THE VICTORIAN “BORDER” GARDEN AND THE “BOARDER” GOVERNESS IN CHARLOTTE BRONTË’S VILLETTE

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While reading Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*, many readers find the main character, Lucy Snowe, a young governess in a foreign city, reserved and rigid. In Brontë’s first novel, *Jane Eyre*, the governess appears to defy social norms. Jane argues with authorities, refuses to settle for a man she does not love, even if he is “best” for her, and ultimately marries her employer. In *Jane Eyre*, Brontë effectively disregards the standards of Victorian culture in order to write a canonical governess fantasy. When readers approach *Villette*, they often expect a fiery woman similar to Jane Eyre. However, Lucy is a far different character—one ruled by Victorian society and her position as governess. Rather than following her heart, Lucy follows the culture’s mandates, even to the point of denying herself and her desires. As a result, most readers declare Lucy horribly disappointing and criticize *Villette* as a dim second to Charlotte’s first novel.

This notion that Lucy is an underdeveloped character has led some critics, such as Syd Thomas, to consider Lucy’s character as entirely too suppressed and distant to draw the reader into the text: “A distance is placed between Lucy’s views and those of the reader’s, so as to cause the reader to view Lucy’s narrative as something of a snare” (571). Beverly Forsyth seconds this belief, stating, “I believe Lucy is a sadomasochistic personality with strong tendencies toward voyeurism,” in essence placing Lucy outside of
the bounds of respectability and even empathy (17). Critics like Francesca Kazan argue that Charlotte’s description in *Villette* lacks the vividness readers expect in Charlotte Brontë’s writing, labeling Lucy the “most secretive narrator” who distances and obscures images, thus denying a true portrayal of the scenes (543-4). John Hughes represents critics that insist *Villette* is more emotion than plot, leaving the reader unfulfilled and confused: “*Villette* is an affect before it is an object of criticism” (716). This “void” has even led some critics, such as Lyndall Gordon, to believe *Villette* was published only because of Charlotte’s popularity and the publisher’s indebtedness to her; this view becomes apparent in Gordon’s text as she chronicles the relationship of Charlotte and her publisher and the faults of the novel. Together, these critics chronicle and label the common assumptions and beliefs held about the novel and its seeming flaws, especially the underdeveloped main character, Lucy Snowe.

I argue, however, that Lucy is not an underdeveloped character at all—she represents the product of Victorian governess culture. Her emotional “void” is actually a spirit repressed to the point of anonymity, which is imposed upon her by the Victorian ideal of governess. Superficially, this repression takes the form of a lack of personality. On closer examination, though, Lucy’s character becomes more vivid and complex, primarily through her connection with the garden. The enclosure and domestication of the garden comes to represent the restriction and containment of Lucy’s identity.

Brontë’s experience with the governess culture provided her with valuable insights that surface in her novel. Charlotte herself held many governess positions, all of which she detested. Furthermore, her sisters, Anne and Emily, also suffered disastrous experiences as governesses. In many ways, *Villette* became a safe place for Charlotte to
unburden herself of the negative memories and emotions connected with this role. As a result, this novel consumed her energy and time, even to the point of illness and disregard of family and friends. As she expresses her own concerns about the governess system through Lucy’s story, *Villette* became another powerful voice in the argument regarding the treatment of governesses during the era. Charlotte utilizes Lucy’s character to comment on society and its treatment of governesses—largely by employing the familiar, symbolic language of Victorian garden culture—rendering *Villette* a subversive social commentary regarding the role of the governess.

In order to understand the assertions made in *Villette*, the role of the governess in Victorian society must be defined. Essentially, women who needed to financially support themselves could choose to either become a governess or a prostitute. Not surprisingly, many of these women chose to become a governess even though it was a difficult and oppressive role. The governess occupied a precarious social position between classes and levels of gentility. Although many types of governesses existed (such as nursery, boarder, or day), all governesses faced similar obstacles. Most women entered the profession due to economic hardship and a lack of alternatives. Although they came from middle and even upper-class backgrounds, governesses found themselves members of a working class, while still maintaining the outward appearance and demeanor of their past. This paradox left them isolated and unsure of their social and personal identity. Furthermore, governesses rarely received any formal instruction regarding teaching or curriculum. Even within the schoolroom, they were utterly alone; they did not receive many teaching resources or opportunities for professional collaboration. Despite governesses’ awkward position and circumstances, employers held
them to remarkable standards. Expectations included superior teaching of academic material as well as the accomplishments (music, drawing, and needlework), firm control of the children, and impeccable moral composition. The role of the governess was well defined, though not well supported, and the position preceded the person—society saw a governess rather than a woman. As such, the governess gradually lost her personal identity in order to better serve the family and maintain her role.

