The Gaze of the Woman Artist in Novels by the Sisters Bronte

Elaine L. Bevington
College of William and Mary

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses

Recommended Citation

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.
The Gaze of the Woman Artist in Novels by the Sisters Brontë

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English from The College of William and Mary

by

Elaine Bevington

Accepted for __________________________
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

________________________________________
Deborah Denenholz Morse, Director

________________________________________
Suzanne Raitt

________________________________________
Kim Wheatley

________________________________________
Kathrin Levitan

Williamsburg, VA
April 26, 2013
“He judged her as a woman, not an artist: it was a branding judgment”
-Villette (1853)\(^1\)

As a female author, Charlotte Brontë was especially concerned both with how women were represented in art and how female artists were perceived by their audiences. Her sisters and fellow authors, Anne and Emily Brontë, were equally preoccupied by depictions of the female artist. This sentence from *Villette* is a succinct explanation of why they shared this concern: the statement refers to Dr. John’s reaction to a performance from the female actress, Vashti – a reaction that is largely negative. The actress gives a fearsome performance of a fearsome role – that of Phèdre, a figure drawn from Greek mythology who has an affair with her stepson and is destroyed by anguish over this.\(^2\) Brontë calls the actress Vashti in her novel after the first wife of King Ahasuerus from the Book of Esther, who is banished by her husband for refusing to display her beauty at her husband’s command. Dr. John reacts predictably to this show of female rebellion, judging Vashti for her strength and her coarseness. He does not separate the actress from her role. *Villette*’s narrator, Lucy, in awe of Vashti, finds Dr. John’s sympathies to be “callous”. His judgment speaks to the way in which the art of women is examined in relation to traditional expectations of ‘femininity.’ Often critiqued for the immorality of their novels, Charlotte, Anne, and Emily were given a different set of standards for their work than their male counterparts. Brontëan writing shows these three authors


\(^2\)Rachel M. Brownstein, *Tragic Muse: Rachel of the Comedie-Française* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 162-163. Phèdre is based on Phaedra in the *Hippolytus* of Euripides. Her husband is Theseus; his son by another woman is Hippolyte, whom Phaedra falls in love with and has an affair with when her husband is gone – she is destroyed by her own self-disgust. The actress Rachel (whom Brontë calls Vashti) played this role in Jean Racine’s play entitled *Phèdre*. 

1
evaluating, critiquing, and challenging the standards set for female novelists and determining their own standards for women’s art.

The callousness of Dr. John mimics the reactions that Charlotte herself faced as a writer. Lucy’s above statement in *Villette* is remarkably similar to Charlotte’s own words in a letter to G. H. Lewes: “I had said earnestly that I wished critics would judge me as an *author*, not as a woman.” She was “hurt,” she wrote to Lewes, a critic whom she respected and whom she knew largely respected her, because he “so roughly – I even thought so cruelly – handled the question of sex” in his review of her novel *Shirley*. Indeed, his review of that novel questions and limits the ability of a woman to write as powerfully as a man. “As Nature qualifies and apparently designs all women to be mothers, it is impossible to know who are to escape that destiny, till it is too late to begin the training necessary for artists, scholars, or politicians,” he writes, continuing to remark that women are often excellent musical performers, but not good at composing, and though they succeed perhaps best at fiction, they cannot write humor as well as men. Lewes loved *Jane Eyre* and his own encouragement of George Eliot’s writing demonstrates his appreciation for the capacity of female writers. Of *Jane Eyre*, he says, “A more masculine book, in the sense of vigour, was never written. Indeed that vigour often amounts to coarseness, - and is certainly the very antipode to ‘lady like’”; however, his review continues, “this same over-masculine vigour is even more prominent in *Shirley*, and does not increase the pleasantness of the book.”

---

5Ibid, p. 163.
Lewes seems to capture much of what made these novels so controversial at the time of their publication. Charlotte and her sisters do not shy away from depicting scenes of violence and sexuality, rude language, and ruder behavior. This “vigour” is part of what makes their novels so compelling, but also potentially off-putting. Coming from women, it is even more shocking, to the point of possibly offending the sensitive Victorian reader. Lewes cites Jane Austen as an exemplum of a perfectly successful female author, whose “range, to be sure, is limited; but her art is perfect.” The Brontës push past the acceptable “range” of female authorship; their characters do not adhere to the drawing-room decorum Lewes sees in Austen’s fiction. This is especially true of Emily’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and Anne’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), which feature a violent, dark-skinned boy of mysterious origins and a cast of alcoholic, brutish aristocrats, respectively. In comparison, Charlotte’s subject matter seems tame, but conservative readers took issue with her bold, highly individualistic heroines, her eccentric male heroes, and her ‘indecorous’ presentation of their love affairs. Anne’s *Agnes Grey* may be the only Brontë novel completely to escape denunciations of ‘immorality.’ Even *Villette*, with the mild-mannered Lucy Snowe as its heroine, was sometimes viewed as harsh or excessive in its rebuke of Catholicism.\(^6\)

“Coarseness” seems to be the word most often thrown at the Brontës’ work from early critics, though what is meant by the term can be hard to discern. The aforementioned ‘immorality’ of the Brontës is certainly a part, as are the Yorkshire accents and vulgar language of many of their characters. Again, Lewes’ criticism is illustrative of a common critical response: “Curious enough it is to read *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, and remember that the writers were two retiring,

---

solitary, consumptive girls! Books, coarse even for men, coarse in language and coarse in conception, the coarseness apparently of violence and uncultivated men…There is matter here for the moralist or critic to speculate on.”7 Though Anne seemed to be exempt from this family brand of ‘coarseness’ after publishing her first novel, *Agnes Grey*, after *Tenant*, “she found that she had made herself vulnerable to the charge so often levelled against her sisters, of a gratuitous liking for sensationalism.”8 What was so disconcerting about the Brontë sisters seems summarized by contemporary critic Albany Fonblanque’s words here: “With a most delicate and intense perception of the beautiful, the writer combines a craving for stronger and rougher stimulants…She has a manifest pleasure in dwelling even on the purely repulsive in human character.”9 Though he was only speaking of Charlotte’s work – mostly *Jane Eyre*, but also *Shirley* – what perplexes him is present in *Wuthering Heights*, *Tenant*, and *Villette* as well; in fact, this insistence that the reader see both the beautiful and the ugly is a distinct component of Brontëan fiction.

Even the Brontës’ admirers – for Lewes and Fonblanque certainly did admire their genius – were flummoxed by the sisters’ obsession with the unsavory. As Lewes wrote, their novels would have been “coarse even for men”; coming from women, they were downright scandalous. The Brontës anticipated that their work would be viewed differently coming, as it were, from women; to mitigate this, they published under pseudonyms, though even they did not realize the full extent to which their sex would affect their critical reception. Charlotte explains this choice in her “Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell”:

---

Averse to personal publicity, we veiled our own names under those of Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell; that ambiguous choice being dictated by a sort of conscientious scruple at assuming Christian names positively masculine, while we did not like to declare ourselves women, because – without at that time suspecting that our mode of writing and thinking was not what is called “feminine” – we had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice; we had noticed how critics sometimes use for their chastisement the weapon of personality, and for their reward, a flattery, which is not true praise.\textsuperscript{10}

Though Charlotte states that they did not suspect at the time that their writing was “unfeminine,” the novels themselves suggest otherwise, for each sister seems to document on the page her own struggle with the notion of “femininity” and how it affects her art. \textit{The Tenant of Wildfell Hall}, \textit{Wuthering Heights}, and \textit{Villette} are each acutely aware of the “prejudice” that authoresses face. These are self-conscious novels, ones in which a discourse on the interplay of gender and artistic construction takes places within the narrative itself. There is a tension between woman as artistic object and woman as purveyor of her own art that underscores each.

These novels are particularly preoccupied with narrative perspective as it relates to gender. The sisters’ use of first-person point-of-view is remarkable, first because it is consistent throughout all of their novels (with the exception of Charlotte’s \textit{Shirley}), and because it blurs the line between author, narrator, and protagonist. It is notable that this is not the case with the works of other female contemporaries of the Brontës – George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell, for example, used the third-person omniscient frequently to narrate their novels – but the Brontës write in the first person almost exclusively. In Charlotte’s novels, \textit{Jane Eyre} and \textit{Villette}, this creates a confessional relationship between reader and narrator, emphasized when the narration breaks at points to address

the reader directly, making Charlotte’s voice even more audible. This confessional tone enhances the autobiographical nature of these novels, particularly *Villette*. In *Tenant* as well, it is easy to imagine that the majority of the novel that consists of Helen’s diary is written in a voice that sounds very similar to Anne’s own. *Wuthering Heights* uses the first person to very different effect, burying Emily’s voice in those of her dual narrators, Lockwood and Nelly Dean, but once again reinforcing the importance of perspective in the novel.

The narrator is the lens through which the reader views the action of the novel; the meaning and the art therein is all a matter of perspective. When reading *Jane Eyre*, one sees what Jane sees, as in *Villette*, one sees what Lucy sees. The focus is on each woman’s vision – the reader can only see as much as the heroine sees and cannot view the narrator or any of the other characters objectively because they are read through the filtered lens of one who is immediately involved in the action. Charlotte uses this subjectivity to help the reader also feel how Lucy feels – that is, to bring the reader into her autobiographical portrait of the repressed woman artist. This feeling becomes particularly important in the many scenes that feature Lucy looking at art directly – in forms other than the novel – but not participating. *Tenant* also engages directly with the idea of art in the form of painting, thus allowing a discourse on aesthetics to unfold. The flow of this discourse is complicated by the introduction of dual narrators, one male and one female, whose presence forces the reader to remain conscious of gender subjectivity throughout. *Wuthering Heights* uses this layered narration to an even greater degree, relying on a highly intricate framing structure to maintain consistently a first-person narrative voice whilst also continuously shifting and controlling the range of perspective.
in the novel. The effect in each novel is to draw the reader’s attention to the construction of the gaze. Made to look at art from the perspective of both the observer and the artist, the reader is consistently reminded of how the gaze of each functions in relation to the other. The Brontës’ concern with the gaze brings attention to how it interacts with the perception of female art and aesthetics.

‘I wished to tell the truth’: The Transformative Power of Female Narrative in The Tenant of Wildfell Hall

Of the three sisters, Anne deals most directly with the topic of female artists by making the heroine of her second novel, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, a painter by trade. When the reader is first introduced to Helen Huntingdon, it is as the mysterious neighbor of the novel’s narrator, Gilbert Markham. Upon visiting Helen’s home, Markham and his sister Rose are ushered into Helen’s studio, where she is in the midst of working on a painting of Wildfell Hall itself. The fact that Helen receives guests in her art studio and not a sitting room makes her priorities immediately clear. She cannot afford to heat both rooms, and the use of her studio cannot be sacrificed because painting is her livelihood. Helen sends her paintings to London, her son explains, as she affirms, “I cannot afford to paint for my own amusement.”¹¹ This illustrates the seriousness of her art – it is not merely a hobby for Helen, nor is she merely an amateur if she is able to earn a living by painting. This scene also removes Helen and her art from the domestic sphere. “Brontë represents Helen not in the feminine role of hostess but in the decidedly unfeminine role of preoccupied and grumpy genius,” writes Antonia Losano, in the chapter of her book

devoted to *Tenant*.

With this introduction to Helen in her home, Anne has forged an identity for her heroine as a professional female artist, an unconventional career for a female protagonist that would not be commonly in literature until later in the Victorian era.

Losano writes, “Brontë’s novel is as much a treatise about how and what women should paint as it is about how men (and critics) should interpret women’s artwork.” Anne’s intent in creating a female painter as her protagonist is not just to show the artistic capability of women, but to show the male reaction to such ability. This topic is personal for Anne, as a female artist herself. Unlike Agnes in *Agnes Grey*, which is widely accepted as autobiographical in nature, there are few parallels between Helen’s life and Anne’s own, but for this one. When reading the scenes of artistry in the novel, both Helen’s vision and the male interpretation of her vision are equally important to consider.

As her relationship with her emotionally abusive husband, Arthur Huntingdon, progresses, his reaction to her paintings evolves from egoistic interest to violent destructiveness – an evolution that is indicative of his treatment of Helen herself. The way that other male characters situate themselves in regards to Helen’s art is also indicative of their relationships with her; however, none of this is to diminish the importance of her craft to Helen herself, as it serves ultimately as her tool of liberation in the novel.

The growth of Helen’s paintings throughout the novel is highly symbolic of her mental and emotional growth. Deborah Morse writes about Helen’s art as reflective of

---

13 Ibid, p. 69.
her mental state throughout the novel. “[Helen’s] paintings reflect her maturing consciousness,” Morse writes, detailing the progression of the art, beginning with an early allegorical painting of young womanhood that Helen paints during the beginning of her attraction to Huntingdon. As an inexperienced artist and lover, Helen paints a picture of a young girl gazing with delight and wonderment at a pair of turtledoves, demonstrating her naïve anticipation of the glories of love and courtship. As she falls deeper in love with Huntingdon, she begins painting portraits of him, which is telling to the reader (and Huntingdon himself, when he discovers them) about her infatuation with the man. When Gilbert Markham visits Helen in her studio, she has ceased painting portraits or conventional allegories, and instead is working on realistic representations of the natural world that are more mature than her early endeavors. Mary Margaret Berg interprets this shift toward realism in Helen’s adult artwork: “Helen, like Anne, is committed to a more literal and objective recording of external reality.” Losano offers a similar reading of Helen’s later work. “Helen’s artwork…can also offer insight into just what sort of realist novel Brontë was attempting to write,” she explains. Just as Helen’s landscapes are detailed, accurate illustrations of nature, Anne’s novel is a frighteningly realistic depiction of alcoholism, domestic abuse, and the reality of marital discord in the 1820s, before the ameliorations of the Infant Custody Act of 1839.

