Reconciling the Self-Divided:

Unmasking Behavioral Inconsistencies in Victorian English Culture through the writing of Charlotte Bronte

by

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This thesis is dedicated to anyone who has been persecuted
for who they truly are.

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Abstract

In this thesis, I will explore the behavioral inconsistencies particularly related to shyness which existed in English Victorian society. I contend that Victorians created an image of sociability in literature and other influential mediums in an attempt to supersede negative perceptions of their behavior which invited foreign prejudice and national inferiority. I will illuminate the emergence of a paradox through which Victorians embraced shy mannerisms which belied their inherent shyness and subsequently evinced prejudice which I will coin 'shyism' toward shy individuals such as Charlotte Bronte who would not conform to their modified behavior ideals in order to protect themselves from foreign prejudice. I will examine the manner in which Bronte accepted her shy personality and encouraged her society to do the same by deconstructing negative perceptions of shyness and reinscribing shy reserve with more positive meaning in order to counteract prejudice in her autobiographical novel *Villette,* through which she gained the power and the influence to signify and thereby became a real life heroine along with her redefined literary heroine, Lucy Snowe.

The first chapter illuminates shyism in the life of Charlotte Bronte as is evident in her personal correspondence and the recollections of others. Such sources reveal Bronte's true identity as a shy individual as well as the ways in which this identity was not accepted within Victorian society.

The second chapter more broadly examines the prevalence of both shyism and shyness in Bronte's Victorian culture. This study reveals Victorians' preference for shy mannerisms and behavioral changeability which aided sociability over fixed and inherent shy behavior which did not, as espoused in both the definition of the word and popular literary texts. It will also include an alternate look at the largely positive connotations associated with talkativeness in order to establish that sociability was the supreme Victorian ideal.

Chapter three reveals the behavioral inconsistencies in Victorian culture, as the Victorians manifested the same shy temperament as Charlotte Bronte but denounced such shyness in order to avoid foreign prejudice of shy traits. The English' desire to disassociate themselves from inherent shy behavior explains the emergence of shyism within English culture, which was aimed at shy individuals such as Bronte who either would not or could not modify their behavior to reflect altered social ideals. I will show how Victorians sacrificed their unique cultural ideals in order to conform to the ideals of other nations and how such conformity once again inspired foreign prejudice.

The fourth chapter examines Bronte's desire for truthful revelation in both the writing of others as well as her own. In an attempt to affirm her shy truth as well as to encourage her Victorian society to do the same, Bronte evidently sought to deconstruct negative notions of shyness and to reinscribe it with more positive meaning in her last novel *Villette.* I will also show how Bronte deconstructed the traditional literary heroine idealized by Victorians in favor of a more realistic and thus idealistic English heroine such as Lucy Snowe.

The last chapter consists of a brief look at critics' reactions to *Villette* which suggest that Bronte's shy truth was resisted but nonetheless still affirmed, thereby giving her the power to signify and to achieve lasting significance.

CONTENTS

Short Titles i

Introduction 1

Chapter I:
Shyism Revealed in the Life of Charlotte Bronte 3

Chapter II:
Shyism and Behavioral Preference Within Victorian Culture 11

Chapter III:
Exploring the Paradoxes and Inconsistencies of English Behavior 17

Chapter IV:
Bronte's Affirmation of Truth and the Narration of Desired Social Change 31

Chapter V:
Critical Reception of *Villette* 64

Conclusion 71

Appendix A 73

Works Consulted 75

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Introduction

When Charlotte Bronte was a young girl, her father Patrick placed a mask over her face in an attempt to help her overcome her shyness. In a letter to Mrs. Gaskell, Patrick wrote, " [. . .] in order to make [her] speak with less timidity, I deem'd that if [she] were put under a sort of cover, I might gain my end-and happen[in]g to have a mask in the house, I told [her] to stand, and speak boldly from under cover of the mask." [1] The goal of this exercise was to enable Charlotte to reveal her true self without feeling embarrassed about who she really was.

Yet years later, Bronte once again donned another mask, assuming the name 'Currer Bell' as part of the literary trio of "Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell', which consisted of Charlotte and her two sisters, Emily and Anne. This mask of anonymity was similarly supposed to help her reveal her true self. As Patricia Wheat states, " [. . .] while "Currer Bell" served on a business and social level to disguise the sex and identity of Charlotte Bronte, on an artistic level it also served as a reminder that each person has an "alias", an invisible, often unknown part of the self that exists beyond the social self and comprises the spirit of the person, the character" (30-31). [2]

As a shy individual, Bronte lacked a social self worthy of societal recognition and acceptance within Victorian society. Yet this very shyness constituted her unique personal spirit and character and therefore comprised Bronte's true identity. Amidst Victorians' superficial idealization and negative perceptions of shyness as that which undermined rather than enhanced an individual's talent and persona, Bronte's shy self was largely demeaned to the extent that she faced social ostracism and personal insignificance. Her mysterious literary persona was an attempt to avoid such

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[1] Patrick Bronte, letter to Mrs. Gaskell, 30 July 1855, Haworth, in *The Brontes: A Life in Letters,* Juliet Barker (New York: The Overlook Press, Peter Mayer Publishers, Inc., 2002), 3. Hereafter cited as 'Barker'.

[2] Patricia H. Wheat, *The Adytum of the Heart: The Literary Criticism of Charlotte Bronte* (London: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1992). Hereafter cited as 'Wheat'.

insignificance and to gain recognition of her true self in order to prove that "[a]lways there was the outward self, the self that other people saw, a self that might be unlovely, limited in experience, or half blind...[yet] beneath this social, superficial self lies the invisible soul, capable of possessing passions and insights evident only to the discerning observer" (qtd. in Wheat 31).

Victorians, however, evidently did not desire to discern truth of this nature, for it seemingly reflected their own truth that they desired to remain hidden. Like Bronte, they too had a shy "alias" beyond their superficial exterior, though they attempted to keep this invisible in order to avoid negative perceptions from foreigners which necessitated its invisibility in the first place. They instead donned a mask of sociability which was meant to counteract the negativity associated with their real identity with a more appealing social image. It seems that the problem for Victorians was not putting on masks but rather taking them off and embracing who they truly were underneath.

Bronte tried to help her fellow Victorians remove these masks of inauthenticity and to embrace who they truly were so that she could subsequently do the same. As she wrote to her friend William Smith Williams, " [. . .] The "Bells" are very sincere in their worship of Truth, and they hope so to apply themselves to the consideration of Art as to attain, one day, the power of speaking the language of conviction in the accents of persuasion" (qtd. in Wheat 24). Charlotte Bronte in particular was "fascinated with the mystery of individual human nature, but dismayed at the potential for its mistreatment. One's real character, the hidden spirit of the person, was often slighted or misunderstood..." (qtd. in Wheat 20). This thesis will chronicle the ways in which Bronte gained the power to "speak the language of conviction in the accents of persuasion" in order to both reveal and embrace the hidden shy spirit and to overcome the self-divided that threatened both her and her Victorian society.

Chapter I: Shyism Revealed in the Life of Charlotte Bronte

Charlotte Bronte was raised in a small town known as Haworth which was situated amidst bleak and expansive moors. This solitary place largely shaped and defined her as a unique individual, as John Stores Smith acknowledged in the following description of Bronte's Haworth environment:

> The village of Haworth, its weather-beaten church, and lonely and desolate parsonage, have been painted in words so very frequently [. . .] yet any attempt to give a full and vivid conception of Charlotte Bronte would altogether fail if quite stripped of due local colouring. For the material aspects of Haworth-the quiet desolation of its mouldy struggle to the unbroken solitudes of the boundless moors, are the background upon which, and upon which only, can Miss Bronte's portrait be portrayed. Haworth was a part of her innermost nature; it was the ground melody that ran through her every book, and laid the basis of her idiosyncrasy...in 1850, [Haworth] was the most dead-a-live, melancholy looking place it has ever been my lot to see. No sign of life, or trace of trade, or traffic, was perceptible. The very houses seemed miserable, and if stone could look positively heart-broken, they did [. . .] How anyone could live a life-time there, and not grow morbid, was incomprehensible [. . .] .[1]

Morbidity was indeed inescapable for the Brontes at Haworth. Amidst the solitude of this gloomy environment, the Bronte siblings found some solace in their companionship with each other and often used their vivid imaginations to escape into an imaginary world which they called Angria. In a letter of correspondence, Bronte expressed extreme gratefulness for her close-knit family. She wrote:

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[1] John Stores Smith, "Personal Reminiscences: A Day with Charlotte Bronte" (1850), in *The Free Lance: A Journal of Humour and Criticism* , vol. 3 (Manchester, 1868) 85-7 in *The Brontes: Interviews and Recollections*, ed. Harold Orel (London: Macmillan Press, Ltd., 1997), 161-63. Hereafter cited as 'Orel'.

> [M]y home is humble and unattractive to strangers but to me it contains what I shall find nowhere else in the world--the profound, and intense affection which brothers and sisters feel for each other when their minds are cast in the same mould, their ideas drawn from the same source--when they have clung to each other from childhood and when family disputes have never sprung up to divide them. [2]

Yet where disputes failed to divide the Bronte siblings, death succeeded. At an early age, the children suffered the loss of their mother, Maria, to ovarian cancer in September of 1821, and two eldest sisters, Maria and Elizabeth, to tuberculosis in May and June of 1825. Charlotte in particular suffered more tremendous loss as her three remaining siblings died, leaving her alone to carry on the literary legacy that was largely begun with her sisters Emily and Anne.

The death of Charlotte's beloved siblings evidently increased her shy reserve and sense of solitude that were both part of her inherent predisposition and by-products of her upbringing at Haworth. Bronte's friend and biographer Elizabeth Gaskell described her as, " [. . .] hav[ing] gone through suffering enough to have taken out every spark of merriment, and shy and silent from the habit of extreme intense solitude." [3] Harriet Martineau was another close acquaintance of Bronte's who similarly remarked that, "[t]here was something inexpressibly affecting in the aspect of the frail little creature who...was able to bear up, with so bright an eye and so composed a countenance, under not only such a weight of sorrow, but such a prospect of solitude." [4]

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[2] Charlotte Bronte, letter to the Reverend Henry Nussey, 9 May 1841. Barker, 92.
[3] Mrs. E[lizabeth] C[leghorn] Gaskell, "Letters about Charlotte Bronte," 1850-1855, in *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, ed. J.A.V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967) 123-29, 139, 228-29, 242-50, 280-81, 335-36. Orel, 142.
[4] Harriet Martineau, "A Personal Impression of Charlotte Bronte," 1847-1849, in *Biographical Sketches*, (New York: Hurst, 1869) 48-50. Orel, 84.

Although shyness and solitude were definitive aspects of Bronte's unique personal identity, they were problematic in the world outside of Haworth in which sociability was a way of life. Bronte was clearly unsuited for the social environment, as she often manifested a social phobia consisting of a fear of social gatherings, particularly those in which she was the center of attention. Harriet Martineau recollected: [Charlotte] was somewhat amused by her fame, but oftener annoyed;-at least, when obliged to come out into the world to meet it, instead of its reaching her in her secluded home, in the wilds of Yorkshire."[5] An anonymous individual similarly commented, " [. . .] I then saw how severely [Miss Bronte's] nerves were taxed by the effort of going amongst strangers. We knew beforehand that the number of the party would not exceed twelve, but she suffered the whole day from an acute headache brought on by apprehension of the evening."[6] A similar account was given by George Smith, who reminisced about a party where he " [. . .] uttered in a loud voice, audible over half the room, 'Mother you must allow me to introduce you to Jane Eyre' [. . .] Everybody near turned round and stared at the disconcerted little lady, who grew confused and angry when she realised that every eye was fixed upon her. My mother got her away as quickly as possible."[7]

Such antisocial behavior often negatively colored others' impressions of her and made her seem quite strange. The following account was given by a woman named Mrs. Strickland who remarked:

> [. . .] [M]y mother, Mrs. Slade Hastings...had a vivid recollection of seeing [Charlotte] sitting apart from the rest of the family, in a corner of the room,

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[5] Harriet Martineau, "Charlotte Bronte's Reaction to Criticism," 1849, in *Autobiography,* ed. Maria Weston Chapman, vol. 2 (Boston: James R. Osgood, 1877) 21-25. Orel, 126.
[6] Mrs. E[lizabeth] C[leghorn] Gaskell, "Letters about Charlotte Bronte," 1850-1855, in *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, ed. J.A.V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967) 123-29, 139, 228-29, 242-50, 280-81, 335-36. Orel ,145.
[7] George Smith, "A Memoir with Some Pages of Autobiography," (London: privately printed, 1902). Barker, 322-23.

> poring, in her short-sighted way, over a book. The impression she made on my mother was that of a shy nervous girl, ill at ease, who desired to escape notice and to avoid taking part in the general conversation. One can well believe that this was actually the case. [8]

Bronte made an even worse impression when she actually did join the social environment. Anne Thackeray Ritchie, the daughter of the famous author William Makepeace Thackeray, gave the following account of Charlotte, whose literary fame made her the object of attention at a private party:

> She enters in mittens, in silence, in seriousness; our hearts are beating with wild excitement. This, then, is the authoress, the unknown power whose books have set all London talking, reading, speculating...My own personal impressions are that she is somewhat grave and stern, especially to forward little girls who wish to chatter...It was a gloomy and silent evening. Every one waited for the brilliant conversation which never began at all [. . .] The room looked very dark, the lamp began to smoke a little, the conversation grew dimmer and more dim, the ladies sat round still expectant, my father was too much perturbed by the gloom and silence to be able to cope with it all. Mrs. Brookfield, who was in the doorway by the study, near the corner in which Miss Bronte was sitting, leant forward with a little commonplace, since brilliance was not to be the order of the evening. 'Do you like London, Miss Bronte?' she said; another silence, a pause, then Miss Bronte answers, 'Yes and No,' very gravely. [9]

In addition to superseding positive notions of Bronte as a respected and talented author, such negative impressions also inspired a shy prejudice and discrimination which

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[8] Mrs. Strickland, "Charlotte and the White Family of Rawdon," 1841, in *Westminster Gazette*, 4 May 1901. Orel, 44.
[9] Charlotte Bronte, letter to Ellen Nussey, 12 June 1850. Barker, 283-84.

I am going to refer to as 'shyism' throughout the remainder of this study. Ellen Nussey wrote of one such instance in which shyism was manifested toward Bronte:

> During one of our brief holidays Charlotte was a guest in a family who had known her father when he was a curate in their parish. They were naturally inclined to show kindness to his daughter, but the kindness here took a form which was little agreeable. They had had no opportunity of knowing her abilities or disposition, and they took her shyness and smallness as indications of extreme youth. She was slow, very slow, to express anything that bordered on ingratitude, but here she was mortified and hurt. 'They took me for a child, and treated me just like one,' she said. I can now recall the expression of that ever honest face as she added, 'one tall lady *would* nurse me'. [10]

Bronte was similarly discriminated against on account of her shy disposition by a woman named Mrs. Sidgwick who she worked for as Governess. In a letter of correspondence, Bronte wrote, "I said in my last letter that Mrs. Sidgwick did not know me. I now begin to find that she does not intend to know me, that she cares nothing in the world about me [. . .] I do not think she likes me at all, because I can't help being shy in such an entirely novel scene, surrounded as, I have hitherto been by strange and constantly changing faces." [11] A similar letter followed several weeks later in which Bronte wrote, "[. . .] the miseries of a reserved wretch like me [. . .] I thought I had done my best-strained every nerve to please [Mrs. Sidgwick]-and to be treated in that way merely because I was shy-and, sometimes melancholy was too bad." [12] Bronte encountered persecution of a similar nature from a woman named Madame Heger, who prejudiced her husband against Charlotte as well. Bronte wrote:

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[10] Ellen Nussey, "Reminiscences of Charlotte Bronte," 1831-1855, in *Scribner's Monthly,* vol. 2, no. 1 May. 1871: 18-31. Orel, 20-21.
[11] Charlotte Bronte, letter to Emily Bronte, 8 June 1839. Barker, 64-65.
[12] Charlotte Bronte, letter to Ellen Nussey, 30 June 1839. Barker, 66.