In *Villette*, Brontë explores the inner thoughts and life of a governess, Lucy Snowe, who finds herself in this very role. Her moral stamina and solitude model the Victorian ideal of the governess. Her actions reflect her proper and self-sacrificing lifestyle, and her students respond very favorably to her instruction and guidance. Despite this vision of perfection, Lucy does not conform exactly to the definition of a governess; she exists as a nursery governess and a boarder governess, as well as a teacher and day governess. This combination of roles allows Lucy to possess freedoms not traditionally given to some governesses, while excluding her from the security of a set role. Because her role is not completely defined, she is able to move about within the home and society more freely than typical, largely because she must move from place to place to fulfill these roles simultaneously. At the same time, the lack of a clearly defined title marginalizes her even further in a society that preferred everything labeled and clearly defined; furthermore, it increases the number of expectations placed upon her overall, leaving her even more fractured than most governesses. In essence, Lucy’s livelihood envelops the self; position rather than passion dictates her actions. The title of governess determines her thoughts and feelings, as seen in her internal dialogue and halted statements throughout the narrative. Characters and readers alike perceive Lucy more as
governess than person. Left on the fringes of the Rue Fossette and society, she appears to be nothing and everything.

The garden occupied similarly liminal position within Victorian society, making it a natural pair for the governess. Its rigid structure and function paralleled the ideal and purpose of the governess. Gardens indicated the wealth and social position of their owner, as well as illustrated their tastes or lack thereof. Elaborate garden plans filled with complicated paths, exotic plants, and vibrant colors flourished during the era. Furthermore, garden culture extended beyond the flowerbeds into a flower language that assigned meaning to each flower and its position in a bouquet, artwork, needlework, or interior décor, which drew gardens from the natural sphere into the domestic sphere. This culture permeates *Villette*, revealing the symbolic relationship between the governess and the garden.

Although governesses and gardens appear to have little in common, Charlotte Brontë utilizes the symbolic language and literal enclosed space of the garden to explore the social position and role of the governess. Brontë connects Lucy closely to garden culture; the garden at the Rue Fossette becomes Lucy’s hiding place and sanctuary. Furthermore, significant events occur within its walls. Interestingly, these events fall outside of the bounds of Victorian propriety or connect with the inner world of Lucy Snowe, revealing her true personality as she escapes briefly from her oppressive role. This garden culture also extends into gifts given and received and interior décor. Because of flowers’ association with freedom and wildness, Lucy gains a sense of power whenever flowers, whether real or embroidered, change hands or surround her, reversing the traditional roles. Moreover, as the wilderness appears within the home in the form of
flowers, significant events occur that lie on the margins of acceptable behavior. This connection reveals elements of Lucy’s character repressed by her role as governess, such as emotion and even sexuality. Rather than as a woman with feelings and desires, other characters perceive Lucy as merely a governess.

Both Lucy and the garden inhabit a type of marginal space—they exist on the fringes of society and propriety. The garden magnetically draws Lucy, and she often compares herself to the garden and its plants. M. Paul—a tutor whose relationship with Lucy vacillates among enemy, friend, or lover—tends to both Lucy and the garden, and most significant events in their relationship occur there. The garden and the governess become synonymous. This link between the two lies in their domestication. Both governesses and gardens possess inherently wild tendencies that must be tamed by the “gardener” in order for them to fulfill their role. Both must be walled in, literally and figuratively, by position and purpose.

Because Lucy Snowe represents the archetypal governess through her embodiment of the ideal, parallels on a more general level appear. Both gardens and governesses exist between the domestic sphere and the societal sphere. Both can be drawn into the home, but they cannot become a part of the domestic sphere, nor act as a part of the community as a whole. They occupy a space between public and private, family and community. By using the language of the garden, Brontë effectively illustrates that a Victorian governess’s individuality and personhood were sacrificed to her role by society. Her position stripped her femininity and sexuality from her by forcing her to repress all emotion and behavior that did not conform to the unattainable ideal of the
governess. With this role and sacrifice revealed, *Villette* develops into a beautifully written critique of repression rather than a static narrative of an emotional void.
Chapter One: The Unattainable Ideal of the Victorian Governess

In Villette, Lucy Snowe’s role as governess best reveals and explains her character. Although Lucy appears rigid and aloof, her role requires these characteristics as she seeks to attain the ideal of the governess. Because Charlotte Brontë lived the life of a governess, she portrays a realistic image of the unrealistic ideal neither she, nor anyone else, could ever achieve. A thorough understanding of this ideal, as well as the position of governesses within Victorian society, provides a much deeper understanding of Villette, its main characters, and Lucy’s actions or lack thereof.