---

17 Losano, p. 90.
18 Because the novel is set before 1839, Helen has no legal right to custody of her son, despite his father’s evident negative influence. There is a thorough explanation of this political context for the novel in Laura C. Berry, “Acts of Custody and Incarceration in Wuthering Heights and The Tenant of Wildfell Hall”, Novel: A Forum on Fiction, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Autumn, 1996), pp. 32-55.
Losano delves into a thorough examination of the symbolism at work in the allegorical painting of the turtledoves. Huntingdon’s response to this painting when he sees Helen working on it is crucial: “a very fitting study for a young lady. – Spring just opening into summer – morning just approaching noon – girlhood just ripening into womanhood – and hope just verging on fruition,” he says, an immediate interpretation of the symbolic imagery engaged in the painting (155). While Huntingdon’s analysis of the painting certainly seems accurate, Losano questions why scholars so willingly accept the interpretation given by a character primarily situated as the novel’s villain.¹⁹ Writing in her diary, Helen gives her own ekphrastic description of the painting, explaining her use of light and shadow to convey the time of day and mood of the picture, and indicating that, for the artist, the elements of the painting are at least as much about the practice of specific technique as they are about allegory. Helen also chooses to give the girl in her painting blonde hair, instead of black, like her own, suggesting that for her, the work is not autobiographical. Huntingdon notices this difference, and asks about it, to which Helen replies “I thought light hair would suit her better” (155). In the way that she discusses her painting, Helen distances herself from the character of the young girl in it, despite Huntingdon’s desire to read the painting as an indication of Helen’s desire for him.

Helen rarely discusses her art outside of her description of this painting, but the way that she writes and speaks provides a kind of indirect ekphrasis for her portraits. Soon before her marriage to Huntingdon, Helen and her closest female friend, Milicent Hargrave, discuss the possible significance of his physiognomy and coloring. Disapproving of her friend’s choice of spouse, Milicent says of Huntingdon, “But don’t

¹⁹ Losano, p. 69.
you think Mr. Huntingdon’s face is too red?” in reference to her concern about his alcohol use (171). Helen disagrees: “It is not red at all. There is just a pleasant glow – a healthy freshness in his complexion, the warm, pinky tint of the whole harmonizing with the deeper colour of the cheeks, exactly as it ought to do. I hate a man to be red and white, like a painted doll – or all sickly white, or smoky black, or cadaverous yellow!” (172). Her discussion of color here allows the reader to see through the filter of Helen’s artistic vision. Her assertions are informed by an outdated humoral theory. When she speaks of red, white, black and yellow coloring, she is referring to the theory of the four humors – red blood, black bile, yellow bile, and white phlegm – whose balance or imbalance was thought to affect an individual’s physical and emotional characteristics.  

This is also referred to when Helen discusses Huntingdon with her aunt, and describes his ruddy complexion as evidence of a “sanguine temperament, and a gay, thoughtless temper” (146). “Sanguine” indicates blood as his primary humor, correlating to a passionate temperament. The scientific basis for the humoral theory had already been rejected by the Victorian era, but Helen’s attention to coloring gives insight to both her artist’s aesthetic vision and archaic, romantic ideals.

This misguided interpretation of physical traits is compounded by the accepted nineteenth-century pseudo-science of physiognomy, or the correlation of personal character with specific facial features.  

Earlier in the novel, Helen declares, “I am an excellent physiognomist,” explaining that by reading Huntingdon’s face she has determined that “he was neither a fool nor a knave, though, possibly, neither a sage nor a saint” (136). Neither this assertion nor the assertion of his “sanguine” temper are

---

20 Lee A. Talley, editorial note, Tenant, p. 146.
inaccurate, but both physical readings reveal flaws in Helen’s vision. She attempts to read Huntingdon both scientifically and artistically, but her attraction for him clouds her perspective, and she ignores the negative elements of his personality, choosing to view him only in a positive light. Milicent’s cautious reading of his appearance provides a counterpoint to Helen’s artistic vision; “I think there’s nothing noble or lofty in his appearance,” says Milicent, laying forth her own physiognomic reading of his traits (136). Helen ignores, or rather, reinterprets Milicent’s concerns through her idealistic vision.

Helen’s conversation with Milicent draws attention to the subjectivity of vision as it relates to beauty and art. They couch their conversation in terms of colors and humors, but theirs is a debate about a deeper aesthetic. Milicent says of Huntingdon, “people say he’s handsome, and of course he is, but I don’t like that kind of beauty; and I wonder that you should” (171). The phrase “that kind of beauty” sets in place the dichotomy between Helen and Milicent’s aesthetic visions. Helen’s appreciation of Huntingdon’s ruddy complexion and physiognomy is very subjective, originating with her attraction to him, and others read the danger in his features that Helen does not see. Helen thinks Milicent is disappointed in Huntingdon because he is not like the idyllic heroes of romance, but Milicent denies that she is seeking an impossible ideal, asserting, “I’ll be satisfied with flesh and blood too – only the spirit must shine through and predominate” (171). Milicent’s words foreshadow her keen ability to detect morality, which comes into play especially as her influence brings out the better nature of her roguish husband, Hattersley. Throughout the course of their marriages, Helen is shown to be the one whose ideals have clouded her vision, as Huntingdon’s spirit grows blacker and blacker, and this moral
decline is accompanied by the degradation of his good looks. His ruddiness only increases as he slides into alcoholism. Meanwhile, Hattersley follows an upward trajectory. Milicent’s claims foreshadow Huntingdon’s decline and challenge Helen’s artistic re-envisioning of his characteristics.

Her vehement defense of his complexion reveals Helen’s powerfully artistic perspective, and its potential failings. Helen speaks as an artist, noticing tints and how colors blend together. From this dialogue, the reader gets an idea of how Helen’s previously discussed portraits of Huntingdon might look. Markham discovers one of the portraits from this period of Helen’s career on his first visit to her studio. His description of the painting aligns with Helen’s verbal illustration of Huntingdon. Markham seems drawn to the intensity of coloring, remarking on the subject’s “bright, blue eyes,” “warmly tinted cheeks,” and “bright chestnut hair” (71). Yet there are hints of character flaws, such as a “lurking drollery” in the eyes and a luxuriance of hair which altogether “seemed to intimate that the owner thereof was prouder of his beauty than his intellect”. Helen herself seems to be aware of a potential darkness lurking within Huntingdon, even managing to convey his vanity in her portrait; this subtext is clear enough to be read later by Markham. Yet, she frames his negative traits – his threatening temper, his overindulgence in alcohol, his excessive pride – as evidence of passion and charm, when she discusses him with Milicent and her aunt. Her portraiture demonstrates how she uses her artistic skill to focus her attention on the positive side of Huntingdon, highlighting the elements that she wants to see in his features. Perhaps the most powerful statement on the subjectivity of this art comes from Helen herself, regarding a portrait of Mr. Huntingdon from their first year of marriage six years later, as she is leaving him: “How
widely different had been my feelings in painting that portrait to what they now were in looking upon it!...Now, I see no beauty in it – nothing pleasing in any part of its expression” (332). The experience of time has transformed her perception of the man himself, which has therefore altered her perception of her art as well.

The context in which Helen’s art appears in the novel is also highly symbolic. The scene surrounding the exposition of the turtledove painting, for example, is as rich in symbolic imagery as the painting itself. Initially, Helen shuts herself in the library to paint as a means of escaping the company of the aptly named Mr. Boarham. From this early point onward, the act of painting becomes associated with escapism, and will be even more so, later in the novel. Then, as Helen is focused on art, nature, and love, Huntingdon literally jumps through the window, with a gun and interrupts her work. The gun is both phallic and symbolic of Huntingdon’s enjoyment of “predation.” 22 “Mr. Huntingdon, all spattered and splashed as he was, and stained with the blood of his prey,” embodies the coarse aspects of masculinity associated with hunting, brute force, and physical violence. His aggressive, consumptive act of hunting is contrasted with Helen’s creative act of painting. Furthermore, the conversation the two have about the painting is heavily imbued with meaning; in response to Helen’s suggestion that her young girl is imagining how “tender and faithful” she will find her lover, Huntingdon replies, “Perhaps – for there is no limit to the wild extravagance of hope’s imaginings, at such an age” (155). Pitting his jaded outlook against the painting’s romantic naïveté, this statement determinedly foreshadows Helen’s failed marriage with Huntingdon, marking the scene with a bitter feeling of cynicism.

The scene continues with Huntingdon slyly asking Helen if she has “any more portraits,” referring to the sketch of himself that he found on the back of one of her paintings the night before (155). Against Helen’s protests, Huntingdon begins to look through the works in her portfolio, and when she attempts to wrench it from him, he grabs the majority of the contents within, with a horrible cry of “Let me have its bowels then” (155). The language here is quite graphic – the word “bowels” is most commonly associated with the intestines; Huntingdon is essentially threatening the medieval torture practice of disembowelment on Helen’s art. “Bowels” could also refer figuratively to the womb, the heart, and the breast in a gendered reading of the word.\footnote{“bowel, n.1”. OED Online. December 2012. Oxford University Press. http://www.oed.com.proxy.wm.edu/view/Entry/22207?isAdvanced=false&result=1&rskey=inGVsP& (accessed January 07, 2013).} The word is inherently physical – Helen’s portfolio becomes corporeal, perhaps even an extension of her own body. It is clear that Huntingdon violates Helen’s privacy here; his language implies that he could and would do the same to her body – it is metaphoric rape. An even worse encounter of a similar nature occurs after the couple is married; when Huntingdon discovers Helen’s plan to run away and support herself by her art, he casts all of her work and her instruments into the fire. The scene illustrates the same violation of Helen’s belongings and art as is shown here, and again, there is the implication that Huntingdon is at least capable of violating his wife in the same way. Losano notes that the BBC film version of The Tenant of Wildfell Hall depicts a violent scene with Huntingdon that implies he does actually rape his wife following his destruction of her possessions.\footnote{Losano, p. 86.}

Huntingdon is not the only one in the novel who violates Helen. Mr. Hargrave continuously pursues her throughout, and after facing her rejection again and again, he
corners her in the library where she is painting. He asks her many times to let him be her protector against the brutal Huntingdon, and despite her denials, he only becomes more persistent, grabbing her hands and proclaiming his love for her. In a final plea of desperation he begs her, “I will be your consoler and defender! and if your conscience upbraid you for it, say I overcame you and you could not choose but yield!” (304). At this point, Helen raises her palette-knife as a defense against him. Morse discusses the significance of the use of the palette-knife, an instrument of Helen’s art, as protection against a male pursuer.²⁵ Again, no literal rape occurs, but the implication hangs heavy over the scene – Hargrave has gone so far as to suggest that Helen might think of intercourse with him as rape to assuage her conscience. Furthermore, Helen has come to think of the library “as entirely my own, a secure retreat at all hours of the day” (301). This personal sanctuary, where she has set up her easel and canvas, has been invaded by the intrusion of an unwelcome male presence. This scene in the library and the later scene in which Huntingdon destroys her painting materials highlight the significance of the first scene inside Wildfell Hall, in which Helen greets Markham and others in her studio. Having her own room in which to paint is a monumental victory for Helen, as she has not had a safe space for herself or her art before.

Ironically, Hargrave claims that his insistent pursuit of Helen proves his respect for her. “I worship you. You are my angel – my divinity!” he cries during their encounter in the library (304). Hargrave does not understand what true worship is – he cannot stand to appreciate Helen’s grace and beauty without also enjoying and possessing her. Despite his claim that he loves Helen more than her husband does, he shows no respect for her agency or choices, ignoring her clear insistence that she does not want to have sex with

him. Speaking of Mr. Grimsby, another despicable cohort of his and Huntingdon’s, Hargrave attempts to caution Helen that he has “no reverence for your sex – no belief in virtue – no admiration for its image” (304). In a display of dark Brontëan humor, the hypocritical Hargrave himself is guilty of these same faults. Hargrave thinks that because he appreciates Helen’s virtue, she should be willing to give this virtue over to him as reciprocation, not realizing that were she to do that, she would no longer have the purity that he claims to desire; his idolization of her has its dark inverse in his desire to desecrate her body. The absurdity of Hargrave’s proposition to Helen, both pathetic and threatening in its desperation, drives home two important points: that virtue cannot be possessed without losing its value, and that the female virtue he so desires cannot exist without female agency.

It is because Helen holds herself aloof that she becomes such an object of adoration for Hargrave. She is an ideal to him. Her resolution to remain chaste in her marriage despite her (warranted) disdain for her husband, highlights her positive character in contrast to Annabella Lowborough, who is cheating on her own husband with Huntingdon. Hargrave’s diction relates his feelings quite clearly – he says he “worship[s]” Helen, seeming to think that this veneration brings him closer to her. In reality, this “worship” places Helen on a pedestal, objectifying her, and distancing her from him. His adoration makes an idol of her, which any reader of Jane Eyre knows is not a good sign: “I could not, in those days, see God for his creature: of whom I had made an idol.”26 Helen herself makes the distinction between real love and mere idolization early in her diary, immediately following her conversation with Milicent, in a

---

response to Annabella, of all characters. “Does he love you – I mean, does he idolize you as much as you do him?” Annabella asks, before Helen’s wedding (172). “I don’t want to be idolized…but I am well assured that he loves me more than anybody else in the world,” Helen replies, firmly disavowing the sort of flattery and unctuous affection that Annabella and Hargrave imagine to be love.

