Articles

"Fairy-Born and Human-Bred": From Fantastical to Farcical in Charlotte Brontë's Fiction

Tyler Clark

Charlotte Brontë's writing has always been conscious of negotiating the truth and the idealistic. Brontë composed her mature novels in sharp distinction to the infernal worlds of the Glass Town saga, the fictional kingdoms she and her siblings created throughout their childhoods. Her juvenilia essentially function as high fantasy genre fiction, though over time, Brontë became more intent on exposing "the extreme of reality, closely depicting characters as they had shown themselves … in actual life" as opposed to these "exaggerated idealisms of her early girlhood" (304), or so writes Elizabeth Gaskell in the author's posthumous biography. This definition of reality, however, was subject to change over the course of Brontë's writing career. In the span of eight years, her novels became increasingly psychologically complex, leaving behind the fairytale pilgrimages of her juvenilia and *Jane Eyre* to make room for the eccentric and pessimistic narration found in *Villette*. Indeed, when we compare the motifs and genre style found in Brontë's texts, an overarching lack of the fantastical emerges throughout her narrative arcs.

Bronte's use of fantasy throughout *Villette* is enigmatic, to say the least. Whereas *The Professor* tells a rather straightforward marriage plot, and Glass Town exists in the genre of exaggerated fantasy, *Villette* and its narrator Lucy Snowe serve as a cynical satire of fantasy and idealism overall, edging further away from high fantasy tropes that Bronte used even in *Jane Eyre*. Its plot progression and first-person narrator are, at first glance, nearly identical to those of *Jane Eyre*: a plain and penniless orphan adopts the mantle of educator and later falls in love with a man who is unavailable to her. *Villette* meanwhile has done away with these popular fairytale motifs, such as an idealistic ending, an Edenic space separate from societal norms, and what is very

possibly a magical link between soulmates. Despite relying heavily on Gothic imagery, with the ghost of the buried nun haunting Lucy Snowe in moments of heightened emotional distress, the text's treatment of the fantastical is scathing rather than earnest—ironic rather than sincere. There is a marked contrast between Jane's expectant optimism—she who "think[s] too much of the love of human beings" and exclaims she would die without the affection of others (85), and the characterization of Lucy, the jaded and cynical expatriate—a bruised and traumatized misanthrope, "Timon of Athens," "Diogenes," "the Dragon" (485).

Furthermore, Lucy's narrative highlights episodes of her severe depression, wavering between clarity and destructive sequences brought on by isolation and stress. She begrudgingly tells her story, hiding behind a reticent exterior. *Villette*'s strange narration has maintained a prominent feature throughout its literary criticism, as scholars often engage with Lucy as an unreliable narrator, marking the unusual grammatical patterns of Brontë's writing as well as the novel's proto-feminist undercurrents. It is also typical to make direct comparisons to Brontë's own unhappy life, citing the death of her siblings and failure to maintain correspondence with her Belgian professor Monsieur Heger with whom she was infatuated as an explanation of the unrelenting gloom of *Villette*. However, when analyzing *Villette* in comparison to Brontë's previous novels as well as general trends throughout the mid-nineteenth century, we notice the intentionality of its misanthropy as a marked rejection of romanticized fantasy and traditional marriage plots.

Throughout this essay, I argue that the intimations of satirizing fantasy and idealism found in *Villette* are indicative of Charlotte Bronte's growing interest in the portrayal of literary realism. Victorian realist novels towards the midpoint and latter half of the nineteenth century became increasingly aware of social and psychological inequalities, with the Realism movement

concerning itself more with the plight of various underprivileged groups. I begin by discussing the mid-Victorian expectations of realism in novels, and how *Jane Eyre* alludes to Romantic optimism and fairytales in order to imagine a just world through the novel's utopian ending at Ferndean. Then, I examine *Villette*'s intensifying cynicism, drawing comparisons between the language of both texts, and looking specifically at moments where Jane and Lucy interact with other characters and how their relationships are depicted. *Jane Eyre* portrays love in many forms, and Jane is often surrounded by friends beyond her love interest. Lucy, meanwhile, exists near characters who hardly notice her: Graham Bretton, for instance, who describes her as "inoffensive as a shadow" (356). Lastly, I analyze both heroines' narrative styles, marking the difference between Jane's trusting and almost naïve relationship with the audience and Lucy's paranoid distrust of her reader, culminating in *Villette*'s highly subversive ending in which the heroine does not marry. These close readings all emphasize Brontë's shift in her treatment of cynicism, marking a shift from the popular fantasy found in the early-nineteenth century towards general realism found in the more traditional Victorian novel.