> You are not to suppose [. . .] that I am under the influence of warm affection for Mde Heger. I am convinced she does not like me-why, I can't tell, nor do I think she herself has any definite reason for the aversion; but for one thing, she cannot comprehend why I do not make intimate friends [. . .] M. Heger is wondrously influenced by Madame, and I should not wonder if he disapproves very much of my unamiable want of sociability. He has already given me a brief lecture on universal bienveillance, and, perceiving that I don't improve in consequence, I fancy he has taken to considering me as a person to be left alone-left to the error of her ways; and consequently he has in a great measure withdrawn the light of his countenance, and I get on from day to day in a Robinson-Crusoe-like condition-very lonely. [13]

Such negative treatment evidently hurt Bronte deeply and caused her to lament her shy existence. She wrote the following letter to Ellen Nussey:

> What am I compared to you...I feel my own utter worthlessness when I make the comparison. I'm a coarse, common-place wretch! Ellen (I have some qualities that make me very miserable, some feelings that you can have no participation in-that few very few people in the world can at all understand. I don't pride myself on these peculiarities, I strive to conceal and suppress them as much as I can, but they burst out sometimes and then those who see the explosion despise me and I hate myself for days afterwards). [14]

Years later in March of 1841, Bronte once again wrote to Ellen:

> Some of my greatest difficulties lie in things that would appear to you comparatively trivial. I find it so hard to repel the rude familiarity of children. I find it so difficult to ask either servants or mistress for anything I want, however

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[13] Charlotte Bronte, letter to Emily Bronte, 29 May 1843. Barker, 115-16.
[14] Charlotte Bronte, letter to Ellen Nussey, ? October 1836. Barker, 40.

> much I want it. It is less pain to me to endure the greatest inconvenience than to request its removal. I am a fool. Heaven knows I cannot help it! [15]

Although Bronte knew that her shy traits were socially problematic and often perceived as undesirable, she evidently could not modify or overcome such tendencies as they were inherent aspects of her unique nature and temperament. This was blatantly apparent in a letter that she wrote to her friend William Smith Williams, advising him how to "handle" a shy acquaintance. She wrote:

> As for that one who--you say has a nervous horror of exhibition--I need not beg you to be gentle with her--I am sure you will not be harsh--but she must be firm with herself, or she will repent it in after life--She should begin by degrees to endeavour to overcome her diffidence. Were she destined to enjoy an independent, easy existence she might respect her natural disposition to seek retirement and even cherish it as a shade-loving virtue--but since that is not her lot; since she is fated to make her way in the crowd--and to depend on herself, she should say--I will try and learn the art of self-possession--not that I may display my accomplishments--but that I may have the satisfaction of feeling that I am my own mistress-and can move and speak, undaunted by the fear of man. While however--I pen this piece of advice--I confess that it is much easier to give than to follow. What the sensations of the nervous are under the gaze of publicity none but the nervous know--and how powerless Reason and Resolution are to control them would sound incredible except to the actual sufferers.... [16]

What Bronte seemingly most laments in this letter is not shyness itself but rather society's negative perceptions of shyness which made such a trait problematic. As Bronte exemplifies, without such societal discrimination, shy individuals could "enjoy an

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[15] Charlotte Bronte, letter to Ellen Nussey, 3 March 1841. Barker, 89.
[16] Charlotte Bronte, letter to William Smith Williams, 12 May 1848. Barker, 189.

independent, easy existence" and "cherish [their natural disposition] as a shade-loving virtue". Yet as she and other shy individuals were forced to "make [their] way in the crowd", Bronte determined the need to make shyness less problematic.

Since overcoming shyness was clearly not a viable alternative for "shy sufferers" such as herself, Bronte instead attempted to change her society's negative notions of shyness which made it a problem that needed to be overcome in the first place. Amidst merciless persecution for her inability to conform to social ideals, Bronte refused to compromise her shy truth as this was what made her truly unique and comprised her self-identity.

Chapter II: Shyism and Behavioral Preference Within Victorian Culture

Overcoming negative notions of shyness was truly a difficult undertaking, for shyism was as prevalent in Victorian culture as the term shyness itself. I will first examine the negativity embodied in the very definition of the word, specifically that related to inherent shyness, as it appears in the *Oxford English Dictionary* online. [1] This contextual nineteenth century definition will be included in its entirety in Appendix A, so I invite readers to familiarize themselves with this Appendix before proceeding on into the close analysis that follows.

I will be breaking these definitions into three categories, each of which contain a thematic characterization of shyness. The first category (definitions #1 and 2 in Appendix A) very generally refers to shyness as an emotional manifestation elicited by *all* living beings, human and animal alike. In this context, shyness is best described as being 'shy of' something, with shyness constituting fear, distrust, or some other type of emotional manifestation. It is important to note that shyness in this sense of the word is an effect that is justified and legitimized by an external cause rather than being a fixed and inherent trait that is in and of itself the emotional cause. As stated in definition #2, there is "some specified person or thing" which causes this shyness to commonly occur among "persons" rather than "a person", with such behavioral conformity implying that it is a normal response.

The second category of *OED* definitions (#3-5 in Appendix A) more specifically refers to shyness as "a person's actions" (5b). Shyness in this context is evidently not a common manifestation evinced by a majority of individuals, therefore it subverts commonality as well as the legitimization that often accompanies such communal manifestation. The fear and "excessive sensitivity" constituting shyness in this grouping

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[1] *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, vers. 2, 1989, Oxford University Press, 8 October 2002 <http:// www.oed.com/>. Hereafter cited as '*OED*'.

stems inherently from within the individual, making it a definitively fixed trait of a person's personality rather than a temporary response to an external cause. The negativity of this 'shy' context is apparent in the *OED*'s use of words and phrases such as, "chary", "fear of committing oneself", "unwilling", "reluctant", "averse", "wary", "shrinking", "retiring", "secluded", and so on. These words and phrases distinctly denote obstinance, non-conformity, and close-mindedness, all of which are undesirable personal traits which inspire social ostracism and discrimination.

The third category of definitions (#6-8 in Appendix A) depicts shyness in such a negative manner that it evidently subverts the realm of humanity. This category encompasses the lowest life forms, ranging from "disreputable and shady" individuals to "chill" and "piercing" weather. Shyness is further negatively characterized as that which causes "unprolific" behavior. Under the survival of the fittest principle, shyness seems to be that which causes individual extinction in society.

As a supplementary addition to this linguistic analysis, I will also examine the context in which shyness was most frequently used in nineteenth-century English literature. The Nineteenth Century Fiction database [2] was a very valuable resource for this study, as it enabled me to survey a wide variety of novels by diverse English authors in order to assess the shy connotations most frequently employed in literature. What I discovered was that shyness was depicted in an overwhelmingly negative context that most closely corresponds to *OED* categories #1 and 2 (or definitions #3-8). The following are a few such literary examples in which shyness is used in a distinctly negative context:

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[2] "Nineteenth Century Fiction (NCF)," *Networked Electronic Resources: University Library Home Page,* Oct. 2001, U of Michigan, 8 October 2002 <http://ets.umdl.umich.edu/n/ncf/>. 'Shy' literary passages chosen from 469 examples listed in database, 'talkative' passages chosen from 128 listed examples.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall **by Anne Bronte (1820-1849):**

"[. . .] how could I engage her brother in my behalf? How could I break that icy crust of shy reserve? [. . .] " (Volume III, Chapter XIII).

Bleak House **by Charles Dickens (1812-1870):**

" [. . .] I was such a shy little thing that I seldom dared to open my lips, and never dared to open my heart, to anybody [. . .] " (Chapter III).

Although these quotes are taken out of context (as they appear in the Nineteenth Century Fiction database), there is enough information to decipher their connotative negativity. The first two quotes by Anne Bronte and Dickens respectively equate shyness with personal coldness that repels rather than attracts others and essentially impedes sociability. Such a trait evidently serves as a personal barrier or external "crust", as Anne Bronte labels it, which prevents shy individuals from emotionally and socially connecting with others.

Sense and Sensibility **by Jane Austen (1775-1817):**

"I never wish to offend, but I am so foolishly shy, that I often seem negligent, when I am only kept back by my natural aukwardness [. . .] If I could persuade myself that my manners were perfectly easy and graceful, I should not be so shy [. . .] " (Volume I, Chapter XVII).

Lothair **by Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881):**

" [. . .] 'The Agramonts...are so shy. It is a family that never was in society, and never will be [. . .] " (Volume II, Chapter VIII).

Austen also negatively associates shyness with negligence, awkwardness, uneasiness, and foolishness. Such reserved behavioral manifestations evidently cause social ostracism for literary characters, as is the fate of the Agramonts in Disraeli's *Lothair*. This type of negative shyness similarly characterized Charlotte Bronte, who was often perceived in the same manner as the characters within these literary texts, as discussed in the previous chapter.

While the majority of literary examples listed in the Nineteenth Century Fiction database depict shyness negatively, there are several instances in which it is portrayed in a more positive manner. The following are a few such examples:

Northanger Abbey **by Jane Austen (1775-1817):**

" [. . .] [h]er manners shewed good sense and good breeding; they were neither shy, nor affectedly open; and she seemed capable of being young, attractive, and at a ball [. . .] " (Volume I, Chapter VIII).

Little Dorritt **by Charles Dickens:**

" [. . .] [s]he forgot to be shy at the moment [. . .] " (Book I, Chapter IX).

David Copperfield **by Charles Dickens:**

"But she was so affectionate and sweet-natured, and had such a pleasant manner of being both sly and shy at once, and she captivated me more than ever." (Chapter X)

In all of these literary excerpts, however, shyness is a superficial and temporary trait that most closely corresponds to that evinced in the first *OED* category. As such, it functions as a mannerism than can be either assumed or non-assumed at will, depending on the behavioral preference of a social situation. This type of behavior appears to have been the preference of English Victorians, as it was most conducive to sociability and personal

agreeableness. Therefore, the ideal shy person in nineteenth century English society was one who could either become shy or "forget to be shy" on a whim. Austen characterizes the ideal shy person as being "neither [entirely] shy, [or] affectedly open". It was this perfect balance of introversion and extroversion which apparently made individuals "attractive" and "captivating during this period of time, with shyness signifying modesty and humility without impeding conversation. Such fickle behavior, however, belied authentic shyness which was a fixed aspect of an individual's personality that could not be turned on and off at will, as was the case for Charlotte Bronte. Yet this preferred type of shyness constituted behavioral performance and adaptability which enabled individuals to "survive and flourish" in any social setting.

'Talkativeness' was similarly regarded favorably in Victorian society and literature, as it too enhanced sociability. The following are a couple of literary examples which also appear in the Nineteenth Century Fiction database:

***Emma* by Jane Austen (1775-1817):**
"When they all sat down it was better; to her taste a great deal better, for Frank Churchill grew talkative and gay [. . .] " (Volume III, Chapter VII).

***The Old Curiosity Shop* by Charles Dickens (1812-1870):**
" [. . .] [he] stoutly determined to be talkative and make himself agreeable [. . .] " (Volume I, Chapter X).

Evidently, unlike shyness, talkativeness was portrayed in an almost exclusively positive manner. It was paired with words such as "gay" and "agreeable", indicating that Victorians preferred such a trait over inherent shy reserve. Yet one such author who depicted 'talkativeness' in a distinctly negative manner was none other than Charlotte Bronte. Passages from all four of her novels are listed in the Nineteenth Century Fiction

database, implying that she consciously tried to negatively influence the way that her society viewed talkativeness, much as other authors tried to do with inherently fixed shyness. The following are illustrations from Bronte's novels in which her dislike of talkativeness is quite apparent:

Jane Eyre:

"[. . .] Georgiana would chatter nonsense to her canary bird by the hour [. . .] " (Volume II, Chapter VI).

The Professor:

"Bien! bien!" interrupted [William Crimsworth]-for all this chatter and circumlocution began to bore me very much [. . .] " (Volume I, Chapter VIII).

Shirley:

" [. . .] but when the small things began to chatter to him, he bid them 'Whisht!' [. . .] " (Volume I, Chapter VII).

Villette:

" [. . .] Ginevra Fanshawe; supine at this moment, it is true-but certain to wake and overwhelm me with chatter when the interruption would be least acceptable [. . .] " (Volume II, Chapter XXIV).

What is evident from this study is that sociability was the espoused ideal in nineteenth century English culture and only that behavior which supported this ideal was encouraged and embraced. In order to both cultivate and affirm this ideal, the majority of Victorian authors, with the exception of Charlotte Bronte, created characters who fully embodied such traits and were subsequently assumed to be accurate representations of who the English truly were.

Chapter III-Exploring the Paradoxes and Inconsistencies of English Behavior

Victorians evidently tried to cultivate agreeableness in literature and other influential mediums in order to enhance their social image because they were neither inherently social or agreeable, or at least were not perceived as such. In his book *Englishness Identified: Manners and Character 1650-1850,* Paul Langford provides a characterization of English behavior based largely on foreign observations in an attempt to give an accurate portrayal of English identity. [1] In the preface to this book, Langford states his intention of "show[ing] how certain traits came to be seen both in England and outside England as typical of the English, and how those traits were defined and redefined to suit changing priorities and preoccupations" . As such, I will be referring to certain traits as English truth in order to signify that they defined who the English truly were in the perceptions of others. I will also use such generalizations to establish a definitive and stereotypical English image from which aberrant behavior will be more readily apparent.

What is most ironic is that the English appear to have been very similar in nature and temperament to Charlotte Bronte. Melancholy was one such trait which reputedly characterized the majority of English citizens. Langford questions, "when did melancholy register with others as an English malady? Certainly by the late seventeenth-century, when the English themselves were reaching a similar conclusion, and terms such as hypochondria, hysteria, spleen, biliousness, vapours, were establishing themselves as part of a novel language of nervous disorder" (51-52). He similarly ruminates:

> Why, it was wondered, should this people relish life less than others, with cause to relish it more? Why did they lag 'behind other nations in the great science of happiness'? Why did their animal spirits, to employ the modish late

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[1] Paul Langford, *Englishness Identified: Manners and Character 1650-1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Hereafter cited as 'Langford'.