Traditionally, the term “Victorian governess” conjures the image of a boarder governess, one who lives with her pupils and is responsible for teaching them academic lessons as well as “the accomplishments”. While this definition is certainly correct, other designations exist. Nursery governesses cared for children too young to attend “school,” essentially serving as a nanny or nurse (Broughton 80). Other governesses lived elsewhere and would travel to and from their pupils’ homes, earning the title of “daily” or “day” governesses (112-3). Interestingly, Lucy Snowe fills each of these definitions. At the Rue Fossette, she begins her career as a “bonne,” or nursery governess, for the mistress of the school and home, Mme. Beck’s, own children (Brontë 82). After proving
her character and talent as a teacher when Mme. Beck accidentally observes her “hearing the children their English lessons…making [the child] translate currently from English to French” and then very carefully observes her every action, Mme. Beck appoints Lucy boarder governess within the school (93). When Paulina, a young girl from Bretton and Lucy’s past before she became a governess, arrives in Villette, Lucy begins serving her as a day governess, despite her protestations against the role: “I could teach; I could give lessons; but to be either a private governess or a companion was unnatural to me” (371). This role of day governess is forced upon her, further illustrating how society, rather than the governess herself, shaped and defined the governess’s course. Lucy envelops all of these definitions of governess, which allows her some freedom of movement while robbing her of the security of a set role. Because she is a nursery governess and a day governess, Lucy is able to escape the schoolroom, but even this escape leads to confinement in another role. Although the type of governess she was theoretically affected her responsibilities to some extent, all governesses faced a similar blurring of roles among nurse, maid, and governess. In fact, this lack of a clear job description most frustrated Charlotte Brontë in her own career:

Charlotte was expected not simply to teach her charges but, to her infinite disgust “wipe their smutty noses or tie their shoes…[Mrs. Sidgwick] cares nothing about me except to contrive how the greatest possible quantity of labour may be squeezed out of me, and to that end she overwhelms me with oceans of needlework, yards of cambric to hem, muslin nightcaps to make, and, above all things, dolls to dress.” (Barker 310)
The role of governess defined not only an occupation but also a lifestyle. Most governesses faced similar situations in which far more than simple academic instruction was expected from them. Governesses were expected to teach general subjects within the schoolroom, most often “basic reading and writing skills, through elementary grammar, history, and literature, to mathematics and natural history, including botany and entomology” (Broughton 42). Employers also expected their daughters to acquire “the accomplishments”: “one or two languages, preferably French and Italian, music, dancing, drawing, and needlework” (Renton 48). Governesses’ duties extended even outside of the classroom; governesses supervised “the children’s amusements, including gardening, horse riding, and games” (Broughton 42). The strictest discipline and control had to be maintained in the midst of all of this as well. In *Letters to a Young Governess* (1840), Susan Ridout advised young governesses,

> Your aim should be, not only to subdue the self-will, passion, or pride of the child; but so to bring conviction to her understanding and conscience, that the punishment you inflict, may lead to improvement. (1:98)

Even when the school day ended, the governess’s day did not. As Charlotte illustrates, employers often asked them to help with the more “menial tasks” often given to other servants, such as mending, light cleaning, or shopping (Broughton 79). Finally, mistresses of the home sometimes took the governesses as their confidante, seeking their company when convenient and dismissing them as easily (K. Hughes 113). A governess’s tasks extended far beyond academic instruction, continually keeping her occupied with little time for herself. Because of this isolation and lack of personal space, governesses often experienced a gradual loss of identity and self.
In addition to the high criterion of instruction, governesses were held to remarkable moral standards. Susan Ridout warns young women seeking positions that “[a] deportment which blends discretion with a cheerful even temper, is truly valuable” and “tenderness, patience, forbearance, kindness are the attaching forms in which self-denial appears” (1:59). Employers expected governesses to possess and exhibit these characteristics. This belief is mirrored in an application for a prospective governess that asks, after establishing her past positions and family’s social standing, “With which of the religious, or moral authors, or poets, are you familiar?” (Broughton 23). While this may seem an innocent question, the answer largely determined the employability of the young woman. Employers expected the governess “to form the Christian gentlewoman, the probable mistress and mother of a family” (Ridout 2:4). Therefore, they expected the governess’s beliefs to align exactly with their own, and governesses found themselves conforming to and emphasizing whatever moral and religious beliefs the family held in order to preserve their positions. This rigid ethical stance led to the stereotype of the ideal governess as “a homely, severe, unfeminine type of woman” because governesses became consumed with moral instruction and example (Peterson 15).

