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I. Introduction

Villette (1853), Charlotte Brontë's (1816-55) last novel, contains several mysteries that seem to derive from the ambiguous narrative by Lucy Snowe, the novel's heroine and first-person narrator. At one time, she describes her family's misfortune in similitudes without details; at another time, she withholds a fact from her readers and divulges it much later, even though she realizes it in an earlier chapter. Thus, she does not fulfill the role of a general narrator.

Because of these peculiar tendencies in her narrative, Lucy Snowe is often referred to as an “unreliable narrator.” The novel's ending is an apt example of this: in the last chapter, M. Paul, Lucy's fiancé, sails back from the West Indies after his three-year absence. Upon his return, a storm arises and the ship on which Paul is aboard is wrecked. However, Lucy does not clearly describe to the reader what has happened to him and finishes her narrative by saying “Here pause: pause at once. There is enough said” (715).

The erratic retention in Lucy's narrative causes confusion and makes *Villette* a “most difficult novel” to read, as suggested by Luann McCracken Fletcher (724). According to Ezra Dan

Feldman, over the past 40 years or so, criticism has addressed numerous problems in *Villette*, such as its omissions, unreliable accounts, and a lack of closure (78). As for Birgitta Berglund, she states that virtually all critics who have commented on *Villette* mention narrator Lucy's unreliability as an established fact (208). Thus, Lucy's enigmatic narrative habits are a problematic topic in *Villette*.

Lucy's story lacks clarity and bewilders her readers. Why does she tell her story in this way? The confusing narrative might have a certain rationale from her standpoint. This paper aims to examine the enigmatic narration of Lucy Snowe by focusing on her perspective. At the same time, the author's situation should be also considered because she lost her three siblings one after another while writing her previous novel, *Shirley* (1849). It is highly possible that Brontë's mental state is reflected as a distortion of the narrator in her last novel.

In this paper, three episodes will be discussed: (1) how Lucy loses her family; (2) the late revelation of Dr. John's identity; and (3) the ending of M. Paul's life. These controversial episodes have been studied sufficiently to classify her as an untrustworthy narrator. Further, by

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concentrating on Lucy's mental state, the reasons for her unnatural narrative will be examined.

II. The Lost Family

Although she is the heroine of her own memoir, Lucy is often unwilling to reveal details about herself. Even her name is not given in the opening chapter. She is silent about her background; for example, she does not mention where she was born, nor why she is looked after at the Brettons.

When Lucy delineates the loss of her family and fortune, she alludes to the incident using the allegory of a shipwreck.

Picture me then idle, basking, plump, and happy, stretched on a cushioned deck, warmed with constant sunshine, rocked by breezes indolently soft. However, it cannot be concealed that, in that case, I must somehow have fallen over-board, or that there must have been wreck at last. I too well remember a time—a long time, of cold, of danger, of contention. To this hour, when I have the nightmare, it repeats the rush and saltiness of briny waves in my throat, and their icy pressure on my lungs. I even know there was a storm, and that not of one hour nor one day. For many days and nights neither sun nor stars appeared; we cast with our own hands the tackling out of the ship; a heavy tempest lay on us; all hope that we should be saved was taken away. In fine, the ship was lost, the crew perished. (46-47)

All that readers are required to do here is to picture what happened to Lucy. She explains her adversity using metaphors such as “wreck,” “storm,” and “heavy tempest.” Readers have no choice but to infer that her peaceful life has become a tragedy. Their conjecture may be supported by the references to Lucy's “bereaved lot” and “my mourning-dress” (48), but no more specific explanation is given.

In the paragraph prior to the above quotation, Lucy writes “I will permit the reader to picture me” (46) and allows her readers to imagine her life before the misfortune. However, this is

simply a disguise: her seeming generosity is none other than an expression of her refusal to explain. In this way, she rejects to disclose the details of the dreadful calamity—the loss of her family and fortune—and buries these facts under the metaphor of an ambiguous shipwreck.

After the tragedy, Lucy is offered a position as a companion of Miss Marchmont, a rich, crippled old woman. Lucy devotes herself to attending to the old lady, but she ultimately dies. Although Miss Marchmont becomes “my [Lucy's] mistress, my friend, my all” (50), Lucy clearly delineates the death of her mistress without hesitation. Her attitude indicates that she is not driven to a vague allegory due to the fear of death: it is the deaths of her irreplaceable family that Lucy cannot face.