> eighteenth-century term, give way to such self-destructive despair? [. . .] In any event, it merged into a wider concern about the innate mental depression associated with the English temperament. (52)

As this quote suggests, it was not entirely apparent why the English exhibited such chronic moroseness. Like Bronte, their melancholy seems to have been a fixed aspect of their inner nature. As Langford states, "the commonest line of argument was simply that there was something incurably tragic implanted in the English temperament" (56). He similarly comments that "incurable melancholy [. . .] was universally agreed to be the inheritance of Anglo-Saxons" (54). Such remarks imply that melancholy and moroseness were common characteristics of the English majority rather than peculiarities of a few minority individuals such as Charlotte Bronte.

These gloomy dispositions evidently made quite an impression on foreigners as they blatantly deviated from traditional characterizations of the English. In a memoir entitled *Souvenirs d'un voyage en Holande et en Angleterre,* a foreigner named A.B. Kurakin wrote:

> No one who has seen much of actual ploughmen thinks them jocund; no one who is well acquainted with the English peasantry can pronounce them merry. The slow gaze, in which no sense of beauty beams, no humour twinkles, the slow utterance, and the heavy slouching walk, remind one rather of that melancholy animal the camel, than of the sturdy countryman, with striped stockings, red waistcoat, and hat aside, who represents the traditional English peasant. (qtd. in Langford 64)

These traditional notions of the English as energetic, strong, and cheerful were the antithesis of that which the English actually appeared to be. Instead of "striped stockings and red waistcoats", "English dress sense lacked flair and panache [. . .] Understatement, unobtrusiveness, uniformity, were it hallmarks" (Langford 158). The more desirable traditional impressions of the English assumedly came from English literature and other

influential cultural mediums, though these portrayals were clearly not accurate reflections of the English' true character.

The same repression that characterized English dress evidently also characterized the English' personalities and temperaments. As Langford states:

> Orderly tranquility was admitted to be a peculiarly English state of affairs...It signified a capacity to control the most powerful feelings, something which figured much in English legal doctrine as well as the observed behaviour of the Englishman. As the French Anglophile Adolphe Esquiros put it, 'the force of passion concealed by a species of solemn and imposing calmness is a national trait'. (183-84)

Like Bronte, the English apparently led staid lives of calmness and tranquillity. In addition to being ingrained in English nature, such emotional repression was also ingrained in English culture and had a professed purpose in society. As Marjorie Morgan states, "[a]bove all else, the rules of 'Society' demanded that men and women display the emotionally repressive quality known as tact. This trait called for the constraint of feelings in the interest of not offending others. Without this suppression of the inner self, the amiability requisite for mutual pleasure and repose would not have been possible" (97). [2] Morgan also comments, "[t]hese rules were especially important in communities composed of strangers where, because people knew nothing of each other's underlying opinions, sentiments and vulnerabilities, the ability to avoid giving offense depended on impersonal conversation and behaviour, if not on utter silence [. . .] " (99).

Yet while cultivating behavior designed to minimize societal offense, the English ironically became particularly offensive to foreigners as their tact often rendered them completely silent and subsequently socially awkward. As Langford states: "[t]he English,

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[2] Marjorie Morgan, *Manners, Morals and Class in England, 1774-1858* (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1994. Hereafter cited as 'Morgan'.

men as much as women, had a reputation for being a silent people [. . .]. Observant visitors noticed that even among friends the English were less loquacious than their Continental neighbours" (175-76). The Swiss Bonstetten remarked, "[i]t is remarkable to see the silence that generally prevails in the social circles of England amongst persons knit together by the strongest ties of friendship. In that lowering climate sentiment and thought, always self-concentrated, seem to be void of language" (qtd. in Langford 175-76). "Napoleonic propagandist Joseph Fievee" was said to have been "so depressed by the silence of the streets that he said he felt perpetually as if he ought to rush up to Englishmen and condole them for some disaster which might explain their want of animation" (qtd. in Langford 178). This reserve clearly shocked foreigners who were evidently not used to such behavior. Langford writes:

> The Swede Geijer called the English 'an amazingly quiet nation'...London was the most dynamic city in the civilized world. Yet its inhabitants maintained a degree of calm and quiet which baffled the denizens of other European cities. To walk from Cornhill to the Strand through Cheapside was to process in an endless column of men and women who combined an air of activity with an unreadiness to engage in conversation. (178)

While traveling abroad, an Englishman named Charles Burney remarked, "I have the English pride and shyness about me so strong [. . .] that I abominate the thought of asking the way" (qtd. in Langford 238-39). As Langford points out, however, "[w]hat he and his countrymen did not always appreciate when abroad was that their very shyness gave offence, not least in other English-speaking societies" (239).

Englishmen such as Burney seemingly did not often recognize their offensiveness because shy reserve was considered an attribute in their society. From their cultural point of view, "[i]t was axiomatic that silence went with a wise mind and a modest manner" (Langford 177). Shyness was particularly idealized as a feminine virtue, as is evident from Samuel Richardson's comment, "silence becomes [women]. Let them therefore

hear, wonder, and improve, in silence. As Langford states, " [. . .] for an Englishman female speechlessness was a significant element in sexual attraction. 'Will not her very silence interest?' enquired James Fordyce'" (qtd. in Langford 200).

Charlotte Bronte closely corresponded to this shy ideal. Declarations such as the following from Bronte were not out of the ordinary in English culture: " [. . .] I believe I should be excessively disposed, and probably profoundly thankful to subside into any quiet corner of your drawing-room, where I might find a chair of suitable height" [3] and "I still continue to get on very comfortably and quietly in London-in the way I like-seeing rather things than persons."[4] Yet Bronte was clearly not treated as an ideal in Victorian society but was instead discriminated against for her shy traits which were socially problematic within English society in much the same manner as they were for the English amidst those from foreign societies.

It appears that although the English were extremely similar in nature and temperament to Bronte and culturally embraced many of the traits that she embodied, the majority of foreigners from other countries did not. The negative manner with which foreigners perceived traits such as shyness and melancholy subsequently undermined their idealism in English culture. The English needed to care about how others perceived them since their political success heavily depended on such perceptions. As Langford states, "[t]he English themselves were conscious that [these traits were] not to be found elsewhere, even among America's Anglo-Saxon descendants" (178). Therefore, like Bronte, English shyness became problematic not because the English regarded it as such but rather because others did. In order to avoid foreign prejudice and discrimination, it was important for the English to overcome their inherent tendencies and disassociate themselves from shy behavior which invited negative perceptions. They evidently began

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[3] Charlotte Bronte, letter to George Smith's mother, 25 May 1850. Barker, 281.
[4] Charlotte Bronte, letter to Ellen Nussey, 19 January 1853. Barker, 361.

to regard their shyness as undesirable and problematic as a result and subsequently began to discriminate against those individuals such as Charlotte Bronte who refused to modify their behavior to correspond to more desirable ideals which could boost their national reputation.

The poet Cowper brilliantly articulated the English' feelings of insecurity and inferiority which largely stemmed from the negative manner in which others viewed their shyness. The following is a poem he wrote:

Bashful men, who feel the pain
Of fancied scorn and undeserved disdain,
And bear the marks upon a blushing face
Of needless shame, and self-imposed disgrace.
Our sensibilities are so acute,
The fear of being silent makes us mutes.
We sometimes think we could a speech produce
Much to the purpose, if our tongues were loose;
But being tied, it dies upon the lip,
Faint as the chicken's note that has the pip:
Our wasted oil unprofitably burns,
Like hidden lamps in old sepulchral urns,
Few Frenchmen of this evil have complained;
It seems as if we Britons were ordained,
By way of wholesome curb upon our pride,
To fear each other, fearing none beside. (qtd. in Langford 189)

The English evidently felt that their shyness made them seem inferior to those of other nations such as France who apparently had no difficulty verbally expressing themselves and regarded talkativeness as a cultural virtue. According to Langford, "[n]o other nation was so fearful of wasting words [. . .] " (176). "'In France', wrote Mercier, 'the art of

keeping silence is not regarded as a merit'" (qtd. in Langford 177). Langford alludes to the Frenchs' gift "for conversing freely with friends, in the presence of strangers, without displaying or causing unease" (189). As Cowper exemplified, the fear of seeming inferior made the English silent and their silence made them seem even more inferior, causing a vicious cycle to ensue. Langford states, "[t]he English preferred to be thought boors rather than simpletons, and opted for silence in dread of saying something that might seem foolish" (190). He similarly notes that the English manifested, " [. . .] a national shyness composed of a mixture of timidity and pride" (192). As an Englishman once remarked, '[w]e do not put forth our force in conversation; we are ashamed of turning sentences; we dislike attracting the attention of others to our manner of speech [. . .] " (qtd. in Langford 192). Such notions of inferiority were similarly apparent in several of Charlotte Bronte's correspondences, in which she wrote things such as: "[h]ad I not been obliged to speak, I could have managed well, but it behoved me to answer when addressed and the effort was torture-I spoke stupidly." [5]

Bronte was representative of a whole group of English authors whose shy personalities demeaned their extraordinary literary talent in the opinion of foreigners and therefore increased the English' notions of cultural inferiority. As Langford writes:

> [. . .] [W]hen the English looked back on their literary history they found it difficult to come up with examples of intellectual giants whose authority was matched by a reputation for a ready tongue [. . .] Addison, the father of modern English politeness, was no conversationalist [. . .] Charles Churchill was one such with little to say in company; [. . .] Coleridge, Sydney Smith, Macaulay, and Carlyle were all charged with monologue rather than dialogue (193).

A similar account was given of Wordsworth who, according to Langford, "was venerated for the genius that he exuded rather than for what he said. Many literary tourists

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[5] Charlotte Bronte, letter to William Smith Williams, 19 December 1849. Barker, 257.

expressed their delight at meeting him. But while they were inspired by his presence and 'moral elevation', they rarely recorded his 'mots'" (194).

The English actually expressed the same disdain for talkativeness as Bronte did in her novels. As Langford states, "[j]abber, babble, chatter, patter, blabber, prattle, tattle, blather", suggested something of the contempt in which the English held speech" (178). He also states, "[t]alking too much was an unforgivable sin for the English, and virtually the definition of a bore [. . .] talkativeness implied ignorance and egotism" (177). Yet in order to gain foreign approval, the English evidently tried to suppress these feelings and to alternately embrace that which they truly disdained in literature and other mediums in order to conform to the ideals of other nations. They apparently also tried to stifle those authors such as Bronte who insisted on depicting them as they truly were rather than helping to cultivate a more agreeable national image which would enable them to conform to foreign ideals and gain foreign approval.

It seems that the English had no choice but to modify their behavioral and cultural ideals in literature and other influential mediums. Otherwise, they were in danger of becoming socially ostracized and inferior to others, much like Bronte within English society. This is evident from Georgiana Chatterton's comment:

> The English have not by nature sufficient sociability in their dispositions to do without a visible fire. A cheerful blaze is necessary to thaw their innate shyness and reserve, and to form a central point of union...They cannot converse comfortably with their hands unemployed. Some excuse must be found for idleness; some reason for being in one part of the room in preference to another. The slightest appearance of formality terrifies them beyond measure, because it reminds them of their own defects...All manner of contrivances are employed to break the bug-bear form. In summer, ottomans, albums, and windows, supply in some measure the loss of the darling fire, and enable English men and women to try and talk to each other. At first sight, society abroad often appears formal to

> English taste, because the houses are not crammed as full as they can hold, and people do not sit in all parts of the room. But foreigners do not feel under any particular restraint because they are sitting in a circle. They all talk away to each other with the greatest ease, and never feel the slightest scruple in traversing the empty space if they wish to converse with any one on the other side. The English are well aware of their own innate formality of disposition, and therefore see, by outward arrangements, to remedy the defect. But all this will not do, unless they feel at ease, they will never be able to impart that feeling to others. (qtd. in Langford 191)

In an attempt to cultivate social ease and to overcome their inherent antisocial tendencies, the English created behavior books which comprehensively outlined rules for 'proper' behavior in order to ideally enable them to induce a more agreeable national image. With such cultural mediums, the English evidently tried to compensate for their inherent social deficiencies by learning how to be like those from other nations so that they could socialize comfortably with them and be regarded as social and political equals. In order to cultivate both internal and external agreeableness, behavior book authors encouraged the inextricable development of outward manners and inner morals. As Morgan states, "[o]ne of the most significant characteristics common to courtesy books was their underlying assumption that manners and morals were inseparable and indistinguishable. Such an assumption was axiomatic among the English elite until the late eighteenth century" (11). Just like a fixed trait such as shyness, however, morality was evidently not as conducive to sociability as superficial mannerisms. Such mannerisms were therefore embraced by English society, as exemplified in the previous chapter, while morality became largely extinct. As Morgan exemplifies: "[t]he *Oxford English Dictionary* indicates that the definition of manners as 'a person's habitual behaviour or conduct, esp. in reference to its moral aspect' became obsolete in 1794. It

was superseded by a view of manners as, 'The modes of life, customary rules of behaviour, conditions of society, prevailing in all people'" (12).

By the time etiquette books emerged around the 1830's, only those things which aided sociability were embraced. As Morgan states, "[e]tiquette writers' overwhelming concern was to codify and dispense the proprieties requisite for performing comfortably and successfully in social or public settings. They placed no value on sheltering individuals from society or on nurturing moral paragons" (23). This being the case, Victorians were intolerant of an individual such as Charlotte Bronte who insisted on sheltering herself from public situations and lacked both the willingness and the ability to "perform comfortably and successfully." As was apparent in many of the literary examples listed in chapter two, behavioral performance became the new ideal to which all English citizens were expected to conform. According to Morgan, "[e]tiquette books presumed a greatly diminished scope for manners that included superficial, external forms but not internal moral principles [. . .] etiquette books' [showed] indifference to an individual's internal nature and character [. . .] rarely discuss[ing] such below-the-surface matters as integrity, modesty, dignity or moral virtue" (22-23). Focusing on superficial traits in this manner was undoubtedly Victorians' attempt to divert attention away from their less desirable inherent traits so that they could subsequently boost their national image. Yet it essentially caused them to demean and undermine individuals such as Charlotte Bronte who lacked significant superficial traits but possessed tremendous depth of character.

Unlike Bronte, Victorians " [. . .] elevated the life of leisure to the status of a virtue" (Morgan 64). As Morgan states, "[f]or them, the ideal qualities needed for life were sociability, manners, conversational skills, and a sense of style and taste, all of which could be cultivated only in social settings. Furthermore, the ideal leisured individual demonstrated his or her moral and social worth by interacting in society" (64). In order to achieve this ideal, Victorians evidently began to cultivate behavior that would render them agreeable and enable them to manifest "social worth" in any social situation.

Morgan states, "[b]ut the goal among the 'Society' set of making themselves universally agreeable required that ladies and gentlemen be capable of changing their manners, taste, opinions, air, and so forth, even as they moved from one street or house to another. That is, people in 'Society' always had to be flexible rather than constant in their behaviour" (107). The necessity of such behavioral changeability explains why it was idealized and positively depicted to such a great extent in literature and definitions throughout this period. As Morgan notes, "[t]he public self necessarily consisted of a cluster of roles which individuals slipped in and out of depending on audience, activity and geographic circumstance" (108). Social agreeableness evidently emerged as the supreme ideal of Victorian culture which enabled the English to "survive", so to speak, around others, as H.F. Mellers reflected when he remarked, "[a]greeableness of forms is one of the most essential elements of a placid and happy life...does not the true repose and serenity of our days depend more upon a multitude of trivial actions, of hourly recurrence, than on more important events, with which the path of life is but sparingly bestowed?" (qtd. in Morgan 23).