In addition to the near-rape scenes in the novel, men also assert their dominance over Helen by critiquing her artwork. As explained before, Huntingdon hastily interprets the symbolism in Helen’s turtledove painting; he also deigns to glance at and comment on her sketches throughout their courtship. Hargrave also remarks on her paintings in an exchange just preceding the already-described scene in which he appears. “Being a man of taste, he had something to say on this subject as well as another, and having modestly commented on it, without much encouragement from me, he proceeded to expatiate on the art in general,” writes Helen (172). When he is welcomed into her studio in the first portion of the novel, Markham also gives his thoughts on the painting she is working on, even offering advice: “A few more touches in the foreground will finish it I should think” (71). These appraisals indicate that the men in the novel think they know at least as much as Helen about art, despite not being artists themselves. Their uninvited commentary is a method of subtly undermining her agency; they offer their opinions not because they are experts, but because they are men, and therefore have automatic authority, even in the domain of art that is rightfully Helen’s.

Markham is differentiated from Huntingdon and Hargrave because Helen actually asks for his opinion on several other occasions: “give me your last opinion, and, if you can suggest any further improvement, it shall be – duly considered, at least,” she says in
one scene, in another: “she somewhat appeased me by consulting my taste and judgment about some doubtful matter in her drawing” (89, 86). As this last quote demonstrates, however, even Markham, who is one of the redeemed male figures of the novel, needs Helen to soothe his ego by appealing to him for advice. This desperation to assert one’s opinion speaks to a pathological need amongst the men in the novel always to be the final authority for the women in their lives. In Hargrave’s case, his need to evaluate and critique Helen’s work precedes his attempts to seduce her. Similar to the scene where Huntingdon seizes several of Helen’s pieces against her protests, Hargrave’s treatment of her art is indicative of his treatment of her in this scene. He has a lot to say about her work, thinking highly of his own opinion, and expecting that she thinks highly of it, too. His presumption here prefigures his presumptuous expectation that Helen will want to have an affair with him; again, it is his appreciation of her aesthetic that he believes makes him worthy of her. Helen differentiates Markham from Huntingdon and Hargrave when she asks his opinion; this exchange signifies that he is worthy precisely because he does not presume to be, allowing Helen herself to mark him as an equal.

The male commentary on Helen’s art has the added effect of obscuring the works from the reader – she herself offers little analysis of her own work, so much of the assessment of her skills comes from the opinions of her male counterparts. The reader is informed of the maturation of Helen’s work through Markham’s statement when he first explores her studio; discovering one of her early portraits of Huntingdon, he compares it to the landscapes he has already seen, concluding “if done by the same hand as the others, it was evidently some years before; for there was far more careful minuteness of detail, and less of that freshness of colouring and freedom of handling that delighted and
surprised me in them” (71). Even when narration is given over to Helen for the middle portion of the novel, she does not draw attention to the details of her own work. The most insight she gives to her own artistic process is in her description of the turtledove painting. Elsewhere in the novel she offers little more than cursory descriptions of her subject matter. This places the onus on the reader to analyze the meaning of her shift from portraiture to landscape, as this is not explicitly discussed in the text. Helen is noticeably silent on her own creative process. Even though the reader is given access to Helen’s interiority through her diary, this interiority does not extend to her thoughts on her art. The reader is therefore forced to look at her work through the lens of its observers, and to infer interiority from this outside perspective.

There is no reason to believe that this is not deliberate on Anne’s part, for the very structure of the novel itself causes the reader to consider the perspective from which the story is being told at all times. The structure of the novel, simply explained, is a frame narrative, using both the epistolary and diary format. The majority of the action of the novel is told ostensibly through Helen’s diary, which itself is framed by a letter that Markham is writing to his brother-in-law, Halford. This narrative structure was largely criticized by early commenters, but has come to be redeemed by several modern critics.27 By structuring the novel in this way, Anne has made it possible for Helen to tell the story of her disastrous marriage in her own words. The addition of Markham as the narrator at the beginning and end of the novel illustrates the impact Helen’s story can have on an

audience. Markham begins his letter by delving into his own memory to explain his initial impressions and encounters with Helen before reading the diary, then copying the text of the diary itself – which he has copied into his journal – into his letter, and finishing his epistle in the present tense, where he is happily married to Helen. The contrast between his tone at the beginning and end of the novel demonstrates just how thoroughly reading the diary has transformed his opinion of Helen and of himself.

That Markham copies the diary word for word is itself significant. When introducing the diary to Halford, he writes “I know you would not be satisfied with an abbreviation of its contents and you shall have the whole” (130). Though it is quite long, Markham understands that the value of the story is greatly enhanced by hearing it firsthand, rather than a summary from a partial observer, such as himself. This displays a great respect for the value of Helen’s own words. He shows a perhaps even more urgent appreciation for her words when he is separated from her later in the novel – after they have confessed their love for each other, but she has left to nurse her dying husband. Markham strikes up a friendship with her brother, Frederick Lawrence, in her absence, and constantly begs him for news of Helen, until finally Lawrence begins letting him read her letters for himself. At one point, Markham asks to keep a letter, pleading, “Were not these characters written by her hand? and were not these words conceived in her mind, and many of them spoken by her lips?” (363). This desperate attraction to anything coming from Helen places him in juxtaposition with the cruel Huntingdon, who could only bring himself to craft short, trite responses to her letters when they were married. Markham demonstrates to the reader the eagerness with which her words should be received.
Initially, Markham’s impression of Helen is not positive. He is attracted to the simpering Eliza Millward and is not predisposed to be taken in by the attractive foreigner. His considerable ego is somewhat trampled by her disinterest in him. As he comes to fall in love with her, he finds his affection crushed by his discovery of what he thinks is an affair between Helen and Lawrence – who is really just her brother. Markham’s suspicions are allayed by reading the diary. Markham’s arrogance makes him somewhat off-putting to the reader, but given the appearance of Helen’s immoral affair, neither is the reader allied with her at the outset. The diary is the corrective force that transforms these opinions and creates sympathy for her character.

Julia Gergits defends the necessity of the diary for these purposes in her dissertation on Anne Brontë, explaining that if Helen were simply to relate her story to Markham, she would have to censor herself for her audience, and the story would be peppered with his interjections.\(^{28}\) The diary also allows the audience to witness how Helen changes through the course of her marriage, and to read the events of her marriage in the present tense, without the commentary of memory, Gergits argues. Though critics disliked the awkwardness of the shift from letter to diary, this transition actually allows for a cleaner, unfiltered reading of the relationship between Helen and Huntingdon.

Gergits makes the salient point that the function of the letter for the frame of the narrative is to force readers to recognize their function as an audience. The reader must either identify as Halford, the intended recipient of the letter, or a nosy onlooker, reading over his shoulder. “In most works, the audience identifies with a major character…or simply remains aloof and omniscient, but Anne removes much of this latitude by

pointedly separating the reader from her main characters and narrators,” Gergits writes. This separation forces readers to remember that they are Anne’s audience, reading her artwork much as Huntingdon reads Helen’s painting. Halford is not characterized directly in the novel, so the prejudices he brings into reading Markham’s letter and Helen’s diary are unknown. However, by introducing him, Anne reminds her audience that prejudice is there, in the reading of any art, and specifically, she creates a fictional male reader and demands that he recognize the male prejudice her protagonist encounters. Ironically, George Moore’s criticism of this narrative device illustrates perfectly the male prejudice that Anne herself faced as an artist. “Almost any man of letters would have laid his arm upon her arm and said: You must not let your heroine give her diary to the young farmer…Your heroine must tell the young farmer her story, and an entrancing scene you will make of the telling,” he wrote in his critique of the novel. Moore’s critique of the structuring of the novel is not gendered itself, but his way of expressing his criticism makes it plain that he has not understood the novel’s argument against male control over female artistry.

The structure means Markham returns to narrate the conclusion of the novel. While Helen is greatly empowered to tell her own story through her escape from Huntingdon to her safe establishment at Wildfell Hall, after that point, control returns to Markham to write about his wooing of the lady and their final domestic bliss. Jill Matus writes that this shift leaves Helen’s voice “silenced and distanced” at the conclusion.

---

29 Gergits, p. 73.
30 George Moore, Conversations in Ebury Street (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1924), pp. 260-261, quoted in Gergits, p. 73. In contrast, he loved the structure of Agnes Grey, calling it “the most perfect prose narrative in English literature,” also in Conversations in Ebury Street, here quoted in The Brontës: The Critical Heritage, p. 35.
This statement is true, but perhaps the silencing of Helen is part of the greater point of the novel. As someone who had to publish her work under the masculine-sounding name of “Acton Bell” so as to be taken seriously as a writer, Anne is critiquing the society that views the female voice as “less than” the male. While Markham’s voice is less artistic and compelling than Helen’s, his is the one that will be taken most seriously in the world that he, Helen, and Anne inhabit. By making him the conduit through which Helen can relate her story, Anne is reminding her readers that art criticism is consistently filtered through the lens of the male audience, regardless of the artist’s individual vision.

In her Preface to the second edition of the novel, Anne responds powerfully to those critics who found her material too coarse and brutal for a woman writer. “All novels are or should be written for both men and women to read, and I am at a loss to conceive how a man should permit himself to write anything that would be really disgraceful to a woman, or why a woman should be censured for writing anything that would be proper and becoming for a man,” she writes.\(^\text{32}\) *Tenant* itself demonstrates how ridiculous this disapproval is. Though fictional, its characters and its plot are not inconceivable; why should a woman who has experienced brutality similar to what Helen experiences in the novel be censured for writing about it? One does not have to look far to find in Anne’s own life a model for degradation she depicts in Huntingdon: it is her brother Branwell, whose alcohol and drug abuse was widely known.\(^\text{33}\) Her preface clearly states that her intention in writing is “to tell the truth”; for Anne, this violence and coarseness is a necessary part of creating a faithful narrative. An early entry in Helen’s diary begins, “My cup of sweets is not unmingled: it is dashed with a bitterness


\(^{33}\) Barker, *The Brontës*, p. 530. Branwell was not known to be violent in the way that Huntingdon is, but Anne was no doubt still troubled by the way in which alcohol tempted Branwell and lessened his character.
that I cannot hide from myself” (175). This bitterness is what makes her story feel authentic, and without the bitter, the sweet would not be enjoyable to read. Anne’s unflinching honesty in depicting some truly horrific scenes is part of her talent. The tenacity of both the heroine and the author of *Tenant* proves that women are more than capable of depicting a range of human experience from the pleasant to the entirely repulsive.

‘*Mrs. Dean’s bitter herbs*: The Storyteller as Artist and Interpreter in *Wuthering Heights*

*Wuthering Heights* and *Tenant* are easily compared because of their similar narrative structure and unsavory subject matter. Emily Brontë’s novel, published a year before her sister’s, is perhaps even more inaccessible than *Tenant*, though it is this very inaccessibility that makes it so compelling. “*Wuthering Heights* rudely mocks its reader,” noted Brontë scholar Stevie Davies says, “equally it haunts her or him.”

It is a coarse novel – not shying away from representing uncontrolled passion, sexuality, cruelty, and madness. In many ways, the novel eschews the artistic in favor of the natural. The trappings of domesticity are certainly mocked in comparison with the sheer power of the natural world. Art is given a narrow margin in which it acts as a mediating force between untamed wilderness and civilization. The novel employs a similar frame narrative as *Tenant* with the effect of creating a great distance between its characters and its audience. The story has two layers of narration – it is told by Nelly Dean, the housekeeper at Thrushcross Grange, to the Grange’s new tenant, Mr. Lockwood, who

---

records the story in his diary for the reader to peruse. This layering adds multiple
dimensions of perspective to the story that the reader must take into account when
reading each portion, as each narrator contributes their own bias to their storytelling.

The layers also serve to foster the sense of isolation that pervades *Wuthering
Heights*. Physically, the Heights and the Grange are deep in the countryside, far removed
from any urban setting, in the difficult terrain of the Yorkshire moors, and shown to have
particularly stormy weather. The inhabitants of the Heights are as wild and tempestuous
as their surroundings. The dual narrators of the novel serve as mediators and interpreters
of this unfamiliar, foreboding territory, allowing the reader to observe the lives of its
characters without coming too close to the wildness that rules untamed at the Heights.

The physical terrain is symbolic of the literary terrain of the rest of the novel: *Wuthering
Heights* is, on the surface, a type of love story, but an exceedingly cruel one. Cathy and
Heathcliff are abrasive lovers to each other, and callous and unfeeling to those who get
catch in the midst of their passions. Edgar and Isabella, their respective spouses, are in
some ways just prey for these two wild predators. The Heights is also the site of
frequent scenes of terrible violence, often precipitated by the drunken anger of Hindley,
Cathy’s brother. It is not until the redemptive love story between Cathy’s daughter – also
named Cathy (henceforth distinguished as Cathy II) – and Hindley’s son Hareton,
towards the end of the novel that a space for artistic expression is carved out of the
landscape of the Heights.

---

35 Stevie Davies discusses this idea of predation in an evolutionary and Darwinian context, suggesting that
Emily developed a “rough and ready theory of the survival of the fittest,” despite not living to see the
publication of *Origin of Species* in 1859 in *Emily Brontë: Heretic* (London: The Women’s Press Ltd,
As in *Tenant*, the reader is reminded of their function as audience by the presence of a bumbling narrator – in this case, Lockwood. Lockwood is so foppish that at times it seems he is there solely to be mocked; for example, attempting to make conversation with Cathy II, he comments on what he thinks are her cats, but “unfortunately, it was a heap of dead rabbits.” He is clearly unfamiliar with the natural setting in which he finds himself, coming out at the start of a storm and finding himself trapped at the Heights overnight. When he returns to the Grange the next morning, he needs assistance to find his way, and gets lost getting from the edge of his own property to his house. Though this can be partially excused since he is new to the area, this sequence serves to demonstrate both how difficult the moors are to navigate, and how incompetent Lockwood is at navigating this rough terrain. Like Lockwood, Heathcliff arrives at Wuthering Heights as an outsider, an abandoned child with mysterious origins, adopted by Cathy and Hindley’s father, Old Earnshaw. Heathcliff adapts to the Heights, making himself at home on the moors; it seems apparent from the beginning that Lockwood will never be able to belong here in the same way that Heathcliff and Cathy do.