I will start by examining mid-Victorian practices regarding literary realism. The nineteenth-century literary market changed dramatically over a short period of time, with the highly popular triple-volume novel dominating the publishing industry at a rapid pace by the time of Brontë's publications. In her article "'Grotesque but Not Impossible': Dickens's Novels and Mid-Victorian Realism," Nathalie Vanfasse asserts that "realism was one of the dominant aesthetics of the Victorian period" and that "this new artistic convention, considered more in keeping with the spirit of the age than the conventions of romance, increasingly applied to Victorian three-deckers" (1). The mid-century Victorians, writing during the general time frame of 1840-1870, were becoming increasingly anxious about composing realism and foregoing the

fabulist conventions of Romantic verse from just a few decades before. This urgency to create a new prose style was due in part to the lucrative market that novels were quickly becoming, but also because of a sustained prejudice against the merits of the genre, though this is by no means just a recent critical opinion. As far back as the mid-twentieth-century, in his book *The Theory of the Novel in England*, Richard Stang notes that, "The use of prose, a form of discourse inferior to poetry, helped even more to lower the new genre in the early-nineteenth century" (20). The Victorian novel had to quickly justify itself, marking its own unique artistic style, in order to live up to its widely marketable appeal.

This urgency of course led to a period of trial and error, with general scholarly consensus believing that mid-Victorian realism was awkward, stunted, and ephemeral. Again, this is a relatively dated description of early entries in the genre, with Walter Kendrick's 1979 article "Balzac and British Realism: Mid-Victorian Theories of the Novel" noting that, in regard to Victorian art and society, "So long as the novel restricted itself to subjects which were socially unobjectionable …the potential contradiction did not become troublesome" (14). The contradiction here refers to the novelist's attempts to portray realistic plots without propagating unwholesome rhetoric at odds with Victorian social mores. Realist writers, according to mid-twentieth-century scholarship at least, were limited in their accurate portrayals of society due to various social conventions. However, recent criticism generally still agrees with this viewpoint. Elaine Freedgood's book *Worlds Enough: The Invention of Realism in the Victorian Novel* further cites that critics generally believe "Victorian fiction is too narrative (diegetic) and not dramatic (mimetic) enough" (1), which leads to the novel's "timid" morality and that it "does not take itself seriously enough" (7). Realism required a sharper-edged tone, and dominant authors such as

Charles Dickens were tasked with the difficult duty of circumventing burgeoning social mores while writing their novels.

Charlotte Brontë, meanwhile, remained skeptical of realism. In a letter sent to the critic G. H. Lewes (quoted in Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*), Brontë notably condemns Jane Austen's style of realism as "more *real* than *true*" (319). Reality and truth then are different schools of thought according to Brontë's literary consciousness, following the format of typical fantasy, and are subject to different traditions and means of execution. Brontë's initial ambition to portray "truth" is deeply tied to the Romantic tradition: "Can there be a great artist without poetry?" she asks of Lewes in the same letter (319). This belief coincides with Brontë's literary upbringing, such as through the Glass Town sagas, and how she and her sisters were well-versed in the poetical works of Cowper and Byron, amongst others. Poetry likewise dominated Brontë's early writings, especially her first attempts at publishable literature beyond the tales of Glass Town. It is plausible to suggest that this belief affected Brontë's early novel writing as well, as her failed attempt at publishing *The Professor*, a highly autobiographical (though gender-bent) account of Brontë's life in Brussels that lacks any substantial amount of "truth" or fantastical imagery, forced Brontë to reconsider her ambitions as an artist as she began working on new projects.

In the introduction to *The Professor*, Brontëwrites that she, in the process of its writing in the 1840s, had "got over any such taste as [she] might once have had for ornamented and redundant composition, and come to prefer what was plain and homely" (2). Ornamented and redundant here refers to the Glass Town saga of her juvenile works.These stories, written alongside Brontë's siblings, are true fantasy. They are comprised of a fictionalized setting with its own dynamic characters, such as the Duke of Zamorna, and are inspired primarily by early British imperialist efforts in the African continent. In the introduction to *The Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë*,

Christine Alexander is quick to point out that the "aristocratic intrigue" which so enthralled Brontës early stories highlights her juvenilia's "interconnection [and] significance in relation to Charlotte's later novels" (4). The most poignant of these connections is possibly the depiction of Brontë's male characters. In the poems and plays that comprise the Glass Town saga, the eager beginnings of the Byronic suitors in her later novels emerge clearly through the Duke of Zamorna or Lord Charles Wellesley.