In order to help their readers achieve this ideal social agreeableness, many English behavior book authors gave advice on how to overcome fixed and inherent shy tendencies and to instead adopt more fickle and changeable mannerisms that would render them agreeable in any situation. As Morgan states:

> A naturally quiet and reserved aspirant to public office in the mid-nineteenth-century emerging world of mass politics had to be like Thackeray's Pendennis when canvassing for election; he shed his reticent nature and: 'became on a sudden [. . .] frank, easy, and jovial [. . .] . He laughed with everybody...shook hands right and left...in fine, acted like a consummate hypocrite, and as a gentlemen of the highest birth and most spotless integrity act when they wish to make themselves agreeable to their constituents'. In this sense,

> public roles in the new society masked people's true selves which were more fully realised and revealed in the confines of the private sphere. (108)

As one conduct book author wrote:

> Maintain a constant cheerfulness and alacrity in every part of your behavior. This is the outward garb and expression of good nature; and tho there may be an appearance of this virtue without the reality, yet, by preserving the appearance of it habitually, you may come, at last, to acquire the virtue itself...Thus, by a kind of innocent deceit, you may not only cheat the world into an opinion of your good-nature, but, what is more, you may even cheat yourself into the actual possession of this amiable quality. (qtd. in Morgan 80)

Yet while this behavioral deception had a professed purpose in English society, it was nonetheless still deception that promoted inauthenticity and required the "masking of true selves". Behavior book authors expressed concern over the growing shallowness and fickleness of English society, even though they were quite influential in helping society become this way. Morgan writes:

> Conduct books [. . .] [attempted] to ensure that society was not composed of characterless persons, in that their ultimate purpose was to persuade people to strengthen their inner principles and rely on them as guides for life. Thus they focused almost exclusively on detailing desirable qualities of mind and heart, extolling them as superior to the more fickle fascinations of external trappings or extraneous circumstances such as fortune, connections and reputation so highly valued by fashionable folk. No conduct book was complete without an admonition or two against bestowing undue attention on the superficialities of appearance, at the expense of the inner self. (65)

Ironically, while trying to modify their behavior in order to please others, the English developed a reputation for being inauthentic and hypocritical, thereby once again inviting foreign disdain and a demeaned national reputation. For example, "[w]hen Sheridan

satirised the fashionable set at Bath in the late eighteenth century, he depicted its members as being, above all else, insincere and artificial" (Morgan 111). As Morgan states, "[t]hese two adjectives remained the ones most universally applied to 'Society'" (111).

Evangelical moralists, among whom was Charlotte Bronte, similarly condemned English society for its fickle behavior. These moralists " [. . .] tended to view character primarily as a force for stability which was urgently needed to counter the increasing power of fickle, anonymous persuaders [and] were [. . .] among the earliest and most fervent promoters of character as an ideal" (Morgan 64-65). The Earl of Shaftesbury expressed this desire for the cultivation of character and for behavioral truth rather than inauthentic and superficial social ideals when he wrote:

> [Eton] makes admirable gentlemen and finished scholars-fits a man, beyond all competition, for the drawing-room, the Club, St. James's street, and all the mysteries of social elegance; but it does not make the man required for the coming generation. We must have nobler, deeper, and sterner stuff; less of refinement and more of truth; more of the inward, not so much of the outward, gentleman (qtd. in Morgan 62).

It seems that the English were in an extremely compromising situation that had no easy solutions. On the one hand, they tried to become more agreeable in order to escape the negative perceptions and discrimination of foreigners which rendered them inferior and posed countless political and social problems. Yet on the other hand, their modified behavior made them seem like inauthentic hypocrites who were willing to compromise who they truly were in order to become what others desired them to be. This compromise undoubtedly made them appear weak and easily dictated which once again made them seem inferior to those of other nations who were trying to gain a political upper hand and to undermine the power of the English nation. Charlotte Bronte faced many of the same problems as a shy individual within a Victorian society that demanded that she modify

her behavior and compromise herself along with everyone else and subsequently persecuted her when she refused to do so in order to try and avoid their own persecution from foreigners. Bronte, however, clearly realized that deviation from true identity was not a solution to the problems both she and her fellow Englishmen faced, as it evidently only led to more problems. She therefore decided to attack the negative notions which rendered English traits such as shyness problematic in the first place in order to enable both herself and her society to embrace who they truly were and to realize that the only way to achieve both personal and national power was to first establish a stable sense of identity that could not be undermined.

Chapter IV: Bronte's Affirmation of Truth and the Narration of Desired Social Change

In *Villette,* the main character Lucy Snowe states, " [. . .] I had great pleasure in reading a few books, but not many: preferring always those in whose style or sentiment the writer's individual nature was plainly stamped; flagging inevitably over characterless books, however clever and meritorious" (313). [1] According to Patricia Wheat, " [. . .] Charlotte Bronte wrote in the belief that her own novels would bear evidences of *her* character, of the adytum of *her* heart", just as she expected the writing of others to do for them as well (90). As discussed previously, Bronte, along with other moralists, was determined to both seek and affirm the English character in order to prove that there was nothing wrong with who either she or her fellow Englishmen truly were and to similarly encourage English authors to embrace such truth in literature in order to create an authentic and truly representative national image.

In Bronte's authorial criticism, she focused very little on the author's writing and instead concentrated on how accurately the writing revealed the character of the author. She was an extremely harsh critic in that she judged both the writing as well as the writer, and criticized whichever failed to convey what she believed to be true. Wheat states:

> [The] highest part of the author's own self was what Bronte continued to look for in the works she read. The identification of an artistic work with its author is a recurrent motif in her literary criticism. Again and again, she praises a book-or finds fault with it-because of the sort of person its author reveals himself to be as the reader reads. The author and the book are inseparable. (30)

If Bronte did not know an author personally, she used their writing to form opinions of their character. "Bronte's method of analyzing literature is...accurately described as 1)

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[1] All *Villette* quotes taken from Penguin edition (see works consulted for publication information).

the setting of an ethical standard for the character of a novelist, and 2) the measurement of each author she encountered by that standard, by way of what he or she had written" (Wheat 34).

Such authorial standards and expectations were particularly apparent in her criticism of her sisters' writing. As Wheat states:

> [. . .] [W]hen Williams wrote to her concerning his initial impressions of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey,* she responded instinctively with an enthusiastic description of the *minds* of her sisters, a subject upon which she had superior knowledge. 'Ellis,' she remarked, 'has a strong, original mind, full of strange though sombre power...in prose it breaks forth in scenes which shock more than they attract'. *Agnes Grey* she described as 'the mirror of the mind of the writer.' She would later object to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* on the grounds that the subject of the novel was 'too little consonant with the character-tastes and ideas of the gentle, retiring, inexperienced writer'. (30)

Bronte was emphatic about maintaining such an inextricable connection between the author and his or her work because she felt that writing was most meaningful and powerful when it was based on that which was true. As Wheat states, "[t]he Truth, for Bronte, was the inextricable linking of the author's ethical standards with the scenes and characters he created" (44). Bronte evidently believed that such truth should be the highest aspiration of an author, as it enabled them to write most passionately and convincingly. "Sentiment, then, [for Bronte was] a species of compassion for the people about whom one writes, the ability to care for their welfare at the same time that one knows their foibles intimately" (Wheat 46). Alternately, she felt that the efficacy of writing was greatly diminished when any aspect of an author's truth was compromised. As Wheat states, " [. . .] art considered as an embodiment of an author's character must presume that the artistic creation is an *accurate* reflection of character" (32).

The terms "real" and "true" are frequently invoked throughout much of Bronte's writing, particularly in her last novel *Villette,* thereby signifying how important these were to her. Wheat defines "real" and "true" as similarly meaning "[. . .] taken from actual life," and "refer[ring] to fictional scenes and characters modeled closely on events that actually happened and people who actually existed" (41). *Villette* closely corresponds to such a definition, as the majority of its characters and events are recognizably autobiographical. Bronte clearly used such a fictional context to reveal rather than hide her real self in order to truly be known. As Wheat discerns:

> Bronte would argue that her novels preserve, for the discerning reader, her "literary character." From them we learn the motives, impulses, and ideas she valued. From her fictional characters we learn also what she considered the essential ingredients of a good or bad, moral or immoral, proper or improper individual. Insofar as we know her fiction, we know-she would insist-the essence of Charlotte Bronte. (90)

Bronte believed that, "[t]he reader's task [. . .] is to look beneath the surface and discover the true nature of the person" and clearly appreciated readers and critics who made the effort to do so (Wheat 31). She responded to critic Eugene Forcade's review of her novel *Shirley* which appeared in *Revue des deux Mondes* in the following manner: "[he is] one whose heart feels-whose powers grasp the matter he undertakes to handle...Were I to see that man, my impulse would be to say: 'Monsieur, you know me: I shall deem it an honour to know you'" (Wheat 32). She similarly wrote to her friend Ellen Nussey, "[Forcade] follows Currer Bell through every winding, discerns every point, discriminates every shade-proves himself master of the subject and lord of the aim" (Wheat 32).

In her last and in many ways most personal novel *Villette,* Bronte evidently desired to embrace her truth through her autobiographical counterpart, Lucy Snowe, and to subsequently have others both seek and affirm her true self in much the same manner as

Eugene Forcade. Amidst a society that tried to deny truth such as she professed and to depict more appealing though inauthentic versions of themselves in literature, such a willingly affirming audience was difficult if not impossible to come by. Rather than passively hoping for such affirmation, however, Bronte ensured recognition by establishing an affirming audience within *Villette* that all readers inadvertently become part of upon entering the text. Placed in this position, readers are required to see the world through the point of view of the shy narrator, Lucy, and to subsequently recognize and affirm both her character and the character of her shy creator, Charlotte Bronte.

Victorian readers undoubtedly desired to dismiss such a character in order to disassociate themselves from the inherent shyness she embodied as they strove to overcome their own shy tendencies. Yet Bronte refused this dismissal by forcing readers into a prolonged relationship with Lucy throughout the entire novel, during which Lucy is never invisible or misunderstood while she has readers as her privileged confidants to whom her private discourse is addressed and received. Such prolonged intimacy during which readers are able to see the many positive aspects of Lucy's character is ideally supposed to counteract the prejudice and negativity which prevented such recognition in the first place. Lucy (and Bronte) therefore strongly encourage and ultimately rely on readers to provide this recognition just as readers rely on Lucy and Bronte to recognize their presence in the text and subsequent need for information. Brenda Silver brilliantly articulates the mutual web of affirmation between Lucy, readers, and ultimately Bronte when she states:

> If, as has been argued, the 'reality' of a narrative is a mutual creation of the text and its readers, and this act depends on the author's ability to stimulate the imagination in such a way as to make us think in terms different from our own, then Lucy, as if aware of this relationship, has self-consciously structured her use of silence and revelation to immerse us in a world as complex and conflicted as that which she herself experienced. Knowing, however, that she cannot trust

> others to perceive her as she is-that even when she is not invisible she is more than likely to be misread-Lucy goes one step further: she projects her readers into the landscape of the novel, the text, and asks them to use their imaginations in a mutual act of creation which in turn validates her own emerging self. In this way her narrative both inscribes her evolving identity and establishes a community of readers whose recognition and acceptance provide the context necessary for an individual's growth to maturity [. . .] ." [2]

Although Lucy's reserve prevents her from being truly known at times within the novel, Lucy's intimate discourse with readers provides a means through which she can be understood at all times. As Silver states, "Lucy's public silence and private dialogue with her reader are deliberate responses to what is perhaps the most potentially destructive aspect of her solitude: the isolation of vision that excludes her from the social discourse necessary for an ontological affirmation of self" (qtd. in Gates 297). This isolation of vision once again implies Victorians' desire to reject unappealing behavioral traits in favor of modified social ideals which were necessary for the "ontological affirmation of self". In her novel, however, Bronte creates her own social discourse in which the true rather than inauthentic self prevails and is embraced by her affirming audience. As Silver states:

> [. . .] Lucy evolves another reader, a nonjudgmental reader, a sharer of the insights that she cannot communicate to those more in tune with the accepted social codes [. . .] Lucy's recognition of society's power to render her invisible and mute leads her initially to endow her newly created 'reader' with the conventional assumptions about women and novels that she must challenge and change for her own life and tale to be plausible [. . .] [and] allows her simultaneously to mock

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[2] Brenda R. Silver, "The Reflecting Reader in *Villette*," in *Critical Essays on Charlotte Bronte,* ed. Barbara Timm Gates (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1990), 287. Hereafter cited as 'Gates'.

> those who choose to remain locked within their traditional expectations and to offer them an alternate version of reality that would reflect and validate her existence. (qtd. in Gates 297)

As Silver further states, "[b]y mocking fictional and thereby social conventions, by challenging her readers to share her perceptions, she creates an audience who learns to read her narrative for what it is-the nontraditional story of a woman's life and a text in which she is not an invisible outsider but the informing presence" (qtd. in Gates 298).

As this informing presence, Bronte evidently sought to challenge the negative and prejudicial notions which rendered shyness problematic and undermined shy individuals. Through her privileged authorial power and influence, Bronte attempted to redeem shy individuals from demeaning characterization by reinscribing shy traits with a sense of mystery, power, superiority, and other positive meaning. Shyness in this redefined context becomes that which enables Bronte's shy literary counterpart, Lucy Snowe, to triumph over all of the forces that undermine her shy identity and was ideally supposed to enable Bronte to do the same. Bronte's reinscription technique is best described in Lawrence's' detailed analysis of the term "cypher" as it evidently relates to *Villette.* She states:

> The word 'cypher' can denote both meaning and absence of meaning. Among its definitions are, according to *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary:* 'a person or thing of no value or consequence, a nonentity'; 'a secret or disguised manner of writing meant to be understood only by the persons who have the key to it'; 'the key to such a code'; 'an intricate weaving together of letters, as in the initial of a name, or a seal'; and in arithmetic, 'a zero, which, standing by itself, expresses the absence of any quantity, but increases or diminishes the value of other figures, according to its position.' Lucy chooses an ambiguous symbol that can suggest she is *less* significant than others (a nonentity), *secretly* significant (a

> code), *more* significant (a key), a significant *depending upon her relation to others* and possessing the power to make others variously significant as well. [3]

Lawrence further remarks:

> In calling herself a 'cypher' in *public,* Lucy refers specifically to her insignificant presence in person. As plain a Jane as her literary predecessor, Jane Eyre, Lucy runs the risk of being overlooked, relegated to a place of nonsignificance. But in articulating herself with a figure that covers, Lucy causes us to wonder if invisibility is not also a strategy like the 'cloak of hodden grey', specifically a strategy to avoid being 'textualized' or read...in her narrative, Lucy constructs herself as a sign worth interpreting for readers able to see significance where others see only a blank. (qtd. in Gates 307)

Lucy differs from the majority of traditional literary characters in that she is not fully revealed to readers right away but is alternately depicted initially as an insignificant and largely invisible person. Yet her powerful status as the main character and narrator of the novel implies that she is quite significant, though readers are required to seek such significance while subsequently enabling her to signify. As Lawrence states:

> In her narrative, Lucy constructs herself as a sign worth interpreting for readers able to see significance where others see only a blank. Silver's interpretation, among others, implies that a total revelation of Lucy is possible for the initiate who may find a 'key' to the code of the text. Indeed, Lucy's own opposition between speech and writing might seem to support the promise that Lucy will be revealed in her written text. (qtd. in Gates 309)

In the remainder of this chapter, I will guide readers in the discovery of Lucy's significance as I illuminate the manner in which Bronte transforms Lucy from a seemingly insignificant nonentity into a "more significant [person], depending upon her

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[3] Karen Lawrence, "The Cypher: Disclosure and Reticence in *Villette*." Gates, 307.

relation to others [who possesses] the power to make others variously significant" just as readers possess the power to affirm her shy truth and to subsequently overcome shyism. In this novel, Bronte evidently mirrored her own social reality with the intention of narrating a desired outcome which she seemingly hoped would manifest in her own life and subsequently free her from the shackles of shy insignificance.

