

# VILLETTE

by Charlotte Bronte



## THE AUTHOR

Charlotte Brontë (1816-1854) was born in Yorkshire, England, the third of six children of Patrick and Maria Brontë. Her father was appointed Anglican curate in the isolated hilltop village of Haworth four years later. When Charlotte was five, her mother died, and she and her siblings were commended to the care of her aunt, Elizabeth Branwell. With only a few brief exceptions, including a year spent in a boarding school (to which she later returned briefly as a governess), she spent the remainder of her life in Haworth.

The isolation of the Brontë children seems to have generated a rich life of the imagination. She and her sisters Emily and Anne began writing poetry at an early age, and actually published a book of poems under male pseudonyms in 1846. Before the publication of their book of poetry, while they were still in their teens, the Brontë children spent years writing their own fictional narratives; Charlotte and her brother Branwell wrote about an imaginary African kingdom called Angria. The three surviving sisters eventually opened a boarding school of their own in Haworth, which was a complete failure - not a single student enrolled in response to their advertisements.

Ultimately, the three Brontë sisters all had novels published. Charlotte's *Jane Eyre* (1847) was an immediate best-seller, but Emily's only novel, *Wuthering Heights*, gained far less public acceptance, being generally viewed as a dark and depressing work, described by one critic as "odiously and abominably pagan." After Emily's death in 1848 and Anne's death a year later, Charlotte found that her fame as a novelist enabled her to gain some measure of acceptance in London literary circles. In 1854, Charlotte married A.B. Nicholls, an Anglican curate whom she had rejected two years earlier when her father objected to the match, despite the fact that she does not appear to have loved him. Shortly after the marriage, she contracted pneumonia and died.

*Villette* (1853) was Charlotte's last novel, and is considered by many critics to be her most complex and satisfying work. It is largely a character study, containing very little action and few plot developments of great significance. Like the more famous *Jane Eyre*, it draws on much of the author's personal experience, especially her time in Brussels at the school of M. Heger (who appears to have been the model for Paul Emanuel) from 1842-4, where she encountered the pervasive Catholicism that is so despised by Lucy Snowe. Like Brontë herself, the protagonist is an observer of life rather than a participant, and knows little gratification in matters of the heart.

## PLOT SUMMARY

The story begins with Lucy Snowe, the narrator, visiting her godmother in the town of Bretton. Mrs. Bretton is a kindly old woman with whom Lucy feels very comfortable and happy. One day, a young girl arrives - Polly Home, a very self-possessed little thing who knows exactly what she wants but misses her father terribly (her father has gone abroad on doctor's advice following her mother's sudden death). Polly mopes around the house, acting more like a little lady than a young girl. Her homesickness is broken by the unexpected arrival of her father, by whose presence she is overjoyed. That night, she meets Graham Bretton for the first time, who teases her by treating her like the lady she pretends to be. She resists him scornfully at first, but the two soon become fast friends. She waits on him and spends time with him whenever possible. The two have a falling out when he has his friends over for a birthday party and she is not allowed to be included, but they soon make up. After two months, word arrives that Mr. Home has settled on the Continent and is ready for Polly and her nurse to join him, but Polly is strangely upset by the news - she is more upset by the thought of leaving Graham than she is pleased by the prospect of being reunited with her father.

After six months in Bretton, Lucy returns home, where she remains for eight quiet and largely uneventful years. At that time she is asked by Miss Marchmont, an elderly invalid, to serve as her paid companion. Lucy agrees and comes to respect the old woman. One night after a storm passes, Miss Marchmont summons Lucy and tells her the story of her lost love Frank, who had died thirty years earlier in a horseback-riding accident after a year of courtship. Miss Marchmont promises to do something for Lucy's benefit the next day, but that night she dies in her sleep.

Lucy, now twenty-three and alone in the world, decides to seek her future in London. After a day exploring the city and taking in its wonders, she decides to take a boat to the Continent. During the trip, she meets a flighty young woman named Ginevra Fanshawe, who is on her way to school in Villette. After a bout of seasickness, she lands and faces her unknown future. After a night in a hotel, she journeys to Villette, a town forty miles distant, but discovers that the coachman has left her baggage behind. She speaks no French, but a kindly Englishman translates for her and finds that her baggage will be sent to her two days hence. He then gives her directions to an inn where she can stay until her bags arrive. She gets lost on the way, however, and stumbles upon the Ladies' Boarding School run by Madame Beck - the very school to which Miss Fanshawe was going. She immediately asks for employment and is hired on the spot.

Her position is as the governess for Madame Beck's three children. She soon discovers that Madame Beck is a master of spying, going through Lucy's things in the middle of the night, watching her employees and pupils through peepholes, and making extensive use of informants. She runs a very effective school, never criticizing or assisting her teachers, but promptly removing any with whom she is displeased as soon as the opportunity arises. Lucy becomes the governess in place of one Mrs. Sweeny, a drunken Irishwoman. She spends much of her time learning the basics of French until one day Madame Beck asks her to substitute for the English teacher in the second form. She enters a classroom filled with sixty girls who are determined to have their way with her. She quickly shows them who is in charge by tearing up the essay written by one ringleader and locking another in the book closet. Madame Beck is pleased and the children are impressed. She thereafter becomes the English teacher in the school.