"Plain and homely," however, was not a successful literary pursuit for Brontë's works so far. Publishers repeatedly rejected *The Professor*, citing its curtailed and awkward narration, and it was this criticism that eventually led to the formation of *Jane Eyre*, a novel that deeply complicates Brontë's own relationship to what is fantasy and what is reality. Brontë establishes *Jane Eyre* solidly in the genre of fantasy. The intertextuality of the novel relies heavily on fairy tales, with Jane often compared to the imp—the forest elf—the plain "beauty" to Rochester's "beast," and whose story ends in a happy, consummated marriage. It borrows extensively from the Glass Town sagas as well, with especially Rochester's likeness to the Byronic Duke of Zamorna and the subsequent plot points of bigamy and locked-away brides providing the driving force for the plot. What is interesting here, then, is Brontë's own fascination and desire to cultivate the plain and the homely. *The Professor*, though published posthumously, was never deemed fit for publication throughout her life specifically because of its lack of narrative inspiration. Despite this, Brontë repeatedly wished to see it in print, at last conceding to locking it away after its ninth total rejection from her publisher Goerge Smith in 1851: "Its merits – I plainly perceive – will never be owned by anybody but Mr. Williams and me" (*The Bront*ës*: A Life in Letters* 329). Brontë's pursuit of realism, and her gradual distancing from fantasy, nevertheless comes full circle with the

publication of her final novel *Villette*, which is essentially a retelling of *The Professor*, albeit with a female narrator and a more cynical relationship, once again, with the fantastical.

Jane Eyre, meanwhile, depicts fantasy and realism from a more symbiotic perspective than her later attempts and those of her contemporaries, showcasing her synthesis of the true with the real. The novel is highly allusive to fairytales, and its fabulist ending, climaxing with Jane becoming an heiress and marrying Rochester after inexplicitly hearing him call for her across the moors, diverges from the increasingly high-brow expectations of three-volume Victorian realist novels. Indeed, Jessica Campbell's "Bluebeard and the Beast: The Mysterious Realism of *Jane Eyre*" notes that Brontë's deployment of fairytales "is central to her brand of realism" and is "oriented around the truth of an individual's experience" rather than remaining faithful to the laws of reality (235). Again, the distinction between truth and reality is apparent. The novel is also multi-genre in its blending of Gothic and realist traditions, serving, as Nicole Diederich describes in "Gothic Doppelgangers and Discourse: Examining the Doubling Practice of (Re)Marriage in *Jane Eyre*," as "a reflection of nineteenth-century social practices or cultural codes" (2). *Jane Eyre*'s position, then, in the nineteenth century is crucial in understanding its relationship to realism; the novel was published at the advent of a developing understanding regarding Victorian realism. Sidestepping the negotiation of Victorian social conventions and blending the novel's depiction of the truth with the more fantastical Gothic genre allowed Brontë to avoid the pitfalls common to mid-Victorian realists. *Jane Eyre*'s eponymous narrator subverted the "intrusive omniscient narrator" (Freedgood 21) who "is objective about reporting on an intact world that it did not make" (Freedgood 17). Brontë's narrative abilities, especially in *Jane Eyre*, are some of the most widely acclaimed features of her novels, as the intimate relationship Jane develops with

her reader exemplifies her quest for "truth" if not material reality, bypassing the washed-out, disingenuous, traditional Victorian narrator.

The fantasy elements found throughout *Jane Eyre* are quintessential not only to its enjoyability as a novel, but also to making its plot logically plausible. Jane's narrative evokes fables and myths. As she encounters Rochester for the first time in Hay Lane, she "remembered certain of Bessie's tales, wherein figured a North-of-England spirit called a 'Gytrash'" (142). Rochester, himself an oblique reference to Bluebeard and the beast in "Beauty and the Beast," calls Jane an "imp," an "elf," and capable of "bewitching [his] horse" (156). The novel's ending furthers its fairytale intertextuality, with Jane's optimistic assertion mirroring a happily-ever-after: I know what it is to live entirely for and with what I love best on earth. I hold myself supremely blest" (592). These motifs all essentially point to the novel's climax, which serves as one of the only "true" elements of magical realism (and evidence of high fantasy) found in *Jane Eyre.* The revealing of Bertha Mason's existence quells Jane's fears about the supernatural plaguing Thornfield, but she still cannot shake the conviction that hearing Rochester's voice from Moor House was somehow a fantastical occurrence. After the reunion with Rochester, Jane herself admits, "You will think me superstitious – some superstition I have in my blood, and always had: nevertheless, this is true – true at least it is that I heard what I now relate" (472). Though enigmatic in its inclusion, to both contemporary and modern readers, this scene is pivotal in its implications of Brontë's relationship to her works as fantastical; without it, Jane would have had no reason to go in search of Rochester again. This "magical realism," as it were, allows the novel's conclusion to end with Jane and Rochester's consummation.

