses Rochester's actions in *Jane Eyre*, when he assumed a female costume to disguise himself as a gypsy. Thus feminised he is enabled to better communicate his feelings to Jane.

This is only fitting when we consider that Bronte presents Catholicism as an institution of slavery, associated with guilty sensuality and obsessive secrecy. Lucy sees the stories of the lives of the saints as tending to, "dreadful viciousness, sickening tyranny and black impiety: tales that were nightmares of oppression, privation and agony" (Chapter 13), all the things she now seeks to escape. In what she sees as the source of the problem, then, she seeks the resolution, but in vain. She turns back, equally unresolved, to the streets to which she entrusts her fate amidst a storm. As Jane entrusted her fate to the marshy moors, after her flight from Thornfield and her haunted subconscious, and is rescued by those who turn out to be kin, so too is Lucy. Her rescuers are the Brettons and, it is only at this stage of the novel, that Dr. John is revealed as being the grown-up version of the youth Graham Bretton.

I suggest that the chapter *The Cleopatra* is one of Charlotte's most direct explanations of Lucy's predicament in *Villette*. During her convalescence at the Brettons, Lucy visits a museum where she views the *Cleopatra* and *la vie d'une femme*. The former is an oversized, opulent seductress, whilst the latter is something of a repressed martyrdom of woman: both serve to ridicule male notions of the feminine, and they also illustrate the male desire to control the female, as do the reactions of the male spectators. Dr. John escorts Lucy to the museum but only rejoins her as a guide after he has viewed the *Cleopatra* unaccompanied. Monsieur Paul is shocked and outraged upon discovering Lucy observing the voluptuous queen and, in his despotic way, commands her to, "Turn to the wall and study your four pictures of a woman's life" (Chapter 19), but views *Cleopatra* himself as "Une femme superbe" (Chapter 19). The paintings offer Lucy a choice of role models in patriarchal society but she rejects both on the grounds that they are false representations of womanhood. *Cleopatra* is, "on the whole an enormous piece of claptrap", while the women in *la vie d'une femme* are dismissed as "cold and vapid as ghosts" (Chapter 19). The rejection of the male given roles leaves Lucy little choice but to repress, or internalise, her *self*, as the role she wants to play is unacceptable in a male dominating society.

On her return to the Rue Fossette, painfully wrenched from the Brettons and thrust



back into reality, Lucy refuses to release Dr. John completely, and induces him to write to her. When his letter comes it is like manna from heaven; she is, "solaced at heart by the joyous consciousness of that treasure" (Chapter 21). Saving the contents until she can privately savour them, she seeks out the attic as a suitable place for its perusal. It is then she imagines she sees the legendary nun's ghost. In her frightened flight from the attic, she significantly leaves behind her precious letter, no doubt to the nun who will perhaps either devour the letter (since she leads such a starved existence), or guard it against Lucy. The emergence of the spectral nun suggests the resurgence of Lucy's suppressed emotions; that she appears to have been exhumed is positive and indicative of Lucy's new found resistance to the idea of burying herself. Dr. John's diagnosis is nearer the truth than he realises when he suggests that the vision is symptomatic of Lucy's, "*mental conflict*" (Chapter 22, italics mine). Furthermore, as a male upholder of the patriarchy, Dr. John describes the attic as a "dismal, perishing, sepulchral garret - that dungeon under the leads ... *a place you ought never to enter*" (Chapter 22, italics mine). Is Dr. John rebuking Lucy for straying beyond the confines of her given role, by indulging in inappropriate thoughts? Just as Monsieur Paul directed Lucy towards *la vie d'une femme*, John Bretton is assigning Lucy her role, and entreating her to accept it. In his eyes, she must be as "inoffensive as a shadow" (Chapter 27).

The use of John Graham Bretton in *Villette* serves much the same purpose as St. John Rivers in *Jane Eyre*. Although he is not nearly so noble as Rivers, a life with Dr. John would be equally as empty as one with Rivers. Just as Rivers is the diametric opposite of Rochester, John strongly contrasts with Paul. John is the epitome of the English bourgeoisie, he is conservative and lacks emotional depth. Paul, alternatively, is foreign, and therefore an alien, or marginalised "other"<sup>7</sup>, he is also radical, displaying a fiery passionate nature. John and Paul therefore offer Lucy a choice. Whilst Lucy is still blind to John's true nature she is attracted to him by his *seeming* (ultimately empty) pleasantness and again his *seeming* reverential attentions. As the epitome of English bourgeoisie self-possession Lucy seeks to emulate, he appears to

