

VILLETTE



CHARLOTTE BRONTË

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FICTION

VILLETTE
BY CHARLOTTE BRONTË
INTRODUCTION BY MAY SINCLAIR

CHARLOTTE BRONTË, born on 21st
April 1816, at Thornton, near Bradford,
the daughter of a clergyman. Married her
father's curate in 1854, the Rev. A. B.
Nicholls. Died on 31st March 1855.

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INTRODUCTION

Villette has an interest of its own apart from its place in literature. It is the great battle-ground of Charlotte Brontë's biographers, of those who have accused her of plagiarising, more or less grossly, from her own experience, and those who are bent on defending her from this charge.

There is, of course, no reason why she should not have plagiarised from her own experience or anybody else's. The question is: Did she? It seems to me that there is not one scrap of evidence to prove that she did. None—not even a fifth-hand rumour—to support the preposterous legends that have gathered round her name on the strength of this one book.

It may at once be conceded that *Villette* is unmistakably the novel of reality. It is the one Brontë book that has most rewarded the lover of identifications. There is hardly a character in it whose prototype had not been discovered by the Brontë specialist. Dr. Bretton is Mr. George Smith, Mrs. Bretton is Mr. George Smith's mother, Madame Beck is Madame Héger, and M. Paul Emanuel is M. Héger. More than any of the Brontë novels it bears the mark, not only of experience, but of intense personal experience. Therefore, out of the materials found in *Villette* the specialist has built up the Romance of Charlotte Brontë, in other words, that actual love-story which is supposed to be the base and root of all novels written by women. *Tout talent de femme est un bonheur manqué.*

Emily Brontë escaped this imputation because her genius was admittedly "of imagination all compact," while in Charlotte that power was coupled with a spirit of observation almost cruelly exact. In her first novel, *The Professor*, the lower talent is predominant. In *Jane Eyre* imagination riots almost to the dethronement of the lesser power. In *Shirley* there is a sharp struggle for ascendancy between the two, causing Titanic upheavals and subsidences. The book shows a larger vision of reality and a slenderer grasp of it. But in all the great scenes, the great passages, of *Villette*, imagination

and actuality are fused in one supreme act of creation. The author's genius is no longer alien but at home in the world. She knows now what is essential to her art, and she is her own best critic. There is one comparative failure in the book, the portrait of Dr. Bretton. She puts her finger on the cause of failure. In a letter to Mr. George Smith (the prototype!) she says: "The fault lies in its wanting the germ of the real."

"The germ of the real." There is the open secret of all great art. To the artist, at any rate to the dramatist and novelist, whose supreme work is to develop the persons of his drama, all that is necessary is the *germ*—the undeveloped thing. What is more, it is the germ that alone is of use to him. Genius is sterile to the thing developed—the complete reality, grown and finished in alien soil. Genius imperatively demands its own, the exercise of its natural function to shape, to nourish, and bring forth. It acts more swiftly on a hint than on the most elaborate demonstration from without.

The germ, of course, must be there. Dr. Bretton is a failure because no germ, we are told, went to his making. But if M. Paul Emanuel had been drawn, line for line, from M. Hégér, of the Pensionnat de Demoiselles, he would never have come before us, as he does, with vivid, startling, indomitable life.

Nor was he so drawn, for the simple reason that Charlotte Brontë, during the longer period of her stay at Brussels, saw very little of M. Hégér or of Madame Hégér either. In her letters home she says: "I never exchange a word with any other man than Monsieur Hégér" [this to repudiate a charge of intended matrimony], "and seldom indeed with him." Again: "Brussels is indeed desolate to me. Since the Dixons left I have had no friend." She suffered, not only from solitude, but from an incurable home-sickness. "Everybody is abundantly civil, but home-sickness comes creeping over me. I cannot shake it off." In view of the "romance" I would suggest that we may be miserable in the house inhabited by the beloved object, but we are not home-sick. And it was only by an effort of will that Charlotte Brontë forced herself to master—not her passion for M. Hégér, but—the German language. It was the German language, still longed for and still unpossessed, that prisoned her in the Pensionnat of the Rue d'Isabelle.

M. Hégér was not the sole object of interest there, neither did Charlotte Brontë use him to better purpose than she did his wife—if indeed Madame Hégér be the original of Madame

Beck, which I am inclined to doubt. The authentic records of that lady do not suggest a moral being in the least resembling Madame Beck. And if M. Héger had possessed the tenth part of M. Paul Emanuel's personality, his insistence, his irrepressible vivacity and charm, I doubt if Charlotte would have described herself as sitting solitary and miserable, bored (for bored we see her) to extinction in that Pensionnat de Demoiselles.

