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Lucy as a “Rising Character”: Character Analysis of Lucy Snowe of Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*

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ABSTRACT

In *Villette*, Charlotte Brontë portrays a woman’s growth in an incredibly subtle way. Her heroine goes through a lonely and painful process from awakening to transformation. Lucy Snowe possesses inner strength and she rises out of difficult circumstances -- suffering, seeking, surviving and finding her career. Charlotte’s insights about love, career, marriage and life are maturer than her previous novels, she also presents her deeper concern and reflection on Victorian women’s situation in the novel. Inspired by Lucy Snowe’s spirit, this paper briefly analyses her sterling character and how she rises from an unrecognized woman to a respected teacher.

1. Introduction

Charlotte Brontë’s last published novel – *Villette*^[1] – is widely regarded as the most autobiographical one compared to her previous novels. *Villette* is a narrative of a woman’s struggle in a “disenchanted world”^[2] and a lonely journey towards self-discovery and personal fulfilment. Lucy Snowe suffers from loss, extreme loneliness and psychic disorientation for eight years. Her turbulence sufferings stem from Brontë’s painful years of loneliness as Carlisle points out, Lucy Snowe “is a mask under which Brontë conceals her identity in order to reveal the unappealing reality of her emotional life and its central figures”^[3].

However, like Brontë, Lucy manages to build up her independence stage to stage through her quest for finding the truth about life. The reader thus is inferred that to feel and to live profoundly, one has to experience painful suffering. Lucy Snowe’s story is tied up with the evolving process of self-discovery and self-fulfilment, involving changes of perspective, reconsideration, a general adjustment of her emotions and consciousness. She is initially marginalized, a “nobody” who is invisible to common gaze and yet through her maturation, she becomes “somebody”. As she remarks, “I am a rising character: once an old lady’s companion, then a nursery-governess, now a school-teacher” (p. 349). On account of this, this essay will focus on Lucy

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Snowe's maturation journey in *Villette*, analyse the character as a "rising character" who transcends herself as "somebody" from a "nobody" through exploring and contrasting with some of the protagonists.

2. Lucy Snowe as an Outsider

Lucy Snowe is an observer, and the narrator of *Villette*, through her narration, the reader gains an insight into the world in which she moves. However, in the beginning sections of *Villette*, the lesser protagonists are stressed engaging the centre stage. As the heroine of the novel, Lucy removes herself from the narrative until the second chapter: she narrates the stories of others, but she withholds the past of herself and remains obscure. In this light, her identity as invisible is indicated in the preceding chapters. Her past remains mystery since she never talks about it, and yet the reader can be indicated that her parents are passed away due to a shipwreck, as she is constantly haunted by the nightmare of a storm, which "repeats the rush and saltiness of briny waves in [her] throat, and their icy pressure on [her] lungs" (p.37). As an orphan left to her own devices, she is essentially a "nobody", a wanderer who must learn to survive. From the beginning of the novel, Lucy lives and works under various constraints as she shifts from one dominated situation to another. She temporarily lives as a guest in her Godmother's house and then became a nurse for a crippled widow -- Miss Marchmont. After her death, in searching for a job, Lucy moves to a foreign land -- *Villette*, and gains a job at Madam Beck's pensionnat taking care of the children. She is a guest, a servant, a foreigner, a "heretic", who lives amongst Catholics in a space monitored by Madame Beck. All of which indicates that her position in her surrounding is marginalized and "exceptional" (p. 273).

In great contrast with Lucy's tragic fate and her invisible status, Paulina is a lucky girl who is sheltered from its troubles, and who often draws the attention of those around her. Despite living together with Lucy in Bretton, she treats Lucy as social inferior, a "nobody", that when she speaks to Lucy, she uses a "trenchant manner", a tone that is "quite different from that she use[s] with Mrs. Bretton, and different again from the one dedicate[s] to Graham" (p.32). However, at this stage, Lucy Snowe is unaware of her subordinate position in society. In addition, her unique nature is incomprehensible to Paulina as her identity is invisible to the "common gaze" (p.179). Partially, her invisibility is ascribed to the concealment of her identity from those around her. Further, she has a curious preference to solitude, repressing her turbulent feelings in her "mind cell" ^[4]. Repression of her private self hinders her from self-recognition and distances herself from the

visible world.