Lockwood’s narration is not necessary as mediation for the reader, as he himself is wholly unequipped to act as a guide to the Heights. He nurses his illness by the fireside while he listens to Nelly’s story for entertainment. The reader is therefore placed at the hearth alongside Lockwood to hear the tale from the safety and comfort of the Grange. Lockwood serves as a reminder to readers that they, too, are outsiders, an audience looking in on a story that they may not even be meant to see. The reader is held at a distance through this style of narration. As Lockwood is placed on the moors with no

---

good sense of direction, the reader is placed in the midst of a story lacking the knowledge to contextualize the immediate action. The relationships among Heathcliff, Cathy II, and Hareton are initially confusing because none of them bother to explain them to Lockwood. On his second visit to the Heights, he muses on the austerity of the household, assuming that he must be the cause of their gloom, writing “they could not every day sit so grim and taciturn, and it was impossible, however ill-tempered they might be, that the universal scowl they wore was their every day countenance” (45). The reader has learned by this point not to trust Lockwood’s impressions; it is clear that this is their everyday countenance, and yet there is no clue as to what trauma could have caused this coldness. By introducing her story in this way, with such an inept narrator, Emily holds herself aloof from her audience.

This is a significant departure from the “Dear Reader” narration used by many of Emily’s contemporaries, including Charlotte. In statements like Jane’s famous “Reader, I married him,” inJane Eyre, the narrator and heroine is allowed to speak directly to her audience. By acknowledging her audience, Charlotte is acknowledging her novel as a work of fiction – a work of art – and therefore subtly revealing herself as author, the artist behind Jane’s voice. Emily never does this; the elaborate frame structure ofWuthering Heights allows her to ignore her readers entirely; or, rather, it allows her readers to ignore her. Nelly emerges instead as a substitute author. Her narrative is already tailored to an audience – Lockwood. He in turn gives her the ability to speak directly to the reader by recording her narrative nearly verbatim – “I’ll continue it in her own words, only a little condensed. She is, on the whole, a very fair narrator, and I don’t think I could improve her style,” he writes (165). Nelly cultivates the persona of a third-person narrator when
talking to Lockwood, but it is important to remember that she is neither impartial nor omniscient. Like Jane or Lucy in *Villette*, she is a character within her own story. Unlike Charlotte’s protagonists, though, Emily’s narrator tells a story that is not focused on herself, but on another woman – Cathy, who is both mistress and quasi-sister to Nelly. This reflects on both women’s roles within the novel. How come Cathy does not write her own narrative? Why does Nelly choose to tell a story that is largely not her own?

It is important that this is not a story that Cathy is enabled to write herself. The first time her character is introduced is also the only time in which the reader is given direct access to her voice through her diary. Given her old bed for repose as a guest, Lockwood stumbles across her collection of books in which she has scribbled her own thoughts – “scarcely one chapter had escaped a pen-and-ink commentary – at least, the appearance of one, covering every morsel of blank that the printer had left” (51). The passage that he reads (and records in his own diary) details how she and Heathcliff have been shut up in the house on a Sunday, instructed by Hindley and the servant, Joseph, to read their bibles. “I could not bear the employment. I took my dingy volume by the scroop, and hurled it into the dog-kennel, vowing I hated a good book,” writes the young Cathy (52). She has since occupied herself by writing this narrative in the margins of another text. However, Heathcliff is impatient, she writes, and the two are planning to escape the house to play on the moors, despite rain and the threat of punishment should Hindley find out. Notably, it is Heathcliff’s impatience that causes her to end her narrative abruptly; it seems obvious at this point that he is the only one for whom Cathy would alter her plans.
Cathy is literally marginalized in this passage – not given the materials to keep her own diary, she has to use the pages of other texts to scribble her thoughts. She illustrates her resentment at this oppression, descrying Hindley’s cruelty to Heathcliff, and sketching a caricature of her nemesis, Joseph, which Lockwood describes as “rudely yet powerfully sketched” (51). She rejects Joseph’s definition of a “good” book by covering her copy of the Testament, most likely the male-authored King James Bible, with the scribblings of a prepubescent girl. Lockwood attempts to dismiss her writing, suggesting that her library was well-used, “though not altogether for a legitimate purpose” (51). Yet he himself gives her diary legitimacy by reading the words in the margins rather than the books themselves, because her childish writing has caught his interest. Before finding her diary, Lockwood sees variations of Cathy’s name – Catherine Earnshaw, Catherine Heathcliff, Catherine Linton – all carved onto the window ledge by the bed. He stares at these names until his eyes close, “but they had not rested five minutes when a glare of white letters started from the dark, as vivid as spectres – the air swarmed with Catherines” (50-51). Like her diary written in the margins, Cathy’s carvings are not “legitimate” – they are vandalism. With such a simple activity as carving her name on the ledge, Cathy has made her impression – just a bit of graffiti has the power to fill the air with her presence. She has claimed this space permanently as her own.

As if summoned by the engravings on the ledge, Cathy’s ghost soon appears to Lockwood in a dream. John Matthews writes about the framing of Wuthering Heights, and of this moment he says, “Catherine’s breaking of the windowpane, whatever manifold psychosexual significance it also carries, suggests the rupture of the frame by
the creatures evoked under a diarist’s hand.”37 In this brief moment, Cathy breaks through the frame structure of the novel – bypassing Nelly and seizing Lockwood’s hand directly, pleading, “Let me in – let me in!” (56). Matthews discusses the appearance of the spectre as “the product of Lockwood’s reading, listening, and writing,” or in other words, the product of Lockwood’s own imagination. By reading Cathy’s diary, Lockwood has allowed her to penetrate his unconscious mind.38 Her written account from childhood is enough to allow a break in his consciousness through which she then attempts to enter into the story – the spectre begging to be let in can be read as Cathy herself begging Lockwood to let her into the narrative proper. Lockwood is terrified of this spectre and uses the books to block the hole and keep the ghost out. These are the very pages that allowed the apparition to take hold in Lockwood’s mind, now used to shut her out. So does the entire structure of Wuthering Heights operate – the idea of Cathy is evoked by stories recorded in Lockwood’s diary, but the frame of the narrative acts as a physical silencing of her voice, blocking the actual Cathy from speaking to the reader except in this one remarkable scene.

Cathy nearly becomes an entirely different person than the girl illustrated in her diary after puberty. The Lintons and the Grange itself have a marked role in this change. Nelly tells the story of a specific event that precipitated this change – one night, Cathy and Heathcliff ventured over to the Grange during their adventures, and Cathy was injured. It is important to realize here that the action of this particular story is especially

38 This penetration is likely the “psychosexual significance” Matthews refers to – this passage is rife with sexual imagery, including the shifting state of penetration as Lockwood shoves his hand through the window, pulls the ghost’s wrist back and forth across the broken pane, and finally snatches his own arm back through the hole. The phallic symbolism of the pile of books Lockwood uses to block the window also lends itself to psychosexual interpretation.
obscured from the reader – Nelly recounts her memory of what Heathcliff told her happened that night. There is no primary source audible here – the only thing the reader is given access to is secondary accounts. The two crept outside the window of the Grange and looked in on the Linton children in curiosity. Edgar and Isabella were fighting over a small puppy, which Cathy and Heathcliff found ridiculous. They laughed, and made enough noise that they drew the Lintons’ attention; the latter sent their bulldog out after the trespassers, and the animal caught Cathy’s leg in his mouth. Thus incapacitated, the adult Lintons take Cathy into their home, and, recognizing her as a gentry neighbor, and just a young girl, offer to keep her there to recover. Heathcliff, however, with his swarthy skin and foul mouth, is put out as a heathen, and returns to the Heights to recount this tale. There is no witness for Cathy’s time at the Grange, and so this portion of her story is obscured from the reader; Nelly’s story picks up five weeks later, when Cathy returns to the Heights.

Cathy enters the Grange dirty and literally barefoot, having lost her shoes during her race with Heathcliff, and exits it as a lady, dignified and well-coiffed. “There lighted from a handsome black pony a very dignified person with brown ringlets falling from the cover of a feathered beaver, and a long cloth habit which she was obliged to hold up with both hands that she might sail in,” Nelly says to describe Cathy’s return (78). The Grange therefore is not only a civilized place, but also a civilizing place, imbued with the power to tame the wildness inherent to Cathy. Hindley and his wife, Frances, are delighted to see the change in Cathy, but Heathcliff is noticeably dismayed that his

39 This scene carries symbolic implications of rape; the dog’s “huge, purple tongue hanging half a foot out of his mouth, and his pendant lips streaming with bloody slaver” seem particularly phallic. He penetrates her with his teeth, and makes her bleed. That this event precipitates Cathy’s transition into womanhood indicates that she perhaps suffered sexual trauma at this point in her life that contributed to her transformation.
former companion has abandoned the savagery that bonded them. His own trajectory has
been nearly opposite that of Cathy’s; laboring at the Heights under the disdain of Hindley
as opposed to the favor of Old Earnshaw has diminished him. “He had, by that time, lost
the benefit of his early education: continual hard work, begun soon and concluded late,
had extinguished any curiosity he once possessed in pursuit of knowledge, and any love
for books or learning,” Nelly explains (91). He stands before her, dirty, covered with the
earth, while she wears a dead beaver, nature subdued, on her head. Cathy is therefore
torn between her new and old friends. Educated in civilization at the Grange she is now
wholly aware of Heathcliff’s relative inferiority in the world: “it would degrade me to
marry Heathcliff,” she tells Nelly (102). Spurred by pride, she accepts Edgar Linton’s
proposal of marriage and thus casts off her old self in favor of becoming a lady.

This choice ultimately tears Cathy apart and results in her death. Heathcliff
disappears after overhearing Cathy’s pronouncement that she could not marry him.
Choosing Edgar over Heathcliff signified Cathy’s embrace of the more “feminine” option
– Edgar himself is seen as feminine in comparison to Heathcliff, as Nelly’s description
reveals: “He [Heathcliff] had grown a tall, athletic, well-formed man, beside whom my
master [Edgar] seemed quite slender and youth-like” (115). Yet this is a great paradox of
the novel: this femininity on Edgar’s part translates into submissiveness to his wife, but
does not correlate to empowerment or a greater masculinity for Cathy. Edgar is afraid of
his wife, and employs a strategy of avoidance rather than confrontation of her temper.
This sublimated tension is brought to the surface by the return of Heathcliff, three years
later. Edgar cannot easily stomach Cathy’s friendship with Heathcliff any more than
Heathcliff can stomach Cathy’s marriage to Edgar, and the two men soon fight. Edgar
issues Cathy an ultimatum – she must choose which of the two to cast off. Cathy has already demonstrated that this is not a choice she is capable of making – she persists throughout the novel in thinking that she can hold both Heathcliff and Edgar in her heart. Rather than choose between the two, Cathy declares, “I’ll try to break their hearts by breaking my own” (133). Having spent her entire marriage in an environment where anger is suppressed or avoided, Cathy shuts herself in her room and starves herself to death, thinking that this protest will make Edgar relent, rather than confront him directly.

Her death illustrates femininity and motherhood as a killing force. Cathy is pregnant when she locks herself in her room, and the combination of her own refusal to eat and the demands of pregnancy on the body kill her after she gives birth to her daughter, Cathy II. This is a topic that Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar address in their seminal work of feminist literature, *The Madwoman in the Attic*. It is a recurring theme in *Wuthering Heights* – Hindley’s wife, Frances, also dies from childbirth. “Must motherhood, like ladyhood, kill? Is female sexuality necessarily deadly?” ask Gilbert and Gubar. This is one way to read Cathy’s trajectory. When she enters Thrushcross Grange she is a girl, but she leaves as an adult woman, and her pregnancy is the culmination of this traditional narrative of puberty and adolescence. Her child with Edgar is the product of their repressive marriage, made possible by her acceptance of the mantle of ladyhood. Gilbert and Gubar describe the unborn fetus as an “alien intruder,” foreign to Cathy as Edgar is. By carrying his child, Cathy is subscribing to a narrative of marriage and domesticity that is necessarily gendered, and to which she does not belong.

---

In contrast, her relationship with Heathcliff is genderless. This is evidenced by Cathy’s radical statement, “Nelly, I am Heathcliff,” in which she attaches her own identity to that of her lover, appropriating an androgynous identity for them both (103). This genderless self is one complete being held in two gendered bodies – her female and Heathcliff’s male form. By marrying Edgar, Cathy splits this whole self in two, and forces her androgynous self into a single female body – the body that becomes “this shattered prison” (169). This rupture causes Cathy to completely disconnect from her physical self: “Don’t you see that face?” she asks Nelly, staring at her mirror while locked in her bedroom at the Grange. “There’s nobody here!” Nelly replies. “It was yourself, Mrs. Linton; you knew it a while since” (138). Cathy finally recovers enough consciousness to explain to Nelly that for a moment, “the whole last seven years of my life grew a blank! I did not recall that they had been at all. I was a child: my father was just buried, and my misery arose from the separation that Hindley had ordered between me and Heathcliff – I was laid alone, for the first time” (140). This confession has obvious psychological implications – the trauma of her current marriage triggers a return to her childhood, at the point when she and Heathcliff first became gendered beings and subsequently, were laid in separate beds.