This image of the ideal largely explains Lucy’s apparent aloofness. Although Lucy appears to embody this stereotype, as seen in her demeanor, Mme. Beck refuses to exempt her from moral scrutiny. When she first arrives at the Rue Fossette, Lucy states her situation simply, “[she] told her a plain tale…[she] had left [her] own country, intent on extending [her] knowledge, and gaining [her] bread” (Brontë 80). To a stranger, this statement appears extraordinarily direct and unfeminine, and her desire to travel abroad and learn compounds this lack of femininity while actualizing the governess icon. She
appears to be an ideal candidate for a governess; however, M. Paul still employs his “skill in physiognomy” to determine her character before Mme. Beck will consider hiring her (81). After some reflection, M. Paul decides Mme. Beck should “Engage her. If good predominates in that nature, the action will bring its own reward; if evil—eh bien!” (82). He decides hiring her would be a good deed if her character was evil because being a governess would refine her disposition, inculcating the moral stamina needed for the position. Throughout the scene, Lucy remains quiet, accepting her fate, knowing that M. Paul and Mme. Beck’s decision lies solely in M. Paul’s determination of her character. Essentially, she resigns herself to moral scrutiny in order to become a governess. The interesting aspect of this scene is not what happens but what does not. Mme. Beck makes no inquiries into her education or previous experience—superficial assumptions of character rather than knowledge or skill determines employability.

Once her character is established and she has the position, Lucy continues to be held to the highest standard under close observation. Her first night at the Rue Fossette, Lucy awakes to find Mme. Beck surveying her and her possessions:

she studied me long…She then drew nearer, bent close over me; slightly raised my cap, and turned back the border so as to expose my hair; she looked at my hand on the bed-clothes. This done, she turned to the chair where my clothes lay…every article did she inspect. I divined her motive for this proceeding, viz., the wish to form from the garments a judgment respecting the wearer. (Brontë 84-5)

Mme. Beck then takes the keys to Lucy’s workbox, trunk, and desk and has a set covertly made for her own use. Nothing of Lucy’s remains private. Mme. Beck feels the need and
duty to spy upon her governess in order to ensure she truly is of the highest moral caliber. Only when the pupils return to their homes for the long vacation can Lucy finally find a space and time in which she can relax this reserved demeanor. However, she falls ill from the stress of repression once she is able to recognize it: “I lay in a strange fever of the nerves and blood. Sleep went quite away” (197). Because she has been repressed for such an extended period of time, Lucy cannot exist once she is allowed to feel freely. This repression and its release results in insomnia, loss of appetite, and ultimately a fainting spell. Even when she recovers both physically and “morally,” M. Paul criticizes rather than empathizes with Lucy: “You have, then, a weak heart! You lack courage; and, perhaps, charity” (254). Lucy tries to defend herself, explaining her illness, but ultimately must change the subject in order to escape the rebuke. She remains unable to preserve herself and her emotions. The slightest break in moral stamina causes Lucy to fall from grace even though she existed as and returns to the ideal. As a governess, she is not allowed to be human—only a saint.

Unsurprisingly, given these difficult circumstances, young women rarely willingly chose to become governesses. Economic necessity required them to procure an income, and governessing remained one of the few viable options for single women working outside of their fathers’ homes; young women found two options available to them: governess or prostitute (Broughton 14). Although governesses were in many ways the social opposite of the sexually experienced prostitutes, they joined the ranks of “fallen women”:

They too had ‘fallen’ from an absolute state of gentility...just like the fallen woman the governess’s degradation could be seen as the result of one man’s
folly—in this case her father’s—rather than her own willfulness or desire.

(Hughes 120)

Necessity cast them out of their father’s homes and out of society’s graces. Lucy Snowe illustrates this sense of desperation as she explains to Ginevra, the young woman she is talking with aboard the boat on their way to Villette, her intention to become a governess even though the work does not appeal to her: “Where Fate may lead me. My business is to earn a living where I can find it” (Brontë 67). Even more telling is the response from Ginevra: “‘To earn!’ (in consternation) ‘are you poor then?’ (After a pause) ‘Bah! How unpleasant!’” (67). When told Lucy is going to be a governess, Ginevra’s first reaction is to her poverty, not the career itself. Even in the beginning of Lucy’s career, she embodies the typical and ideal governess.

Even within their employers’ homes, governesses faced a precarious position. Socially, the families for which they worked benefited tremendously not only from having a governess, but also from acknowledging her ladyhood; however, acknowledging her as part of the family would have degraded the entire household—especially its women (Hughes 88). Governesses signified a life of leisure for their employers, but the governesses themselves were still poor and had to be made the Other within the home to preserve the purity of the family. Therefore, the governess was often displayed as a sign of wealth and leisure, and then banished from the family drawing room. In “Hints on the Modern Governess System” published in 1844, this situation was acknowledged as part of a need for change within the system: “It is only the governess, and a certain class of private tutors, who must hear the echoes of the drawing-room and the offices, feeling that, in a house full of people, they dwell alone” (575). Lucy feels this type of isolation
often at the Rue Fossette, but she comments, “I chose solitude,” in order to better cope with the loneliness she feels amid all the bustle of the school and Villette (Brontë 155). Interestingly, Lucy views her isolation as a choice, repressing even the emotions and limitations associated with her repression; the apparent lack of emotion is actually an internalization of the expectation that governess sacrifice their own identity in order to better serve their employers and meet the ideal. Lucy cannot recognize what the title of governess has done to her identity.