She finds that the pupils have no real interest in serious learning, nor does Madame Beck expect it of them; she must make things easy enough for them to swallow and can expect no support when discipline is necessary. Furthermore, most of her pupils are Catholic and are far more concerned about missing Mass than about lying whenever they find it convenient. Her greatest trial is Ginevra Fanshawe, who turns out to be a selfish, ignorant flirt. She puts little effort into her studies and is constantly trying to wheedle new dresses out of her guardian or her chaperon, Mrs. Cholmondeley. She spends much time with a young man she calls Isidore, though she cares nothing for him except as a source of presents; her real love is a handsome colonel with whom she occasionally dances at parties.

Madame Beck is as lax with her own children as she is with her pupils. She ignores Georgette, the youngest, who is dying for affection, and indulges the vicious Desiree, who lies and steals constantly from her mother and everyone else, while allowing the adventurous Fifine to do as she pleases. One day Fifine manages to fall down a set of stone steps and break her arm. Madame Beck goes to fetch the doctor, taking her good old time in doing so, and brings back Doctor John, a young Englishman who becomes the regular attending physician for the family. He also turns out to be the young man who helped Lucy on her arrival in Villette, though he seems not to have remembered the incident. When Fifine's arm heals, Desiree immediately plays sick to get attention, and the doctor continues coming to the house on a daily basis. That summer, Georgette takes ill and the other two children are sent away for their own protection. Doctor John continues his ministrations, and expands his attentions to some of the pupils. This causes a brief scandal, which Madame Beck quickly overcomes, though rumors persist that she intends to make the young doctor her husband. One day, however, Lucy hears an exchange between Doctor John and the flirtatious doorkeeper, Rosine Matou, that leads her to the conclusion that he is seeking her affections without success; Lucy is disappointed at the doctor's lack of judgment if that is indeed the case.

Lucy finds enjoyment in walking in the school's garden early in the morning and later in the evening. One secluded alley ending in a sheltered bower is her favorite spot. One night after a storm a small casket is dropped into the alley. It contains a bunch of violets and a love note which, though speaking of her in uncomplimentary terms, shows that some young lovers were sharing her hiding place. She is unable to identify the writer or the recipient, but soon Doctor John arrives and she tells him of her discovery. Sensing Madame Beck lurking in the bushes, the doctor leaves and Lucy exchanges pleasantries with her supervisor, though she is sure the ubiquitous spy has seen something of the foregoing encounter. One evening while the girls are listening to a "pious lecture" - a reading from saints' tales that Lucy finds abominable - she goes upstairs and finds Madame Beck snooping through her things. She retreats and says nothing, but now knows that her boss suspects her of a love affair. Later, Madame Beck announces that Georgette is still feverish and that she will go for the doctor, but that Lucy must receive him. Doctor John comes, Rosine hangs around and asks him about the discovery of the casket earlier, but his answers are cryptic, though they make clear to Lucy that nothing is going on between the doorkeeper and the doctor, nor is the doctor directly involved in the earlier incident. After Rosine leaves, Lucy and the doctor see another note being dropped from the window of the neighboring building, a college dormitory. Lucy fetches the note and the doctor tears it up without reading it. He clearly knows both the sender and the recipient - an unworthy young man and a thoroughly admirable young lady. He is about to tell Lucy the identity of the girl when they hear a sneeze, making it obvious that Madame Beck had returned from her jaunt and had been eavesdropping on

their conversation. Thus, though Lucy was quite willing to help the doctor preserve the identities of the young lovers, she never finds out who they are.

Lucy makes no close friends among the teachers; all tried to win her affection, but she found each one wanting in character. One in particular, Zélie St. Pierre, had no morals at all, but kept the children in order and humored Madame Beck by planning the annual summer party in her honor, including a play directed by Paul Emanuel, the literature teacher. On the day of the party, the girls and teachers alike devote the entire day to making themselves look beautiful. Lucy is ready hours before everyone else and goes to a classroom to read. There she is interrupted by Paul Emanuel, who tells her that one of the girls playing one of the major male roles is sick and that he needs her to fill the part. She reluctantly agrees and he locks her in the attic with the rats and cockroaches so she can memorize her part. After a rushed dinner, Lucy is thrown into the role and finds herself getting into it and playing the part with more feeling than she could have imagined. She does notice, however, that Ginevra Fanshawe, who is playing the female lead, seems to be playing to the audience and to one person in particular - Doctor John. After the play, the dance begins, and Lucy goes off into a corner to observe the proceedings. Ginevra is the belle of the ball, even though Madame Beck will not allow the single young men to dance with her girls. When she tires of dancing Ginevra comes over to Lucy, tells her how glad she is that she is herself rather than her dowdy schoolmistress, and offers to point out the two men in her life - Isidore and the colonel. The latter turns out to be a handsome but pompous fool, while Isidore is none other than Doctor John, who loves Ginevra to distraction while she is doing little more than toying with him while she really loves the colonel. Lucy later tries to warn John against Ginevra, but is unsuccessful in getting through to him.