“Is that Catherine Linton?” Cathy asks during her delirium (136). Her confusion seems to arise partially from her inability to recognize herself as Catherine Linton, the wife of Edgar Linton. It therefore seems strange that the childlike spectre that appears to Lockwood identifies itself as Catherine Linton. Even Lockwood notices this oddity, wondering, “why did I think of Linton? I had read Earnshaw twenty times for Linton” (56). Though the ghost identifies herself as Linton, she begs to be let into the bed at
Wuthering Heights, the space she shared with Heathcliff. Stevie Davies writes about Cathy’s arc as “a quest for the self: a counterpart which fatedly and fatally offers a mirror identification, as the left hand mirrors the right.” Cathy finds her counterpart in Heathcliff, and after they are separated several times – by Hindley, by the Linton’s dog Skulker, who holds Cathy at Thrushcross Grange, and by Cathy herself when she marries Edgar – Cathy evades Edgar’s attempt to separate them a fourth time by starving herself. She continues her quest for self after death. When the spectre breaks Lockwood’s window and begs to be let in, it is Cathy Linton begging to return to her childhood state – to Wuthering Heights, to the place where she was called Earnshaw, to the androgynous identity she shared with Heathcliff before they were parted.

Place is once again crucial to understanding this rupture. As already stated, when Cathy’s ghost penetrates Lockwood’s window, she is breaking the frame of the narrative. Cathy and Heathcliff’s saga is profane, perverse, incestuous, and arcane; a story of this magnitude must be contained somehow – the frame of Nelly and Lockwood’s narration is the method for this containment. After Lockwood’s encounter with the ghost of Cathy, he retreats to the Grange where Nelly begins to decipher for him the strange things that he witnessed at the Heights and he records this narrative as a way to restore the frame that Cathy ruptured. It is significant that this story is told and recorded at the Grange, because as Garrett Stewart writes, “Wuthering Heights is precisely the kind of fiction which would be read only in the cultivated world of the Grange.” In fact, Thrushcross Grange appears as the frame for Wuthering Heights – both the place and the novel. It is

---

at the Grange that the saga of the Heights, at its core the saga of Cathy and Heathcliff, is framed by Nelly into an ordered narrative that can be contained in a novel. The significance of this space to the framing of the novel cannot be downplayed. As stated before, the reader is placed in the study of the Grange to hear Nelly’s story – the Grange provides the vantage point from which to decipher the arcane story of the Heights.

The Grange is also indicated as the place where Nelly learned the art of creating stories. “I have read more than you would fancy, Mr. Lockwood. You could not open a book in this library that I have not looked into, and got something out of also,” she herself says (87). Lockwood and Nelly both refer to the story she tells him as “gossip,” but this term belies the intricacy of Nelly’s tale. Her narrative is tightly controlled, fast-paced, and neatly ordered. Though the novel itself is anything but chronological, Nelly’s story within a story is perfectly so. Readers often remark that the first half of the novel is far more captivating than the second half⁴³; while this can be attributed to the intensity of Cathy and Heathcliff, it is also worth considering that the first half is dominated by Nelly’s narration, while the second is more evenly split between Nelly and Lockwood. Nelly’s skill at storytelling should not be overlooked; she has clearly learned the art of narrative at the vast library of the Grange and uses these tools to mold the chaos of the Heights into an artistic and compelling story.

The term “gossip” is given as the medium through which Nelly can communicate. Lockwood first uses this term as he begins probing her for stories about the Heights, “hoping sincerely she would prove a regular gossip” (62). Nelly also characterizes herself this way, saying she wishes to tell her story “in true gossip’s fashion” (87). This

⁴³ For example, William Wyler completely excludes the second generation of characters in his 1939 film adaptation of the novel.
is problematic, as previously stated, because it seems to diminish the complexity and artistry involved in her storytelling. It is a distinctly gendered term. The definition of gossip closest to its use here in the novel is “A person, mostly a woman, of light and trifling character, esp. one who delights in idle talk; a newsmonger, a tattler.”\textsuperscript{44} Davies writes of \textit{Wuthering Heights’} placement in literary tradition: “one of its deepest roots is in the genres of English literature which are verifiably related to the female experience: sung poetry such as lullaby, ballad, folk-tale and nursery story, and last but not least, gossip.”\textsuperscript{45} Though the definition of “gossip” suggests negative connotations (“trifling character,” “idle talk”), Davies reminds us that a gossip has a specific place in literary tradition. Nelly attaches herself to a tradition of oral storytelling as this is the only medium open to her as a poor farmer’s daughter. By incorporating this tradition of “gossip” into the frame of a novel, Emily Brontë challenges notions of “literature” that exclude the art of marginalized groups, particularly women and the poor.

“Gossip” also characterizes Nelly’s supposed position as observer of the action. Initially, Lockwood fears Nelly might not be a gossip, “unless about her own affairs, and those could hardly interest [him]” (62).\textsuperscript{46} Ironically, her own affairs are completely intertwined with the story she tells, but she works consistently to suppress the appearance of her own involvement in the action. For example, Nelly never acknowledges her responsibility in Cathy’s illness and death – it is she who keeps Cathy’s condition a secret from Edgar for so long because she thinks Cathy is exaggerating her distress to get


\textsuperscript{45} Davies, \textit{Emily Brontë}, p. 11.

\textsuperscript{46} Note that Lockwood’s dismissal of the possible interest in Nelly’s affairs once again speaks to the classism that undermines oral storytelling and the character of the “gossip,” a topic that requires a discussion that is tangential to the focus of this paper.
attention. When Edgar finally realizes how sick his wife is, he chastises Nelly, “You shall account more clearly for keeping me ignorant of this!” but she never does account for her actions – to him or to the reader (142). From one perspective, Nelly’s deliberate silence about Cathy’s condition makes her partially at fault for Cathy’s death. Looking at the story objectively, Nelly, Cathy, Edgar, Heathcliff, and the sad realities of Victorian-era medicine could all bear some responsibility for Cathy’s decline. It is therefore important to remember that *Wuthering Heights* is not told from an objective perspective, and that these scenes are a likely instance of Nelly eliding details that reveal her own guilty meddling.

Perhaps the most important example of Nelly’s interference in the narrative is when she discovers Heathcliff’s hair in Cathy’s locket after her death. Nelly allows Heathcliff into the Grange to view Cathy’s body lying in state, violating what she would know to be Edgar’s wishes. She enters the room afterwards to find that while there, Heathcliff cast Edgar’s hair out of the locket Cathy is wearing and replaced it with his own. Seeing this, “I twisted the two, and enclosed them together,” Nelly tells Lockwood (176). This weaving of the hair is highly symbolic of Nelly’s role as story-weaver. It is a reminder that Nelly is *not* just a gossip recounting events she has witnessed – she has an active role in the story herself, and she controls the audience’s perception of herself and the other characters. With the twisting of the hair, Nelly illustrates her capacity to recast scenes according to her vision, after the other characters have exited the scene. Placed as it is at the center of the novel – just about 140 pages in and 140 pages out – this scene draws attention to the fact that Nelly *is* the center of the novel. The novel is written in dualisms – contrasting masculine and feminine, civilization and wilderness, fallen and
unfallen – all of these symbolized by the contrast of Edgar’s light and Heathcliff’s dark hair – and Nelly is the one who twists these opposing strands and encloses them together in the course of her narrative.

This scene is a rare revelation of Nelly’s agency. Nelly frequently struggles to be as self-effacing as possible, seemingly attempting to camouflage herself in the background of the story as she tells it. This ability to keep from being noticed is a necessary skill for Nelly to have all of the information that she does – it is because she presents herself so passively that she gains the confidence of everyone else in the novel. Furthermore, as Beth Newman writes in regards to her physical appearance, “since Nelly is not herself an object of visual pleasure, her look falls into a blind spot in the male gaze.”47 Newman quotes the misogynistic Joseph for evidence of this: “Shoo wer niver soa handsome, bud whet a body mud look at her ‘baht winking [She was never all that attractive; you might look at her without blinking]” (297). As the housekeeper, Nelly is involved in the majority of domestic affairs; furthermore, despite not having children of her own, Nelly plays surrogate mother to all of the novel’s children at some point. It is her crucial role in household duties that allows her to be present for all the dramatic scenes of births, deaths, and disputes in the novel. This presence is what gives her credibility as a narrator – Lockwood and the reader trust Nelly’s account because she is a first-hand witness. As surrogate mother, Nelly also becomes the trusted listener for other characters’ secrets. In order for Nelly to maintain her reliability to other characters and the reader, she must continue to present herself as non-threatening and disinterested. She must blend into the background – of the house, and the novel itself.

Nelly is domestic in every sense of the word. Her role as surrogate mother and domestic servant satisfies a need in the novel for “a steady, reasonable kind of body,” as Nelly describes herself to Lockwood (87). Nelly counters the hysteria of the novel’s other characters, particularly Cathy, with attention to practical concerns. When Cathy begins tearing out the feathers of her pillow in her delirium, Nelly chides her to “give over with that baby-work!” and to “lie down and shut your eyes, you’re wandering. There’s a mess! The down is flying about like snow!” (138). She proves herself unaffected by the tempers of the Earnshaws and Heathcliff; when Hindley threatens to force a knife down her throat, for example, Nelly responds, “for my part, I was never much afraid of his vagaries. I spat out, and affirmed it tasted detestably – I would not take it on any account….,” (96). Similar versions of these scenes play out throughout the novel – whenever Nelly is confronted with the hysteria, violence, and unreasonable demands of the family she serves, Nelly responds with a calm refusal to engage in their fits. In fact, she reacts in the way that a tired mother might be expected to react to the frequent squabbles of her ill-behaved children.

This coolness might seem appropriate were Nelly dealing with rambunctious children, but this is how she continues to treat people long after they have grown. Nelly’s response to an adult man’s drunken attempt to force a knife in her mouth is actually shocking in its calmness – terror would be a more appropriate response to that situation. This scene illustrates the way in which Nelly neutralizes the overwhelming passions of the household. Her narrative style does something similar to the novel itself. “Nelly’s prose style, with its curious nullity and blankness of emotional response, neutralises and frustrates the hysterical compulsions recorded in direct speech,” Davies writes of this.
phenomenon.\textsuperscript{48} Davies is speaking specifically of how Nelly eliminates some of the passion of the novel by paraphrasing many of the characters’ frenetic speeches, but this analysis applies to the entirety of Nelly’s narration. Her matter-of-fact recitation of the trauma she has witnessed works to tame the coarseness of the novel, just as her unemotional response to Hindley tames his anger. Nelly literally domesticates the text—her narration sterilizes the story so that its raw passion and furious emotion can be accessed by an armchair reader in the civilized confines of the Grange and by generations of readers to come.

It is important that responsibility for this domestication is given to the housekeeper. From a biographical standpoint, Emily’s enjoyment of household chores and her affection for the family’s long-term servant, Tabitha Aykroyd, likely contributed to this choice.\textsuperscript{49} It means something that Emily gives the majority of narrative control in her novel to the domestic servant. In a novel that wrestles with such metaphysical and theoretical topics like romantic transcendence, the domestic narrator serves to ground the story in its very material, worldly elements. But Nelly is also very flexible, and she has the capacity to speak to experiences beyond her own. Matthews writes about the many times that Nelly acts to supply a deficiency of mothers and companions in the novel, often occupying positions that are above her station in life: “In one respect, then, Nelly's situation mimes the very principles of inclusion, exclusion, and limited permeability that are the foundation of family and class. Nelly negotiates the boundaries that define inside

\textsuperscript{48} Davies, \textit{Emily Brontë}, p. 64.
\textsuperscript{49} Barker, \textit{The Brontës}, p. 318, 439.
and outside.”

In a novel that is obsessed with boundaries and transgression, Nelly has a unique power because of her fluidity.

Nelly is the center of the novel because she is continuously placed as intermediary between its bounded realms. She straddles past and present, the one consistent character throughout the entire time period of the novel. Structurally, her narrative is at the heart of the novel, enclosed as it is by Lockwood’s diary. As stated before, Lockwood’s narration does not serve as a guide for the reader; this job is given to Nelly and she faithfully fills this role as cipher – to use Matthews’ term – decoding the mystery of Wuthering Heights for Lockwood and his readers. Her literal crossing back and forth between the Heights and the Grange also illustrates her liminality as a character. She is the only one to survive a transfer from one house to the other until Cathy II in the second half of the novel – Cathy I dies after leaving the Heights for the Grange, and Linton Heathcliff dies after Heathcliff brings him to the Heights from the Grange. This liminality also manifests in her dual role as storyteller and character within the story. At the center of the novel is Cathy and Heathcliff’s struggle to dissolve the boundaries of class, gender, and even body that keep them separate; the novel’s end suggests that this is accomplished by the crossing from the mortal to the spirit realm, implied by the shepherd boy’s bewildered testimony after the death of both: “They’s Heathcliff and a woman, yonder, under t’ Nab, un’ Aw darnut pass ‘em” (311). Nelly sits on the line of these boundaries, observing, sometimes participating, and most importantly, reporting, and therefore providing the point at which the reader can access both realms.