The confession that Lucy suffers the loss of her family even “[t]o this hour” by having nightmares indicates the severity of her psychic wound. In another chapter, as she admits “my hair which till a late period withstood the frosts of time, lies now at last, white under a white cap, like snow beneath snow” (60-61), it is apparent that some decades have passed since she experienced the previously described adversity.

Lucy's life-long misery that derives from the loss of her family is reminiscent of the author's bereavements. Charlotte Brontë was the eldest of four surviving Brontë children since her two elder sisters died in childhood. However, she was destined to lose her remaining siblings as well: on September 24, 1848, her brother, Branwell, died at the age of 31, and her novelist sisters, Emily (December 19, 1848, age 30) and Anne (May 28, 1849, age 29), followed him in succession. Thus, she lost her loving family members one after another over a period of several months, and the motherless Brontë was left with her elderly father.

The reason why Lucy cannot clearly describe her loss may be attributable to the author's familial ordeal. Brontë lost her siblings while she was engaged in writing her previous novel, *Shirley*. When she started writing *Villette*, barely three years had passed since the tragedy. In the novel, on a February night when Miss Marchmont dies, Lucy refers to the legend of the

Banshee, a woman spirit or supernatural being in Irish folklore whose mournful screams at night were believed to foretell the death of a family member of the household she visited. Lucy says she has heard the Banshee-like cry "[t]hree times in the course of [her] life" (51). This number coincides with the number of siblings that Brontë had lost just a few years prior. In her mind, the heroine's loss may have been closely associated with her own tragedy.

The Brontë sisters used to walk around the dining room each evening and discuss their works. Their novels, *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Wuthering Heights* (1847), and *Agnes Grey* (1847) merged through these discussions. After her sisters' deaths, Brontë had to continue writing all by herself. Writing alone must have triggered the awareness that she had lost her siblings forever. It is conceivable that her profound grief was the cause of Lucy's ambiguous statements about her adversity. The author's miserable loneliness is reflected in her heroine. Lucy is unable to depict her loss many years later; even "[t]o this hour." She can merely refer to the incident through the allegory of a shipwreck. However, her reticence expresses her agony more eloquently than any other specification. By withholding her narrative, Lucy effectively conveys the severity of her hardships.

III. Delayed Revelation

Another infamous example of Lucy's unreliable narrative occurs when she reveals Dr. John's identity. Even though she recognizes him as Graham Bretton, her distant relative and old friend, it is chapters later that she shares this information with the reader. Somehow, she withholds the fact and does not tell the reader about her discovery on the spot.

Gretchen Braun suggests that narrative structures that rely on traumatic experiences provide a model for understanding Lucy's silences (190). However, it is difficult to identify the cause of Lucy's narrative tendencies. As Karen Lawrence remarks, Lucy's autobiography does not fully express her essence, and her narrative leaves only a trace (455). In retrospect, though, Lucy admits that she was sensitive as a child, saying, "Oh, my

childhood! I had feelings: . . . when I thought of past days, I *could* feel" (151). Details are not provided, but in the following paragraph, Lucy describes her morbid change in mindset:

At that time [when Lucy worked for Madame Beck's boarding school], I well remember—whatever could excite—certain accidents of the weather, for instance, were almost dreaded by me, because they woke the being I was always lulling, and stirred up a craving cry I could not satisfy. . . .

I did long, achingly, then and for four-and-twenty hours afterwards, for something to fetch me out of my present existence, and lead me upwards and onwards. This longing, and all of a similar kind, it was necessary to knock on the head; which I did, figuratively, after the manner of Jael to Sisera, driving a nail through their temples. Unlike Sisera, they did not die: they were but transiently stunned, and at intervals would turn on the nail with a rebellious wrench; then did the temples bleed, and the brain thrill to its core. (151-52)

The Lucy who "could feel" transforms into the Lucy who strictly hides her true nature. She does not explain what she means by "the being," but the second paragraph from the quote implies that underlying her calm, cold appearance, she conceals a deep longing.

As M. Paul observes with his keen insight, Lucy possesses a passionate disposition. Therefore, he compares her to a "fire," "flame" (216), and "éclair [a flash of lightning]" (456). She proves her bravery when she travels alone all the way from London to Labassecour, an imaginary kingdom on the Continent, and secures her situation as a nursery-governess by negotiating for herself, which was quite unusual for a woman at the time. She is also endowed with versatile abilities and manages her first English lesson as a teacher at the sudden request of Madame Beck. Her theatrical performance at her mistress' birthday fete is another example.