The school term comes to an end with a flurry of activity - apparently the last two months of school is the only period of time in which either students or teachers really put in any significant work. Exams are oral, and all are administered by Paul Emanuel except the English examination, since he knows too little of that language. Lucy thus has a part to play on examination day, much to the displeasure of the jealous M. Paul. Once exams are over everyone leaves for the long vacation - everyone, that is, except for Lucy, one servant, and a poor mentally handicapped girl who is unwanted by her relatives. For Lucy, this is a lonely time, even when the cretin is taken away by her aunt. She becomes increasingly depressed, and finally gets sick during a rainy spell. One night she walks far outside the city to a small Catholic church, where she, for some unknown reason, goes up to confess to the priest, Pere Silas. She tells him of her spiritual struggles and he, sensing her sincerity, invites her to come to his home the next day, stating that she would find much greater solace in a Catholic convent than she could ever find in a Protestant church. She appreciates his kindness but is determined to refuse his invitation, knowing that a false step at this point could lead her into a life of seeking comfort in her own works of holiness and submission. On the way home she gets lost, is caught in a storm, and passes out in the street.

When Lucy wakes she has no idea where she is or how long she has been unconscious. She recognizes specific pieces of furniture and decorations in her room but does not recognize the room itself. The furnishings are associated in her mind with Mrs. Bretton, her godmother, and her experience in Bretton ten years earlier. Soon Mrs. Bretton herself appears, though she does not recognize Lucy. When Lucy recovers her strength, she is brought downstairs and discovers that the person who brought her to safety after her fainting spell was none other than Doctor John, who is the same Graham Bretton she knew as a child - he had transported her to his home, where

his mother had recently moved from England. Lucy does not exactly treat her readers fairly here; we find that she had recognized Doctor John as being her childhood acquaintance Graham several months earlier, but she omitted this from her narrative. She now derives great peace from the fact that she now has a friend in the vicinity of Villette - something she had lacked to this point. As Lucy's health improves, she discovers how she came to Doctor John's house. Apparently Pere Silas was worried about her and followed her to see that she got home safely. When she fainted he had picked her up, and soon after John had come by in a carriage. The two together had taken her to the Bretton house. One day during Lucy's recuperation Doctor John brings up the subject of Ginevra. Lucy, after hearing him praise her to the skies, finally loses control and tells him she cannot respect his fine opinion of one she knows to be unworthy of it. Later she apologizes for her words, and the two come to be on better terms than ever. He speaks to her freely of the object of his love, and she bites her tongue and says nothing to contradict his wildly inaccurate perceptions.

In the weeks before returning to school, Doctor John often takes Lucy with him to places around Villette - on his rounds among the poor and in the hospitals as well as to museums and art galleries. Lucy particularly enjoys the latter. One day she is left alone to view the art at her leisure and comes upon a large and rather ugly portrait of Cleopatra. As she sits before it, Paul Emanuel appears and insists that no single woman should look at such a picture; he takes her away to another part of the gallery and orders her to study what he considers to be edifying pictures of the stages of a woman's life. Lucy humors him, but when Doctor John returns they have a good laugh about the little despot's actions. John, too, dislikes the Cleopatra, but expresses his dislike by telling Lucy how inferior the looks of the woman in the painting are to those of Ginevra. A few days later, Mrs. Bretton announces that she is having a new dress made for Lucy; much to the horror of the latter, the dress is pink! The purpose was to clothe Lucy appropriately for a charity concert given by the pupils of the local Conservatory. The concert was to be attended by the King and Queen of Labassecour (the fictional country in which Villette is located) and all its nobility in their finery. Lucy has never been to such an event before and enjoys observing the place and the people in it. She notes that the king suffers from depression and that the queen, his second wife, tries her best to cheer him up. Among the courtiers in their finery are a few of Lucy's pupils, including Ginevra Fanshawe. During the course of the evening Ginevra is seen to stare at Mrs. Bretton and make mocking remarks to her neighbor about Doctor John's mother. He catches the exchange and loses all respect for her; his antipathy is doubled when he sees the strength of her attraction to Count de Hamal. Aside from disapproving glances at her dress from Paul Emanuel, Lucy has a delightful evening, especially because of the warmth of the friendship she receives from Graham and his mother.

Soon Lucy returns, not without regret, to her duties at school. Dr. John promises to write to her, but she does not allow her hopes to be built up too much. Her imagination hopes much, but her reason tells her she can expect nothing of life. Paul Emanuel catches her in tears and divines their meaning, though he is consistently rude and overbearing to her. Ginevra soon brings up the subject of the concert, delighting in her insulting treatment of Doctor John and his mother and her flirtations with her colonel. She wants to know how the doctor responded, but Lucy lies to her and tells her that he was angry and miserable all evening and could neither eat nor sleep. Two weeks later, Lucy receives a letter from the doctor which is intercepted and delivered to her by Paul, with suitably snide and disapproving comments. She wants to savor the moment, so she hides the letter in her dormitory. When she returns, Paul strikes out at her in anger over her

pupils' poor performance, then offers her his handkerchief to dry her tears. That night Lucy goes to her room to read the letter but finds it occupied, so she seeks a private spot and winds up in the cold, musty attic. The letter is a long one, in kind terms reminiscing about the joys of the previous weeks. As she savors her pleasure, she is suddenly confronted with an apparition - the ghost of a nun who is said to haunt the premises. She flees the attic and goes to Madame Beck, imploring her assistance. She and her brother, along with Doctor John himself, who had come to see her mother, go to the attic but find nothing. Lucy discovers that her candle has been extinguished and that her cherished letter is missing. The doctor takes her downstairs and sits with her by the fire, finally admitting that he himself had picked up the letter and was hiding it from her to tease her. After much coaxing she tells him what she saw, and they agree that she should tell no one else of her encounter. He believes it was a spectral vision explicable by the mental strain under which she had been living, but Lucy is not sure what to think - other than that Doctor John is the best man she has ever known.