In *The Madwoman in the Attic,* Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar discuss this scene to mark the similarities between Jane's narrative and John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and that

"Charlotte Brontë appears here to have imagined a world in which the prince and Cinderella are democratically equal" (354). Ferndean, the retreat of Jane and Rochester after the destruction of Thornfield Hall, posits itself as an Eden-like withdrawal from the inequitable Victorian society at large. The fantastical "calling" Rochester casts to lure Jane here is idealistic in the same way that Ferndean itself is. Only here are Jane and Rochester able to "circumvent the strictures of a hierarchal society" (369). Brontë had an essentially impossible task to write—how could a man and a woman in such a society live in egalitarian equality? This again speaks of *Jane Eyre*'s portrayal of truth rather than reality, because Ferndean exists far beyond the possible conventions of Victorian reality, and is the "far, far away" to conclude Brontë's fairy tale. I posit, then, that Ferndean metonymically exists as a fictionalized space, not only in the fact that it is in a novel, but also because of what it represents diegetically. The union of Jane and Rochester mirrors a fairy tale in its optimism, and therefore allows *Jane Eyre* to be read as one of the more fantastical works in Brontë's overall oeuvre.

Furthermore, scenes from *Jane Eyre* also mirror quite a few throughout Brontë's juvenilia, showcasing the basis of the novel in her own fantasy worlds, whereas *Villette* exists as a restructuring of her first serious attempt at a realist novel. Take, for instance, the ending to Brontë's juvenile novella *Elizabeth*, written in 1838. Here, the "proud god incarnate" Sir William (*The Juvenilia of Charlotte Bront*ë 362), offers the heroine Miss Hastings to be his mistress after his conquests throughout her kingdom. He tells her, "Elizabeth, your eyes betray you. They speak the language of a very ardent, very imaginative temperament. They confess not only that you love me, but that you cannot live without me. Yield to your nature, and let me claim you this moment as my own" (364). Readers, of course, will recognize how Rochester's frantic pleading with Jane before she escapes Thornfield is essentially a revised version of this scene, nearly line-by-line: "I see you

can say nothing … you are thinking how *to act – talking* you consider is of no use … I should have asked you to accept my pledge of fidelity and to give me yours. Jane – give it to me now" (327). Through this comparison, the similarities of Brontë's early style are notable; in *Jane Eyre* here, she still writes of "bedroom dramas" (4), as Christine Alexander suggests of Brontë's juvenilia. Brontë's writing in the world of Glass Town and *Jane Eyre* signifies similar tropes, all pointing towards melodrama and Romantic motifs. The fictionalized settings of the Edenic Ferndean and the fantastical Angria mirror the larger-than-life Byronic heroes of Sir William and Mr. Rochester, who defy social customs in favor of a more Romantic, emotional satisfaction.

This is not to suggest of course that *Jane Eyre* is a bright and sparkling novel, or that Brontë's implementation of cynicism was entirely devoid in the text. Indeed, Christopher Lane's analysis "Charlotte Brontë on the Pleasure of Hating" argues how "few critics have addressed her novels' preoccupations with hatred" (199). Gilbert and Gubar are also aware of *Jane Eyre*'s "Satanic rebellion" and the extent to which Brontë's rage against social norms pervades her prose (314). Rather, Brontë's indictment of Victorian social mores is present though contrasted in each of her novels. Lane notes that *Jane Eyre* "accepts the Romantic strain of individualism that flourishes as hatred in her novels" (200). Brontë's engagement with misanthropy by this time is dependent on rebellion and a wish to imagine a better, more just social dynamic, as evinced by *Jane Eyre*'s ending. Whereas Jane's rage is fantastical and idealistic in its rejection of societal evils, Lucy Snowe's, as will soon be discussed, is deeply misanthropic—vindictive and cynical because she accepts her fate as remaining solitary and unhappy. Gilbert and Gubar are quick to surmise in the end of their analysis that, "Brontë was never again to indulge in quite such an optimistic imagining" (371). Thus begins Brontë's marked shift into avoiding fantastic elements, such as Edenic scenes or magical realism, in *Villette*.