As insinuated by Lucy’s total sense of isolation, governesses were separated from the larger community, as well. In her advice to young governesses, Ridout reminds them that their position “is a seclusion from society altogether, at least any which sympathizes with you” (2:49). The idea that the governesses had “fallen” largely contributed to this idea, and this seclusion left the governess more a position than a person. Because they fell outside of the bounds of the ideal woman, governesses did not receive the empathy of the masses. Instead, they became a tool to achieve social success—becoming more of an object than a person. This idea is further argued by those who believed that governesses “who have vigorously used their faculties have thereby lost their distinctive womanly graces” (“Hints” 583). In effect, Victorian society stripped governesses of their femininity. Their role became a topic to be debated in newspapers and their presence a convenient part of middle and upper class households, while their own personalities were sacrificed.

This lack of personhood largely explains Lucy Snowe’s reserved appearance: her role as governess confines her personality. Originally, M. Paul and Mme. Beck only perceive her as governess. When Lucy arrives exhausted and frightened at their door in
the middle of the night, they only concern themselves with their need of her rather than her needs: “He gazed steadily. ‘Do you need her services?’ ‘I could do with them’” (Brontë 82). Lucy, although frightened and alone, reserves herself to this utilitarianism—Lucy being the tool. As time passes, Mme. Beck changes Lucy’s role within the school without ever consulting her. Even though Lucy expresses a desire to remain a nursery governess, Mme. Beck “with out more ado, made [Lucy] relinquish [her] thimble and needle; [Lucy’s] hand was taken into hers, and [she] was conducted downstairs” (94). From that moment, Lucy became a boarder governess to the school in order to better meet Mme. Beck’s needs. Her actions, disposition, and status are continually defined by others’ perceptions and needs rather than her own. Lucy’s career develops into a lifestyle dominated by the ideal of the governess and her employer’s demands. Her personality serves as a sacrifice to “help” others.

Ultimately, Lucy adopts this sacrificial and nominal view of herself, to the point of anonymity—she is only the governess in the eyes of those around her. Even when Mme. Beck rummages through her belongings again for no reason, Lucy cannot bring herself to be angry; instead, she perceives it as a part of her position: “Loverless and inexpectant of love, I was as safe from spies in my heart-poverty, as the beggar from thieves in his destitution of purse” (146). Although she knows she is innocent, Lucy essentially allows Mme. Beck to question her character rather than confront her. She suppresses her own natural tendencies towards privacy and self-preservation to place herself within the sacrificing ideal of the governess.

Even when Lucy is taken out of the governess role as she spends time with John and his mother, her childhood friend and her godmother, she is always consciously aware
that she does not belong. When John takes her to a concert, he gives her a new soft pink dress to wear. However, Lucy feels awkward because the color does not belong in the wardrobe of a governess: “my godmother and I went down. She was clad in brown velvet...how I envied her those folds of grave, dark majesty!” (Brontë 260). Even once John assures her she does not look ridiculous, as she fears, Lucy is consciously aware that she does not belong at the concert, even though her godmother and Dr. John treat her like “their kin” (261). On the way to the concert as she comments on the splendor of the evening, her thoughts turn back to the Rue Fossette, illustrating how her position consumes her thoughts. No matter where she is physically, her mind remains with her pupils and her role.

Once they arrive at the concert hall, Lucy catches a glimpse of herself in the mirror, but she does not recognize herself: “I enjoyed the ‘giftie’ of seeing myself as others see me. No need to dwell on the result. It brought a jar of discord, a pang of regret” (Brontë 262). Lucy is unable to recognize herself; symbolically, she has lost her own identity and briefly recognizes that pain. However, this pain is quickly brushed aside so that her melancholy mood will not disquiet John; even when removed from the role of the governess, her thoughts return to serving others at the price of harming or repressing herself. Although she secretly loves John, she listens patiently and comforts him while he discusses his own unrequited love for Ginevra, stifling her own pain to soothe his: “[John’s] desire must take precedence of my own” (276). When M. Paul sees Lucy after the performance, he gives her a “swarthy frown” and recognizes her only with “the stiffest and sternest of nods” (278). Lucy blushes and her belief that she should not be there, even though she enjoys the concert, is confirmed—governesses did not belong in
situations among higher classes. A simple look places her firmly back in her position as governess, and the concert is ruined for her. This scene illustrates perfectly how imbedded the ideal becomes for Lucy. Although she is in a social situation with close friends, consciously she chooses to remain a governess rather than to attend the concert as an ordinary woman. Even outside of the Rue Fossette her role consumes her and dictates her actions. The role of governess, with its social and economic constraints, defines her thoughts and actions.