In the weeks that follow Lucy receives four more letters, kind but not by any means emotional, and decides that from now on her life will be one of happiness rather than detachment. In response to the letters she writes two answers - one containing her true and full feelings, which she destroys, and the other bland and direct, which she sends to Graham. She also is invited to visit Graham and his mother each week, and delights in their friendship. One day Graham suddenly appears at the school and tells Lucy that his mother has another engagement and that she is welcome to join him at the theater. Since the star of the performance is a world-famous actress whom Lucy has always wanted to see, she joins him gladly. She is absorbed with the power of the woman's performance, but the evening is suddenly interrupted by cries of "Fire!" She and the doctor remain calm and hold their place while many panic around them, but then a young girl is knocked over by a man in panic and the doctor rushes to her aid. He helps her father carry her to their coach and accompanies them to the hotel where they are staying. There he ministers to her needs and Lucy helps to care for her. They are English, and are very grateful for the unexpected help they have received. On the way home, Graham and Lucy learn that the fire has been quickly extinguished and no real damage has been done to the theater.

For seven weeks Lucy receives no letters or invitations to visit the Brettons. She keeps her depression to herself. One day Ginevra enters in a bad mood because her wealthy uncle, Monsieur de Bassompierre, is in town. She dislikes him heartily, and hates his daughter even more - a foolish young thing who always puts on airs. That same day Lucy gets a letter from Mrs. Bretton inviting her over for dinner. There she meets M. de Bassompierre and his daughter and finds not only that they are the ones Graham helped that night at the theater, but also that the daughter is the same little Polly who spent time at Bretton as a child and fell madly in love with Graham. She is now seventeen, and quite a composed young lady. Graham and her father made have realized the connection from the past, but Graham has never brought up the subject of the childhood games he played with Polly, now known as Paulina. Paulina turns out to be a strange mixture of little girl and young lady; at times she is playful, particularly in her father's company, while at other times she is serious and quiet (Lucy notes this as a marked contrast to Polly's cousin Ginevra). M. de Bassompierre, meanwhile, considers the possibility of enrolling Paulina in Madame Beck's school, but instead offers to pay Lucy to be her companion (at three times her current salary); Lucy refuses the kind offer, though she continues to have frequent contact with the family. Back at school, she finds that her letters, hidden within three locked compartments, have been taken by Madame Beck. She is used to the ways of her employer, and is not surprised to find them

returned the next day, apparently untouched. When they disappear again, however, and show signs of having been perused by another, more careless hand, she concludes that Madame Beck had shared them with her cousin, M. Paul, and decides that such liberties are no longer to be tolerated. She purchases a thick glass bottle, seals the letters inside, and buries them under a pear tree near her seat at the end of the alley, cementing the hole closed afterward. She knows that she will receive no more letters - it seems that Graham has turned his attentions elsewhere. While she is in the alley, she again sees the nun who haunts the premises.

She and Paulina, who are becoming increasingly close, decide to take German lessons together from a woman named Anna Braun. After their lesson one day, Paulina confides in Lucy that her recent conversations with Ginevra have become increasingly uncomfortable, not only because Ginevra continually speaks ill of Mrs. Bretton, but also because she speaks slightingly of Graham, insisting that he throws himself at her feet and begs her to marry him, and that she will probably give in to the poor man some day soon. Paulina finds this hard to believe and Lucy knows better, so they decide to set up a test and invite Ginevra to a dinner that Graham and his scholarly friends are scheduled to attend. The occasion of the dinner was the birthday of the king's eldest son. Local college students were to give speeches and a professor was to present an oration. Much to Lucy's surprise and dismay, the professor turns out to be Paul Emanuel, who actually does a fine job of giving his presentation. Later at dinner Ginevra shows off, not realizing how ignorant she sounds in the august gathering, while Paulina converses intelligently with the men around her and makes a very positive impression. Graham arrives late and spends much of the evening close to Ginevra, though his eyes are on Pauline. When the opportunity arises Graham goes to Pauline and gives her his attention. As one might imagine, Ginevra sees his actions as a slight and is furious. Meanwhile, at one point when Graham is conversing politely with Lucy, Paul comes over and makes some very rude remarks. He later apologizes, and Lucy forgives him. On the way home, Ginevra vents her anger against Graham to Lucy, who for once shows her emotions and gives her a dressing down in no uncertain terms.

In the days that follow, Lucy often clashes with Paul Emanuel. He became furious whenever anyone dared to interrupt his class or even walk through the room, and one day the portress is called upon to do so numerous times. After being threatened within an inch of her life, she calls on Lucy to bear the next message. Lucy handles the situation playfully and with great aplomb, and Paul, rather than being angry, actually smiles at her, even when she accidentally breaks his glasses. That evening, though, he openly embarrasses her when he sits next to her to read to the students and she moves aside to give him room, and later rebukes her for the ostentation of her dress - the pink dress she had worn to the dinner, and even the small ribbon and flowers she uses to adorn her normal plain gray garb. Soon after is Paul's birthday. Though the school does not plan a big event as they do for Madame Beck, the custom is for each teacher and pupil to bring him a small gift, usually a flower or bouquet. Lucy stitched a lovely watch guard and put it in a small box, intending to give it to him. When the day arrives, Zelig, who has her eye on Paul, brings an ostentatious bouquet and begins the parade, as the girls lay their gifts on Paul's desk. Lucy alone has no flowers, and Zelig embarrasses her in front of the whole school. Paul, disappointed at her neglect, gives a lecture in which he violently denounces the English and all their ways, especially those of their women. Lucy, exasperated beyond measure, stands up and cries, "Long live the English," while at the same time denigrating the French. Paul, surprisingly, is pleased because he has gotten a reaction out of her. That night, Paul, as he often does, is snooping through Lucy's desk - he often leaves her small gifts, books that he thinks she will enjoy