Then, why does Lucy suppress her longing and capability? Through the misfortune of

her childhood, including the loss of her family, she must have decided to prioritize survival as a goal in life. Although the details are not made clear due to the severity of the incident, it made enough of an impact on young Lucy to cause her to place importance on survival instead of her hopes and dreams. If she were to allow herself to “feel” her emotions as nature would lead her to do, this could result in a fatal mistake. Consequently, she gives up her desires, hides her sensitive nature, and becomes a repressed, withdrawn woman like a “colourless shadow” (216). This is her survival strategy.

When she begins her story, describing a teary farewell between Paulina Home and her father, she declares “I, Lucy Snowe, was calm” (28). In this way, she indicates that she is far from being emotional, but her statement can be interpreted as a self-suggestion. In other words, she needs to persuade herself to control her feelings. The metaphor of bleeding temples at the end of the previous quote explains how tough it is to suppress her natural tendencies. It is highly possible that such conditions seriously influence Lucy’s narrative.

For survival, Lucy is extremely cautious not to run any risks. She is always on alert to avoid becoming upset. This caution could be the reason why she delayed revealing Dr. John’s identity.

To *say* anything on the subject, to *hint* at my discovery, had not suited my habits of thought, or assimilated with my system of feeling. On the contrary, I had preferred to keep the matter to myself. . . .

Well I knew that to him [Dr. John] it could make little difference, were I to come forward and announce “This is Lucy Snowe!” So I kept back in my teacher’s place; and as he never asked my name, so I never gave it. He heard me called “Miss,” and “Miss Lucy;” he never heard the surname, “Snowe.” As to spontaneous recognition—though I, perhaps, was still less changed than he—the idea never approached his mind, and why should I suggest it? (249-50)

Here, Lucy makes ambiguous excuses that disclose the above fact does not “[suit her] habits of thought,” but it is evident that her rationalization does not justify the delay.

However, the second paragraph offers a clue. Lucy mentions the possibility that even if she were to state the fact that she recognizes him as her old friend, John Graham Bretton, and also who she herself is, this might mean nothing to him. While she assumes an air of indifference, she does not forget him and her old attachment to him. What she fears is Dr. John’s reaction to the revelation, or, even a lack of reaction from him.

Lucy’s fear comes true in a sense. Dr. John lacks interest in her, and despite that “I [Lucy] was still less changed than he,” her childhood friend shows no signs of recognition. His indifference must disappoint, grieve, and hurt her deeply. She might also feel angry at his insensitivity.

To avoid any emotional disturbances, Lucy tries to stop facing the situation: she must remain aloof to anything that stirs up her feelings. She does not want to be hurt, and she does not want her readers to notice this. In addition, she does not wish to admit this fact herself, either. As a means of self-protection, she inevitably engages in self-deception at the same time.

When Lucy confesses her discovery that the gentleman who helped her on the first night in Villette was also Dr. John, she exhibits the same attitude, saying “it was a pleasant thought, laid by in my own mind, and best kept there” (325), but she never explains it to him. Her attitude derives from the same motive: if she were to try to remind him of that re-encounter, he might not remember it at all. She cannot bear the fact that it is always she that recognizes him and not he.

Hence, her agony prevents her from telling the reader about her discovery of Dr. John’s identity. She reluctantly shares this fact much later; if she could, she would hide it, even from herself. Elizabeth Preston insists that silence can be strategically deployed as a technique to gain control over Dr. John and sees a power-game structure in Lucy’s secrecy (394). However, as discussed above, Lucy withholds information not

only from him, but also from the reader. Thus, other factors should be considered, rather than engaging in a power struggle with Dr. John.

Judging from her survival strategy, Lucy’s silence is closely tied to her suppressed emotions. She worries that her existence means nothing to Dr. John and becomes afraid when her fear is realized. Her anger—which derives from her trampled-upon attachments to Dr. John—is also inseparable from the delayed revelation of his identity. The more she represses her feelings, the more strongly they arise. As a result, under the complexity of her emotions, Lucy hesitates and postpones disclosing Dr. John’s background.