Lucy deduces most of her story from her outward observation, ignoring her blazing soul and dealing with those who around her as the only constitution of her life. Admitting she neglects something during the process of observing others, but she gains a growing insight of the human nature and gradually discovers the truth about her private self, as she states,

I always, through my whole life, liked to penetrate to the real truth; I like seeking the goddess in her temple, and handling the veil, and daring the dread glance...we may gasp in untold terror, but with that gasp we drink in a breath of thy divinity; Our heart shakes, and its currents sway like rivers lifted by earthquake, but we have swallowed strength. To see and know the worst is to take from fear her main advantage. (p.345)

Indeed, in the process of her observation, she finds Paulina is fulfilling her gender role as a conventional Victorian woman by conforming herself to her father's expectation. Paulina is seemed to Lucy as a child "had no mind or life of her own, but must necessarily live, move, and have her being in another man." (p.22) Her father, Mr. Home implants his conventional conceptions of gender roles onto Paulina, who is growing to meet the expectation as an ideal Victorian woman. She is a girl who is beautiful, refined and with a tender charm, who can only realize her value in the eyes of men around. Paulina gives up her independence for social acceptance, whereas Lucy rebels against conventions and seeks for independence. Just as her name -- Polly Home, "signifies comfortable domesticity", and indicates Polly is incapable and unwilling to fight for her independence, thus silently submitting herself to the patriarchal norms in exchange for a domestic comfort. Lucy observes Paulina with a mixture of detest and sympathy. Though provided with a much better salary, she refuses to be a private governess for Paulina provided with a much better salary, Lucy refuses to be a private governess for Paulina. For Lucy, to be either a private governess or a companion is unacceptable that she strives to make her own way to take a housemaid's place instead of being a "bright lady's shadow" (p.337). In this light, by refusing to become Paulina's accomplice, Lucy declares her resistance to submission.

In spite of this, Lucy recognizes the shallowness of Ginevra Fanshawe, who initially amazes Lucy with her "fair, fragile style of beauty" (p.52), but then disgusts Lucy with her vanity nature. Opposite to the tenderness and gentleness of Paulina, Miss Fanshawe is a narcissistic female character who has an obsession to her own physical appearance. However, while Dr. John perceives Fan-

shawe as an innocent and graceful angel on the basis of her fancy looking, Lucy goes beyond her shallow appearances. At a notable scene in which Fanshawe forces Lucy to look into the mirror with her, Miss Fanshawe takes pride of her fancy looking in the mirror that attracts men's gaze. Despite Fanshawe's shallow judgment of Lucy as a "poor soul" and "nobody", Lucy sees through her "preposterously vain" and refuses to give even sixpence to be a Fanshawe. Unlike Dr. John, Lucy pierces into the pure vanity of Miss Fanshawe's soul as she states,

[a]s to admires, you hardly know what they are; you can't even talk on the subject: you sit dumb when the other teachers quote their conquests. I believe you never were in love, and never will be; you don't know the feeling. (p.138).

Through the observation on Paulina and Miss Fanshawe, Lucy presents her resentment to conventional female gender role that submits to male gaze. Lucy is certain that she is not "the adjunct of any beauty" or "the appendage of any greatness" (p.286). Lucy's subversive trait reveals to the reader about her creator's a crude example of feminist awareness. By rejecting the feminine sexuality, Bronte "allows the reader recognize the severe character flaws that are associated with Fanshawe's level of womanhood"^[5].