or even chocolates - and Lucy catches him in the act. He has brought two books for her, and at this point she gives him the prepared gift. He is very pleased and immediately puts it on, making sure it is arranged in such a way that everyone can see it. At this point, the two are closer to being friends than they have ever been before. The relationship continues to be difficult, however, largely because Paul is jealous of anyone else's accomplishments - particularly those of a woman. When he finds out that her skills in arithmetic are very limited, he undertakes to tutor her, which makes him feel superior. Things go very well until she begins to make progress, at which point he becomes angry and accusatory. Finally he tries to get her to give an impromptu address in French at the next examination period along with the graduating seniors, but she flatly refuses and he accuses her of pride and of a refusal to put herself in a situation where she might fail.

Between the increasing distance between her and Graham and the frequent insults of Paul, Lucy increasingly gives thought to leaving Madame Beck's and starting her own school. One lazy Sunday afternoon she goes to her classroom and falls asleep at her desk. She awakes to find that someone has placed a shawl around her shoulders to keep her warm and another folded under her head to cushion the hard desktop. She then goes out to her alley and realizes that she has been followed by Paul. He tells her that he has often spied on the teachers and pupils of the school from a window overlooking the grounds, and that he consequently knows most of them far better than they suspect. For instance, he knows that, despite her charms and her evident fondness for him, Zelig is proud and vicious and deserving of no affection on his part. Lucy rebukes him for spying on people in such a way, but he then asks her if she has ever seen the ghost of the nun from the old legend. She affirms that she has, and he tells her that he has seen her also. At that moment the wind rises, a strange convulsion racks that large tree on the hill, and the ghost of the nun passes by, closer and clearer than either had ever seen her before.

Soon M. de Bassompierre and Paulina return from travel abroad and Lucy is invited to their home. Paulina immediately takes her up to her room to tell her all about her trip, but Lucy soon realizes that Paulina has something else in mind. She begins to ask Lucy's opinion of Graham Bretton, to which Lucy responds very favorably. Paulina then confides in her the fact that Graham had written to her during their trip and expressed his love for her. Lucy, not the least surprised, encourages Paulina that the two would make a good match, but that she should be cautious in breaking the news to her father, who still thinks of her as a little girl. Paulina has no conception of how much this conversation costs Lucy in terms of inner pain.

Paul had promised to take the girls and teachers on a picnic, and the appointed day breaks clear and warm. Lucy wears a pink dress, but knowing how much Paul had upbraided her for daring to wear such a color earlier, she tries to hide it from him. He eventually discovers it, but instead of being angry and lashing out, he compliments her on trying to look pretty for his party. After breakfast Paul and Lucy sit under a tree and she reads to him while he smokes a cigar. Strangely, Paul asks if she would miss him if he went away. She says she would, but he pursues the conversation no further. That night, he comes searching for her after dinner, but she hides, though she admits to herself that she would like nothing more than to hear what he has to say to her. Soon after, Lucy is asked by Madame Beck to run some errands for her in town - to get some cloth for the girls' projects and to deliver a present of fruit to an old woman named Madame Walravens. After purchasing the cloth she arrives at Madame Walravens' home, but is about to be turned away when a kindly old priest - Pere Silas again - gains her admittance. She gives the fruit to Madame Walravens, an old hunchbacked crone who treats her rudely and speaks ill of Madame Beck. Soon a thunderstorm arises. While the storm rages, Pere Silas tells Lucy the story

of a picture on the wall - that of a young woman named Justine Marie, dressed like a nun. She had once been in love with Pere Silas' prize pupil, a bright and dedicated young man. Her family had opposed the match, especially the grandmother, Madame Walravens. Justine had then entered a convent, where she soon died. The young man, however, once he had established himself in the world, supported the now-impoverished Madame Walravens, her elderly servant, and his former tutor, Pere Silas. This charitable soul turns out to be none other than Paul Emanuel. Paul had told Lucy previously that he could never marry, and she now understands that he said so because of the extreme financial burdens he bears for the support of this household and his lasting fidelity to Justine Marie, who has now been dead for twenty years.

The next day, while Lucy is still musing about her experience of the night before, Paul storms into her classroom and almost bodily drags her into the next room. There she sees two local professors, Messieurs Boisseac and Rochemorte. Paul tells her that he had shown them one of her essays and that they had refused to believe that he himself had not written it. He therefore invited them to examine her. Lucy is an awkward public speaker at best and performs miserably. In the written part of the examination, she writes a sarcastic little piece on Human Justice. Paul is disappointed, of course, but realizes that he has been unreasonable, as he so often is. Later in the day Paul comes to her and asks her seriously what she thinks of him. She speaks only of what appears on the surface and gives no hint of her recent insights into his character. He then accuses her of not knowing him at all, and she reveals her true understanding of who he is. He then asks if, despite his poverty and the fact that he is tied to his elderly dependents, she might be his true friend, and she readily agrees. She is at that moment happier than she can ever remember being at any time in her life. Finally, Paul asks her if she thinks there is any connection between his long-dead love and the nun who persists in appearing to both of them on the school grounds.