Lucy’s actions conform to the repressive ideal of governess, but the true Lucy—the Lucy filled with passions and desires—does appear in the novel. After Lucy silently flees from her room when Mme. Beck rummages through her belongings, Lucy’s inner dialogue reveals her true personality and emotion:

I never felt so strange and contradictory an inward tumult as I felt for an hour that evening: soreness and laughter, and fire, and grief, shared my heart between them. I cried hot tears…Complicated, disquieting thoughts broke up the whole repose of my nature. However, that turmoil subsided: next day I was again Lucy Snowe.

(Brontë 146)

In her inner-monologue, Lucy explores her true feelings about her role within the school. In another instance, Lucy escapes the preparations of Mme. Beck’s fête day, a day meant to honor her with a play, dance, and banquet. Away from all of the activity, she finds “a sort of companionship in [her] own thoughts,” again revealing a peace within her that she cannot find without—a friendship when no other exists (160). Although her thoughts allow her to explore the emotions she generally refuses to acknowledge, she cannot remain in her inner-world. Lucy Snowe the person becomes Lucy Snowe the governess:
“next day I was again Lucy Snowe” (146). On the fête day, her thoughts, her identity, end when duty calls her back to the preparations. In order to uphold the appearance of the ideal, her emotions must be suppressed and her position must dictate her actions. Lucy ultimately appears to internalize her role and the Victorian ideal.

In addition to Lucy’s thoughts, her actions illustrate her true identity and passion. After her illness, Dr. John sends Lucy letters of friendship, but Lucy views these letters as a connection with the outside world and a hope for a romantic future with Dr. John. She escapes to the grenier to read his first letter, finding “to [her] longing and famished thought it seemed, perhaps, kinder than it was” (Brontë 305). As she reads, the nun appears, and Lucy races down the stairs to seek help and reassurance regarding the intruder. However, once she reaches the salon and explains what she saw, she becomes consumed with the thought of the letter she left behind: “This precious letter! Flesh or spirit must be defied for its sake” (307). Lucy disregards decorum and whole-heartedly seeks John’s letter in the grenier as the rest look for the intruder. Her reserved demeanor vanishes as her search for a romantic connection becomes apparent. Lucy unapologetically allows her passion and desires to become public, disavowing the governess ideal—if only temporarily—to reveal her true identity and passionate self.

The image of the severe, unfeeling governess best portrays the ideal governess in the Victorian era, and Lucy superficially embodies this ideal. Although this ideal was well described, the actual role of the governess was not, and her social position increased this marginality. However, economic circumstances led young women to internalize the ideal in order to provide for themselves by maintaining their role. The end result of fulfilling the ideal was a sacrifice of the person, the self, to the position. Lucy Snowe
envelops this repression. Essentially, she becomes the ideal, resulting in a seemingly emotionless, underdeveloped character on the surface. However, in Lucy’s thoughts, and occasionally in her actions, her true personality reveals itself. The deviations from the ideal in Lucy’s character reveal a much more complicated main character than first perceived.
Chapter Two: The Garden Craze and Domesticity

While the governess occupied a liminal social position within Victorian society, the garden occupied a liminal physical position. It created a border space between the domestic sphere and the societal sphere—the domestic and the wild. Furthermore, the garden represented more than the physical space traditionally pictured; it also marked the owner’s social status, propriety, and taste. The garden became an extension of the home, marking the space as neither private nor public. Therefore, significant and symbolic events occurred within its walls, both in society and Villette. Furthermore, the garden infiltrates the home in interior décor and needlework, bringing its marginality and freedom into the repressive home. Because of the marginality of the physical space of the garden, Lucy’s personality shifts and emerges within its walls and in its figurative presence. Lucy’s personality must shift in order to maintain her role as the governess at the Rue Fossette and retain her identity as Lucy Snowe. This duality allows Lucy to progress into a well-developed character, rather than the flat character identified by many critics.

In the Victorian era, gardening became a type of obsession, and the gardens themselves became an object of art rather than a simple reproduction of nature:
Gardening was no longer to be subservient to the natural landscape, but to be independent, imaginative, and original. The old idol of Nature had been overthrown, and out of the bewildering wreckage rose instead the idol of Art. (Elliott 10)

Because of this air of creation, gardening became far more than a pastime. In 1842, T. James compared the gardening to a religion “with its own leaders, language, laws, exclusiveness—ay, even its party bitterness and personal animosities” (208). People evaluated a person’s taste by the colors and types of plants in his or her garden, labeling them as elegant or crude (Elliot 150). The garden culture enveloped all of society, and even the economy reflected this near religious absorption with the garden. New gardening equipment and periodicals flooded the market, including monthly publications and newspapers (James 208). These magazines soon dictated the fashion of private gardens: “the majority of garden owners adapted what they saw around them in the larger gardens and public parks, and seized upon the more tangible offerings of the books and magazines: the seats, statues, remarkable trees, and conspicuous flower beds” (Bisgrove 190). The gardening phenomenon also created a new market for the trading of plants and seeds, and the market for seed catalogues reached new heights (Drury 18). The culture dictated the structure and contents of a proper garden, and proper Victorians strove to achieve perfection.