3. Lucy Snowe as a Truth-seeker

While both Fanshawe and Paulina submit themselves to the expectations of Victorian gender roles, Lucy constantly seeks to find the truth about the world and strives to discover herself. Under the Victorian confinements, both Lucy and Paulina repress and conceal themselves. However, Paulina's personal development ceases by turning to "the angel of the house", and yet Lucy's transcends through her increasing maturation. Lucy surpasses them, she rises step by step. She is indeed a "rising character" and more than a "nobody" as she replies Fanshawe when being asked "are you anybody" (p.349). Lucy holds the belief that to escape the confinements of her society, she must gain her economic independency.

In accordance with Lucy's growing awareness, her affection towards Dr. John begins to fade as she realizes that he proves to be so limited in his emotional and spiritual sphere that he is incapable of discerning the Fanshawe's shallowness and unable to love a woman without beautiful appearance. In addition, Dr. John entirely misuses Lucy's unique nature, and fails to recognize the intellectual beauty of Lucy. As she notes, "[n]ature and I oppose[s] him. He [does] not at all guess, what I [feels]: he [does] not read my eyes, or face, or gestures" (p.305). Instead, he deeply hurts Lucy by judging Lucy as "quiet" and "inof-

fensive as a shadow". Consequently, Lucy recognizes his superficial nature, and realizes his misapprehension. Finally, Lucy walks out of her falling for Dr. John. And her recognition of Dr. John's defectiveness offers an opportunity for her to identify M. Paul's hidden passion and profound insight. She gradually discovers that Mr. Paul shares her sympathetic imagination. He penetrates through Lucy's cold appearance into her flaming heart. Perhaps because of his accurate apprehension, Lucy grows an affection towards Paul. Lucy sees in Paul "a clearness of amity in his blue eye, and a glow of good feeling on his dark complexion". Under this dark complexion, Lucy discovers Mr. Paul's tenderness (p.324) and a charming soul with "vivid passions, keen feelings [...] pure honour and [...] artless piety" (p. 433).

M.Paul and the apparition of the nun play significant roles in Lucy's awakening and turn her outward gaze inward. The nun that haunts Lucy appears five times in different occasions. It appears at moments when Lucy struggles from emotional turmoil. Reflecting through her encounters with the ghostly nun, Lucy begins to observe her private self that is neglected and repressed by herself a very long time. Gilbert and Gubar points out that 'the nun is [...] of Lucy's desire to submit in silence, to accept confinement, in shadowy black, to conceal her face, to desexualize herself.' Indeed, Lucy locks her desiring self and tries to bury it. And she suffers tremendously during the progression of the haunting and self-reflecting. She suffers from passion and pain of loss concerning Dr.John; she grows affection to M.Paul yet her hard-won love is obstructed by 'the secret junta' constituted by Madame Walravens, Madame Beck and Pere Silas, who prevents her from seeing M.Paul; she is forced taking sedative by Madame Beck and she walks toward Rue Fossette in an ecstasy status which makes her see an heartbreak illusion. However, Lucy finds the fact that the ghostly nun is nothing but a hoax. Lucy thus relieves herself from illusion that she matures through the suffering and becomes courageous, believing in she can take control of her own identity. In this light, she recognizes her own fractured desiring self that she turns to a road of self-fulfillment. In addition, her finding of the truth regarding the nun also signifies her subversion of patriarchal ideology for she rebels against her social's confinements.

4. Lucy Snowe's Independence

Lucy's romance with M.Paul facilitates her self-fulfillment. Paul is drawn to Lucy's beautiful soul and sees through her struggles and accepts her faults and all. They have their quarrels and struggles but both make efforts to balance themselves and keep their relationship in harmo-

ny. However, M.Paul sets off to an Indian isle and promises will be back in three years. Rather than suffers from M.Paul's absence, Lucy confesses to the reader that she conducts her happiest three years. As she narrates,