If *Jane Eyre*'s ending exemplifies the indulgence of Romantic optimism, then *Villette* certainly is its dark twin. Scholars are quick to discern the narrative similarities between Brontë's novels, with both heroines "suggest[ing] a similar point about women's disenfranchisement from culture" (Gilbert and Gubar 406) or, as Robyn Warhol's "Double Gender, Double Genre in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*" argues, "lend[ing] themselves especially well to feminist tropes of doubleness, as critics of *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* repeatedly invoke dualities, oppositions, and doublings in their interpretations of the texts" (858); however, the scenic and plot minutiae of the novels are also highly allusive to one another, with both Jane and Lucy reliving near identical moments in their lives, though from a sharp contrast in degrees of internal optimism. Emily Heady's article "'Must I Render an Account?': Genre and Self-Narration in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*" argues that, like *Jane Eyre*, *Villette* is "often described as an uneasy fusion of two dominant novelistic modes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Gothic and realism" (341), though with *Villette*'s Gothic conventions reflecting more of Lucy's trauma as internal conflict, as opposed to the more literal impediment to Jane's marriage in the form of Bertha Mason. These similarities, however, allow the heroines to be read as doubles of one another, with Lucy serving as the jaded and traumatized double of the ever-hopeful Jane Eyre, expanding on Brontë's discourse regarding realism.

When considering Jane and Lucy as doubles, it is easy to notice their similarities at first glance, as both novels are told from the perspective of an indignant heroine who ventures beyond the familiar, albeit traumatic, sanctity of their childhoods. The interference or existence of a separate female character (Bertha Mason/Blanche Ingram or Madame Beck/Walravens) interrupts Jane's/Lucy's ability to love and find reciprocation for it, only for their love interest to return to the plot before the novel's end in order to secure the happiness of the narrator. Only the final page

of the novels, all considered, differ dramatically in plot and end the doubling metaphor, with Jane's story concluding in a happy marriage and Lucy's ending in mourning and spinsterhood. What could have caused such a pronounced change in the novels' conclusions? These final pages have long been analyzed in Brontë's response to her "deepening pessimism about woman's place in man's society" (Gilbert and Gubar 399), but they also speak of Brontë's cynicism being indicative of the Victorian novelist's desire to better portray realism. Lucy Snowe's infamously laconic and paranoid distrust of the reader, *Villette*'s decidedly less fabulist intertextuality, and the divergence from the marriage plot (by Lucy's remaining unmarried by the conclusion) are all indicative of a greater Victorian attempt to represent "the novel as an art form with intrinsic values apart from its effectiveness as a moral instructor" (Kendrick 19). There is no egalitarian paradise of Ferndean in *Villette*, but rather an unremarkable yet plausible *externat de demoiselles* in which Lucy must live and work alone.

The doubling of the novels, as well as the cynical realism of *Villette*, becomes most apparent when reading their passages closely and comparing them side-by-side. Take for instance, early on, the similarities as both Jane and Lucy undergo journeys from their childhood residence to their unknown teaching positions. In *Jane Eyre*, the narrator invites her reader to fantasize the expedition as though it were a Romantic play:

> A new chapter in a novel is something like a new scene in a play; and when I draw up the curtain this time, reader, you must fancy you see a room in the George Inn at Millcote … I sit in my cloak and bonnet; I am warming away the numbness and chill contracted by sixteen hours' exposure to the rawness of an October day … Reader, though I look comfortably accommodated, I am not very tranquil in my mind. (117)

Jane's anxiety contrasts with her desire to romanticize this moment to the reader, and she recognizes the duality of her situation: "The charm of adventure sweetens that sensation, the glow of pride warms it; but then the throb of fear disturbs it" (118). Jane relates her story in an almost ironically self-aware statement as though she were in an epic or acting on a stage, whereas in reality she is simply waiting alone in an unfamiliar inn. The self-allusion to the theatre is indicative of Brontë's careful treatment of realism in *Jane Eyre*, where the material reality of the narrator is set in conjunction with a high imagination—an optimistic impulse to recognize the romance of travel and the excitement of a new situation, as though Jane Eyre were the actor of an idealized play.