The highly stylized structure of these gardens essentially made them an extension of the home. Ideally, the garden used similar materials and colors to match the exterior of the home (James 200). Terraces came into fashion to mark the transition between the house and the park, creating a sense of harmony by blending the two worlds. The
architectural elements in the garden mirrored those in the home, while the plants clearly delineated a “natural” space (Elliott 62,111). Rock gardens also became a fashionable representation of wilderness and were placed farther away from the home, allowing for a transition between home and nature (Bisgrove 176-7). By arranging the garden into levels, a “natural” progression appeared from the very domestic realm of the home to the untamed realm of nature.

Within these broad sections of the garden, other, smaller structures dominated. The shapes of the flowerbeds themselves were very elaborate, largely due to the invention of the lawn mower in 1832, which made it possible to trim around the complex borders (Bisgrove 166). James describes the shape of flowerbeds as “tadpole, and leech, and comma, and sausage figures” instead of the “trim gardens of symmetrical forms” (206). Even long border gardens took on irregular edges to achieve the desired look. Other beds were created from large, geometrical shapes filled with brilliantly colored bedding plants (Bisgrove 170). Although clear delineations between stylish and ghastly existed, “this new formality…provided great scope for bedding in all its forms, and great flower-filled parterres of elaborately patterned beds became an essential feature of every garden” (173). Furthermore, these gardens “bloomed” year-round; “bedding out” allowed gardeners to maintain large masses of color all year since young plants were instantly transplanted (Davies 11-2). The end result was a dazzling show of color displayed in striking shapes and patterns.

While these gardens appeared mainly in country estates, homes in town maintained similar standards. Front yards traditionally had one long border and a central plot similar in shape and color to the country estates (Davies 220). The backyard varied
according to the preference of the owner; some created a small, rustic scene reminiscent of cottage gardens, while others built small, formal beds parallel to the larger versions on the country estates (220). Finally, the entire estate was walled either literally or figuratively with evergreens (220). These walls complete the domestication of the garden: although the space was outside, it took the form of an inner room. Frequently, women tended town gardens because gardening was thought to benefit their complexion and temperament (215). The town garden served as an island of nature in the midst of the city, while remaining safely domestic.

Charlotte Brontë was very familiar with the structure and culture of the garden, and she also found herself most at home within its walls. The parsonage struggled against the elements to achieve the ideal of the Victorian garden, managing only lilacs and cornflowers planted along gravel walks (Barker 99). Both the Clergy Daughters’ School and Roe Head School gave their pupils, including Charlotte, plots of land in order to teach the feminine art of gardening while benefiting their health (121, 170). When she and Emily studied in Brussels, they spent all of their recreation time in the school garden, seeking a solace in its walls and each other (Gaskell 177). The garden there was filled with brightly colored beds, ivy covered recesses, and an allée along the wall that became Charlotte’s favorite place; this garden ultimately inspired the garden within Villette (Barker 379-80). Even as a grown woman, Charlotte sought solace in gardens when she visited friends’ homes and unfamiliar places. She would “retreat to the garden away from the daily round of visitors,” and this practice would later influence her work (187). Further evidence of Charlotte’s love of flowers and gardening appears in her drawing; a large portion of her sketches portrays these subjects, illustrating her fascination and
knowledge (Alexander). This love of gardens and significant acquaintance with the
garden culture heavily influenced Brontë’s writing.

Seemingly because of Charlotte’s knowledge and experience, both the culture and
the structure of the garden play a dominant role in *Villette*. Behind the Rue Fossette, a
large garden becomes an extra room of the school:

in the summer, the pupils almost lived out of doors amongst the rose-bushes and
the fruit trees. Under the vast and vine-draped berceau, madame would take her
seat on sunny afternoons, and send for the classes, in turns, to sit round her and
sew and read. (Brontë 92)