And yet, because of M. Héger, Mr. Clement Shorter tells us that "the sojourn in Brussels made Miss Brontë an author." He might just as well have said that sojourn at Eton made Shelley a poet. It would, of course, be absurd to say that "Miss Brontë" owed nothing to Brussels and M. Héger, or that the conquest of two languages did not help her to mastery of her own. Probably they did. What is more important, at Brussels she met for the first time with outside encouragement and stimulus. And Brussels was her first great change of scene, a change thrilling and illuminating. It stirred her genius as it had never been stirred before, if it did not bring it to the full knowledge of itself. But it had no more to do with its development than had the Chapter Coffee House or the dome of St. Paul's.

I do not want to criticise Mr. Clement Shorter. He has earned his right to cherish this theory by the admirable manner in which he has disposed of the Héger "romance." It is a well-conceived and simple theory, but it does not and it cannot bear the weight he has put on it. It does not and it cannot account for the tremendous fact of Charlotte Brontë's genius, nor for its quality, nor for the abrupt turn that it took in *Jane Eyre*. Heaven only knows what turn it would have taken had Charlotte Brontë never learnt two languages, nor written "devoirs" under M. Héger's eye. Its true character certainly does not appear in *The Professor*, which was the first-fruits of the "sojourn in Brussels." Compare that book with *Jane Eyre*. Sober, deliberate, depressed, half cynically observant, and obedient to the fact, inspired by the very genius of prudence and common sense, the tale moves, passionless as a "devoir," to its respectable conclusion. It has a crude finality and distinction, a charm, for all its occasional precocity, as candid and clear as innocence itself, a miniature talent that attains perfection in the fine portrait of Frances Henri. Charlotte Brontë thought better of *The Professor* than did her publishers. But between this book and *Villette*, between this book (this tame book that Brussels brought

out of her) and *Jane Eyre*, is a distance that no biographer has yet bridged, a difference that no specialist has yet accounted for.

It is not a mere difference in style and technique, in mastery of material. In some respects *The Professor* is a better constructed book than any that succeeded it. The story moves more evenly, more straightforwardly, than either *Villette* or *Jane Eyre*. The style, if not perfect, is adequate, assured. Many of Charlotte Brontë's later faults, the exaggeration, the violence, the abuse of metaphor, are absent from it. There is insight in it and analytic power, things that Brussels could nourish and stimulate if it could not give, qualities shared in abundance by lesser novelists. But of the master quality of passion, that quickening flow, that continuous and sustaining breath, that makes *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* unique in literature, there is not a sign.

The Professor is the novel of calm, half-conscious, wholly conscientious talent. *Jane Eyre* is the novel of illumination, of genius excited, unfettered, and glorying in its power. *Villette* is the novel of that power made perfect. The problem for the critic and biographer is: What made the difference? From what quarter did liberation and illumination come? We have nothing to guide us but the letters, the psychological evidence of the novels, and the argument from their dates. Those of *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* come too late to establish M. Héger as the influence; and there is no testimony to that effect in any of Charlotte Brontë's letters. She is eloquent as to his kindness, but of his influence there is not a word.

The researchers who crossed the Channel to find the clue, missed, it seems to me, what lay under their eyes. In 1848, in the quiet parsonage at Haworth, the three sisters were all writing novels, and while Anne Brontë produced *Agnes Grey* and Charlotte *The Professor*, Emily brought forth *Wuthering Heights*. *Wuthering Heights* is to *Agnes Grey* as the flames of sunrise and sunset to a parlour fire. It made the lambent lucidity of *The Professor* pale. And it is my belief that with the reading of *Wuthering Heights* there came Charlotte Brontë's moment of illumination. Her fire was kindled at her sister's, the only flame to which it would have owned itself akin. It is doubtful whether she acknowledged in Emily a genius greater than her own; her criticism of *Wuthering Heights* does not prove this, but certainly she recognised it as a thing apart and alone. She saw that Emily had cast off all conven-

tion, all tradition; she had dared to be herself, to let herself go. What Emily had done she too might do.

So she, too, let herself go, and she wrote *Jane Eyre*. The sources of her inspiration sprang, like Emily's, from within; but she had always been timid and distrustful of herself, and it took the audacity of Emily to point out the way. It was from *Wuthering Heights*, then, that her deliverance came.