In *Villette*, Lucy undergoes a nearly identical experience, though her narration differs noticeably in tone. Lucy's employment ends after Miss Marchmont's death, and she sets off for London, aware that she must find a new situation as quickly as possible. Here, Lucy describes her arrival:

> About nine o'clock of a wet February night I reached London. My reader, I know, is one who would not thank me for an elaborate reproduction of poetic first impressions; and it is well, inasmuch as I had neither time nor mood to cherish such; arriving as I did late, on a dark, raw, and rainy evening, in a Babylon … How difficult, how oppressive, how puzzling seemed my flight! (42)

Villette offers no romanticized travelogues regarding the thrill of an uncertain future. Lucy here refrains from offering any imaginative solace to her reader; rather, she addresses them obliquely, baldly stating that she was in no mood at the time to imagine London as anything but a dangerous wilderness. Her cynicism is both self-deprecating and offensive, imagining that she could neither attract an audience with poetical tastes nor believe that the reader could be inspired by such

imaginings. However, Lucy's contempt is not needlessly bleak, and she awakens the next morning endeavoring to make the most of her circumstances: "I did well to come," she soliloquizes, "I like the spirit of this great London which I feel around me. Who but a coward would pass his whole life in hamlets?" (45). She is, to use a fairly modern description of the word, a *realist*. She accounts for her losses as the cost of experience, recognizing a similar thrill to being in unfamiliar territory though without the sentimentalized allusions that Jane utilizes. Lucy's narrative journey, therefore, hinges on her balance of presenting reality without excessively divulging in her romantic imaginations.

When comparing the doubled circumstances of Jane and Lucy early in their respective plots, we become aware of the reader's position and how it changes throughout Brontë's novels. In fact, Lucy's dialogue with the reader functions satirically towards the narrative choices found in *Jane Eyre*. While Jane urges the reader to "fancy" her in the new scene of a play, Lucy undercuts any attempts to picture her beyond what she wishes to be perceived as. During her voyage from London, Lucy cuts short her "reverie," the "wide dream-land, far away" to scold us: "Cancel the whole of that, if you please, reader … *Day-dreams are the delusions of the demon*" (63). Lucy is overwrought by her relationship with imagination, and this interaction with her reader harkens back to Kendrick's previously cited remark regarding the Victorian novel's goal to portray art as more than mere moral instruction for the sake of realism. Brontë's writing here satirizes novelistic pedantism. Lucy's reprimands and harsh attempts to remind herself of the pitfalls of imagination only serve to increase her own unhappiness; furthermore, she does not trust her reader enough to attempt further moral instruction, often carelessly writing the reader off: "Well! The amiable conjecture does no harm, and may therefore be safely uncontradicted. Far from saying nay, indeed, I will permit the reader" (39). This exchange treats moralizing ironically as Lucy does not care

what we imagine or believe. She tells us it "does no harm" to imagine, only to contradict herself later that dayreams are demonic delusions. Lucy's narrative distrust of the reader, therefore, highlights Brontë's changing relationship with realism, and how her novels function as forms of art that showcase reality beyond pedantism.

As an example, in reference specifically to the Gothic, we see the distinction between Jane and Lucy, and how this represents a change in Brontë's literary relationship to fantasy from accepting to satirical. As previously mentioned, Jane's true encounter with the supernatural, namely Rochester's voice calling her from across the moors, is accepted at face value. Jane notes that "the coincidence struck [her] as too awful and inexplicable to be communicated or discussed" (472), yet no resolution is offered; we as readers, therefore, take this claim true. Rochester's connection to Jane allows him to communicate with her from afar, positioning the novel in the realm more of the fantastical (or in Bronte's words, the "true"), rather than the real. This is not the case in *Villette,* where the Gothic apparition of the nun turns out to be nothing more than a sham, with Lucy criticizing herself and the reader for believing otherwise. Upon seeing its appearance for the last time, she states, "Be the spectacle what it might, I could afford neither consternation, scream, nor swoon. Besides, I was not overcome … I defied spectra (483). Later on, Lucy receives a letter from Ginevra Fanshawe admitting that her lover was using the costume of the nun to visit her on the school grounds. The illusion in *Villette* is dismantled scornfully, whereas in *Jane Eyre*, it is left open to interpretation and acceptance. Brontë's use of the nun, and the illusion of the supernatural it provides, further provides satirical commentary on the fantastic and magical realism found even within her own earlier novels.