The novel’s end hints at a peaceful dissolution of these boundaries through the redemptive love of Cathy II and Hareton, respectively the children of Cathy and Edgar

---

and Hindley and Frances. After Cathy II’s marriage to Linton Heathcliff, Heathcliff’s son, ends with his death, she begins a tentative courtship with Hareton, the other surly male that Lockwood encounters on his first visit to the Heights. Though she at first mocks Hareton for his lack of education and civilization, the two soon become friends as she teaches him how to read. Their relationship serves not only to redeem themselves from the worst qualities of their parents, but to redeem the value of civilization as it is portrayed in the novel. Unlike the transformation that Cathy undergoes at the Grange, Hareton’s education at Cathy II’s hand does not stifle his nature, but rather illuminates his better qualities. Lockwood observes the two in a scene of domestic bliss, specifically remarking on the twining of their hair: “her light, shining ringlets blending, at intervals, with his brown locks, as she bent to superintend his studies” (287). This scene revises Nelly’s twisting of Edgar and Heathcliff’s locks. In this case, the twisting occurs naturally and peacefully, suggesting an end to the need for the storyweaver.

The union of Cathy II and Hareton accomplishes the taming of passions that Nelly has attempted through her narrative. Though Nelly originally wanted Lockwood to marry her charge, she embraces Cathy II’s love for Hareton instead, exclaiming, “the crown of all my wishes will be the union of those two” (294). Their subdued love is a relief after the chaos of the Cathy-Edgar-Heathcliff triangle. Notably, Lockwood himself observes the love between the two – when he remarks on the blending of their hair, he is outside of the Heights, looking in through a window. Unlike Cathy and Heathcliff, these second-generation lovers do not need a mediator through which their story can be told, because theirs is already contained and can be viewed by an outsider through the frame of the window. In the original hair-twisting scene, Nelly first facilitates the act of
transgression by letting Heathcliff enter the room in the first place, and then attempts to reconcile this transgression by twisting the light and dark strands. In this revisionary scene, her role as storyweaver has become obsolete because reconciliation is no longer necessary – both because her characters have learned self-expression and because her audience has learned how to read the landscape of the novel – though this learning does not extend to the ever-oblivious Lockwood. Pausing over the graves of Edgar, Cathy, and Heathcliff, he wonders “how any one could ever imagine unquiet slumbers for the sleepers in that quiet earth,” though the whole of Nelly’s narrative and the shepherd boy’s testimony instructs the reader to imagine those unquiet slumbers (312).

It is difficult at first to identify a female artist in *Wuthering Heights*. Nelly does not immediately come to mind because she is hidden in the frame of the novel. Though she speaks in the first person, Nelly does not draw attention to herself. Rather, she projects her audience’s attention to what she sees through her outward gaze, only occasionally turning that gaze inward to allow the audience to observe the structure of the frame itself. This skillful act of concealment of self speaks to the skill of the true artist of *Wuthering Heights*, Emily Brontë. Nelly is really only a device employed by Emily herself to conceal her own authorial presence – simultaneously drawing the reader’s attention to the narrative voice and burying her own voice in those of her invented storytellers. Peter Kosminsky looks at Emily as the hidden voice of *Wuthering Heights* in his film adaptation of the novel, which opens with the author herself walking across the moors to stumble upon the crumbling Wuthering Heights, and envisioning the events of the novel taking place there. By casting the author as a character within the movie,
Kosminsky adds yet another frame to his telling of the same story, privileging a reading of the novel that focuses on its multiple levels of narration.

With its two distinct narrative voices, *Wuthering Heights* is a novel that is very much concerned with storytelling as an artistic act. It is easy when reading to forget that Cathy and Hindley are long since dead, that Heathcliff is a middle-aged man, that so much of the story occurs decades before it is told – so vivid and lifelike are Nelly’s remembrances of her youth. But as Matthews explicates, “paradoxically, her remarkable recall of speeches, accounts, confessions, and letters actually testifies to a freer imaginative hand; the more letter perfect Nelly claims her memory to be, the more confident we can be that she has had to make up at least the surface of the narration.”51 Her imaginative capacity is impressive, as is her command of timing, foreshadowing, and other elements of good storytelling. As Matthews says, her skill creates a paradox – the reader is simultaneously made aware of Nelly’s creative voice, and encouraged to forget that voice as he or she is drawn further into the story itself. Lockwood’s obliviousness serves to emphasize Nelly’s artistry, as the transitions in and out of his voice jar the reader from her entrancing tale. Thus in reading the structure of the novel, Nelly emerges as a captivating character in her own right. Her gender and her class are not irrelevant – as a woman and a servant, Nelly’s role as storyteller, as artist, makes a statement about art transcending social boundaries. *Wuthering Heights* is as much about the process by which stories are observed, recorded, and imparted as it is about Cathy and Heathcliff. Nelly’s liminal position in the story – her constantly shifting surrogate status, her role as both character and narrator – draws the reader’s attention to the perspective from which the story is told. Strikingly, control of narration is not given to the gentry or the male.

---

51 Matthews, “Framing in *Wuthering Heights,*” p. 49.
characters, but to the plain, unremarkable domestic servant. Nelly is unseen, and so she sees, her character claiming the powers of artistic observation and production for a class of largely ignored women storytellers.

‘Picture me then’: The Artist Becomes Her Art in *Villette*

Charlotte Brontë’s last novel, *Villette*, is a study of self-representation and the imaging of women. It is the story of Lucy Snowe, an Englishwoman who takes a position at a girls’ school in Belgium and falls in love with another teacher there. It is often read semi-autobiographically, as this mirrors events of Charlotte’s own life, when she worked at the Pensionnat Heger. The novel’s romantic hero, Paul Emanuel, is said to be a representation of the school’s headmaster, Constantin Heger, whom Charlotte fell in love with. The cunning Mme. Beck is based on his wife. Lucy narrates her story in the first-person, giving the reader many glimpses into her inner monologue, enhancing her personal, autobiographical tone. The novel is frequently bleak and mournful, reflecting the shadow of loss that hung over Charlotte’s own life at this time, having lost Branwell, Emily, and Anne in quick succession. *Villette* navigates a landscape of thwarted love and loss alongside rich discussions of art, theater, and female performance. Like Charlotte, Lucy is very reserved, typically preferring to observe and analyze action from the sidelines rather than interact. Her narrative style reflects this – she is very self-effacing, always offering the spectator’s point of view.

Despite its confessional tone, *Villette* can be a difficult novel to read. It is a long, meandering narrative in which characters disappear and then reappear in new contexts.

---

52 Barker discusses the relationship between Monsieur Heger and Charlotte at length in *The Brontës*, particularly in the chapter entitled “Monsieur Heger,” pp. 412-441.
with different names (e.g. Graham Bretton is also called Dr. John and Isidore). The prose often drifts into romantic musings before returning to move the action along. Set largely in the titular city of Villette in Belgium, the novel carries a sense of foreignness and isolation, which is increased by Charlotte’s frequent use of French phrases without complete context for her English readership, Rachel Brownstein argues.\(^{53}\) This is all intentional, of course; the cast of revolving characters, the foreign setting, and the frequent snippets of French all serve to disorient the reader as Lucy herself is disoriented. The text itself wanders and searches in much the same way that she does. The novel’s climactic scene shows Lucy searching through a park in the center of Villette at night, seeking a specific water basin that she remembers as particularly beautiful, because she wants to gaze at the reflection of the moon in its waters. This scene is a good metaphor for the process of artistic reflection that unfolds within the novel itself. It is a self-reflexive text, pondering over the very aesthetics it employs and examining the mental landscape of a woman not dissimilar to the author herself. Deliberately inaccessible, \textit{Villette} asks the reader to periodically disengage from the story itself to observe the process of narrative storytelling in action.

\textit{Villette} addresses themes of gazing and desire that are in part continued from Charlotte’s first novel, \textit{The Professor}. The two novels have similar plotlines – both feature an English protagonist teaching at a school in Belgium and falling in love with a foreigner there, though \textit{The Professor}’s narrator and protagonist is a man, William Crimsworth. Carl Plasa describes \textit{Villette} as “a rewriting of \textit{The Professor} from the perspective of a first-person female narrator.”\(^{54}\) In a telling scene, Crimsworth is shown

to his apartment at the boys’ school where he will teach. One of the windows, which
overlooks the courtyard of the next-door girls’ pensionnat, is boarded up. The first thing
Crimsworth does is try to find a chink in the boards by which he can look into the
courtyard. Frustrated in his search, he laments, “I thought it would have been so pleasant
to have looked out upon a garden planted with flowers and trees, so amusing to have
watched the demoiselles at their play; to have studied female character in a variety of
phases, myself the while sheltered from view by a modest muslin curtain….“55 This
voyeuristic desire is revisited in *Villette*, though both Crimsworth and Lucy end up
disappointed in their study of “female character.” After her first experience teaching the
Belgian schoolgirls, Lucy finds there is a “wide difference that lies between the novelist’s
and poet’s ideal ‘jeune fille’ [young girl] and the said ‘jeune fille’ as she really is,” as the
girls prove themselves rude, loud and uncooperative. Crimsworth discovers the same
traits in his pupils, and this discovery underlines the disconnect between artistic ideals
and reality that both novels seek to correct; disillusionment frustrates the voyeurism of
both narrators.

Desire is also articulated through a master-pupil relationship in both novels,
between Crimsworth and Frances in *The Professor*, and between Paul and Lucy in
*Villette*. Karen Chase deconstructs the implications of their relationship; because
susceptibility to the influence of others is necessary for growth, those who are “self-
willed and self-enclosed” are impervious to moral change (she gives Ginevra Fanshawe
and Madame Beck as examples of this). “The master/pupil relation, on the other hand,

presupposes moral fluidity; it regards the self in relation and in process,” she concludes.\textsuperscript{56} The voyeuristic desire that Crimsworth expresses and Lucy also displays is predicated on a desire to keep oneself concealed, participating only in the act of observation. The master-pupil relationships that both become involved in challenge this concealment because they force observation in both directions. As Frances’s teacher, Crimsworth becomes the object of her attention just as much as she is the object of his. When Paul takes an interest in Lucy, he becomes very attuned to her every move, something she finds annoying and invasive because she is not accustomed to, nor does she enjoy, such attention. However, the gaze of a lover alters the way that Lucy regards herself and precipitates her climactic quest for self-reflection.

As a narrator, Lucy is particularly concerned with image and imagination. She is obsessively conscious of her own presentation, constantly evaluating how she is perceived by others. Yet, her constant self-observation is not accompanied by a desire to be an object of other’s attention; rather, Lucy typically prefers to cast herself as a spectator and deflects attention from herself. She is also very observant of others’ presentation and image. Much of the novel is occupied with Lucy’s gaze – it is highly concerned with what she sees and how she perceives it in tandem with how she herself is gazed upon. “I will permit the reader to picture me….Picture me then idle, basking, plump, and happy,” she says at the start of Chapter 4 (99). Her diction establishes control over the reader’s gaze – she will, in this instance, permit the reader to picture her. Ability to regard Lucy herself is not automatically given by reading her narrative, but will only be allowed at her discretion. Lucy reveals to the reader throughout the novel that she is

physically very plain, and because of this she eschews looking and thinking about her appearance. In a scene embedded at the center of the novel, Lucy chances to see her party’s reflection in a grand mirror. Not immediately recognizing the reflection as herself and her companions, she makes an “impartial” observation of the group, before realizing that it is her own image upon which she is looking. “Thus for the first, and perhaps only time in my life, I enjoyed the “giftie” of seeing myself as others see me. No need to dwell on the result. It brought a jar of discord, a pang of regret; it was not flattering, yet, after all, I ought to be thankful: it might have been worse,” she concludes (279). It is not modesty so much as a resignation to her flaws that forces her to look elsewhere for aesthetic fulfillment. The reader is drawn into Lucy’s gaze as it seeks out both internal and external beauty in others in order to avoid its own reflection.

Much of Lucy’s gazing is upon other models of femininity with which she does not identify. Jill Matus thoroughly examines Lucy’s role as an observer, particularly of women. “Although she watches Graham and Monsieur Paul closely, her observation of women – Madame Beck, Ginevra, the women in the audience at the concert, the subjects of paintings in the gallery, the actress playing Vashti – is closer still,” she writes.57 Lucy’s first female focal point is the elderly Miss Marchmont, who summons Lucy to wait on her in her home when Lucy finds herself without other relations. Miss Marchmont is a mournful figure; her lover having died before they were even married, Miss Marchmont never loves another, but rather dies an aged maid. Lucy considers what her life will be if she takes Miss Marchmont’s offer: “to live here, in this close room, the watcher of suffering…through all that was to come of my youth” (101). She and Lucy

are at opposite points in their life; Miss Marchmont’s tragedy is coming to an end, and Lucy has yet to know if her life will end in such sadness.\(^\text{58}\) Thankfully for Lucy, the elder woman dies before Lucy’s youth is over, forcing her to seek out another place to go rather than risk immersing herself in life’s losses before having experienced romantic heartbreak herself. But the memory of Miss Marchmont casts a gloom over the entire novel, until that memory is invoked by the story’s end, which implies that Lucy herself may face a similar denouement.

Lucy departs Miss Marchmont’s for Belgium, continuing her practice of observation in a foreign setting. The chapter in which she details her voyage perfectly establishes Lucy’s character as one who is constantly watching others; she spends the great majority of the chapter describing all that she has noticed about her travel companions, detailing each party’s appearance, costume, demeanor and group dynamic. She pays most attention to the character of Ginevra Fanshawe, whose youth and gaiety make her a sharp contrast to the austerity of Miss Marchmont. Ginevra is attractive and charming, also placing her in juxtaposition to Lucy. Ginevra chatters to Lucy and the latter is amused when she declares herself “quite blasée about the sea and all that,” despite being, Lucy notes, only seventeen (118). The two part ways when they reach Villette, but Ginevra reappears later as a student at the school where Lucy finds employment. She quickly attaches herself to Lucy as a companion. Lucy is not kind in her assessment of Ginevra, nor is Charlotte kind in depicting her. “I have had a continental education, and though I can’t spell, I have abundant accomplishments,” Ginevra says, ironically unaware of her ridiculous ignorance (214). “I am pretty; you

\(^{58}\)Robert Polhemus argues that indeed Miss Marchmont is a version of Lucy; she “previews her [Lucy’s] later life…her experience is completely fused with Lucy’s text and fate” in *Erotic Faith: Being in Love from Jane Austen to D. H. Lawrence*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1990), p. 121.
can’t deny that; I may have as many admirers as I choose,” she continues. Ginevra is exaggerated to the point of caricature; she fills completely the roll of empty-headed coquette, the perfect antidote to Lucy’s quiet stoicism.