For the next two days Paul ignores Lucy completely. She wonders why, then finds in her desk a little pamphlet written by Pere Silas with an inscription to her from Paul. The book is a Catholic tract intended to convert Protestants. Lucy reads it but is unimpressed, preferring the comforts of Heaven to the dubious lure of Purgatory. Paul tries to convince her to turn to Rome, and Pere Silas even devotes his time to become her spiritual tutor. She listens to arguments, attends services, and hears of good works, but remains unconvinced. Finally she tells Paul that she can take no more - she wishes to be exposed no further to the blandishments of Popery. Paul is disappointed, but both sense that they have a depth of faith in common despite their differences.

Meanwhile, Graham and Paulina have been keeping their promise to postpone their courtship until the consent of Paulina's father may be obtained. As they wait, however, their love grows apace. Lucy continues to be Paulina's confidante as she pours out her feelings for her beloved. One evening Graham and Lucy are at the Bassompierres' home for dinner and Paulina's father becomes cognizant of the unspoken exchanges going on between Graham and his daughter. Later that evening he asks Lucy about their relationship, and Lucy tells him what the two of them have been wanting to tell him for months. He is reluctant to give Paulina up to anyone, but appreciates Lucy's candor in discussing the matter. Soon Paulina comes into the room and pours out her heart to her father. He is gruff and outwardly stubborn, but she knows he will in the end succumb to her pleas. Graham then returns and M. de Bassompierre gives his consent. The two are married, and Lucy gives the reader a glimpse into the future - their marriage is a happy one despite eventually having to suffer the loss of Paulina's father and Graham's mother, and they produce many fine children, though not all survive infancy.

Back at the school, Paul and Lucy are growing increasingly close. One day the two of them are in the hidden alley, hand in hand, when they are come upon by Madame Beck and Pere Silas. A few days later Paul does not appear at school and Madame Beck announces that he will not be returning, but will be leaving Europe to go to the West Indies. Lucy, of course, is distraught, but waits patiently for Paul to come and say goodbye. He finally stops by the night before his departure, but Madame Beck conspires to keep Lucy from him. The two of them have an unpleasant exchange in which Madame Beck tells Lucy that Paul can never marry her and Lucy accuses her of wanting him for herself. He manages to send Lucy a note promising to see her privately before he goes, but he never appears. Lucy cannot sleep, so Madame Beck sends her a soothing drink, not telling her it contains opium. Lucy then walks in the park in the middle of the night and encounters friends and acquaintances, and finally comes upon Madame Beck, Pere Silas, and Madame Walravens - the three people she believes are responsible for Paul's abrupt departure. Over time she has put tidbits of gossip together and has concluded that Madame Walravens owns a plantation in Guadeloupe that is failing and needs a manager. Paul is the obvious choice, though the three have different motives - Madame Walravens because she wants the money from the plantation, Pere Silas because he does not want his star pupil to fall into apostasy because of his love for a heretic, and Madame Beck because she is determined that if she cannot have Paul for herself, no one else will get him either. As the three continue to talk, they begin to speak of the impending arrival of Justine Marie. Lucy knows this cannot be Paul's long-dead love; it is in fact one of the students at the school, Justine Marie Sauveur, a local girl for whom Paul is the godfather. Surprisingly, however, Paul himself appears. He has chosen not to take ship that night, but to sail two weeks hence. As the conversation continues, Lucy discovers that the family intends Paul to marry this young girl after his return from the Indies. He seems quite taken by her, and by no means opposed to the idea. When Lucy arrives back at the school, she is startled to find the ghostly nun in her bed! She attacks the apparition, but it turns out to be merely the nun's clothes, accompanied by a note promising that the ghost would appear to her no more. Lucy quickly bundles up the nun's clothing and goes to sleep.

The next morning the whole school is in an uproar because Ginevra Fanshawe has disappeared, leaving her stuffed nightgown in her bed. She has eloped with Alfred de Hamal. Soon Lucy receives a letter in which Ginevra explains that the "nun" she had encountered on the grounds of the school had been none other than Alfred, who took advantage of the superstition to disguise himself and visit Ginevra during the night. M. de Bassompierre is furious about Ginevra's marriage, both because de Hamal is an inveterate gambler and "nincompoop" and because Ginevra is underage. After much noise and threatening he finally agrees to recognize the status quo and settle some money on Ginevra, which pleases her greatly. In the years that follow they have a son who becomes the delight of Ginevra's life and is spoiled rotten, while Alfred continues his gambling ways, leading Ginevra constantly to ask her uncle for money, showing no qualms about expecting everyone else to support her in the lifestyle to which she has become accustomed.