From the very beginning of *Villette*, Lucy Snowe's shy traits make her appear insignificant and invisible in many ways. Unlike most traditional narrators, she initially denies her own importance and introduces herself in a distinctly negative manner. Lucy narrates, " [. . .] with my usual base habit of cowardice, I shrunk into my sloth, like a snail into its shell, and alleged incapacity and impracticability as a pretext to escape action" (139). Her predisposition for solitude ostracizes her from other characters in the text rather than makes her the central figure in the narrative as is evident when Lucy narrates, "[t]he whole day did I wander or sit...alone, finding warmth in the sun, shelter among the trees, and a sort of companionship in my own thoughts. I well remember that I exchanged but two sentences that day with any living being: not that I felt solitary; I was glad to be quiet" (198). Lucy is similarly perceived by others as being shy, as is apparent when Graham Bretton, also known as Dr. John, says to her, "[o]nly, shy and retiring as your general manner was, I wondered what personal or facial enormity in me proved so magnetic to your usually averted eyes" (250).

While Lucy seems to be comfortable to a large extent with who and what she is, her society is evidently not accepting of her reserved characteristics. As Amanda Andersen states,"[Lucy's] life narrative thus registers with some sensitivity the ways in which prevalent conventions and practices made it almost impossible for Victorians to imagine a positive and disinterestedly critical, conception of feminine detachment" (47). [4] Silver

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[4] Amanda Anderson, *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and The Cultivation of Detachment* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001). Hereafter cited as 'Anderson'.

further states, "[f]rom society's perspective, then Lucy has no being, and her subsequent presentation of herself as a shadow, as well as other characters' misreading of her nature and her needs, mirrors her social reality" (qtd. in Gates 290).

The negative manner in which Lucy is perceived by others undermines her unique personal identity and largely contributes to her growing self disillusionment. She frequently ridicules herself for her inability to fit in with the rest of society as is evident when she questions, "[w]ho but a coward would pass his whole life in hamlets, and for ever abandon his faculties to the eating rust of obscurity?" (108). Her persistent embarrassment over being shy is also apparent when she comments, "[. . .] I suddenly felt all the dishonour of my diffidence-all the pusillanimity of my slackness to aspire" (141). In an attempt to fit in with others and to avoid this demeaned sense of self, Lucy attempts to overcome her natural shy disposition. Yet such attempts only cause her to feel inauthentic and untrue to who she really is. When she is pressured into acting for a school play, she narrates "[. . .] [f]or the second time that night I was going beyond myself-venturing out of what I looked on as my natural habits-speaking in an unpremeditated, impulsive strain, which startled me strangely when I halted to reflect" (222). As Lawrence states, " [. . .] throughout Lucy's story (the events of her life) and her narrative (the writing of her story), she displays dual impulses to be overlooked and to signify" (qtd. in Gates 306). Such divisive forces ultimately cause Lucy to further retreat into her shell of reserve as she seeks to protect herself from further self compromise. As John Kucich states, "[r]eserve becomes simply the sign of radical self-transcendence, an internal surrender to disruptive, self-destructively expansive power." [5]

There is, however, no way for Lucy to fully escape such disruptive and self-destructive forces. Although she attempts to modify her behavior, she is ultimately prevented from

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[5] John Kucich, "Passionate Reserve and Reserved Passion in the Works of Charlotte Bronte". Gates, 80.

doing so by internal forces which demand that she maintain personal consistency in order to similarly preserve a stable sense of identity. The novel affords the opportunity for Bronte to depict these forces as personified characters in order to make them as prevalent for readers as they are in the minds of shy individuals such as Lucy. One of the most prominent personified forces in the novel is Reason, which Bronte refers to with a capital 'R' in order to emphasize its power and influence in the shy mind. Lucy's behavior is frequently tempered by this force, as is evident when she narrates:

> A keen relish for dramatic expression had revealed itself as part of my nature; to cherish and exercise this new-found faculty might gift me with a world of delight, but 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 a resolution which neither Time nor Temptation has since picked. (211)

Another such instance where Reason predominates occurs when Lucy experiences intense delight over a letter from Graham Bretton and thus deviates from her definitive stoicism. She narrates, "Reason still whispered me, laying on my shoulder a withered hand, and frostily touching my ear with the chill blue lips of eld" (307). The manipulative control that this personified, cold figure maintains over her undoubtedly contributes to readers' negative perceptions of Lucy as a cold and strange character. For those who have never experienced such mental dictatorship, Reason appears to be an unnecessary and unwelcome presence in the text. Yet in the mind of a shy individual such as Lucy, it is a never-ceasing force; therefore, Bronte forces readers to endure its presence as well as she tries to create a sympathetic audience for Lucy's character.

The voice of Reason often convinces Lucy that she is incapable of overcoming her shyness, as it says such things as, "'[t]alk for you is good discipline. You converse imperfectly. While you speak, there can be no oblivion of inferiority-no encouragement to delusion: pain, privation, penury stamp your language....'" (307) As Lawrence states, however:

> Lucy rejects this self-image of impoverishment; she counters that "where the bodily presence is weak and the speech contemptible, surely there cannot be error in making written language the medium of better utterance than faltering lips can achieve?" (307) Her writing, then gives her access to power, a means of signifying herself in a different way. Her "heretic narrative" indeed offers an alternative to the inarticulateness of her speech, marked with privation, and the nun-like silence of her presence [. . .] so in writing she schools her readers to understand her significance. (qtd. in Gates 309)

Lucy clearly desires the approval of others and to develop close companionship and intimacy, yet she desires for others to accept her for who and what she is. Since Lucy can not modify her behavior without compromising her personal truth, she instead decides to embrace her truth through writing in much the same manner as Bronte was doing through Lucy's narrative in *Villette* in a subsequent effort to convince her Victorian society to do the same.

This decision, however, initially renders Lucy, much like Bronte, the ostracized victim of a society that is not accepting of who she truly is, as she manifests none of its superficial ideals. She is essentially discriminated against by every major character in the novel. Lucy's godmother, Mrs. Bretton, initially appears to be the only person who does not treat her in a negative manner, yet as the story progresses, it becomes clear that she lacks the personal depth to be a true friend to Lucy and therefore causes her personal pain. Andersen writes:

> Lucy cannot always suppress her bitter sense that Mrs. Bretton's impersonality translates into indifference, especially where her god-daughter is concerned. This is hinted at very early in the novel, when Lucy makes the following puzzling remark, in reference to her own presence at Bretton: 'One child in a household of grown people is usually made very much of, and in a quiet way I was a good deal taken notice of by Mrs. Bretton' (61). What is so strange about this remark is that

Lucy is not the only child in the household-Mrs. Bretton's beloved son Graham is also there-and this seems to invite the suspicion that Lucy is, or perceives herself to be, always already supplanted by a more favored child, first Graham, then Polly. Later in the novel, despite the fact that the Brettons provide a haven for Lucy and manifest an allegiance to her, Lucy registers the fact that the Brettons' serene behavior issues in neglect. The most telling indication of Lucy's suppressed anger at Mrs. Bretton comes at the moment when Mrs. Bretton renews contact after a lapse of seven weeks, precisely the time when Polly Homes reappears on the scene. This is a moment of great isolation for Lucy: when she does finally receive an invitation from Mrs. Bretton, she transcribes it into the narrative. In the context of Lucy's complaints about her present lot, and Mrs. Bretton's knowledge of Lucy's past troubles, the letter's breezy kindness carries an almost sadistic edge. Indeed, given Lucy's preamble, in which she catalogs her sufferings and refers to herself as a hermit and caged animal, the letter reflects an immediately jarring carelessness and unknowingness:

'Dear Lucy,-It occurs to me to inquire what you have been doing with yourself for the last month or two? Not that I suspect you would have the least difficulty in giving an account of your proceedings. I daresay you have been just as busy and happy as ourselves at La Terrasse' (354) [. . .] [Lucy] registers the chilling fact that '[t]heir feelings for me were-as they had been'. (356) (qtd. in Anderson 56)

The precocious Paulina, who dominates Mrs. Bretton and Graham's affection and takes over Lucy's coveted role in the Bretton family, similarly behaves contemptuously toward Lucy even though Lucy does nothing to warrant such rude behavior. Polly, as she is called as a little girl, condescendingly refers to Lucy as "the girl" (67) and speaks to her in a blatantly disrespectful manner, as is evident when Lucy refers to the " [. . .] trenchant manner she usually employed in speaking to me; [. . .] which was quite different from that she used with Mrs. Bretton, and different again from the one dedicated to Graham" (89).

Graham, the son of Mrs. Bretton, similarly behaves in a rude and disrespectful manner toward Lucy. He frequently charms women but bestows no such charms on Lucy, who he often regards as being unworthy of his attention. His personal slights clearly disturb Lucy, as is evident when she remarks:

> There was not a girl or woman in the Rue Fossette who could not, and did not testify to having received an admiring beam from [Graham's]
> [. . .] blue eyes, at one time or another. I am obliged, however humbling it may sound, to except myself: as far as I was concerned, those blue eyes were guiltless, and calm as the sky, to whose tint theirs seemed akin" (178).

She further comments, "[I tried] then to keep down the unreasonable pain which thrilled my heart, on thus being made to feel that while Graham could devote to others the most grave and earnest, the manliest interest, he had no more than light raillery for Lucy, the friend of lang syne [. . .] " (401). When Graham refers to her as being "inoffensive as a shadow", a pained Lucy inwardly cringes, "[o]h!- I wished he would just let me alone-cease to allusion to me. These epithets-these attributes I put from me. His 'quiet Lucy Snowe,' his 'inoffensive shadow,' I gave him back; not with scorn, but with extreme weariness: [. . .] let him whelm me with no such weight [. . .] " (403). As Lawrence states, "Lucy begins to understand Graham's limitations as a 'reader' of women [. . .] [and] guards herself against such misapprehension, biding her time until others learn to recognize her significance" (qtd. in Gates 308).

Ginevra Fanshawe, a spoiled rich girl who attends the French-speaking Villette school where Lucy teaches as well as one of Graham's romantic interests, is another character who persecutes Lucy mercilessly. At one point in the novel, she demeaningly refers to Lucy as an insignificant person, stating, "if you really are the nobody I once thought you [. . .] " (393). Ginevra judges people superficially and since Lucy lacks the beauty and social graces that Ginevra both possesses and idolizes, she regards Lucy as insignificant.

Lucy's blatant external inferiority enhances what Ginevra believes to be her own superiority. She often forces Lucy to recognize this contrast, such as when she states:

> Caustic creature! You never have a kind word for me; but in spite of you, and all other envious detractors, I know I am beautiful: I feel it, I see it-for there is a great looking-glass in the dressing-room, where I can view my shape from head to foot. Will you go with me now, and let us two stand before it? (214).

Regardless of whether Lucy acknowledges her attractiveness or not, Ginevra rarely misses an opportunity to insult Lucy and to point out her inferiority. She says to Lucy:

> I would not be you for a kingdom [. . .] I suppose you are nobody's daughter, since you took care of little children when you first came to Villette: you have no relations; you can't call yourself young at twenty-three; you have no attractive accomplishments-no beauty. As to admirers, 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: and so much the better, for though you might have your own heart broken, no living heart will you ever break. Isn't it all true? (215-16).

This, however, is not true, for Lucy eventually does fall in love with the Professor Paul Emmanuel, a character who complements Lucy in many ways. Yet ironically, even he initially torments her. He often hisses insults in her ear such as the following that Lucy narrates: "[h]e said that, of all the women he knew, I was the one who could make herself the most consummately unpleasant: I was she with whom it was least possible to live on friendly terms" (418). Another such persecutory instance occurs when Lucy narrates:

> [. . .] [H]e accused me of being reckless, worldly, and epicurean; ambitious of greatness and feverishly athirst for the pomps and vanities of life. It seems I had no 'devouement,' no 'recueillement' in my character; no spirit of grace, faith, sacrifice, or self-abasement. Feeling the inutility of answering these charges, I mutely continued the correction of a pile of English exercises. (387)

Such relentless persecution causes Lucy to soliloquize:

> You deemed yourself a melancholy sober-sides enough! Miss Fanshawe...regards you as a second Diogenes. M. de Bassompierre, the other day, politely turned the conversation when it ran on the wild gifts of the actress Vashti, because, as he kindly said, 'Miss Snowe looked uncomfortable.' Dr. John Bretton knows you only as 'quiet Lucy'-'a creature inoffensive as a shadow;' he has said, and you have heard him say it: 'Lucy's disadvantages spring from over-gravity in tastes and manner-want of colour in character and costume.' Such are your own and your friends' impressions [. . .] (420-21).

The social prejudice and persecution that Lucy experiences from every major character in the text comes close to destroying her during several instances in the novel. Lucy often laments her existence, such as when she despairingly remarks:

> [. . .] [G]alled was my inmost spirit with an unutterable sense of despair about the future. Motive there was none why I should try to recover or wish to live; and yet quite unendurable was the pitiless and haughty voice in which Death challenged me to engage his unknown terrors. When I try to pray I could only utter these words:- 'From my youth up Thy terrors have I suffered with a troubled mind'. (231-32)

These lamentations resemble passages from Bronte's personal correspondence, as discussed in the first chapter. What Lucy clearly desires more than anything is close companionship with others who are willing to embrace her as she is rather than persecuting her for what she is not. She expresses such a desire when she states, "[. . .] my days and nights were grown intolerable; a cruel sense of desolation pained my mind: a feeling that would make its way, rush out, or kill me [. . .] I wanted companionship, I wanted friendship, I wanted counsel" (258).

Bronte tries to encourage such companionship and intimacy between Lucy and readers to compensate for that which is lacking between Lucy and other characters in the novel.