IV. An Ambiguous Ending

In the closing chapter of *Villette*, Lucy depicts the catastrophic scene of a storm and shipwreck, yet she never mentions what happens to M. Paul, who is returning to Labassecour on the ship. The novel ends with his fate left unknown, without clearly accounting for his disappearance. This is the most controversial mystery in *Villette*, as M. Paul is an essential character through which Lucy can realize her wishes, since she cannot do so on her own.

Courage, Lucy Snowe! With self-denial and economy now, and steady exertion by-and-by, an object in life need not fail you. Venture not to complain that such an object is too selfish, too limited, and lacks in interest: be content to labour for independence until you have proved, by winning that prize, your right to look higher. But afterwards, is there nothing more for me in life—no true home—nothing to be dearer to me than myself, and by its paramount preciousness, to draw from me better things than I care to culture for myself only? Nothing, at whose feet I can willingly lay down the whole burden of human egotism, and gloriously take up the nobler charge of labouring and living for others? (522-23)

Villette is often defined as a feminist novel, as the heroine succeeds in running a school and becomes

financially independent. Lucy is firmly resolved to exert effort to achieve her goals. However, the questions in the latter part of the quote hint that her true desires lie not in economic success. She seeks someone who is dearer than herself. Words such as “true home” and “paramount preciousness” indicate her intense longing, which may derive from her lonely background.

M. Paul is the key person through whom she may realize her wish. Through her relationship with him, Lucy confesses her delight at loving someone and being loved by someone else for the first time in her life, exclaiming “to see un hoped-for happiness take form, find place, and grow more real as the seconds sped, was indeed a new experience” (590).

What is noticeable in this experience is that when Lucy feels loved, her narrative changes dramatically. When she tells M. Paul Emanuel about the night of the national fete, she is not a “shy and retiring” (252) narrator any longer.

“Speak, Lucy; come near; speak. Who prizes you if I do not? Who is your friend, if not Emanuel? Speak!”

I spoke. All leaped from my lips. I lacked not words now; fast I narrated; fluent I told my tale; it streamed on my tongue. . . . All I encountered I detailed, all I had recognized, heard, and seen; how I had beheld and watched himself; how I listened how much heard, what conjectured; the whole history, in brief, summoned to his confidence, rushed thither truthful, literal, ardent, bitter.

Still as I narrated, instead of checking, he incited me to proceed; he spurred me by the gesture, the smile, the half-word. (708-09)

Lucy proves herself to be an eloquent narrator if she understands that she is fully accepted. Her awareness of love affects her narrative style. M. Paul is important for uncovering the leading factor in Lucy’s narrative.

Then, why does “eloquent” Lucy leave the ending of her story unclear? She describes the storm and suddenly puts an end to her narrative:

That storm roared frenzied for seven days. It did not cease till the Atlantic was strewn with wrecks: it did not lull till the deeps had gorged their full of sustenance. Not till the destroying angel of tempest had achieved his perfect work, would he fold the wings whose waft was thunder—the tremor of whose plumes was storm.

Peace, be still! Oh! A thousand weepers, praying in agony on waiting shores, listened for that voice, but it was not uttered—not uttered till, when the hush came, some could not feel it: till, when the sun returned, his light was night to some!

Here pause: pause at once. There is enough said. Trouble no quiet, kind heart; leave sunny imaginations hope. (715)

The novel ends with a few more sentences. Judging from descriptions such as “It [The storm] did not cease till the Atlantic was strewn with wrecks” and “Not till the destroying angel of tempest had achieved his perfect work, would he fold the wings,” it is conceivable to think that M. Paul’s ship was wrecked.

The reason why Lucy refrains from giving an explanation during the climax has long been a fascinating topic. For example, Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz points out that, while Lucy encourages her readers to make up a story as they see fit, she will not reveal what she knows. Rabinowitz suspects that Lucy retains her sense of superiority in her attitude (249-50). Gilbert and Gubar assert that the ambiguous ending reflects “Lucy’s ambivalence, her love for Paul and her recognition that it is only in his absence that she can exert herself fully to exercise her own powers” (438). It is Laurence who shares the feminist critical perspective with them, claiming that Paul’s absence “allows the plot of ambition to thrive” (465).

The purpose of this paper is to focus on Lucy’s psychology and how time affects her mind. To interpret the ending, the recollection of Miss Marchmont’s fiancé (which is told on the night of her death) could indicate how time works in relation to the wounded mind. Chapter 4, where

Miss Marchmont appears, has, as Jian Choe insists, been given little critical attention. It is considered a minor episode that prefigures the tragic denouement (173). However, the importance of this elderly lady should be recognized in terms of Lucy Snowe’s repressed narrative.