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<sup>7</sup>In fact Paul is French, living in Belgium; thus both he and Lucy are in a sense aliens living in a foreign country.

be a desirable choice. When the painful (i.e. to Lucy) attraction between John and Ginevra wanes, Lucy views John's speedy recovery through new eyes. This reinforces the discovery of his emotionally shallow capabilities which finally opens Lucy's eyes to his nature and his perception of her, "With now welcome force, I realised his entire misapprehension of my character and nature. He always wanted to give me a role not mine. Nature and I opposed him" (Chapter 27). The combination of this realisation and the reintroduction of Polly to the plot serves to sever Lucy and John completely and forever. However, with this divorce comes an important recognition of the falsity of romantic love, displayed by John and Polly, Ginevra and de Hamal.<sup>8</sup> Painful as her rejection by romantic love is, Lucy's new found knowledge frees her from the, "feeling that she is a nun (*none*) as a single woman" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984, p. 428, italics mine). Lucy later describes being reclaimed "from love and its *bondage*" (Chapter 41, italics mine).

Our introduction to Monsieur Paul Emmanuel presents a despotic "little" tyrant, who swings from rational benevolence to irrational severity. In her frank condemnation of his many idiosyncratic faults, Lucy renders him an equal. While possessing an admirable fiery and passionate nature, Paul is also both harsh and severe, qualities that complement Lucy's puritanical tendencies. I suggest that Bronte too equates these qualities with honesty. In *Jane Eyre*, Jane prefers Rochester when he is teasing her rather than making pretensions to heedless romanticism: "For caresses, too, I get grimaces ... at present I decided that I preferred these fierce favours to anything more tender" (Chapter 24, *Jane Eyre*). Perhaps for Jane, and Lucy, displays of a harsh temper and nature cannot conceal anything more sinister, such as falsity. As with Jane and Rochester, Lucy feels an affinity for Paul. She also finds his impressive perception a welcome change from John's misapprehension. "You want so much checking, regulating, and keeping down" (Chapter 31), says Paul to Lucy, he also tells her that she needs "watching, and watching over" (Chapter 31). In this way Paul helps to curb Lucy in a manner desirable to her, but also to look after her needs - Paul has perceived, and is aware of Lucy's guilty secret life - the life of thought.

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<sup>8</sup>One of Ginevra's suitors.



## CHAPTER 4

In *Jane Eyre*, Bronte uses Bertha Mason as the central alter ego of Jane, while the other characters only embody what Jane admires, for example, Rochester is passionate, Rivers is self-disciplined, Helen Burns is submissive. However, in *Villette*, the equivalent of these characters are developed one step further. While there is still a central alter ego in *Villette*, the characters and role models surrounding Lucy Snowe parody her as well as merely showing Lucy her aspirations. The tension between Lucy and Polly, on examination, reveals the tension between two selves of Lucy. She tells us that Polly must, "live, move and have her being in another" (Chapter 3). Yet Lucy's narrative, whilst she inhabits the Bretton house, is such that we are introduced to her in the context of the other inhabitants. As the connection between Lucy and Polly unfolds, we learn that to some extent, Lucy lives through Polly, just as Jane's inner self lived through the actions of Mad Bertha. Polly and Lucy sleep in the same chamber, yet Lucy's brief description of the Bretton house with its, "large peaceful rooms" (Chapter 1), suggests that there is no shortage of space. Why then, should the two share unless they are in some way connected? It becomes painfully obvious that Lucy is living through Polly when she admits, "I wish she would utter some hysterical cry, so that I might get some relief and be at ease" (Chapter 2). Here the connection is almost corporeal.

Another insight into Polly/Lucy's nature is revealed when Lucy tells us that the public Polly is remarkably different to the private Polly. Like Miss Temple, Polly is the "angel in the house". In the company of Mrs. Bretton, "she would sit on a stool at that lady's feet all day long, learning her task, or sewing, or drawing figures with a pencil on a slate", conforming to notions of appropriate occupation, "and never kindling once to originality, or showing a single gleam of the peculiarities of her nature. I ceased to watch her under such circumstances: *she was not interesting*" (Chapter 3, italics mine), and again, "she never showed my godmother one glimpse of her inner self" (Chapter 3). This suggests that Polly only commands Lucy's attention when she behaves in what might be considered an unconventional or inappropriate manner. Yet when Lucy happens on Polly alone, in an empty room, she

describes that chamber as being haunted, just as Lucy is haunted by her self-imposed restrictions, and the realisation of what might have been. Thus Lucy is really reflecting on her own future as she nestles Polly in her bed.