Though the circumstances of Jane and Lucy are quite similar, their outlook on life and the treatment of their imaginative psychologies remain curiously distinct. In "A Great Break in The

Common Course of Confession: Narrating Loss in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*," Gretchen Braun analyzes in detail the effects that trauma has on Lucy's personality, arguing that "the intensity of her grief render[s] her inarticulate" (189). Braun notices that "Jane, like Lucy, has lost her family and fortune" though "unlike Lucy, Jane never conceals the details of her misfortunes, relating her youthful trials in an open, self-asserting manner" (196). Lucy's condition, and her relationship with her own trauma of being orphaned and homeless, correlates more directly with realistic interpretations of trauma. Her misanthropic sarcasm and near-paranoid distrust of her reader indicate an internal fear of repeating her cycle of loss and undergoing grief. When Polly, the optimistic and beautiful counterpart to Lucy, questions her life philosophy and states that to always be alone is the equivalent to sadness, Lucy responds, "Yes; it is sadness. Life, however; has worse than that. Deeper than melancholy, lies heart-break" (437). Lucy's defensiveness, her guarded attempt to endure isolation to avoid heart-break, is realistically portrayed in line with the fallout of her trauma; Brontë herself was acutely aware of this and painstakingly applied this level of realism to *Villette*. In response to criticism regarding Lucy's characterization, Brontë wrote, "I consider that she *is* morbid and weak at times … anybody living her life would necessarily become morbid" (Gaskell 485). "Morbid" of course refers to Lucy's depression and the various causes of her misanthropic nature. Jane Eyre would never be referred to as morbid, though her trauma is hardly less severe than Lucy Snowe's, as it is Brontë's portrayal of the latter's realistic cynicism that invites this critique.

When considering the criticism that early Victorian novels depicted flawed realism in order to not contradict socially objectionable standards does not hold up in regard to *Villette*, as Lucy's trauma does begin to accurately affect her marriageability and her relationships with other people, both of which (especially the former) were imperative in the social expectations of single women.

Jane Eyre, meanwhile, is at fault for this presentation of inconsistent reality, as its narrative structure is much more conventional in its design as a marriage plot. Jane's love is reciprocal both romantically and platonically, and it is external phenomena that originally prevent her marriage to Rochester as opposed to unrequited affection. Overall, Jane is actually rarely alone in the novel. Upon her return to Thornfield after visiting the sick Mrs. Reed, the household staff greets Jane: "This was very pleasant" she writes, "there is no happiness like that of being loved by your fellow-creatures" (320). Even after fleeing Thornfield, Jane miraculously lands on the doorsteps of her cousins, with Diana and Mary specifically bonding with her at once: "I know all your sisters have done for me since … and I owe to their spontaneous, genuine, genial compassion as large a debt as to your evangelical charity" (456). "Sisters" is spoken reverently, and Jane fits in with them effortlessly, finding friends almost immediately after she is forced to abandon Thornfield. The novel's format as a marriage plot comes full circle, as I previously discussed, as she hears the voice of Rochester calling to her, ascends to the paradise of Ferndean, and happily marries her true love. *Jane Eyre*, in this aspect at least, does not undermine the Victorian model of marrying off the heroine by the novel's conclusion in its representation of realism.

Villette, however, contradicts all such ideals. Whereas Jane encounters adoptive siblings in Diana and Mary, Lucy pessimistically casts away such thoughts towards Dr. John: "I could not help forming half a wish that the said doctor were my brother … I say half a wish; I broke it, and flung it away before it became a whole one, discovering in good time its exquisite folly" (103). Ironically, Dr. John *is* in fact Lucy's god-brother, and she enjoys perhaps one of the happiest periods of her life upon realizing that her god family, Graham (Dr. John) and Mrs. Bretton, are living in Villette as well. This happiness, however, is tempered by the novel's cynical authenticity: Graham drifts away from Lucy over time, especially as he begins to fall in love with Polly. As for

Mrs. Bretton, Lucy painfully admits to herself that, "The difference between her and me might be figured by that between the stately ship cruising safe on smooth seas … and the life-boat, which most days of the year lies dry and solitary in an old, dark boat-house" (184). Lucy's trauma, and her pessimistic refusal to expect anything from her relatives, deepens her own isolation. Her nature is not congenial enough to have her relationship with the Brettons be as idyllic and romanticized as Jane's sisterly affection with the Rivers.

