
“I, Lucy Snowe:” Identity as Performance in *Villette*

Following a foray into third-person omniscience in her second novel, *Shirley*, Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* returns to the first-person narration for which *Jane Eyre* remains famous. Unlike that novel's immediately vivid and feisty eponymous narrator, however, *Villette*'s Lucy Snowe begins and ends the novel a shadowy, largely unknowable figure. As narrator, Lucy seizes absolute control of her narrative, and yet her characterization is rife with contradiction. Lucy, who rejects and condemns performance even as she recognizes an affinity for it in herself, fails to recognize the inherently performative nature of her own identity. In her very attempt to avoid performance, Lucy actively constructs and controls her character, enacting for the reader a carefully rehearsed role of Lucy Snowe. Meanwhile, just as Lucy fails to recognize her own inevitable tendency to perform, she likewise fails to recognize that even the most calculated performance is subject to interpretation by the audience. In her constant attempt to maintain complete control over both her own characterization and her representation of others, Lucy bristles when other characters exercise this same right, repeatedly rejecting other interpretations of her character even when they appear to align with her own. Clinging to her elevated role as narrator, Lucy forgets that she is both a participant and an observer in the story she relates, equally among the watched and the watching. Her identity is constructed as much by her own performance as it is by others' interpretation of it.

While motifs of performance recur throughout the novel, the final disrobing of the costumed “nun” can be understood as *Villette*'s consummate rejection of the possibility of objective characterization. The anticlimactic and bizarre, if vaguely humorous, revelation of the ghostly nun thought to embody Lucy's deepest psychological torment as nothing more than a mere tertiary character in drag exposes both Lucy's and the reader's inability to correctly interpret Lucy's character. Meanwhile, Lucy's failure to unmask the performance of another in conjunction with her own unwittingly performative tendencies casts doubt on the representations of other characters with which she, as the narrator, is entrusted. Lucy's unwitting role as one equally among the observant and the observed calls her reliability into doubt, but her role as an unreliable narrator is symptomatic of a greater inability to truly know others. In rendering Lucy unknowable, Brontë positions the reader as one in a series of failed interpreters—Lucy fails to know others just as the reader fails to know Lucy—suggesting a broader commentary on the impossibility of accurate interpretation and representation of the self and the other.

Well before Lucy discovers her thirst for acting in her first performance at Madame Beck's fête, she has already assumed her first role: that of Lucy Snowe. Despite being a first-person narrator, Lucy refers to herself by her first and last name often, almost as if in the third person. These detached references to her own name frequently accompany Lucy's claims to particular

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

GET HELP

characteristics she seems to consider—or wants to present as—inherent, thus becoming a verbal marker of her self-characterization. In Lucy's first mention of her name, she states it as if declaring an oath: "I, Lucy Snowe, plead guiltless of that curse, an overheated and discursive imagination" (10). Repetitions of this seemingly unnecessary antecedent appear alongside similar claims to faultless cool-headedness: "I, Lucy Snowe, was calm" (19). It is unlikely that either Lucy or Brontë believe any clarification of the first-person antecedent is truly necessary here. Rather, Lucy seems to reach to this rhetorical device in an attempt to establish and contain her ideal characterization within a verbal signifier. Indeed, the name "Lucy Snowe" is one of few concrete identifying details the novel provides about its narrator. However, through this obsessive eponymous characterization, the narrator ultimately distances herself from the Lucy Snowe she describes, almost rendering that Lucy Snowe a character distinct from the narrator. In fact, Lucy's name, with its almost heavy-handed meaning—Lucy meaning "light," Snowe suggesting cold—seems to literally suggest the harsh, cool characteristics to which Lucy lays claim. While Brontë's use of such a name is hardly a coincidence, I posit that Lucy's own use of the name is likewise not coincidental. Of an unreliable narrator who not only fails to provide, but actively conceals almost all information about her past and family, there is little reason to assume that "Lucy Snowe" is not an alias. Lucy clings to this assumed name as an embodiment of her own self-characterization, allowing that embodiment to become a character itself.

Despite her repeated attempts to solder her name, assumed or otherwise, to her first-person narration, Lucy herself often suggests a split between her name and identity. In one instance, after relating an episode of "complicated, disquieting thoughts," Lucy concludes, "However, that turmoil subsided: next day I was again Lucy Snowe" (110). Here, Lucy suggests that her own status as Lucy Snowe is conditional, dependent on her performance of the qualities she has deemed appropriate for that character. Interestingly, other characters also seem to view Lucy's name as inherently indicative of their expectations of her identity, though those expectations differ from Lucy's. Upon learning that Lucy is now a teacher, Polly remarks in surprise, "Well, I never knew what you were, nor ever thought of asking: for me, you were always Lucy Snowe" (267). Like Lucy, Polly clings to the name Lucy Snowe as a signifier, though her (mis)interpretation of the signified has more to do with Lucy's class and station than her personality. Ultimately, Polly, too, suggests a conditional quality to Lucy's identity, one that Lucy proceeds to question. In response to Lucy's somewhat sarcastic inquiry, "And what am I now?" Polly replies "Yourself, of course" (267). This response, while seemingly redundant, actually does little to close the gap between "Lucy Snowe" and the narrator's identity. If anything, Polly's refusal to restate the name only reinforces the distinction between "Lucy Snowe" and "yourself." Lucy actively performs the role of Lucy Snowe, both for the reader and other characters. However, as Polly's use of the name reveals, Lucy's performance remains open to interpretation, despite her best attempts to maintain control over her character.