When the two are attracted to the same man, the tension unfolds in a dramatic staged performance that has Lucy courting Ginevra. In a strikingly homoerotic scene, Lucy takes the role of a male character wooing a woman played by Ginevra in a show – a “vaudeville de pensionnat” – put on by Paul. Strikingly, Lucy refuses to wear male costuming for the part, rather “retaining [her] woman’s garb without the slightest retrenchment, [she] merely assumed in addition, a little vest, a collar, and cravat…” (208). Kathryn Stockton remarks on the “indefinite sexual signification when she overlaid her customary feminine dress with masculine signs,” and then proceeded to make love to Ginevra. The story mimics a love triangle in the novel proper, in which Ginevra is being courted by two men – Graham Bretton and the “little dandy” de Hamal; the courtier and the fop, respectively, in the play. Lucy takes on her masculine role with relish – realizing Ginevra’s coquetry is aimed at the object of their mutual affection, Graham, who is in the audience, she “rivalled and out-rivalled him…as if wishful and resolute to win and conquer,” even altering her own role as the fop to be more charming (209). Acting as Ginevra’s suitor, Lucy is fully aware of the charms of the coquette, stating, “Ginevra was tender; how could I be otherwise than chivalric?” Lucy is attracted to Graham, but knows that he is more taken with Ginevra, and though the flirt is unworthy of him, Lucy recognizes that Graham would not love her even if there were not another in the way. Her frustration manifests in her masculine performance; unable to have Graham, she reacts by portraying him.

This scene is a bizarre manifestation of Lucy’s intensely repressive nature. It is, first of all, fascinating that Lucy refuses to wear male clothing for her part. She recognizes that her femininity does not accord with the conventional femininity of someone like Ginevra. When she persists in wearing her own garments, she ensures that she will retain her female gender despite the vestiges of masculinity that she dons. When she acts, however, she fully embodies the masculine, even altering her role, which was supposed to be that of the fop, not the courtier. Confronted with a potential female rival, Lucy retreats, and flips the script to put herself in the position of one courting that rival; from this vantage point she can be the recipient of the charms she herself does not possess. This is a twist on the voyeuristic desire expressed in *The Professor*. Here Lucy is also seeking to witness the “play” of a coquettish “demoiselle,” but she also engages with this play, responding to it from behind the mask of her male character. However, to do this, she rejects the physical concealment that a costume might offer. It is clear that acting is a form of escapism for her, though, providing a sort of mental concealment. Lucy admits that “a keen relish for dramatic expression had revealed itself as part of my nature,” but in a typical display of self-repression, she subdues this relish, avowing, “it would not do for a mere looker-on at life: the strength and longing must be put by; and I put them by, and fastened them in with the lock of resolution which neither Time nor Temptation has since picked” (210). Having discovered an outlet for gender performance she is shut out of in normal life, she then flees back to her self-imposed role as constant observer, never the observed – her chosen form of concealment.

Other women at the school are subject to Lucy’s scrutiny as well – the pupils, the Irishwoman Lucy replaces, and Madame Beck, the school’s directress. The men, too –
Graham Bretton, Paul Emanuel – are examined and evaluated by her probing gaze. It is this focused attention to the details of others’ characters that makes Lucy such a good narrator; like Nelly in *Wuthering Heights*, ‘narrator’ seems to be her very role in life because she is so fastidious in her observations. Her attention to Madame Beck is particularly interesting because Madame herself is a character very devoted to observation. Madame goes far beyond Lucy, however, not just observing but actively investigating the people around her, Lucy included. Lucy is struck one night by finding Madame rifling through her belongings, quite stealthily, opening each drawer and disturbing all of the contents before carefully replacing each one. Lucy is at once both horrified and awed by Madame’s spying, grudgingly respecting Madame’s sense and efficiency, if not her principles. When Madame decides she wants Lucy in the position of full teacher, rather than her original role as combination governess and lady’s maid, she challenges Lucy to convince her to take the job. Of this moment of challenge, Lucy says, “At that instant, she did not wear a woman’s aspect, but rather a man’s. Power of a particular kind strongly limned itself in all her traits, and that power was not my kind of power” (143). Like Lucy, Madame lacks traditional femininity, and for this, Lucy respects her for the greater part of the novel, though, as she says, their power is not the same.

It is not just women in real life that Lucy takes an interest in; she also notices how women are portrayed in art. “I never had a head for science, but an ignorant, blind, fond instinct inclined me to art,” she says, adding that she likes to be left alone in museums and galleries, for “in company, a wretched idiosyncrasy forbade me to see much or to feel anything” (267). In fact, visual art offers Lucy the chance to do one of the things she
likes best, which is to observe, but again, she likes to observe without being watched herself – the company of others prevents her from being able to “see” the art as she would like to see it. Lucy describes how Graham would take her to art galleries in Villette and leave her to explore on her own, where she would be “happy; happy, not always in admiring, but in examining, questioning, and forming conclusions.” She has a very critical eye, asserting, “it seemed to me that an original and good picture was just as scarce as an original and good book” (268). Her statement is a subtle play at metafiction, reminding the reader that there is art in their hands at this moment, demanding to be examined and questioned itself. Any discourse on art within the prose of the novel begs for consideration to be given to the artistic purpose and success of that novel itself, and *Villette* is filled with these moments.

Keeping this discourse in mind, Lucy fixes her gaze on a large painting entitled “Cleopatra” with which she takes issue. The first outstanding feature of the Cleopatra painting is the size – of the canvas, and the figure herself. Lucy is particularly struck by Cleopatra’s “affluence of flesh” (269). What stands out from Lucy’s description of the painting is a sense of excess – not just of flesh, but of wealth, sexuality, and leisure. The figure is depicted lounging, loosely draped, surrounded by an “untidiness” of pots, vases, flowers and upholstery. Matus notes how this imagery describing the lazing Cleopatra hearkens back to Lucy’s early self-imaging – “picture me then idle, basking, plump, and happy, stretched on a cushioned deck.”  

However, this fanciful daydream is reversed by an imagined shipwreck that classes this sort of sensuality and relaxation as sin, Matus explains. She and other scholars focus on this painting as a condemnation of the male gaze that presents the foreign queen as a gluttonous, lazy, lustful odalisque, whose entire

---

purpose is to be a paragon of beauty and desire. “It was on the whole an enormous piece of claptrap,” Lucy pronounces. Matus dissects the term “claptrap,” which “means insincere or empty language, but it is also an artifice or ploy for winning audience approval. This piece of claptrap ensnares applause; it is an empty artifice seducing its viewers as Cleopatra is supposed to have seduced and ensnared hers.” What Lucy disapproves of is the spectacle of the piece, the way that the figure invites nothing but gazing and objectification.

Contrasted against this image is a set of four small paintings catalogued as “La vie d’une femme,” or “The life of a woman.” They depict a woman through four stages of her life – adolescence, marriage, motherhood, and widowhood – intending to illustrate her piety in relation to social role. “They were painted in a remarkable style – flat, dead, pale and formal,” Lucy says, finally concluding of the images: “What women to live with! Insincere, ill-humoured, bloodless, brainless nonentities! As bad in their way as the indolent gipsy-giantess, the Cleopatra, in hers” (271). Set against each other, these two works of art illustrate the problematic virgin-whore dichotomy that informs the way that women are pictured and classed. But it is not just the images themselves that are symbolic; the context in which they are embedded is also important. While looking at “Cleopatra,” Lucy is interrupted by Paul Emanuel. He is shocked that she is by herself and looking at that painting specifically. “How dare you, a young person, sit coolly down, with the self-possession of a garçon [boy], and look at that picture?” he demands, insisting that she sit somewhere else, and finding the corner wherein she sees “La vie

---

61 The racialization of the Cleopatra figure is also being critiqued here; this scene draws on the intersections of race and gender, highlighting how Cleopatra’s Orientalism is used to convey overt sexuality and supposed moral laxity. This topic is beyond the scope of this paper, but Matus, among others, discusses it in depth in Unstable Bodies.

62 Matus, Unstable Bodies, p. 142.
d’une femme” (270). There is a second commentary occurring in this appearance of Paul; not only does the text critique the fallacy of the male gaze and its accompanying virgin-whore paradigm, but it critiques male control and direction of the gaze as well. By telling Lucy that the “Cleopatra” painting is inappropriate, Paul is attempting to protect her from the hyper-sexuality it evokes, but in doing so, he is asserting control over what she is allowed to look at. This establishes boundaries that seek to contain the female gaze within the greater, unrestricted male gaze.

Lucy herself complicates the matter, however, with the restraints she imposes on herself. When looking at “Cleopatra,” Lucy “projects her own anxieties about laxity and displaces her own struggle for sexual identity onto it,” Matus says. Part of Lucy’s negative reaction to Cleopatra’s sexuality demonstrates her own intense fear of libidinal desire; she is not just disgusted by the figure’s seductiveness, but also intimidated by it. The reason for this is twofold: she feels inferior knowing that she does not possess the physical charms to attract attention the way that Cleopatra does, and processes this inferiority by maintaining strict control over her own desires. The odalisque not only indulges the desire of men who look upon her, but succumbs to the lustful and gluttonous desires that Lucy fears within herself. Matus points out how Lucy struggles with self-indulgence while looking at the paintings in the gallery, describing how difficult it is to allow herself to enjoy the paintings without regard to the canons of taste. “Cleopatra” is much admired by many other visitors to the museum, but Lucy cannot bring herself to give it the same approbation. Having already decided on her own that the painting is not worth its reputation, Lucy finds her judgment undermined by Paul’s insistence that she should not even be looking at it in the first place. In a way, his interference confirms her

---

63 Matus, Unstable Bodies, p. 143.
feelings that the painting evokes desires that are inappropriate, illustrating how her self-repression is externally reinforced.

This scene in the museum is part of a discussion on female figures in art that is continued by the dramatic performance of the actress Vashti. Vashti’s character is inspired by a real actress, known by her stage-name, Rachel, by whom Charlotte was greatly impressed when she saw her perform at the St. James Theater in 1851 on a visit to London.64 Vashti has the dual role of artist and art – as an actress, she projects her vision through her performance, and receives the vision of her audience. She is a paragon of female artistry through which the reader can access the tensions between art, artist, and audience. It is important that Charlotte chooses to associate the actress with the character of Vashti, the wife of King Ahasuerus from the Book of Esther. She is notable for her resistance to her husband’s demand that she display her beauty for the aggrandizement of himself and his kingdom.65 The reference to Vashti has racial significance, as Matus explains, because she is “one woman of the East who refused to be exhibited as the object of the male gaze. She contrasts interestingly with Cleopatra, whose exhibitionism and feasting and seductive manipulation of men define her.”66 Vashti does not invite the male gaze, but rather rejects it, as Lucy is wont to do. She is not beautiful, but powerful. Of her performance, Lucy says, “It was a marvellous sight: a mighty revelation,” and then, “It was a spectacle low, horrible, immoral” (328). The intensity leaves a deep

---

64 Brownstein, *Tragic Muse*, p. 223. *Tragic Muse* offers a detailed portrait of Rachel, who was famous not just for her extraordinary talent, but also her nontraditional appearance – she was extremely slight and also plain. She was also a lower-class Jewess, which was radical for the stage at the time. Brownstein closely examines why Brontë was so taken with the actress.

65 Kate Lawson, editorial note, *Villette*, pg. 323.

66 Matus, *Unstable Bodies*, p. 147.
impression on Lucy, who is taken with the sacredness of Vashti’s performance despite
the profanity of the character she portrays.

Vashti is characterized by her suffering, as is Lucy. Though she never says so
explicitly, it is clear from the start that Lucy’s past is marked by tragedy; her early
daydream of idle basking on a cushioned deck ends with the chilling statement: “the ship
was lost, the crew perished” (100). Her introduction of Vashti suggests that she identifies
with her, as they are both termed “plain” in a physical sense (328). It is evident from
how she speaks of herself that Lucy’s plainness is both a blessing and a curse, as it allows
her a level of invisibility that she desires, but causes her much pain when she is
inadvertently noticed. Vashti is Lucy’s visible double, unabashedly displaying her
ugliness and her sorrow before an audience. “Suffering had struck that stage empress;
and she stood before her audience neither yielding to, nor enduring, nor in finite measure,
resenting it: she stood locked in struggle, rigid in resistance,” Lucy describes her (329).
As has already been demonstrated, Lucy retreats from the prospect of pleasure.
Brownstein explains, “she can take pleasure only when it seems there is no pleasure
there, from an ugly scene.”67 This is why she identifies so closely with Vashti’s
performance: it is tragic and terrifying, not aesthetically pleasing. In the face of this,
Vashti is defiant, demanding that her audience see that which is unattractive.

Vashti presents a moral conflict; she is neither pure nor evil. “Wicked, perhaps,
she is, but also she is strong; and her strength has conquered Beauty, has overcome
Grace, and bound both at her side,” says Lucy. Her artistry is in opposition to both
“Cleopatra” and “La vie d’une femme.” She does not seduce her audience with her

67 Rachel M. Brownstein, Becoming a Heroine: Reading About Women In Novels (New York, NY:
beauty nor does she appease them with docility and complacency. Gilbert and Gubar mark this distinction as a desire to use her art, “not to manipulate others, but to represent herself.”