Furthermore, and perhaps its strongest subversion of mid-Victorian social mores in an attempt to better portray realism, *Villette* does not end with Lucy's marriage, effectively breaking the expectation of Brontë's novel fulfilling itself as a marriage plot. After burying Graham's letters in her attempt to bury her emotional attachment to him, Lucy's relationship with M. Paul begins to develop rapidly. They recognize their shared interests, similar trials of burying their affection for a lover out of reach, and—symbolically—Lucy and M. Paul are the only characters who can see the nun haunting the school's corridors. *Villette* picks up pace toward its conclusion as Lucy and M. Paul must overcome multiple hurdles in order to merely speak to each other, not to mention propose marriage. However, M. Paul is at last able to reveal to Lucy the depth of his affection for her—he had rented and furnished an *externat* school in which Lucy could live and teach away from the oppressive oversight of Madame Beck. *Villette*'s ending, so far at least, begins to mimic the fairytale bliss of *Jane Eyre*.

Lucy's description of the new residence aligns quite similarly to Jane's opinion of Ferndean. Lucy's school is "in a good-sized apartment, scrupulously clean, though bare, compared with those I had hitherto seen. The well-scoured boards were carpetless; it contained two rows of green benches and desks, with an alley down the centre, terminating in an estrade" (497) whereas Ferndean "was a building of considerable antiquity, moderate size, and no architectural pretensions

… Ferndean then remained uninhabited and unfurnished, with the exception of some two or three rooms" (566). Indeed, the *externat* becomes dangerously close to Ferndean in its metaphorical dimensions as well. Here, away from intruding society, Lucy and M. Paul might live together in egalitarian harmony. Brontë's delineation of Lucy's character as a cynical individual, and the aim to convey a novel more truthful in its realism, begins to pave way in respect for the mid-Victorian expectation of single heroines naturally being paired off in marriage before a novel's conclusion.

However, as mentioned previously, the final page or so of *Villette* contains the majority of the novel's subversive realism. Lucy recounts that her *externat* quickly developed into a prosperous *pensionnat*; and, though not coming into the inheritance that supported Jane Eyre, Lucy's hard work pays off to finally give her a modicum of financial liberation. M. Paul, however, gone across the Atlantic at the behest of Walravens's designs, is nowhere to be seen. Lucy strongly hints that he perished at sea during a raging storm across the ocean, and advises her reader: "Here pause: pause at once. There is enough said. Trouble no quiet, kind heart; leave sunny imaginations hope" (507). Lucy almost disdainfully refuses to answer for his fate, revealing the same cynical impression of her reader as she did at the novel's start. Her wisdom to "leave sunny imaginations hope" is acerbic in its denunciation of any optimism left from the reader's perspective. This, of course, implies that Lucy remains single for the rest of her life, making Lucy's "story so different from those of literary peers like Elizabeth Gaskell's Margaret in *North and South*, Charles Dicken's *Oliver Twist* and *David Copperfield*, and Charlotte Brontë's own earlier *Jane Eyre*" (Braun 189). The final chapter of *Villette* is what separates Brontë's writing from the flawed realism of her other mid-Victorian contemporaries. Lucy, in an almost nonchalant fashion, condemns the reader for having any expectations of her marriage and effectively breaks the barrier of the independent values of life and literature that plagued the Victorian realist tradition.

Villette's misanthropic heroine and pessimistic view of fantasy and idealism is doubly significant in both Brontë's own journey as an author and the Victorian novel's triumph over its difficult relationship with realism. Brontë's Gothic conventions and allusions to fantasy are indeed artistically pertinent to her oeuvre, but the stark difference between *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* in how she utilizes these motifs is what secures Brontë's overall development as a writer in the realist tradition. Though the Victorian novel would undergo more significant developments in its narrative style, and in its interpretation of representing reality in the most truthful way possible, Brontë's novels stand as providing a remarkable insight in how nineteenth-century authors would forego the fantastic and dramatic traditions, such as Edenic paradises and magical realism, of the Romantics before them. By subverting fairytale tropes and constructing a cynical narrative style, Brontë's *Villette* emphasizes the mid-Victorian shift in its employment of literary realism, marking a general trend towards contradicting nineteenth-century social ideals in order to strengthen literary realism's legacy with the novel format.

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Tyler Clark is a Ph. D. candidate at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst with an emphasis in Victorian literature and Gay/Lesbian studies. His focus lies primarily on sensation and affect in Decadent literature. Currently, he is researching "camp" as ritual expression from the Cambridge Apostles to fin de siècle literature.