At times, Bronte seems to plead for reader sympathy and understanding of Lucy's character in order to also initiate regard for her own shy self. Her voice evidently breaks through the narrative in an attempt to elicit such reader sympathy, as is apparent in the following passage:

> The world can understand well enough the process of perishing for want of food: perhaps few persons can enter into or follow out that of going mad from solitary confinement. They see the long-buried prisoner disinterred, a maniac or an idiot!-how his sense left him-how his nerves, first inflamed, underwent nameless agony, and then sunk to palsy-is a subject too intricate for examination, too abstract for popular comprehension [. . .] Long may it be generally thought that physical privations alone merit compassion, and that the rest is a figment. (356-57)

Bronte similarly has Lucy directly address readers in order to further try and encourage an intimate understanding of her character. This direct address is apparent when Lucy says, "[b]efore you pronounce on the rashness of the proceeding, reader, look back to the point whence I started; consider the desert I had left [. . .] " (121-22). After a long passage filled with complaints and laments, Lucy once again directly addresses readers in the following manner:

> Religious reader, you will preach to me a long sermon about what I have just written, and so will you, moralist; and you, stern sage: you, stoic, will frown; you, cynic, sneer; you, epicure, laugh. Well each and all, take it your own way. I accept the sermon, frown, sneer and laugh; perhaps you are all right: and perhaps, circumstanced like me, you would have been, like me, wrong. The first month was, indeed, a long, black, heavy month to me. (228)

As Silver states, "[n]ot surprisingly, [Lucy] appeals to her reader most often during times of intense self-conflict and when, owing to the lack of recognized context or precedent of her responses, she is least able to express herself openly. These moments occur both when she is alone and in social gatherings" (qtd. in Gates 299). As discussed earlier,

Lucy is never really alone since she has the constant companionship of readers who are privileged recipients of her personal discourse. Yet Bronte seemingly desired for readers to want to intimately connect with Lucy rather than merely being forced to do so.

Despite numerous intimate appeals and emotional manifestations to readers, many critics and readers of *Villette* were (and continue to be) of the opinion that Lucy withholds information and is subsequently an unreliable narrator. Silver reflects this notion when she states:

> [. . .] [M]ost [critics] have assumed that [Lucy] is an 'unreliable' narrator whose voice, according to Helene Moglen, is characterized by 'indirection' and 'neurotic rationalization' [. . .] Mary Jacobus is more direct: 'Lucy lies to us. Her deliberate ruses, omissions and falsifications break the unwritten contract of first-person narrative (the confidence between reader and 'I') and unsettle our faith in the reliability of the text.' [. . .] but it can also be argued that Lucy is less evasive and even less unreliable than most critics have assumed-that she is, in fact, a self-consciously reliable narrator of unusual circumstances whose narrative choices ask her "readers" to perceive her on her own terms. The difficulty may be that Lucy's terms are so different from the maxims and prejudices of the culture she inhabits and portrays that they are read by even sympathetic readers as perverse or implausible. (qtd. in Gates 287-88)

Such unfounded accusations as Silver tries to counter once again prove the existence of shyism which evidently blinds readers to the more positive aspects of Lucy's character. At times, Lucy seems to question whether readers truly desire an intimate connection with her. During the few instances in which Lucy does blatantly withhold information, she acknowledges that she does so for readers' benefit, most likely because she assumes they don't care to know every intimate detail of her life. She states, "[m]y reader, I know, is one who would not thank me for an elaborate reproduction of poetic first impressions [. . .] " (105-106).

Silver further tries to defend Lucy's narrative reliability when she states:

> Her constant shifting between self-justification and "silence" thus becomes a plausible portrayal of the conflicting needs and desires she confronts and experiences without being able to count on either the ear or the understanding those who dictate social behavior-and plots of novels. Rather than misleading or lying to us, or to herself, Lucy is deliberately creating not only a new form of fiction for women, but a new audience-part critic, part confidante, part sounding board-whose willingness to enter her world and interpret her text will provide the recognition denied to women who do not follow traditional paths of development. (qtd. in Gates 288-89)

Lucy is indeed a very reliable narrator whose shy traits enhance rather than diminish her narrative competency. Since she is rarely observed herself, Lucy instead observes others and turns her social invisibility into an attribute which enables observational power. As Lawrence states, "[. . .] Lucy's 'invisibility' is not wholly wished away in the course of the narrative, for it affords a sense of power related to her skills as narrator [. . .] " (qtd. in Gates 307). Much attention is given to such observation throughout the entire novel, as is evident when Lucy comments, "[w]ithdrawing to a quiet nook, whence unobserved I could observe-the ball, its splendours and its pleasure passed before me as a spectacle" (211). Through the art of observation, Lucy is able to achieve a narrative omniscience that is often lacking in the majority of first person narratives and to therefore become superior to traditional narrators who lack such narrative competency.

In *Villette,* eyes reflect the souls of individuals and enable such narrative omniscience to occur. This is evident when Lucy comments, " [. . .] my eyes being fixed on [Polly's]-I witnessed in its irid and pupil a startling transfiguration" (70). Ironically, Lucy is often invisible to those that she is so intensely scrutinizing. While observing Graham one day, she remarks:

> It was not perhaps my business to observe the mystery of his bearing [. . .] but, placed as I was, I could hardly help it. He laid himself open to my observation, according to my presence in the room just that degree of notice and consequence a person of my exterior habitually expects: that is to say, about what is given to unobtrusive article of furniture, chairs of ordinary joiner's work, and carpets of no striking pattern. (162)

More than anything, Lucy wants others to desire to know her intimately in the same manner that she desires to intimately connect with others, yet she clearly prefers to remain invisible if she cannot be rightly known. She states, "I liked entering [Graham's] presence covered with a cloud he had not seen through, while he stood before me under a ray of special illumination, which shone all partial over his head, trembled about his feet, and cast light no farther" (248). As Silver remarks, "[Graham] [. . .] barely notices her existence. Her decision not to reveal herself where she 'can never be rightly known' has, not surprisingly, led to the strongest accusations of narrative unreliability, as well as accusations of lying, neurosis, and perversity" (qtd. in Gates 300).

Most of Lucy's problems, however, stem from the fact that her society, like Bronte's, is not willing to look beyond the superficial surface of her persona to discover her depth of character, as she tries to do with others. This is evident when Lucy says:

> These struggles with the natural character, the strong native bent of the heart, may seem futile and fruitless, but in the end they do good. They tend, however slightly, to give the actions, the conduct, that turn which Reason approves, and which Feeling, perhaps, too often opposes: they certainly make a difference in the general tenor of a life, and enable it to be better regulated, more equable, quieter on the surface; and it is on the surface only the common gaze will fall. (252)

Superficial judgments are clearly not always accurate, as Bronte exemplifies through Lucy's initial misjudgment of Monsieur Paul. Lucy states, "[a] dark little man he

certainly was; pungent and austere. Even to me he seemed a harsh apparition, with his close-shorn, black head, his broad, sallow brow, his thin cheek, his wide and quivering nostril, his thorough glance and hurried bearing. Irritable he was [. . .] " (197). Yet the more she observes Paul, the more she realizes that he possesses many desirable traits which become apparent once she gives him the opportunity of being truly known. As Wheat states, "Lucy Snowe sees the true character of people-almost immediately, except in the case of Paul Emmanuel [. . .] " (86). Readers similarly discover Paul's depth of character in the same gradual manner in which they discover Lucy's. As Janice Carlisle states: "[w]e learn to value Paul just as Lucy has done. At first, he is hostile, malicious-an intriguer, a despot [. . .] Slowly, however, [. . .] we are allowed to see his good qualities as Lucy discovers them. [6]

Paul similarly gives Lucy the opportunity of being truly known once he overcomes his initial negative impressions of her. Unlike most other characters in the novel, he is willing and able to look past her superficial unattractiveness to see that which makes her inwardly attractive. As Lawrence remarks, "[w]hile Graham sees [Lucy] as 'a creature inoffensive as a shadow (403),' Paul recognizes her passion and imagination. He is the one male character who helps draw out the meaning of Lucy Snowe and, in turn, challenges her abilities in tracing his character" (qtd. in Gates 317). Once Lucy finds someone who desires to truly know her, she becomes much more open with readers. As Silver states, "[a]t least part of the change of tone-and the relative sparseness of the addresses to the reader she now speaks to without justification as a true companion-can be attributed to Paul, whose belief in her 'fiery and rash nature' (386) gives her a warmer image of herself and whose own perverseness badgers her into speaking to him directly" (qtd. in Gates 302).

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[6] Janice Carlisle, "The Face in the Mirror: *Villette* and the Conventions of Autobiography". Gates, 276.

Paul and Lucy are able to overcome their prejudicial notions of each other and to realize that they are indeed quite similar, much as Bronte hopes will happen with readers. Carlisle remarks, " [. . .] [Paul] is also another Lucy. At one point, he even forces her to look in a mirror so that she can see the "affinity" between them" (qtd. in Gates 283). Margot Peters states, "[l]ike almost all of Charlotte's characters, Monsieur Paul's nature is founded on paradox and contradiction. His bullying ferocity protects a heart that is peculiarly tender, intuitive, and idealistic. His impossibly exacting nature compensates for a generosity that is almost too self-sacrificing" (350). [7]

Such self-sacrifice is also a defining characteristic of Lucy and serves to counteract assumptions that her reserve signifies self-centeredness. This trait is quite evident when Lucy nurses the ailing Miss Marchmont in the beginning of the novel. Lucy states, "[h]er service was my duty-her pain, my suffering-her relief, my hope-her anger, my punishment-her regard, my reward [. . .] all within me became narrowed to my lot. Tame and still by habit, disciplined by destiny, I demanded no walks in the fresh air; my appetite needed no more than the tiny messes served for the invalid" (97). This selflessness is similarly a defining aspect of Lucy's narrative, as she focuses largely on others and admirably avoids narrative bias. Since readers only know other characters through Lucy's perceptions of them, such narrative impartiality is particularly essential. Lucy has the opportunity to superficially and prejudicially judge others in the same manner that they often judge her, but she instead rises above such pettiness by not treating other characters in this same negative manner.

Graham is one such character whose goodness Lucy reveals despite the fact that he often causes her emotional pain and fails to see beyond her superficial reserve. Lucy writes, "*[h]is* features were not delicate, nor slight like those of a woman, nor were they

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[7] Margot Peters, *Unquiet Soul: A Biography of Charlotte Bronte* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1975). Hereafter cited as 'Peters'.

cold, frivolous, and feeble; though well cut [. . .] Much feeling spoke in them at times, and more sat silent in his eye. Such at least were my thoughts of him: to me he seemed all this" (219). Lucy similarly acknowledges Ginevra's good qualities such as when she says, "[. . .] Ginevra had a kind of spirit with her, empowered to give constant strength and comfort, to gladden daylight and embalm darkness; the best of the good genii that guard humanity curtained her with his wings, and canopied her head with his bending form" (230). Lucy relates both good and bad traits of other characters in order to enable readers to form their own impressions, though Bronte is always behind the scenes trying to bias readers in favor of Lucy.

Bronte establishes other characters as foils by which to illuminate Lucy's superiority. As Carlisle states:

> *Villette* is less a narrative in which other characters are granted an autonomous existence than a hall of mirrors in which they are allowed to appear because they serve as facets reflecting the affective truth of Lucy's life. This process allows Lucy to set her identity at a distance for the purposes of honest scrutiny while she transforms that image of self into an emotionally satisfying prospect. (qtd. in Gates 279)

One such foil character is Madame Beck, who is the director of the French-speaking Villette boarding school where Lucy teaches. Like Lucy, Madame Beck secretly observes others, yet she does so in a voyeuristically invasive manner that is blatantly offensive, particularly to Lucy. Madame Beck's sneaky observational methods are narrated by Lucy in the following passage:

> I dare say she sat a quarter of an hour on the edge of my bed, gazing at my face. She then drew nearer, bent close to me; slightly raised my cap, and turned back the border so as to expose my hair [. . .] This done, she turned to the chair where my clothes lay [. . .] every article did she inspect. I divined her motive for this proceeding, viz., the wish to form from the garments a judgment respecting the

> wearer, her station, means, neatness, &c. The end was not bad, but the means were hardly fair or justifiable. (131)

Madame Beck evidently desires to know Lucy intimately, yet she tries to achieve such intimacy in an unacceptable manner by invading Lucy's personal space and even temporarily stealing some of her belongings. As Andersen states, "Lucy is contemptuous of Mme. Beck's system of surveillance because it operates extrinsically, failing to prompt or inspire any genuine moral growth or self-understanding. It both employs and promotes artificiality, deception, and indirection. A fundamentally limited form of power, it mistakes evidence for knowledge, and knowledge for control" (53). On the one hand, Lucy feels flattered that someone desires to know her as much as Madame Beck does. On the other, she clearly feels personally violated by her employer and desires to maintain her privacy. Such intrusion seemingly increases Lucy's reserve, as she tries to protect herself from unwelcome invasion. As Andersen remarks, "[s]he reacts to those who intrude their powers of scrutiny upon her by attempting to shield or distance herself, wary of the perpetual threat of failed intimacy and the acute potential of misrecognition" (48).

At times, Lucy's observation of others is in danger of seeming too similar to that of Madame. Beck. Her observation never becomes voyeuristic or invasive like Madame Beck's, yet she still evidently makes a conscious effort to temper her behavior so that it is not misperceived. Andersen states:

> Lucy is all too aware that her practices of shielded observation come strikingly close to the immoral practices of surveillance pursued by Mme. Beck. Indeed, in large part the novel records Lucy's ongoing attempt to appropriate and transform what otherwise operate as disabling or negative modes of detachment: crippling psychological and emotional exile, instrumental and self-interested forms of surveillance, and complacent stoicism. (59)

Andersen further comments, "[. . .] detachment is also shown as the enabling condition of Lucy's capacity for social critique through artistry, a source of power and pleasure that she takes some pains to distinguish from the highly instrumental and fundamentally self-interested power of Mme. Beck" (59). These comments once again illuminate the fact that Bronte was attempting to inscribe reserve and detachment such as Lucy manifests with positivistic meaning in order to overcome prejudicial notions which undoubtedly stemmed from the negative actions of a character such as Madame Beck.

Bronte juxtaposes the self-interested power of Madame Beck with Lucy's more desirable selflessness and warmth of character. In contrast to the cold and callous Madame Beck, Lucy is warm and effusive, thereby challenging prejudicial and stereotypical notions that her shy reserve signifies behavioral coldness. Lucy says of Madame Beck, " [. . .] to attempt to touch her heart was the surest way to rouse her antipathy, and to make of her a secret foe. It proved to her that she had no heart to be touched: it reminded her where she was impotent and dead" (137). She also states, "Madame Beck was a most consistent character; forbearing with all the world, and tender to no part of it. Her own children drew her into no deviation from the even tenor of her stoic calm" (157). As Robert B. Heilman comments, " [. . .] the rational virtues are much less attractive in Mme. Beck, who, like other characters that Charlotte does not admire, consults only her "judgment" and is not "led an inch by her feelings [. . .] ." [8]

This rigid and harsh sense of control is a virtue for Madame Beck as the director of a school but is a negative personal characteristic which prevents her from intimately connecting with others. Lucy greatly differs from Madame Beck in that she does possess the emotional depth to make such intimate connections and manifests a great desire to do so. As a governess, Lucy assumes the role of a surrogate mother to Madame Beck's

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[8] Robert B. Heilman, "Charlotte Bronte, Reason, and the Moon". Gates, 36.

children and is able to meet their emotional needs in a way that their own mother can not. Lucy narrates:

> I affected Georgette; she was a sensitive and a loving child: to hold her in my lap, or carry her in my arms was to me a treat...her clasp and the nestling action with which she pressed her cheek to mine, made me almost cry with a tender pain...this pure little drop from a pure little source was too sweet: it penetrated deep, and subdued the heart, and sent a gush to the eyes. (188-89)

As this passage reveals, children are as emotionally attracted to Lucy as she is to them. Even little Polly warms toward Lucy despite all of her initial conceited reservations toward her. Lucy narrates:

> I saw the little thing shiver. 'Come to me,' I said, wishing yet scarcely hoping, that she would comply: for she was a most strange, capricious, little creature, and especially whimsical with me. She came, however [. . .] I warmed her in my arms. She trembled nervously; I soothed her. Thus tranquillized and cherished she at last slumbered. (92)

Lucy evidently desires to make emotional connections with others; therefore, she feels hurt when others withhold such intimacy. When she finds herself desolate and alone in London, the following emotional display ensues:

> What was I doing here alone in great London? What should I do on the morrow? What prospects had I in life? What friends had I on earth? Whence did I come? Whither should I go? What should I do? I wet the pillow, my arms, and my hair, with rushing tears. A dark interval of most bitter thought followed this burst. (107)

Although Reason and other internal stimuli encourage her to suppress her emotions and maintain a solitary existence, Lucy is clearly unable to do so. Her lack of emotional control is evident at many points throughout the novel, such as when she comments, "[t]hough stoical, I was not quite a stoic; drops streamed fast on my hands, on my desk: I

wept one sultry shower, heavy and brief" (378) and, " [. . .] I had feelings: passive as I lived, little as I spoke, cold as I looked [. . .] I *could* feel" (175).