At parting, I [has] been left a legacy; such a thought for the present, such a hope for the future, such a motive for a persevering, a laborious, an enterprising, a patient and a brave course-I could not flag. Few things [shake] me now; few things [have] importance to vex, intimidate, or depress me: most things pleased-mere trifles had a charm. (p.472)

She is delighted with her life and fully devotes to her career. In great contrast to her being nobody at the beginning of the novel, Lucy stands out as an independent woman with a career heading her school. She is indeed succeeded in rising up stage by stage. Although Lucy honestly states that her success does not lie so much in herself as the school is a legacy left by M.Paul, she evidently points out she gains her "endowment" and "power" by herself, and her living of a "wonderfully changed life" gives the credit to her "relieved heart" (p.557). In this light, Bronte conveys her moral code through Lucy's fulfillment. "Honor your word. Do your best. A good soul with good intentions triumphs wealth, stature, and position in society."^[6] And she suggests that a woman is able to declare her independence without a man's presence. Indeed, without Paul around, Lucy thrives and her career flourishes. She finally stands right at the centre of her own life stage. In other words, the absence of the hero provides a way spacious room for Lucy to freely engage with her career development. With perseverance and enterprise, Lucy becomes spiritually stronger than ever.

Nevertheless, her happy days without Paul do not indicate that she has no love to Paul. She expects him to come home. Unfortunately, it is not a "then they lived happily ever since" story. M.Paul is "lost" at sea, as it is highlighted by the image of storm which symbolizes fatality. Lucy's narration comes to its closure with the description of a storm and a sudden end with a somewhat ambiguous statement,

[t]hat storm roare[s] frenzied for seven days. It [does] not cease till the Atlantic [is] strewn with wrecks: it [does] not lull till the deeps [gorges] their full sustenance. Not till the destroying angel of tempest [achieves] his perfect work [will] be fold the wings whose waft [is] thunder-the tremor of whose plumes was storm. (p.559)

With no definite answer, readers are led to read between lines. Though ambiguous, the metaphorical indication of the storm actually "leads readers to the direction of reading the death of Paul into the ending"^[7]. It is suggested

from the beginning chapters that the storm and shipwreck symbolize death. The storm in this ending page, which Charlotte adopts in the way of flashback, circles back to Lucy's narration the night of Miss Marchmont's death. "The wind wailing at the windows: it ha[s] wailed all day; but, as night deepened, it [takes] a new tone-an accent keen, piercing, almost articulate to the ear; a plaint, piteous and disconsolate to the nerves, trilled in every gust" (p.41). In the night, Miss Marchmont tells Lucy her love story with Frank, who is a "noble" and "faithful" gentleman. Unfortunately, death takes him away on a Christmas Eve. In the following thirty years, Miss Marchmont lives a secluded life in response to her lover's death. For Miss Marchmont, love is the only meaningful thing in her life and in her memory. It is the sign implied from the very beginning chapters of Lucy's ill-fated love journey and her confinement in loneliness. As Gilbert and Gubar remarks, Marchmont's "calamity" suggests that "self-incarceration is potentially every woman's fate".

Nevertheless, in contrast with her service at Miss Marchmont's, Lucy rises to an entirely different woman who now conducts a "wonderfully changed life", which is disparate to her days living in Miss Marchmont's "[t]wo hot, close rooms" (p.40) that constituting all her life. Lucy Snowe, a woman who suffers from loss, rejection and disorientation, rises up as a premier example of an independent woman whose blazing soul and quiet strength far eclipses the house angels like Ginevra Fanshawe and Paulina Home.

5. Conclusions

Villette is the journey for Lucy Snow's self-discovery and self-fulfilment. It also encloses Charlotte Bronte's insight of life. The reader is indicated that life is a constantly evolving journey, and every individual in the world has to mature up and navigate one's living. The reader is indicated with a strong mind and constant self-reflection one will triumph over the hardship just as Lucy. Lucy Snowe, like her creator, struggles with her tender heart and yet dynamic feminine strength, and manages to rise above her restrictions.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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