Clearly, the experience of Miss Marchmont presages the life of Lucy Snowe. Miss Marchmont lost her fiancé Frank when he died; they had been planning to marry soon. Her agony lasts for 30 years. On the night of her own death, she narrates the story to Lucy:

“I love Memories tonight,” she said; “I prize her as my best friend. She is just now giving me a deep delight; she is bringing back to my heart, in warm and beautiful life, realities—not mere empty ideas. . . . I possess just now the hours, the thoughts, the hopes of my youth. I renew the love of my life—its only love—almost its only affection; . . . Let me now ask, just at this moment, when my mind is so strangely clear,—let me reflect why it was taken from me? For what crime was I condemned, after twelve months of bliss, to undergo thirty years of sorrow?”

“I do not know,” she continued, after a pause: “I cannot—*cannot* see the reason; yet at this hour I can say with sincerity, what I never tried to say before—Inscrutable God, Thy will be done! And at this moment I can believe that death will restore me to Frank. I never believed it till now. (52-53)

For the first time in 30 years, she understands the meaning of her loss, before then, she was in the process of interpreting and needed this long period of time to accept Frank’s death. At the end of her confession, she comprehends that “[w]e should accept our own lot whatever it be” (56). The passage of time enables her to reach spiritual enlightenment and tell Lucy about her memories, namely the death of her fiancé, which has become enshrined in her heart. Thus, Miss Marchmont not only foreshadows the heroine’s bitter experiences, but also embodies the effect of time on a tragic trauma.

In the novel, Lucy verifies that many years have passed since the events in her story occurred, by referring to her white hair looking like snow. It is well known that Lucy's surname "Snowe" was chosen because Brontë thought "[a] cold name she [Lucy] must have. . . . for she has about her an external coldness" (to W. S. Williams, November 6, 1852, Smith 3: 80). The simile to snow of old Lucy's white hair leads to the presumption that her surname represents the passage of time, as well as her cold demeanor. After many years since her youth, Lucy finally holds a pen to write down her life story.

However, this does not mean that she achieves enlightenment as Miss Marchmont does. Lucy relates in the novel what she can disclose in the moment. Although she is now old, there are still some traumatic experiences that she cannot talk about. She tries to express these episodes by adopting oblique similitudes or narrates with hesitation and postpones the disclosure. She often leaves the reader to imagine what she cannot describe clearly. Her narrative tendencies confuse her readers, and that is why she is referred to as an untrustworthy narrator.

Despite her narrative attitudes, Lucy calls herself a "faithful narrator" (281). From the reader's viewpoint, her narrative can only be regarded as ambiguous. Then why does she define herself as "faithful?" From her standpoint, her narrative is a truthful reproduction of her present state of mind. Lucy tells as much as she can: after many years of agony since M. Paul's shipwreck, this is all she can express. The passage of time allows her to narrate, but she needs more time to tell her story as clearly as Miss Marchmont does.

V. Conclusion

Lucy Snowe is an infamous narrator because of her unreliable storytelling. However, her suppressed narrative can be interpreted as a genuine expression of her torment, which is beyond words. Sometimes she uses metaphors to describe her traumatic afflictions, while at other times, she withdraws information and postpones disclosing it. Her silence makes her a gloomy, secretive narrator.

Lucy's narrative also reflects the author's situation. Charlotte Brontë's real-life loss of her three siblings hinders Lucy from describing her own fictional loss in detail. Brontë's psychological state seems to affect the characterization of her morbidly introverted heroine.

On the contrary, the confession of Miss Marchmont provides a clue to understand the complexity of Lucy's narrative. Miss Marchmont's episode is not just an inset story but demonstrates the effect of time on a hurt mind. The passage of time enables those who suffer traumatic agony to understand the meaning of their torture. *Villette* conveys the importance of the "effects of time" (14) in healing the wounded mind, as 14-year-old Lucy states in the very opening chapter of the novel.

If this period is too short, then the person who is suffering requires more time to be cured. Miss Marchmont needs 30 years to tell her traumatic story on her deathbed. Lucy does not reach this state, which produces a controversial narrative. However, her narrative genuinely expresses her mental situation at the stage she is in. She narrates what she can and leaves ambiguous what she cannot, as a truthful expression of her state of mind. From this angle, she can be regarded as a "faithful narrator," as she calls herself.

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