Lucy is similarly very passionate, as is revealed to readers who are privileged and intimate recipients of her private discourse but not always apparent to other characters within the novel. This passion is often evinced in the form of diatribes against fickle characters who are too shallow to see past her superficial exterior. Ginevra is one such fickle character who is evidently symbolic of traditional literary heroines whose superficial charm and beauty are their only attributes. In Bronte's novel, however, Ginevra is characterized as ridiculous, annoying, and above all, inferior to Lucy. Bronte's voice seems to once again resonate through Lucy's as she writes:

> Many a time since have I noticed, in persons of Ginevra Fanshawe's light, careless temperament, and fair, fragile style of beauty, an entire incapacity to endure: they seem to sour in adversity, like small-beer in thunder: the man who takes such a woman for his wife, ought to be prepared to guarantee her an existence all sunshine. (118)

Although Ginevra often uses Lucy to illuminate her own superiority, it is actually Ginevra who makes Lucy seem superior.

Bronte ridicules society for being so shallow that they idolize a superficial character such as Ginevra and fail to see all that is unattractive about her. As Rachel M. Brownstein states, "[s]ince beautiful women are imagined as made for love and the romances that love inspires, that inspire love, the beauties of the world look to readers like heroines" (165). [9] Bronte mocks such societal foolishness through Lucy's momentary recognition of Ginevra's heroism which is delivered in a blatantly sarcastic tone. Lucy states, "Ginevra gradually became with me a sort of heroine. One day, perceiving this growing

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[9] Rachel M. Brownstein, *Becoming a Heroine* (New York:Penguin Books Ltd., 1984). Hereafter cited as 'Brownstein'.

illusion, I said, 'I really believe my nerves are getting overstretched: my mind has suffered somewhat too much; a malady is growing upon it [. . .] " (231). Ginevra is one of the only characters in the text who legitimates a superficial reading largely because she has no deeper layers to her character. In comparison to Lucy who is much more complex, such superficiality makes Ginevra seem very dull and predictable.

In order to make readers see the lack of depth in such a character, Bronte often depicts Ginevra's heartlessness which belies her loving and charming exterior. Lucy asks her:

> Is it possible that fine generous gentleman...offers you his honourable hand and gallant heart, and promises to protect your flimsy person and wretchless mind through the storms and struggles of life-and you hang back-you scorn, you sting, you torture him! Have you power to do this/ Who gave you that power? Where is it? Does it lie all in your beauty-your pink and white complexion and your yellow hair? (218).

Ginevra is evidently so superficial that she even recognizes her own shallowness, as is apparent when she says to Lucy, "I am far more at my ease with you, old lady-you, you dear crosspatch-who take me at my lowest, and know me to be coquettish, and ignorant, and flirting, and fickle, and silly, and selfish, and all the other sweet things you and I have agreed to be a part of my character" (155). Bronte takes every opportunity to demean Ginevra in order to deconstruct traditional notions of the ideal literary heroine and to prove that such heroines are not ideal at all. Instead, Bronte posits Lucy Snowe as a much more realistic heroine who embodies the true ideals of the authentic and unique English character. As Brownstein states, "'[t]he realistic' novel insists that a true heroine is authentically, not artificially, beautiful [. . .] The rivals who serve as her foils primp for vain hours before their mirrors, torment themselves by uncomfortable postures to display their figures" (166).

Bronte's own voice once again seems to break through the narrative in the form of a diatribe against traditional heroines who lack heroic qualities. She states, "[w]hat women

to live with! [I]nsincere, ill-humoured, bloodless, brainless nonentities! As bad in their way as the indolent gipsy-giantess, the Cleopatra, in hers" (278). Cleopatra and Vashti are both classical female figures who Bronte devotes much attention to in *Villette.* Lawrence describes Vashti in the following manner: Vashti was the Queen of King Ahasuerus before Esther [. . .] The actress Vashti, who makes such an indelible impression on Lucy...is anything but passive object of the gaze [. . .] What Vashti embodies so completely and fully is female power, passion, and rage [. . .] " (qtd. in Gates 318). Brownstein further remarks that, "[t]he historical Rachel was the embodiment of the Romantic aesthetic, a public demonstration of its truth. Her art was celebrated as artless, instinctive, personal, peculiar, original, self-consuming [. . .] Rachel stood for free love and free expression, for intense and unladylike living, for the imagination" (176). While this classic figure was evidently an ideal which embodied the truth of other cultures, it clearly did not accurately reflect who the English truly were, though they seemingly adopted it as an ideal in order to conform to other cultures.

Bronte depicts Vashti in the following manner:

> Before calamity she is a tigress; she rends her woes, shivers them in convulsed abhorrence. Pain, for her, has no result in good; tears water no harvest of wisdom: on sickness, on death itself, she looks with the eye of a rebel. Wicked, perhaps, she is, but also she is strong; and her strength has conquered Beauty, has overcome Grace, and bound both at her side, captives peerlessly fair, and docile as fair [. . .] Fallen, insurgent, banished, she remembers the heaven where she rebelled. (340)

This feminine figure is clearly the antithesis of shy. She is powerful, passionate, and as Lawrence states, "anything but the passive object of the gaze". Yet amidst all of her power, she seems mythical, surreal, and entirely unrealistic, particularly as an ideal for Victorians who inherently possessed none of the traits she embodied. Instead of promoting this ideal like the majority of authors during her time, Bronte sought to

deconstruct its idealism and to instead create a more realistic heroine to whom Victorians could truly relate and admire.

Like Ginevra and Vashti, Graham Bretton is the stereotypical literary hero who is as heartless as he is handsome. Despite all of Graham's external attractiveness, Lucy quickly discovers that he possesses few if any inner attributes. Lucy narrates an early impression of Graham's portrait in which this is evident:

> Ah! that portrait used to hang in the breakfast-room, over the mantel-place: somewhat too high, as I thought. I well remember [. . .] holding it in my hand, and searching into those bonny wells of eyes, whose glance under their hazel lashes seemed like a pencilled laugh; and well I liked to note the colouring of the cheek, and the expression of the mouth. I hardly believed fancy could improve on the curve of that mouth, or of the chin; even *my* ignorance knew that both were beautiful, and pondered, perplexed over this doubt: How it was that what charmed so much, could at the same time so keenly pain? (243).

As Silver states:

> Most of [Lucy's] addresses obsessively explain what she calls the "seeming inconsistency" of her portraits of Graham, an inconsistency that reflects her struggle to say honestly what she instinctively knows: that he is neither as perceptive nor sensitive nor selfless as he appears to others in public. Limited by his "masculine self-love" and conventionality, lacking the necessary sympathy, he will never replace the reader as the sharer of Lucy's inner life. (qtd. in Gates 301)

Lucy essentially concludes that Graham is only charming if others recognize him as such. This conditional power and influence is evident when Lucy says, "[. . .] to satisfy himself did not suffice; society must approve-the world must admire what he did, or he counted his measures false and futile" (460). Graham evidently has no fixed sense of self identity beyond that which others give him and is subsequently unadmirable because he is so

inconsistent. Ironically, Lucy possesses the narrative power to give him an identity even though he seemingly cares nothing for her approval or recognition.

Graham manifests the same traditional fickleness of character as Ginevra and therefore subverts heroism within Bronte's text. While Lucy attempts to intimately understand Graham's character, or lack thereof, Graham in turn fails to do the same for Lucy. Silver remarks, "[Lucy] observes [Graham] directly; he, as in the recognition scene in the nursery, sees her in the mirror of his own egotism and therefore fails to see her at all" (qtd. in *Gates* 296-97). Lucy similarly states, "[a] god could not have the cruel vanity of Dr. John, nor his sometime levity. No immortal could have resembled him in his occasional temporary oblivion of all but the present- [. . .] extracting from it whatever it could yield of nutriment to his masculine self-love [. . .] " (272).

No matter how much Dr. John charms readers, Lucy (and ultimately Bronte) consistently remind them that he is not worthy of such admiration. According to Peters, " [. . .] [Bronte] made the point that actually Dr. John is not quite good enough for poor, plain, shadowy Lucy. 'Dr. John *could* think, he *could* feel-in his way"; but he could not think well enough or feel strongly enough to finally be worthy of Lucy Frost or, as she finally became, Lucy Snowe'" (353). Silver further states, "[Graham] [. . .] become[s] a statue, heroic perhaps, the ideal suitor for Polly, but not for Lucy, a responsive human being" (qtd. in Gates 302). In case readers fail to recognize what an inferior character Graham really is, Lucy blatantly reveals his character flaws and inconsistencies in another one of her classic direct addresses to readers:

> The reader is requested to note a seeming contradiction in the two views which have been given of Graham Bretton-the public and the private...In the first, the public, he is shown oblivious of self; as modest in the display of his energies, as earnest in their exercise. In the second, the fireside picture, there is expressed consciousness of what he has and what he is; pleasure in homage, some

> recklessness in exciting, some vanity in receiving the same. Both portraits are correct. (273)

Polly, or Paulina as she is called when she re-emerges all grown up in the middle of the text, is one of the more admirable characters in the novel and at times runs the risk of being perceived as the real heroine of *Villette.* After being re-introduced to her former child acquaintance, Lucy describes her in the following manner:

> [. . .] Paulina Mary was become beautiful-not with the beauty that strikes the eye like a rose-orbed, ruddy, and replete; not with the plump, and pink, and flaxen attributes of her blond cousin Ginevra; but her seventeen years had brought her a refined and tender charm which did not lie in complexion,...nor in outline...but I think, rather in a subdued glow from the soul outward. (359)

In addition to being beautiful, Paulina manifests great depth of character and is seemingly an embodiment of Lucy (and Bronte's) feminine ideal. Lucy clearly approves of her, as is evident when she says:

> I liked her. It is not a declaration I have often made concerning my acquaintance, in the course of this book; the reader will bear with it for once. Intimate intercourse, close inspection, disclosed in Paulina only what was delicate, intelligent, and sincere; therefore my regard for her lay deep. An admiration more superficial might have been more demonstrative; mine, however, was quiet. (461)

It becomes apparent, however, that Paulina's behavior is actually modeled after Lucy Snowe, who is therefore once again identified as the real heroine of *Villette.* Paulina evidently desires to avoid seeming fickle and superficial like her cousin Ginevra in order to gain Lucy's respect, as is evident when she says to Lucy, "[. . .] you know you would despise me if I failed in self-control, and whined about some ricketty liking that was all on my side" (463). Paulina's father similarly recognizes Lucy as a role model for his daughter, as is apparent when he remarks, "[i]f my Polly ever came to know by

experience the uncertain nature of this world's goods, I should like her to act as Lucy acts: to work for herself, that she might burden neither kith nor kin" (369). As Peters states, "Charlotte agreed that Paulina was the weakest character in the book: she had tried to make her the most beautiful, but since she was purely imaginary she 'wanted the germ of real'" (356). Robert A. Colby further writes, "Ginevra Fanshawe, who flits over the surface of life, and Polly Home de Bassompierre, who is sheltered from its troubles and vicissitudes, really set off Lucy Snowe, who becomes the most deeply and intensely engage of the three. Lucy is intended to represent a fuller and completer woman. [. . .]". [10]

By the end of the novel, all of the characters who initially persecute Lucy overcome their prejudice and recognize her as the feminine ideal that she truly is, as readers are ideally also supposed to do. Paulina, for example, says to her:

> 'You no longer remember the night when I came crying, like a naughty little child as I was, to your bedside, and you took me in? You have no memory for the comfort and protection by which you soothed an acute distress?' (358) [. . .] and 'I love you. I had an odd content in being with you even when I was a little, troublesome, disobedient girl; it was charming to me then to lavish on you my naughtiness and whims. Now you are acceptable to me, and I like to talk with and trust you' [. . .] (463).

Even Graham grows to admire and appreciate Lucy as is evident when Paulina proclaims, "Graham says you are the most peculiar, capricious little woman he knows; but you are excellent; we both think so'" (520). Lucy similarly comments, [. . .] people became accustomed to me and my habits, and to such shades of peculiarity as were ingrained in my nature-shades, certainly not striking enough to interest, and perhaps not prominent

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[10] Robert A. Colby, "*Villette* and the Life of the Mind," in *Critics on Charlotte and Emily Bronte*: *Readings in Literary Criticism*, ed. Judith O'Neill (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1968), 39. Hereafter cited as 'O'Neill'.

enough to offend, but born in and with me, and no more to be parted with than my identity [. . .] " (174).

It is not Lucy who changes in order to conform to the ideals of others but rather individuals within her society who modify their prejudicial mentality which prevented them from truly appreciating Lucy as she is. In this manner, Lucy maintains her true personal identity and uses it to triumph over societal forces which threaten her personal existence, thereby becoming the true heroine of the novel. As Peters states:

> [. . .] Lucy rejects the world of Dr. John and Mrs. Bretton, of Paulina and Ginevra. Its inmates do not know the stern, elevating discipline of poverty and solitude, sorrow and labor. They do not know the great pain of unrequited love, or the profound contentment of real love, love 'furnace-tried by pain, stamped by constancy.' In mind and heart Lucy Snowe is superior to the other characters of *Villette* [. . .] (354).

Kate Millett similarly comments:

> Looking over all the 'role models' her world presents, the adoring mother, the efficient prison matron, the merciless flirt, the baby-goddess, Lucy, whose most genuine trial is that she has been born into a world where there are no adequate figures to imitate so that she is forced to grope her way alone, a pioneer without precedents, turns her back on the bunch of them. [11]

In this manner, Charlotte Bronte attempted to overcome shyism and other negative notions through the fictional context of *Villette* with the hope of enacting change in her own society. Although shyness opposed the traditional ideals of other cultures, it was a unique trait with an idealism that only needed to be cultivated and embraced in order to become idealistic.

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[11] Kate Millett, "From Sexual Politics". Gates, 259.