Mme. Beck's establishment is Lucy's destination, she admits to being drawn to it. This is because Beck's school either houses or forms a meeting point for all Lucy's selves: it is the home of Lucy's unconscious. Beck appears to be a matriarch of her establishment, but this is deceptive. The practice of spying and surveillance in which she engages renders her merely an agent in a giant patriarchal socialisation process; she guards against Lucy's guilty secrets, secrets that would be deemed inappropriate to Lucy's sex, and station. Thus, Beck herself, is a product of Victorian socialisation. Arriving at the haunted house of her unconscious, Lucy is given a warning by Mme. Beck, a pillar of society, of the consequences of not conforming to the set rules of society. The example is the dismissal of Mme. "Svini" (Sweeny), a drunken imposter with no respect for social conformity, "This brisk little affair of the dismissal was all over before breakfast ... *mutineer expelled*" (Chapter 8, italics mine). Lucy's envy of, and admiration for Beck shows us how deeply engrained in her is the desire to conform to society. When she speaks of Beck's intrusive practice, she associates it with "duty".

On her arrival at Mme. Beck's pensionnat, awaiting the forthcoming interview with her prospective employer, Lucy tells us that Mme. Beck's first words were, "so unexpected", and that, "so certain had I been of solitude...No ghost stood beside me, nor anything of that spectral aspect" (Chapter 7). This is not strictly true as Beck is yet another fragment of Lucy. Both she and Lucy closely resemble each other, physically, and in their demeanour, another indication that they are in fact, doubles. They dress similarly in bland, discreet grey dresses, both are small in stature and, in public, they are the epitome of self-possession and discretion. Mme. Beck's attempts to uphold the system are not always successful, however. Ironically, it is her daughter, Desiree, who demonstrates that repression breeds revolt. It is one of Desiree's pleasures to steal secretly into the rooms of her maids and nurses, and indeed that of her mother's, and to plunder the contents within.



Ginevra Fanshawe, as another facade of Lucy, is in strong contrast to Mme. Beck. Ginevra is the selfish, pleasure-seeking side to Lucy, one who constantly reminds her of her social and physical shortcomings. Ginevra continually tempts Lucy, of which the latter is aware. Lucy experiences a struggle, to succumb, or to resist. The most blatant indication of their connection is during the fete, when Ginevra pulls her aside and asks her to satisfy a whim. Lucy complies. They both go to a large mirror where upon examining the two reflections, or doubles, before her Ginevra, says "I would not be you for a kingdom" (Chapter 14). Later, the connection between the two appears almost real when Lucy is actually mistaken for Ginevra in the garden. This is significant when we consider that this garden is the equivalent of the attic room in *Jane Eyre*.

Just as Jane was inadvertently drawn to the third storey of Thornfield Hall, so too is Lucy drawn to the garden in *Villette*, as a place of refuge, but also as a place of secret suggestion. Physically, the garden is an oasis in the crowded cityscape; it is also a place which facilitates imaginative fantasy, just as the stone-walled school encourages repression. *L'allée defendue*, forbidden to students, at once suggests the illicit, and it is to this alley that Lucy is particularly drawn. Perhaps *L'allée defendue* may be compared to the Garden of Eden, the garden of original sin. Mme. Beck's school and premises once housed a convent, indeed many of the small dormitories still resemble nun's cells. "Romantic rubbish", as Lucy terms it, suggests that a nun was buried alive in the garden for sinning against her vow. Is Lucy in fact the nun who, through her self-imposed restrictions, will bury herself alive? Gilbert and Gubar suggest that, "Lucy's repression is a response to society cruelly indifferent to women" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984, p.401). The forbidden alley acts as an outlet for Lucy's suppressed tensions, the buried nun as a warning. It is in this garden that Lucy admits to herself, "I had feelings: passive as I lived, little as I spoke, cold as I looked, when I thought of days past, I *could* feel" (Chapter 12). Bronte often uses the storm, in *Villette*, as a means of expression for Lucy's inner turmoil, the struggle between passion and reason, "At that time, I well remember whatever could excite - certain accidents of the weather for instance, were almost dreaded by me, because they woke the being I was always lulling, and stirred up a craving cry I could not satisfy"

(Chapter 12). Immediately a storm breaks, Lucy is drawn to the garden, and her subsequent feelings are: "I did long achingly, then for four-and-twenty hours afterwards, for something to fetch me out of present existence and lead me upwards and onwards". Reason quickly overcomes her, "This longing and all of a similar kind, it was necessary to knock on the head; which I did" (Chapter 12).