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

GET HELP

Lucy's active splitting of her own character resurfaces in her attitude toward performance itself. During her initially unwilling participation in the vaudeville at Madame Beck's fête, Lucy discovers "a keen relish for dramatic expression." Although Lucy even goes as far as to acknowledge this "newfound faculty" as "part of [her] nature," she rejects it immediately, stating that such a passion "would not do for a mere looker-on at life" (131). Here, Lucy again alludes to a distinction between her nature and her character. Although acting has "revealed itself" as part of her nature, Lucy rejects it, as it does not suit her carefully constructed characterization as cool, calm, and never prone to an "overheated imagination." Thus, Lucy's rejection of performance becomes a kind of performance in itself. Lucy buries her performative impulse out of an obligation to continue her own performance of the character she has created for herself, who must remain "a mere looker on at life."

Of course, Lucy can be no such thing. She is no more capable of being a mere onlooker than any of the characters on which she herself looks. There is no such "quiet nook, whence unobserved I could observe" (131). Because she has control of the narrative, Lucy forgets that she, too, is among the observed. When reminded, Lucy bristles, rejecting others' interpretations of her character even when they align with her own. Although Lucy dedicates herself to the construction and preservation of her character as cold and unassuming, she is not always pleased when others characterize her as such. Throughout the novel, Lucy often figures herself as a shadow. Dressed in a "gown of shadow," Lucy recalls "feeling [her]self to be a mere shadowy spot on a field of light" (122). Yet, when offered a position as Polly's paid companion, Lucy retorts with the disdainful declaration, "I was no bright lady's shadow" (279). Lucy may well perform the role of "quiet Lucy—a creature inoffensive as a shadow," but when so characterized by any external observer, Lucy lashes out against her lack of absolute control (315). It is not enough for Lucy to have complete control over her presentation, she must also be the sole interpreter—the impossibility of which she cannot accept. Lucy is neither sole performer nor sole audience member. She is as vulnerable to interpretation as the "fellow actors" whose performances she observes and seeks to represent in her narrative (130).

Ultimately, Lucy can no more accurately separate performance from identity in others than they can in her, or than she can in herself. By positioning the reader as one in this series of failed interpreters, *Villette* takes its stance on the impossibility of objective characterization as cemented in the novel's absurd anti-climax. While the novel repeatedly resists both climax and closure at various points throughout its final chapters, the bizarre unmasking of the ghostly "nun" figures as the cornerstone of the novel's rejection of objective characterization. The supposedly spectral nun, the novel's gothic apparition of choice, seems to haunt Lucy throughout her narrative. Often appearing in moments of psychological distress, both Lucy and the reader are invited to view the nun as "a case of spectral illusion" symbolic of some repressed aspect of Lucy's past or character (235). The ultimate unmasking of the nun as a mere tertiary character—the Count de Hamal, the underdeveloped and largely inconsequential

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

GET HELP

beau of Ginevra Fanshawe—reveal that both the nun’s spectral qualities and their relevance to Lucy were purely imagined. Both Lucy and the reader misinterpret the nun as somehow related to Lucy, when in fact the “nun’s” presence is entirely coincidental, and is merely a disguise assumed in order for the lovers to carry out their affair in secret. This revelation signals Lucy’s failure to unmask the performance of another, as well as a self-centered propensity to misinterpret coincidental figures and events as deeply intertwined with her own character, despite claims of immunity to any “overheated imaginings.” This humorous anti-climax calls Lucy’s powers of interpretation and representation into question. More broadly, however, Lucy’s inability to unmask another’s performance while constantly engaged in a seemingly unwitting performance of her own identity renders this a novel in which no one—neither the narrator nor the reader—is capable of objective interpretation or characterization.

Lucy begins and ends her narrative in shadow. This imagery, however, suggests a doubleness to Lucy’s nature; Where there is shadow, there must also be light. Lucy manages to paint herself as a shadow while providing very little illustration of what is casting it. Lucy’s characterization is rife with such contradictions that split her personality, and the doubleness implied by her shadow imagery is reflected in her very name. While Lucy chooses to live in shadow, her name means “light.” Perhaps the real Lucy Snowe exists somewhere between the light cast by that alias, and the shadow she seeks to embody. However, if there is such thing as a “real Lucy Snowe,” Brontë gives no indication of it. While Lucy, on stage at Madame Beck’s fête, gradually becomes aware of her fellow performers, she neglects to recognize that this performance continues well after the curtain closes. In *Lucy*, Brontë presents a lens through which the novel’s other characters all become increasingly obscured. If Lucy begins the novel as a shadow, she ends it a shadow among shadows.

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

[GET HELP](#)