Chapter V: Critical Reception of Villette

Bronte was evidently worried about the publics' reception of *Villette.* Margot Peters writes the following about Bronte's concern:

> Although a seasoned writer, [Bronte] was more anxious about this novel than about her previous books, even proposing that Villette be brought out under 'the sheltering shadow of an incognito' if sales would not be hurt. 'I seem to dread the advertisements-the large-lettered 'Currer Bell's New Novel,' or 'New Work by the Author of 'Jane Eyre'" [. . .] More than with *Shirley*, she agonized over Smith, Elder's verdict: 'I can hardly tell you how I hunger to hear some opinion beside my own, and how I have sometimes desponded, and almost despaired, because there was no one to whom to read a line, or of whom to ask counsel [. . .] She was diffident too about the subject matter: she was no an artist engage; she could not, like Gaskell, Dickens, or Kingsley, make unemployment, illegitimacy, poor laws, free trade, religious revival, protectionism, penal reform, corn laws, or sanitation her subject...'You will see that 'Villette' touches on no matter of public interest,' she continued to Smith. 'I cannot write books handling the topics of the day; it is of no use trying [. . .] Still, there were strict limits to her diffidence. 'Remember to be an honest critic of 'Villette', she closes, 'and tell Mr. Williams to be unsparing: not that I am likely to alter anything, but I want to know his impressions and yours. (352-53)

Although Bronte realized that her shy truth was often undesirable, she felt that the only way to be truly known was to reveal it in its entirety. She remarked, "it is true and Truth has a severe charm of its own. Had I told all the truth, I might indeed have made it far more exquisitely painful" (qtd. in Wheat 41). Unlike other authors who wrote about whatever was sure to gain public sentiment and subsequent popularity, Bronte insisted on writing about that which her Victorian society strongly opposed and did not want to see reflected in literature. As Bronte remarked, however, "[t]he spirit of Romance would have

indicated another course, far more flowery and inviting...but this would have been unlike real life" (qtd. in Wheat 27). She further remarked, "I was a good deal harrassed by doubts as to how *Villette* might appear in other eyes than my own" [1] and "[s]till-I fear they must be satisfied with what is offered: my palette affords no brighter tints-were I to attempt to deepen the reds or burnish the yellows-I should but botch." [2]

Amidst fears and doubts concerning *Villette's* public reception, Bronte continued to courageously stand by her truth, as she felt that it was the only thing that would enable her to achieve lasting significance. She firmly declared, "[s]uch as I have, give I unto thee...Now that 'Villette' is off my hands-I mean to try to wait the result with calm. Conscience-if she be just-will not reproach me, for I have tried to do my best." [3] She further remarked, "my convictions...forbid me to sacrifice truth to the fear of blame" (qtd. in Wheat 24).

Yet despite her resolve not to alter her Truth for public appeal, Bronte was forced to make numerous changes in her writing in order to gain a public audience through the publication of her novel. In the *Note on the Text* at the beginning of the Oxford edition of *Villette*, Tim Dolin comments, "Charlotte Bronte cut out, with scissors or a knife, passages varying from a few words to half a page in length, and removed some seven pages from the end of Chapter 30" (xxxvi). In the editing stage of the novel, Bronte similarly downplayed autobiographical references in order to once again appease her publishers, though undoubtedly displeasing herself. The following edits which Dolin documents exemplify the manner in which she watered down her Truth in order to gain a public forum:

> Charlotte [. . .] increased the vagueness of Lucy's shadowy past, perhaps in order to remove possible identification with her own history: in 'The Casket' she

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[1] Charlotte Bronte, letter to George Smith, 3 November 1852. Barker 354.
[2] Charlotte Bronte, letter to William Smith Williams, 6 November 1852. Barker, 354.
[3] Charlotte Bronte, letter to George Smith, 20 November 1852. Barker, 355.

> deleted the phrase 'Oh lost affections!' after 'Oh, my childhood!', and in 'The Long Vacation', based on her own miserable autumn vacation at the Heger pensionnat, she deleted the last sentence in the sequence 'Shall I ever forget it? I think not. Many a solitary struggle have I had in life, and this was one'. Another striking intrusion of personal feeling in the same chapter was removed in proof; the terrifying transformation of the dormitory into a spectral world occurs when Lucy is in her 'sane mind', yet the manuscript and proof show, in words omitted from the first edition, that her sanity is retained at the cost of almost intolerable pain. (xxxvii) [4]

Interestingly, Dolin notes that " [. . .] the chapters describing Paulina are the least revised; in contrast, those closely based on Charlotte Bronte's own experiences, such as 'The Long Vacation' (Chapter 15) [. . .] are marked by many afterthoughts and deletions" (xxxvi). The nature of these revisions once again indicates that Victorians preferred a character such as Paulina who embodied traditional ideals and manifested both inner and outer agreeableness over a character such as Lucy who reminded them how disagreeable they actually were and subsequently opposed the more desirable social image that they were trying to create. Even despite such changes, however, Bronte remarked, "[t]he book, I think, will not be considered pretentious, nor is it of a character to excite hostility" (qtd. in *Peters* 355).

Yet *Villette* did attract a great deal of hostility and prejudice, most of which was directed specifically at either Bronte or her literary counterpart Lucy Snowe by English critics who were undoubtedly still trying to disassociate themselves from shy behavior that invited foreign prejudice as well as to ensure that authors promoted more desirable

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[4] Tim Dolin, Note on the Text, *Villette,* by Charlotte Bronte (1990; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) xxxvi-xxxix.

ideals in literature that conformed to those of other nations. An anonymous critic of the *Christian Remembrancer* wrote in 1853:

> Many passages are turgid, flighty, unreasonable, or otherwise objectionable, and involving subjects not suited for composition at all. Thus, in the holidays, when left to herself, [Lucy] has a nervous fever, and in the course of it has excited thoughts, and does eccentric things. Such matters are too much like dreams, be they fancy or experience, to be otherwise than irksome to the reader. [5]

What was perhaps most irksome to readers was the fact that Bronte insisted on writing about such things rather than about that which would render their national culture and personas most appealing. This author further remarked:

> We will sympathize with Lucy Snowe as being fatherless and penniless, and are ready, if this were all, to wish her a husband and a fireside less trying than M. Paul's must be [. . .] but we cannot offer even the affections of our fancy (the right and due of every legitimate heroine) to her unscrupulous, and self-dependent intellect-to that whole habit of mind which, because it feels no reverence, can never inspire for itself that one important, we may say, indispensable element of man's true love.... [6]

On the one hand, this anonymous author affirms the fact that Lucy is indeed the heroine of the text. On the other, he or she tries to contradict Lucy's heroism by refusing wholehearted affirmation.

Even Bronte's publishers had misgivings about *Villette's* heroine. Peters writes:

> Williams had doubts about the heroine: would she be considered weak and morbid? Charlotte answered decisively: 'I consider that she *is* both morbid and weak at times; her character sets up no pretensions to unmixed strength, and

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[5] Anon, *Christian Remembrancer* vol. XXV, 1853: 423-43. O'Neill, 18.
[6] Anon, *Christian Remembrancer* vol. XXV, 1853: 423-43. O'Neill, 19.

> anybody living her life would necessarily become morbid. It was no impetus of healthy feeling which urged her to the confessional, for instance; it was the semi-delirium of solitary grief and sickness. If, however, the book does not express all this, there must be a great fault somewhere'. (354)

According to Peters:

> *Villette* did express all this; there was no fault. With terrible fidelity Charlotte had recorded the ambivalences of a neurotic mind. As psychological realism the novel has no equal in Victorian fiction. What Dickens knew about the darkness of the mind, but had to cloak in strident humour and mneumonic eccentricity, Charlotte told plainly. (354)

As Bronte clearly expressed, Lucy Snowe was not supposed to be a traditional heroine but was rather meant to break from traditional ideals and to instead embody the unique truth of the English. It was the truth and realism of Lucy's character that made her most ideal in Bronte's opinion. Amidst the lingering negativity which continued to disparage Bronte's ideal, recognition of Lucy's idealism did manifest. Harriet Martineau, for example, wrote:

> An atmosphere of pain hangs about the whole, forbidding that repose which we hold to be essential to the true presentment of any large portion of life and experience [. . .] there is not a touch of light-heartedness from end to end [. . .] Lucy [. . .] is in a state of chronic nervous fever, for the most part; is usually silent and suffering; when she speaks, speaks in enigmas or in raillery, and now and then breaks out under the torture of passion; but she acts admirably-with readiness, sense, conscience, and kindliness. Still we do not wonder that she loved more than she was beloved [. . .] Perhaps Paulina and her father are the

> best-drawn characters in the book, where all are more or less admirably delineated. We are not aware that there is one failure. [7]

Martineau clearly maintained her preference for more traditional characters such as Paulina, who she seemingly favored over Lucy. Yet amidst such preference, she refers to Lucy as "act[ing] admirably-with readiness, sense, conscience, and kindliness" before once again demeaning her character by stating that she is not worthy of love or respect. Such mixed comments imply that critics such as Martineau were trying to affirm new English behavioral ideals at the same time that they acknowledged old cultural ideals that were affirmed before behavioral modifications took effect. The fact that such recognition occurred at all proves that Bronte succeeded in overcoming shy prejudice to some extent.

Although Bronte's truth was not always desirable to Victorians, it nonetheless enabled her to achieve literary power and efficacy that could not have been obtained if any aspect of either her persona or her experience was compromised. George Henry Lewes wrote, "*[Villette]* is a work of astonishing power and passion. From its pages there issues an influence of truth as healthful as a mountain breeze." [8] Elizabeth Gaskell similarly remarked, "I am only just returned to a sense of the real world about me, for I have been reading 'Villette', a still more wonderful book than 'Jane Eyre'. There is something preternatural in its power. [No other author has] the glory and the power which light up the writings of 'Currer Bell'" (qtd. in Peters 357).

Such reviews were the ultimate testament to the fact that the only way to achieve power and significance was to maintain an authentic sense of self, no matter what forces tried to undermine this authenticity. As Lewes stated of *Villette*, "[m]uch of the book seems to be brought in merely that the writer may express something which is in her

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[7] Harriet Martineau, "Review of *Villette* by Currer Bell," *Daily News* [London] 3 Feb. 1853: 2, col. 1. Gates, 254-55.
[8] G.H. Lewes, "*Ruth* and *Villette,*" *Westminster Review,* vol. LIX, 485, April 1853. in Robert A. Colby's "*Villette* and the Life of the Mind". O'Neill, 38.

mind; but at any rate she *has* something in her mind and expresses it as no other can...." [9] *Villette* was indeed written so that Bronte could try to reshape the negative notions surrounding shyness in order to enable both herself and her English society to be comfortable with who they truly were.

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[9] G.H. Lewes, *Westminster Review* 1853, vol. 3: 485-91. O'Neill, 19.

Conclusion

In the process of redefining the Victorian heroine in a novel such as *Villette*, Charlotte Bronte actually became one herself. As Brownstein states, " [. . .] Bronte effectively argued-which is to say she won-the case for a heroine as a developing individual, not a creature made at puberty for a man" (156). Bronte's life was a testament to this very development, as she transformed from an insignificant shy individual who faced social ostracism into an author who was able to achieve great significance and influence through her writing. Just like Lucy's, "[t]he life of Charlotte Bronte, viewed apart from her high gifts and genius as an authoress, was a very unsensational life; for the most part it was a life of domestic duty, self-sacrifice, fidelity to whatever she believed to be right, fortitude in suffering, and patient resignation under all inevitable trials; and these are not elements of attraction to readers who care for excitement." [1]

Yet rather than trying to sensationalize her life in order to become something she was not, Bronte instead embraced who she truly was and proved that reality had a sensationalism that inauthenticity could not rival. By accepting her truth as she did and ultimately triumphing over the various forces which threatened to destroy her, Bronte's life became sensational and garnered a great deal of public interest. As Brownstein states, "Charlotte Bronte's fictions about the lives of passionate young women were popular and influential; and so was she herself as the heroine of Elizabeth Gaskell's engrossing biography, and later of innumerable other versions of the romantic Bronte story" (156). Such public appeal was quite a testament to Bronte's personal success, as it proved that she was able to gain recognition where it was formerly denied and to therefore dismantle shyism to some extent.

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[1] Ellen Nussey, "Reminiscences of Charlotte Bronte," 1831-1855, in *Scribner's Monthly* vol. 2, no. 1, May. 1871: 18-31. Orel, 13.

In this thesis, I also attempted to both identify and deconstruct the shyism which I believe still exists today. I was inspired to explore this issue in great detail after studying *Villette* in several English classes in which I noticed that the majority of individuals expressed extreme disdain and prejudice toward Lucy Snowe's character. Since I had never seen such negative reactions directed at other literary characters, I was interested in exploring what it was about Lucy's character that invited such contempt. The following comment by a student named Nathanael O'Reilly is representative of the kinds of comments I frequently heard in the classes in which we studied *Villette:* "my number one reason for disliking this book so much: the protagonist, Lucy Snowe. I like to think of myself as fairly easy-going and open-minded and able to relate to most people. But I just couldn't stand Lucy Snowe! She is judgmental, narrow-minded, repressed, snobbish, conservative, and boring." [2]

As I attempted to show in my analysis of *Villette,* Lucy is none of these things yet may be perceived as such if readers are of a prejudicial mindset. My goal in this thesis, much like Bronte's in her writing, was to make my readers recognize the existence of shyism since awareness is the first step in overcoming prejudice. Just like any other type of prejudice and discrimination, shyism is hurtful to individuals and is an impediment to social equality. Society needs to overcome the inclination to make all personalities conform to one ideal and to instead embrace each individual for exactly who and what they truly are.

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[2] "*Villette*: The Most Tedious Book I Have Ever Read," *Epinions.com,* 6 October 2002, keyword: Villette <http://www.epinions.com/book-review-/>.

Appendix A

shy, *a*[1]

1a. Easily frightened or startled.

b. Of a horse: Skittish, unmanageable; high-mettled.

2. Easily frightened away; difficult of approach owing to timidity, caution, or distrust; timidly or cautiously averse to encountering or having to do with some specified person or thing; suspicious, distrustful.

a. of persons.

b. of an animal, bird, etc.

c. *to be* or *look shy on* or *at*: to regard with distrust of suspicion.

d. frightened (of), averse or reluctant (to).

3a. Fearful of committing oneself to a particular course of action: chary, unwilling, reluctant. Const. *of, in, about, at,* and *to* with infinitive.

b. Averse from admitting (a principle), or considering (a subject).

c. to be shy of, to be afraid of (doing).

d. unwilling to expose oneself.

4. Cautiously reserved; wary in speech or action.

5.a. Shrinking from self-assertion; sensitively timid; retiring or reserved from diffidence; bashful.

b. of a person's actions, etc.

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[1] Only the *OED* definition of shyness in adjective form is listed here, since this most specifically relates to my study.

c. Of a place, etc.: Retiring, secluded.

6. In various transferred uses of sense.

a. Of plants, trees, etc.: Unprolific, not bearing well. Also rarely of *birds:* Not breeding freely.

b. Short (of), lacking.

7. a. Of questionable character, disreputable, 'shady'.

b. Doubtful in amount or quality.

8. Of the wind:

a. Chill, keen, piercing.

b. 'Not exactly fair for the ship's course'

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