I am aware that there is no direct proof of this. But, theory for theory, it seems to me more probable than any other. I am not suggesting that Emily was responsible for one word that her sister wrote. I do not believe this, any more than I believe that Charlotte Brontë wrote *Wuthering Heights*.¹ But if there *was* an influence, sustaining her, inspiring her, and revealing her to herself, it was Emily, and I do not see how it could well be otherwise. With the Brontës, the tie of sisterhood, the devotion, the passion of sisterhood, was supreme. Between Charlotte and Emily the tie was closest. We know how when Emily was absent Charlotte languished;⁷¹ how when Emily died her genius suffered its darkest eclipse. Compared with Emily, other people—the Héggers, the Smiths, Mr. Williams, and the rest—were inconceivably unimportant. This fact, poignant, self-evident, inevitable, is the one that the Brontë specialists have missed. Some of our critics have even denied that there was any spiritual sisterhood. It is to the great honour of Mrs. Humphry Ward that she has recognised in Charlotte Brontë an imagination of the highest order. Not a word can be added to or taken away from her fine appreciation prefixed to Mr. Shorter's edition of the works.

We know how that imagination worked, for Charlotte Brontë has described the process to Mrs. Gaskell. One of the most powerful and vivid scenes in *Villette* is that in which Lucy Snowe, drugged with opium to delirium, gets up and wanders through the city on the night of the festival. "I asked her," writes Mrs. Gaskell, "whether she had ever taken opium, as the description given of its effects in *Villette* was so exactly like what I had experienced—vivid and exaggerated presence of objects, of which the outlines were indistinct, or lost in golden mist, etc. She replied that she had never, to her knowledge, taken a grain of it in any shape, but that she had followed the process she always adopted when she had to describe anything that had not fallen within her own

¹ This is the latest legend, of which Mr. Malham Dembleby, of Yorkshire, is the ingenious author. How the Brontës would have delighted in Mr. Malham Dembleby!

experience; she had thought intently on it for many and many a night before falling to sleep—wondering what it was like or how it would be—till at length, sometimes after her story had been arrested at this one point for weeks, she wakened up in the morning with all clear before her, as if she had in reality gone through the experience and then could describe it, word for word, as it had happened." There is the same power of brilliant, piercing imagination in all the great scenes of the book, in the chapters which tell of Lucy's arrival in the capital, of her agony of loneliness when she is left by herself in the great deserted house, and in the confession scene and all that goes before it. And for a humbler reality, take the inimitable scene where M. Paul drags Lucy to the garret, the scene in which she breaks M. Paul's spectacles, and all that delicious chapter headed "Monsieur's Fête." ↓

It is impossible to review *Villette* without reference to *The Professor*. Much of the local scenery and one character (Mdlle. Reuter) of the earlier book reappear in it. But *Villette* is not *The Professor* re-written. *The Professor* is a sort of nursery ground for all Charlotte Brontë's later novels. Crimsworth is her first attempt at Louis Moore in *Shirley*, Frances Henri is a first cousin of Jane Eyre, Yorke Hunsden splits up into Mr. Yorke and Rochester. But there is no M. Paul in *The Professor*. He is the unique glory of *Villette*, from his first invasion of the scene, in *paletot* and *bonnet grec*, to his final disappearance in the storm. If Mdlle. Reuter is a younger, slightly more perfidious Madame Beck, Frances, in spite of her cousinship, is a person complete in herself. In *The Professor* we see the beginnings of Charlotte Brontë's marvellous power of word-painting. "It was through streaming and starless darkness that my eye caught the first gleam of the lights of Brussels." Some of the scenes, Crimsworth's search for Frances Henri, his finding of her in the cemetery, the description of her innocent ménage, are admirable in their soberer manner. Frances is drawn, in some ways, with a more delicate touch than Lucy Snowe.

For the character and rôle of Lucy betray a shifting of the author's intention. We do not know what this intention was, but one thing is clear that, from the beginning of *Villette*, Polly is the character predestined to high suffering. The marvellous chapters which tell of Polly's childhood are manifestly the prologue to a tragedy of which she is the unique heroine. Lucy is merely a disagreeable subsidiary character. But with chapter four Polly disappears, and Lucy takes her

place and thereafter dominates the book. When Polly comes in again she is merely the happy foil to Lucy, the grand type of obscure but impassioned suffering. Lucy has developed into what we expected Polly to become—the sensitive, intense, passionate creature, foredoomed to tragedy. Charlotte Brontë has put it on record that she disliked Lucy Snowe. Now, why, if she disliked her, did she take her out of her humble place, exalt her to the position of heroine, and follow her career with such passionate interest? Why did she abandon what must have been, artistically, a cherished plan? Because reality was too strong for her. She abandoned her plan when the accidents of the undeveloped story brought Lucy to the Pensionnat. Then reality seized her. From that point the tale goes securely, triumphantly, inevitably to its close.