In *Villette*, the buried nun, who on occasion haunts the *attic*, is the equivalent to Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*. It is interesting that Bertha is portrayed as a sexual nymphomaniac, whereas the nun conjures up an image of one completely desexualized. This reinforces the possibility that Bronte purposely used polar sexual opposites to expose the difficulty inherent in successfully reconciling oneself to a suppression of one's sexual desire and identity. In *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* this difficulty has not been overcome; the results of a society oppressive to women are Bertha and the nun. The former is driven mad by an abundance of unsatisfied sexual appetite, the latter is tortured by an imposed lack of sexual existence. In the case of the nun, Gilbert and Gubar have derived *none* from *nun* (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984, p.428), which on further extrapolation becomes *no-one*, suggesting Lucy's feelings of insignificance and worthlessness.

During her mental breakdown Lucy imagines she sees ghosts haunting her chamber - the ghosts of her mind. With physical recovery dawns the glimpse of acknowledgement that a starved and suppressed imagination or existence cannot solve Lucy's struggle. She must reconsider her declaration:

I seemed to hold two lives - the life of thought, and that of reality; and provided the former was nourished with a sufficiency of the strange necromantic joys of fancy, the privileges of the latter might remain limited to the daily bread, hourly work, and a roof of shelter (Chapter 8).



The actress Vashti<sup>1</sup>, reinforces the futility of such a course of action (i.e. denial of the life of thought). Unlike the false shallow "actors" in *Villette*, Vashti manipulates her art to represent herself rather than manipulating her audience, as *Cleopatra* does. In doing so, however, she brings about her own downfall and ultimate self-destruction, mirroring the painful difficulties of a woman artist or author in the nineteenth century. Indeed Dr. John, as an example of the patriarchy, "judged her as a woman, not an artist: it was a branding judgement" (Chapter 23). As a subversive threat to the patriarchy, it seems, Vashti must be checked. The theatre seems to self-ignite, and the performance is thus halted. This suggests that although Lucy has made an important realisation with regard to the secret life she lives, if she is now to renounce the secrecy of that life, she will encounter resistance, stronger than her previous self-restraint and suppression, in the patriarchal system. The use of a fire is again symbolic as an attempt to purge a dissenter.

In his radicalism, Paul is an underachiever because, as we have seen (e.g. his reactions to the *Cleopatra*), he practices sexual politics, at one point appointing himself as Lucy's master. As such, does he pose a threat to Lucy? In his characteristic benevolence, he installs Lucy in a small school of which she is to be the mistress. The separation wrought by the departure from the Rue Fossette signifies the renouncement of Lucy's alter egos. In her new abode and position she says that, "few things shook me now; few things had importance to vex, intimidate or depress me" (Chapter 42). The years of Paul's absence, instead of rendering Lucy distraught, are the, "three happiest years of my life" (Chapter 41). As a successful directress of a pensionnat, Lucy receives a small gift of £100 from Miss Marchmont's heir, giving her perhaps a taste of independence, just as in *Jane Eyre*, her late uncle's legacy makes it easier for Jane to accept Rochester, i.e. on her terms. Thus the ambivalent ending of *Villette* may be an attempt to release Lucy, by Paul's death, hence enabling her to achieve her full potential. While Paul lives, Lucy is merely the keeper of her

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<sup>1</sup>Bronte's choice of *Vashti* for the name of the actress who so impressed Lucy Snowe, is significant. *Vashti* is taken from Queen Vashti in *The Book of Esther*. During a banquet given by King Xerxes, the King summons Vashti to his presence in order to show off her beauty to his guests; Vashti refuses to comply, and is dethroned. In *Villette*, the actress Vashti imitates her biblical counterpart by refusing to be objectified in her art as an actress. Also like Queen Vashti, she is judged and punished by the patriarchy.