Inspired by Vashti’s strength, Lucy issues a challenge: “Where was the artist of the Cleopatra? Let him come and sit down and study this different vision. Let him seek here the mighty brawn, the muscle, the abounding blood, the full-fed flesh he worshipped: let all materialists draw nigh and look on” (329). Here is a mention of the “flesh” of which Lucy is so afraid herself, but more important is the vision that transcends the materialism of the flesh. Lucy asks that the male artist of Cleopatra study Vashti’s performance – her depiction of a female subject from the perspective of a female artist. She asks that the audience of the play, but more importantly, her own audience – her readership – consider this representation of a woman whose artistic value is divorced from discussions of her sexuality and morality.

Vashti’s performance is all-consuming. Her crucial scene is perceived as inflammatory, as the cry of “Fire!” rings out in the theater. This end to the performance reverts the attention from the actress back to the audience, cutting off Vashti’s final moments, but the fire turns out just to be group hysteria. “The baseless rumour of fire is a bitter, dismissive last image of the passionate woman,” says Brownstein.

Vashti’s performance is incendiary, but the fuss is short-lived. Once the rumoured flames have subsided, the narrative resumes seemingly without change – just as life would resume for the audience of any of the real Rachel’s performances. Brownstein argues that “to insist that her effect was but fleeting is…a way of arguing against its force”. Meanwhile, the fire is also symbolic of Rachel-Vashti’s own reaction to her audience’s indifference.

---

“The respectable audience helps transform the performer into a fiend,” Brownstein explains; “she openly experiences the violent passions that middle-class people…repress and deny;” Lucy herself, of course, typifies this middle-class repression. The actress suffers in the process – her performance of tragedy becomes tragedy itself, as she becomes literally consumed while her audience leaves the theater unharmed. By writing this end to Vashti’s performance, Charlotte makes her a martyr – therefore subtly questioning her own apparent assertion that Vashti is to be forgotten. Though not physically present in the remainder of the narrative, Vashti remains immortalized in its subconscious throughout, the memory of her performance providing a lasting challenge to Lucy’s repressive energies.

The themes that Vashti brings to light are at the crux of the novel. Not for nothing is this chapter, entitled simply “Vashti,” positioned as its structural midpoint. As with Nelly’s hair-weaving scene in *Wuthering Heights*, the placement of this scene seems deliberately calculated to demonstrate the centrality of Vashti’s performance and what she represents. “Vashti, exposing and expressing the emotional life boldly, as Lucy cannot express hers, is challenging what would consume her, consuming herself, letting go of masks and risking her life by acting,” says Brownstein.70 “[Lucy] is possessed” by the actress, “as Vashti is possessed by her role,” she argues elsewhere.71 This conclusion can be drawn out to further illustrate the artistic layering here: Charlotte herself is also possessed – both by Rachel-Vashti and by Lucy; Lucy is a role that Charlotte adopts just as an actress would – using her character as a mask through which to speak. Vashti’s scene is cathartic, both for Lucy and, presumably, for Charlotte. Her performance

---

70 Brownstein, *Becoming a Heroine*, p. 177.
responds to Lucy’s prior role in the vaudeville show, illustrating the fiery end that Lucy so fears and desires. Watching Vashti allows Lucy to experience this moment of an artist’s consumption by her art without being completely consumed herself; Lucy’s character offers this same process to Charlotte.

It is Graham’s dismissive response to Vashti that signifies why it is necessary for Lucy to restrain and project her creative energies elsewhere. Here is the novel’s pivotal statement, “he judged her as a woman, not an artist: it was a branding judgment” (331). Here is the fear that Charlotte expressed in her letter to Lewes: that her art cannot be viewed separately from her gender. Having watched this actress give herself wholly over to her role, displaying a passion and an anger that defies expectations of femininity and female art, Lucy is devastated to find that this art has been misinterpreted, even gone unrecognized, by the man she so loves and admires. To understand the significance of this judgment to Charlotte, one must understand the distinction that she makes between artist and self. Along with her “Biographical Notice,” Charlotte also wrote in her “Editor’s Preface” to the 2nd Edition of Wuthering Heights and Agnes Grey:

But this I know; the writer who possesses the creative gift owns something of which he is not always master – something that at times strangely wills and works for itself…As for you – the nominal artist – your share in it has been to work passively under dictates you neither delivered nor could question…If the result be attractive, the World will praise you, who little deserve praise; if it be repulsive, the same World will blame you, who almost as little deserve blame.72

From this, the reader of Villette can see how Vashti’s performance represents for Charlotte this moment of artistic possession – this moment in which the actress is moved by a creative force that is beyond her, in which her performance is imbued

with a presence that is greater than the gender to which she is reduced by Graham’s unfeeling judgment.

This moment of possession by one’s art has been seen earlier in the novel. Lucy tells us that between the acts of the performance between her and Ginevra, “M. Paul told us he knew not what possessed us” and that she herself no more expected her dramatic performance “than to be lifted in a trance to the seventh heaven” (209-210). This possession-like or trance-like state is the feeling that she chooses to repress afterwards. Having never allowed this creative force to give itself over to expression after her first performance, Lucy is in awe of Vashti’s ability to be possessed. Seeing Graham repulsed by the anguish and the bloodlust that Vashti conveys reinforces Lucy’s instinct for repression of this energy within herself, just as Paul’s admonitions reinforce her fear of the Cleopatra’s libidinal energy. Through the voice of Lucy, Charlotte has shown her readers just how keenly she feels criticism that examines her work differently because it is produced by a woman. Brilliantly, she illustrates the prejudice that taints perception of her work within that work itself. Published after Jane Eyre, Wuthering Heights, and Tenant had been critically received, Villette emerges in part as the female novelist’s manifesto, arguing for the ability of women to illustrate that which is deemed ‘coarse’ without undue male censorship.

Vashti’s scene indicates a turning point in Lucy’s narrative. After this, her love for Graham wanes as she slowly turns toward Paul. This is not to say that her relationship with Paul is not problematic; it is, and his character is as problematic as Graham’s, if not more so. Lucy more than once describes Paul as
“despotic,” and as his intervention in the museum indicates, this is not undeserved. Paul is intensely concerned with what is and is not appropriate for women, particularly Lucy, to be exposed to. This is in part related to his Catholicism, which Charlotte roundly critiques throughout the course of the novel. Beyond this, Paul’s ‘despotism’ provides the perfect challenge for Lucy; though he is nearly as consumed with the project of observation as Lucy is, his is a nature which seeks to control the full range of observation in others. He displays the same desire to see without being seen that resides in Madame Beck, Crimsworth in *The Professor*, and Lucy herself. Showing Lucy his room that overlooks the pensionnat’s garden, he says without shame, “My book is this garden; its contents are human nature – female human nature” (436). And yet, though he finds himself fit to gaze unfettered on the nature of women, he attempts to prevent Lucy from doing the same.

The narrative’s end seeks to reconcile Paul’s despotic, controlling nature with Lucy’s search for female independence. Soon after realizing their love for each other, they are parted by the machinations of Madame Beck and two Catholic cohorts of hers – Madame Walravens and Père Silas – who do not want Paul to marry Lucy for religious and other selfish reasons. The three conspire to send Paul to the West Indies to oversee a business venture. He is intended to return in three years, but the narrative ends before this is fulfilled; Lucy implies he may have died in a shipwreck on the return trip, but leaves this ending ambiguous, saying:

*Here pause: pause at once. There is enough said. Trouble no quiet, kind heart; leave sunny imaginations hope. Let it be theirs to*
conceive the delight of joy born again fresh out of great terror, the rapture of rescue from peril, the wondrous reprieve from dread, the fruition of return. Let them picture union and a happy succeeding life. (568)

Charlotte’s choice to leave interpretation of the novel’s end in the hands of the reader is complicated and frustrating because it simultaneously begs for interpretation whilst also pointing out the futility of interpretation that will always remain inconclusive.

Yet despite the stated promise of ambiguity, Charlotte does not really leave her narrative open to much interpretation. The entirety of the novel suggests that Lucy will suffer the tragedies of women like Miss Marchmont and Vashti. Furthermore, her diction within this passage itself contradicts the hope that Paul returned safely. “Let it be theirs,” she says, “let them picture union,” distinguishing that this optimistic view is separate from her experience. Her invitation to the reader to “picture” a happy ending invokes her earlier instruction to “picture me then idle, basking, plump, and happy,” but the reader must remember that this initial fanciful daydream was almost immediately overturned—by a shipwreck, no less. Lucy’s diction softens at the end of the novel, no longer explicitly instructing the reader to “picture me then,” but offering, allowing, the imagination conjure this vision of “union and a happy succeeding life.” Then, she withdraws her gaze, briefly mentioning the long, prosperous lives of the novel’s villains, and concluding simply, “farewell”. Having directed the reader for 400 pages through her vision, Lucy extends her gaze no further; instead she asks her audience to project its own vision, to imagine the suffering and loss that is the converse of her proffered union and happiness. The expectation is that not only is this optimistic-but-naive vision no longer Lucy’s, it is no longer the reader’s, either. Having been instructed by the pain of these
female narratives – of Miss Marchmont, Vashti, and most importantly, Lucy – the audience is now enabled to picture for themselves the tragedy the female artist invokes.

**Conclusion**

*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, Wuthering Heights* and *Villette* each attempt to demonstrate the process of artistic creation – specifically female artistic creation – to their readers. Each author interacts with her audience in some way, or a variety of ways, to demonstrate that she is conscious of their presence, and to ask that they be conscious of hers, so that neither forgets that this is a piece of very deliberate art. This interaction suggests that art itself is not a unilateral act, but a mutual process between artist and audience. This process ultimately seeks to invert the audience’s gaze, on an individual and social level. For the Brontës, the dominant social gaze that is inverted is the male gaze, but their novels address topics of race, class, and religion that indicate the multiple perspectives from which to approach this process of inversion. They demonstrate the perspective bias inherent in gazing, and write consciously from their perspective as female authors – their writing is deeply personal, even autobiographical, as a result. Thus the Brontës invoke the idea of the female artist so as to introduce their own distinct subjectivity for the reader’s edification.

The intricacies of narrative structure in *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* reject any notion of narrative objectivity in order to engage the reader’s awareness of perspective. The presence of dual narrators forces the reader consistently to be on guard for each speaker’s bias. In *Tenant*, the reader’s impression of Helen is colored by Markham’s introduction of her; this impression is carried into the beginning
of Helen’s diary. It is through reading her diary that Markham and the reader adjust their opinions of her; this posits narrative as a corrective force. The framing of a woman’s narrative within a man’s makes the difference in their perspectives overt; the same effect is accomplished between Nelly Dean and Lockwood in *Wuthering Heights*. Additionally, *Tenant* uses an epistolary mode for its outer frame, creating an imagined audience that implies a subjective reading for the novel. In *Wuthering Heights*, the frame itself creates the illusion of an audience. Whereas in *Tenant*, Helen’s narration is ostensibly in her diary and therefore significantly more raw, here Nelly is tailoring her story to an audience – Lockwood – throughout. Furthermore, because her narration is transmitted to the reader through Lockwood’s instantiation through his diary, there is an even further layer of subjectivity imposed on her narrative.

By devising an audience for their narratives within the text as a whole, Anne and Emily allow the reader to identify in part with the storyteller, to observe the artist in action and the story as it is crafted, rather than as a finite product. *Villette*, too, offers the reader this chance to view the artist at her canvas, as does *Tenant*, in overt scenes that depict this exact process. *Tenant*, of course, does this in a very literal way through Helen’s character, and furthermore, illustrates the artist as she interacts with her largely male audience. In *Villette*, this is done in Vashti’s pivotal scene, but also before that in Lucy’s own theatrical performance, which offers the reader a chance to see inside the mind of the actress while she performs. This scene is a prelude to the artistic possession that is consummated in Vashti’s performance. As in *Tenant* and *Wuthering Heights*, this overt illustration of the artist at work serves as a reminder of the relationship between artist and audience that is fundamental to the novel itself. By continuously shifting the
narrative perspective between that of the artist and that of the audience, these novels ask
the reader to consider how subjectivity functions in each role.

The suggestion of ambiguity at the end of both *Wuthering Heights* and *Villette*
invites the reader into the narrative process. Emily ends her novel with Lockwood’s
naïve imagination of peaceful rest for the deceased Cathy, Edgar, and Heathcliff, as
Charlotte ends *Villette* with Lucy’s suggestion of happy union for herself and Paul.
These peaceful, happy images are at odds with the tempestuous and gloomy narratives
that precede them; everything in the novels contradicts these endings. The implication is
that the opposite is true, but neither author will deign to offer this alternative ending to
the reader, instead asking that the reader imagine it for themselves. This is another
inversion of the reader’s gaze. Anne achieves a similar effect at the conclusion of
*Tenant*, in which Markham withdraws from his reminiscences to address Halford again,
speaking primarily now in the second person. He invites Halford to leave the “dusty,
smoky, noisy, toiling, striving city for a season of invigorating relaxation and social
retirement with us” (407). This exhortation, too, suggests an inversion, invites the
audience to leave their situation and to see instead from his and Helen’s vantage point.
Each ending suggests that having read the body of the novel, the reader is now equipped
to look at the world from the artist’s point of view. Thereby, Charlotte, Emily, and Anne
create their own female gaze in defiance of the boundaries around what women “should”
see, think, and create.
Primary Works


Works Cited


Works Consulted