However much she may have done violence to her original conception, there is no faltering in her hand. In *Villette* her minor characters for the first time attain roundness and fulness and finish—Polly, Mrs. Bretton, Dr. Bretton (it is consistency not completeness that he lacks); even the sketch of the little De Hamal has a certain firmness and solidity. But Ginevra Fanshawe—well—the portrait of Ginevra has been praised as a masterpiece. And in many ways it is a masterpiece, achieved triumphantly, in spite of a simply abominable method, a method tainted by a certain artistic vulgarity. At her best Charlotte Brontë never attained to a detached and impersonal view of any person or thing, but, really, Ginevra is handled with a violence, a personal ferocity, which is destructive to the illusion of reality. The artistic immorality of the procedure is the more shocking by contrast with the inimitable restraint and delicacy, the deadly suave precision of the touch that has immortalised Madame Beck. And it is no excuse to say that the figure of Ginevra is Lucy Snowe's work and not Charlotte Brontë's. It must be judged by its place in the picture, and it cannot stand beside Madame Beck, M. Paul Emanuel, and Polly.

As for the portrait of Lucy, it, too, is a masterpiece, the most perfect, the most finished, the most psychologically unerring, that Charlotte Brontë ever achieved. And yet she has sinned, and sinned doubly here. Not only did she allow Lucy to usurp the supreme place obviously intended for Polly, but she has changed her own attitude to her in accordance with the altered rôle. In the earlier chapters Lucy is drawn with a grudging interest, a cold aversion, which communicates itself to the reader. But no sooner does she arrive at

the Pensionnat, the scene of Charlotte Brontë's own misery, than she is marked for her tragic part, dowered with the fatal gift of passion and developed with an extreme and poignant sympathy.

That sympathy was at once Charlotte Brontë's weakness and her strength. The book is flung, as it were, from Lucy's beating heart; it is one profound, protracted cry of the agony of longing and frustration. This was a new voice in literature. *Villette* was the unsealing of the sacred secret springs, the revelation of all that proud, decorous, mid-Victorian reticence most sedulously sought to hide. There is less overt, audacious passion in *Villette* than in *Jane Eyre*, but there is a surer, a subtler, a more intimate psychology, a steadier hold of the uncompromising reality.

How was it that Lucy's creator disliked, almost to vindictiveness, this helpless, appealing child of her imagination? The point is psychologically interesting. Even so do mothers after the flesh abhor their own failings reincarnate and exaggerated in their offspring.

This brings us again to the secret, "the germ of the real." It is the ground on which our specialists have based their diagnosis of Charlotte Brontë's "case." Lucy Snowe was by her own confession in love with Dr. Bretton, Lucy Snowe was Charlotte Brontë, therefore Charlotte Brontë was in love with M. Héger. (We shall be told next that Mrs. Humphry Ward herself endured the ignominious agonies of Eleanor, for at this rate none of us are safe.) Fortunately for us, Charlotte Brontë was not, at that period, in love with any one, or we should never have had Lucy Snowe. At that period—indeed at all periods, even in the time of her husband's courtship—Charlotte Brontë was quite singularly not in love. All her heroic strength, her defiant virtue, was against it. Her admirable common sense, and her still more admirable sense of humour, alike revolted from poor Lucy's orgies of mis-directed sentiment. Yet when she wrote *Villette* she was aware that "the germ of the real," from which Lucy grew, was transplanted from her own heart—ruthlessly transplanted that it might become the glory of *Villette*. Such an innocent, natural germ, but not a germ that, even for artistic purposes, she cultivated in herself. Mr. Clement Shorter, while he rightly denies that it ever grew into the proportions of a passion, tells us that Charlotte Brontë did so cultivate it, morbidly, artificially, for the purposes of her art. There is not a shadow of foundation for this view. All the evidence

is against it. Charlotte Brontë knew the feminine heart. She knew her century. She knew that "sensibility" was the vice of the half-educated women of its upper classes, and she fought the first symptoms of it in herself with as stern and high a courage as Emily brought to the defiance of her physical malady. This, I believe, once for all, to be the truth about Charlotte Brontë.