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school, an agent for him in his absence. During Paul's sea journey home a storm rises. Perhaps this storm is symbolic of Lucy's anxiety at his return, he may threaten her new-found peace with a resurgence of old haunted emotions. By dying, Paul is liberating her, but he is also denying her the regard she desperately sought<sup>2</sup>.

As her fourth and final novel, *Villette* reflects Bronte's increasing sense of claustrophobia as a woman living in a restrictive society, indeed Gilbert and Gubar describe Lucy Snowe as, "a progressive deterioration in spirit ... from Jane Eyre" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984, p.400). In *Villette*, Lucy Snowe is outwardly more submissive, but inwardly more rebellious than Jane Eyre. Perhaps Lucy is an older version of Jane, embittered by experience (hence more submissive) and showing a progression of the rage within Jane which shocked many Victorians. In *Villette*, Bronte frequently expresses Lucy's feelings of entombment, a symptom of a society oppressive to women. Critics have argued in the past that *Villette*, like all Bronte's novels, achieves only a middle ground (Eagleton, 1975, p.73). This may be so, but in a society unconcerned with the needs of women I would suggest that a "middle-ground" or compromise was perhaps the best Bronte could have hoped for. Sadly it was usually not enough.

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<sup>2</sup>This may reflect Monsieur Heger's unbroken silence to Bronte's letters from Haworth. In one of these letters she wrote, "If my master withdraws his friendship from me entirely I shall be altogether without hope." (Gardiner, 1992, p.101). The letter was torn up by Monsieur Heger and later secretly patched together by his wife, the role model for Mme. Beck.



## CONCLUSION

Bronte's *Jane Eyre* was published in the then standard three-volume form in October 1847. By the end of that year there was a demand for a second edition, and by the spring of 1848 a third edition was required. Miriam Allott believes that, "'Currer Bell's' success" (Currer Bell was the pseudonym Bronte adopted), "with *Jane Eyre* owed much to its timing" (Allott, 1974, p. 22), in that the novel was published in the interval between Jane Austen's publications and the work of future writers such as George Eliot who would dominate the mid to late Victorian era of writing. The immediate success following the publication of *Jane Eyre* may have been partially attributable to William Smith Williams, the literary advisor to Bronte's publishers, who selected notable literary personalities to become recipients of presentation copies as part of a vigorous and successful promotion of the novel (Allott, 1974, p. 15).

In writing what became commercially successful novels, Bronte also managed to subvert the then recognised female writing tradition. The ingenious use of Bertha Mason and the buried nun, in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* respectively, successfully illustrates the reality behind the Victorian facade of women's lives that required women to suppress or deny alternative concepts of femininity and an enlarged social role for women. Society was in fact creating a situation ripe for potential "deviation"; a situation in which women who resisted socialisation could induce their own self-destruction or be destroyed by male authoritarianism.

The use of parodies in *Villette* effectively illustrates the particular problems with female identity. The male and female role models used in *Villette* present the heroine with a difficult choice, paradoxical in nature, which often results in her tendency to morbid introspection. Aside from the choice to acknowledge or deny existence to "unacceptable" inclinations, there was also a choice of opposite personas within Victorian levels of social acceptability. For example, should Lucy Snowe choose repression (Mme. Beck) or superficial freedom (Ginevra Fanshawe)? I believe that *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, in particular, suggest that the range and type of choices available to the Victorian middle class woman deceptively masked the evident lack

of, or right to choice.

Fundamental to the success of all Bronte's novels, however was the increase of a reading public due to the spread of literacy or semi-literacy. This reading public was predominantly middle class, as according to Ian Watt, "Being able to read was a necessary accomplishment only for those destined to the middle-class occupations" (Watt, 1967, p. 39). The changes in work practices and the increase in specialized labour begun in the eighteenth century led to increased feminine leisure in both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This resulted in a "tendency for literature to become a primarily feminine pursuit" (Watt, 1967, p. 43), as middle class women were effectively banned from the business and leisure pursuits of their male contemporaries. Thus Bronte's middle class heroines may have strongly appealed to a wide reading audience.

Bronte's novels clearly transmuted the thoughts and feelings of many middle class Victorian women who were trapped within a rigid and oppressive patriarchy. With regard to the mere "middle ground" to which Eagleton refers in connection with her work (Eagleton, 1975, p.73), I suggest that given the context of the era in which she was writing, the achievement of such a "middle ground" is a measure of Bronte's success. Furthermore, I believe that Bronte's novels provide an invaluable source of information and insight into the nineteenth century Victorian middle class woman.

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