The day before Paul's departure he comes to visit Lucy at the school. No sooner does he enter her classroom than Madame Beck appears and insists that she needs him to come with her, and will require his presence for the rest of the day. Paul insists that she leave instantly, and the shocked Madame Beck has little choice but to obey. He then takes Lucy for a walk and shows her a small but beautifully-furnished apartment containing at the rear a lovely compact schoolroom. He then hands her a packet of advertisements announcing the opening of a new Ladies' School

under the supervision of one Lucy Snowe. He has spent the preceding weeks preparing this surprise, which he has shared with no one. It is his intention that Lucy leave Madame Beck's establishment and operate her own school, not only because this has been her long-cherished dream, but also so they can communicate freely during his absence without Madame Beck's interference. He has already obtained four pupils for her, one of whom is his goddaughter Justine Marie. This stuns Lucy into a jealous silence, then she pours out her experience in the park several weeks earlier. Paul tells her that she misunderstood the dialogue - that though the family wished him to marry Justine, he had no intention of doing so; in fact, she was to marry a young German merchant, Heinrich Muhler. Paul then professes his love for Lucy and asks her to marry him when he returns from the Indies. The next three years are happy ones as Lucy's school prospers. She and Paul correspond regularly in anticipation of his return. As his ship travels toward Europe an enormous storm arises, and though the author leaves the final outcome uncertain, it appears that Paul's ship is lost and Lucy is left with nothing but memories and the school he so generously provided for her.

## **MAJOR CHARACTERS**

- Lucy Snowe - The protagonist and narrator of the story, she is a shy, plain girl who keeps to herself but is a shrewd observer of all around her. During the story she develops unrequited love for Graham Bretton and later shares a love with Paul Emanuel that never reaches fruition.
- Mrs. Bretton - Lucy's godmother, a kindly old woman, she reenters Lucy's life when she moves to the outskirts of Villette.
- Doctor John Graham Bretton - Mrs. Bretton's son, sixteen years old when the story begins, he grows up to become a doctor and is the unknown man who helps Lucy when she first arrives in Villette and the Doctor John who ministers at Madame Beck's school and falls in love with Ginevra Fanshawe; he is the "Isidore" who loves her madly but with whom she merely toys and flirts. He later falls in love with and happily marries Paulina de Bassompierre.
- Paulina (Polly) Home de Bassompierre - A six-year-old girl whose mother has just died at the beginning of the story; she is taken in by Mrs. Bretton while her father is abroad and falls in love with Graham. Ten years later Graham assists her when she is nearly trampled in a theater during a fire, and the two become reacquainted, fall in love, and marry. She is Ginevra Fanshawe's cousin.
- Mr. Home de Bassompierre - Polly's father; he is told by doctors to travel abroad after his wife's sudden death. He becomes wealthy when a distant relative in France leaves him some estates. He is also Ginevra Fanshawe's uncle, and the one who pays for her education.
- Maria Marchmont - An elderly invalid for whom Lucy briefly serves as a companion.

- Ginevra Fanshawe - A flighty young woman Lucy meets on the boat to the Continent; she is a student at Madame Beck's boarding school in Villette, and a selfish flirt who cares nothing for her studies or for anyone besides herself. She leads on Graham Bretton, but loves and eventually marries Alfred de Hamal, a penniless gambler with a title.
- Mrs. Cholmondeley - Ginevra's chaperon, from whom she begs presents until the woman refuses to give her any more.
- Colonel Alfred de Hamal - The colonel with whom Ginevra professes to be in love, he is pompous and shallow and a persistent gambler. He and Ginevra elope and he continues his irresponsible lifestyle.
- Madame Beck - The owner of the Ladies' Boarding School attended by Ginevra, she is nosey and demanding; Lucy finds employment there as a governess, then as a teacher of English. She hopes one day to marry her cousin, Paul Emanuel.
- Rosine Matou - A pretty young doorkeeper at the school.
- Zélie St. Pierre - A Parisian woman who teaches in the school; she has no morals, but keeps the students in order and humors Madame Beck by planning a big party for her each summer. She desires to marry Paul Emanuel, but he has no interest in her.
- Paul Emanuel - Teacher of literature at the school, he directs the plays at Madame Beck's annual party. He thinks very highly of himself but hates any form of display in others, and takes it upon himself to tell everyone around him what to do. He is harsh and outspoken, but he and Lucy ultimately become friends. She later finds out that he is secretly a man of enormous charity, even to those he has good reason to dislike. He is manipulated by his relatives to leave Villette to manage a plantation on Guadeloupe, but before he goes he arranges for Lucy to open her own school and asks her to marry him when he returns. Sadly, his ship sinks in a storm and he never makes it back to his waiting beloved.
- Justine Marie - The love of Paul's youth. Her family refused to permit their relationship and she retired to a convent and soon died.
- Madame Walravens - Justine's grandmother; she hated Paul and opposed his marriage to Justine. After the girl's death Paul voluntarily supported the vicious old crone despite her hatred for him. She, along with Madame Beck and Pere Silas, is determined to break up Paul's relationship to Lucy.
- Pere Silas - Formerly Paul's teacher, he is now supported by Paul as well. At one point in the story Lucy comes to him for confession, and he later helps her after she passes out in the street, and later yet tells her the story of Paul and Justine Marie. He opposes Paul's relationship to Lucy because she is a Protestant.
- Justine Marie Sauveur - A student at the school and Paul's goddaughter; she eventually marries a German merchant, Heinrich Muhler.

## NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“How will she get through this world, or battle with this life? How will she bear the shocks and repulses, the humiliations and desolations, which books, and my own reason tell me are prepared for all flesh?” (Lucy, ch.3, p.93)

“There is nothing like taking all you do at a moderate estimate: it keeps the mind and body tranquil; whereas grandiloquent notions are apt to hurry both into fever.” (Lucy, ch.5, p.105)

“There is a perverse mood of the mind which is rather soothed than irritated by misconstruction; and in quarters where we can never be rightly known, we take pleasure, I think, in being consummately ignored.” (Lucy, ch.10, p.164)

“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.” (Lucy, ch.14, p.211)

“I did not, in my heart, arraign the mercy or justice of God for this; I concluded it to be a part of his great plan that some must deeply suffer while they live, and I thrilled in the certainty that of this number, I was one.” (Lucy, ch.15, p.229)

“If life be a war, it seemed my destiny to conduct it single-handed.” (Lucy, ch.26, p.381)

“To study the human heart thus, is to banquet secretly and sacrilegiously on Eve’s apples.” (Lucy, ch.31, p.456)

“He had become my Christian hero.” (Lucy, ch.35, p.491)

“While he spoke, the tone of his voice, the light of his now affectionate eye, gave me such pleasure as, certainly, I had never felt. I envied no girl her lover, no bride her bridegroom, no wife her husband; I was content with this my voluntary, self-offering friend.” (Lucy, ch.35, p.501)

“Yes, [solitude] is sadness. Life, however, has worse than that. Deeper than melancholy, lies heartbreak.” (Lucy, ch.37, p.520)

“Here pause: pause at once. There is enough said. Trouble no quiet, kind heart; leave sunny imaginations hope. Let it be theirs to conceive the delight of joy born again fresh out of great terror, the rapture of rescue from peril, the wondrous reprieve from dread, the fruition of return. Let them picture union and a happy succeeding life.” (Lucy, ch.42, p.596)

## ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. Compare and contrast the protagonists of Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* and *Jane Eyre*. Both have rich inner lives and tell the reader much about what they are thinking and feeling, and both have much in common with the author. In what important ways are the young heroines the same, and how are they different? How are the differences critical to the themes of the two novels?
2. Compare and contrast the leading male figures in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* and *Jane Eyre*. How are Paul Emanuel and Edward Rochester alike in their personalities and in their relationships to the heroines of the stories? In what important ways are they different? How do these differences reflect the divergent themes of the two novels?
3. Discuss the character of Paul Emanuel in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*. Consider particularly the extremes of his behavior to Lucy and to others in the story. Is such a character credible? Do you believe that such extremes could coexist within the same person? Can you believe that Lucy falls in love with him? Why or why not? Support your answer with details from the novel.
4. Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* is strongly anti-Catholic in many of the narrator's editorial comments. Do you think the author is fair in her assessment of Catholicism? Her language certainly would not be considered politically correct today, but are her conclusions valid ones? Why or why not? Be specific, and support your conclusions with Scripture.
5. Compare and contrast the sexual mores contained in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* and Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. How do the two stories demonstrate the social strictures faced by men and women seeking to know one another better? Are these strictures healthy or oppressive? Do they serve to protect people from harmful relationships or encourage them to form lifelong relationships on shallow foundations? Use examples from the novels to support your analysis.
6. Compare the characters of Ginevra Fanshawe in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* and Lydia Bennet in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. To what extent are their values similar? To what extent are the consequences of their priorities comparable? Discuss the views of such sets of values held by the authors of the two novels, using details from the stories to support your conclusions.
7. Evaluate the ending of Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*. Readers in her day objected to the open-ended nature of the concluding paragraphs, but modern critics have found little mystery in the ending. What do you think happened to Paul Emanuel? Why do you think so? Do you find the ending satisfying or unsatisfying? Why?

8. Compare and contrast the role of the supernatural in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* and *Jane Eyre*. Are the differences significant to the plots of the two stories? Do they reflect a change in the author's thinking in the six years between the publication of the two stories, or are they merely useful plot devices? Why do you think so?
9. Discuss the role of home and a place of one's own in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*. Consider the different places where Lucy Snowe lives and visits and apply your observations to a discussion of the psychological importance of a sense of place as communicated by the author.
10. Discuss the use of biblical allusions in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*. The book is full of them, and thus demonstrates an extensive knowledge of Scripture on the part of the parsonage-bred Miss Brontë. How do these contribute to the tone and themes of the novel? Use specific examples to support your discussion.
11. Discuss the role of the single woman in society as it is portrayed in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*. In the opinion of the author, is the single woman pitiable or is society culpable for holding her down and keeping her from achieving her potential? Evaluate the concept of singleness communicated by Brontë in the novel and assess it in the light of the society of her day, in the light of modern society, and in the context of Scripture.
12. Discuss the role of loneliness in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*. Lucy Snowe spends virtually her entire life as an outsider with few significant human relationships. How does this affect her as a person? Does Brontë see her heroine's isolation as an advantage or disadvantage? In what ways? Support your conclusions with details from the novel.
13. In Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, is isolation something Lucy Snowe seeks or something she suffers? Discuss the role of isolation in the life of Brontë's protagonist. To what extent does it reflect and to what extent does it shape Lucy's character?
14. Evaluate the reliability of Lucy Snowe as a narrator in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*. As a reader, to what extent are you able to believe her assessment of other people? Of her own character and experiences? Is she always honest with the reader? How does her ability as a narrator influence the reader's perceptions of her and her acquaintances? Use specific examples to support your conclusions.
15. Discuss the role of coincidence in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*. On several occasions characters from the early part of Lucy's life reappear, and other characters seem to show up suspiciously often when something important is happening. To what extent does this dependence on coincidences affect the credibility of the novel? To what extent does it affect the reader's enjoyment of the story?