Why on earth should she have cultivated the thing? She had no need of it. Her imagination was like a child's, lonely and independent, impatient of the obtrusive and protracted instruction of the actual. From a mere hint, a gleam of M. Héger's eye, from his sardonic (if he really was sardonic) smile, it could create the whole outer and inner man of M. Paul, while a qualm of home-sickness, a pang of longing, was enough to furnish forth the whole phantasmagoria of Lucy's love-agony.

It may be said against her that she repeated herself in all her books. And yet with each repetition she became more complex and, unconsciously, more modern; she advanced nearer and nearer to the searching analytic light. *Villette* was published in 1852. At that date George Meredith was unknown to the mass of his contemporaries. It is a far cry from *Villette* to *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, and still more far from the insight of Charlotte Brontë to that of Mr. Henry James. Her emotion, her overmastering sense of the coloured and the concrete, her very prejudices, saved her from excesses of psychological analysis. But in *Villette* she was the first to give to that method the place it holds in the English novel of to-day.

MAY SINCLAIR.

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CHAPTER I

BRETTON

My godmother lived in a handsome house in the clean and ancient town of Bretton. Her husband's family had been residents there for generations, and bore, indeed, the name of their birthplace—Bretton of Bretton: whether by coincidence, or because some remote ancestor had been a personage of sufficient importance to leave his name to his neighbourhood, I know not.

When I was a girl I went to Bretton about twice a year, and well I liked the visit. The house and its inmates specially suited me. The large peaceful rooms, the well-arranged furniture, the clear wide windows, the balcony outside, looking down on a fine antique street, where Sundays and holidays seemed always to abide—so quiet was its atmosphere, so clean its pavement—these things pleased me well.

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, who had been left a widow, with one son, before I knew her; her husband, a physician, having died while she was yet a young and handsome woman.

She was not young, as I remember her, but she was still handsome, tall, well-made, and though dark for an English-woman, yet wearing always the clearness of health in her brunette cheek, and its vivacity in a pair of fine, cheerful black eyes. People esteemed it a grievous pity that she had not conferred her complexion on her son, whose eyes were blue—though, even in boyhood, very piercing—and the colour of his long hair such as friends did not venture to specify, except as the sun shone on it, when they called it golden. He inherited the lines of his mother's features, however; also her good teeth, her stature (or the promise of her stature, for he was not yet full-grown), and, what was better, her health without flaw, and her spirits of that tone and equality which are better than a fortune to the possessor.

In the autumn of the year — I was staying at Bretton,

my godmother having come in person to claim me of the kinsfolk with whom was at that time fixed my permanent residence. I believe she then plainly saw events coming, whose very shadow I scarce guessed; yet of which the faint suspicion sufficed to impart unsettled sadness, and made me glad to change scene and society.

Time always flowed smoothly for me at my godmother's side; not with tumultuous swiftness, but blandly, like the gliding of a full river through a plain. My visits to her resembled the sojourn of Christian and Hopeful beside a certain pleasant stream, with "green trees on each bank, and meadows beautified with lilies all the year round." The charm of variety there was not, nor the excitement of incident; but I liked peace so well, and sought stimulus so little, that when the latter came I almost felt it a disturbance, and wished rather it had still held aloof.

One day a letter was received of which the contents evidently caused Mrs. Bretton surprise and some concern. I thought at first it was from home, and trembled, expecting I know not what disastrous communication: to me, however, no reference was made, and the cloud seemed to pass.

The next day, on my return from a long walk, I found, as I entered my bedroom, an unexpected change. In addition to my own French bed in its shady recess, appeared in a corner a small crib, draped with white; and in addition to my mahogany chest of drawers, I saw a tiny rosewood chest. I stood still, gazed, and considered.

"Of what are these things the signs and tokens?" I asked. The answer was obvious. "A second guest is coming; Mrs. Bretton expects other visitors."

On descending to dinner, explanations ensued. A little girl, I was told, would shortly be my companion: the daughter of a friend and distant relation of the late Dr. Bretton's. This little girl, it was added, had recently lost her mother; though, indeed, Mrs. Bretton ere long subjoined, the loss was not so great as might at first appear. Mrs. Home (Home it seems was the name) had been a very pretty, but a giddy, careless woman, who had neglected her child, and disappointed and disheartened her husband. So far from congenial had the union proved, that separation at last ensued—separation by mutual consent, not after any legal process. Soon after this event, the lady having over-exerted herself at a ball, caught cold, took a fever, and died after a very brief illness. Her husband, naturally a man of very sensitive feelings, and shocked inexpressibly by too sudden