The garden played a key role in the educational process at the Rue Fossette; it became
another room—a literal extension of the domestic space. Furthermore, it provided an
opportunity to relax the typical schedule of the day, giving the students more freedom to
read or sew. This significance sets the stage for Brontë’s exploration of Lucy’s character.
In order to maintain Lucy as the ideal, she has to live in an ideal environment, and the
garden compares favorably to the Victorian ideal. Lucy describes the garden as “large,
considering it lay in the heart of the city...how lovely an enclosed and planted spot of
ground!” (130). Within these walls, border gardens and bright floral beds comprise the
focal points of the garden, along with terrace steps and trimmed paths. On the edge of
these bright beds, secluded bowers hung with ivy fade into a dark and unkempt path, the
end of which is marked by an ancient and gigantic pear tree. The garden meets the ideal;
it becomes an extension of the home and moves from highly stylized to “natural” as it
stretches away from the Rue Fossette. With this established, Brontë uses the image and
language of the garden to characterize both Lucy and events in the novel.
Interestingly, the secluded and forbidden path becomes Lucy’s place: “I became a frequenter of this straight and narrow path. I made myself gardener of some tintless flowers that grew between its closely-ranked shrubs” (133). “The straight and narrow path” often portrays the “right” path; for Lucy, this is the path to the ideal governess. However, just as Lucy is marginalized in society, this path remains at the margin of the garden. Paradoxically, she tends the path although she disregards herself. The “tintless flowers” represent Lucy’s empty spirit, and the “closely-ranked shrubs” represent the cultural elements that repress her. The garden path and Lucy share the same liminal space, physically and figuratively.

As Joseph Boone, a literary critic, suggests, the garden is a place of observation and ambiguity (22). It exists between the private sphere of the home and the public sphere of the community; the physical space is neither public nor private. Because of this paradox, certain events occur within its walls that cannot transpire elsewhere, and these events acquire additional meaning because of their location. In the garden, Lucy is able to briefly leave her governess self. The inner monologues which reveal her repressed feelings and personality occur within the garden. Because the garden disconnects from the privacy of the home, Lucy is able to leave her identity of governess without facing the larger world that labels her as Other. For her, the garden’s “seclusion, the very gloom of the walk attracted [her]” (Brontë 132). Only here can Lucy embrace seclusion that she chooses rather than accepting that which society forces upon her. Her seclusion in the garden becomes a time of rest and reflection rather than the isolation found in society. In essence, the garden becomes her sanctuary: “I took refuge in the garden” (160). The
liminality of the space parallels her own position, and the “room” created there becomes a personal space in which she can escape the pressures of her role.

Furthermore, relationships surface in the garden that cannot appear elsewhere. In the garden, Lucy, even as a governess, regains her sexuality (Gates 36). Victorian images of gardens portray lovers waiting for each other or men seducing young women (37). Brontë draws on these cultural images to make Lucy’s encounters in the garden more poignant. When Dr. John comes to care for Mme. Beck’s children, Lucy observes him carefully, fascinated by his personality and his care. As they sit in the garden one afternoon, Lucy first recognizes her relationship to Dr. John, although she does not fully admit her recognition to the reader or him, and his identity as the young Graham she knew in her childhood during a tête-à-tête: “an idea new, sudden, and startling, riveted my attention with an overmastering strength and power of attraction” (Brontë 120). While her initial response is simply recollection, the word “attraction” suggests Lucy recognizes her own emotions and sexual desire towards Dr. John. She allows herself to feel what she must not, and the cultural images of lovers found in paintings highlight this emotion and call attention to the heartache that must result. She cannot be John’s partner because of their social statuses, and he falls in love with her pupil instead, marking Lucy’s realization of what must be: he must marry someone from his own social class, definitely not a governess.

In another instance, Lucy comes across a love letter labeled “Pour la robe grise” in the garden and immediately assumes the letter is for her because she “wore indeed a dress of French gray” (Brontë 136). Lucy is immediately enraptured with the possibility of a romance, even though she recognizes that it is hardly likely: “This then was no billet-
doux; and it was in settled conviction to the contrary that I quietly opened it” (137). However, once read, Lucy recognizes the love letter and believes John may return her feelings; yet again, Lucy reclaims her sexuality and identifies her own longing for a relationship. Soon, John intrudes on her space in the garden, and reveals the letter most assuredly is not for her but for a pupil, destroying the little femininity she regains and placing her back within the confines of her role as governess.

M. Paul and Lucy partake of intimate conversation in the garden, as well, establishing a new facet of their relationship. As Lucy walks in the alley one evening, M. Paul joins her and “He took [Lucy’s] hand. [She] looked up in his face...But through his touch, and with his words, a new feeling and strange thought found a course” (Brontë 552-3). Lucy becomes a sexual being, and they embark on a relationship that would be unacceptable both within the Rue Fossette and in society at large. She finds him “more than a friend or brother” and desires that relationship, even though, ideally, governesses did not embark on romantic trysts (553). As seen through the relationships that Lucy forms there, the garden provides a freedom not found anywhere else, and Lucy becomes a person rather merely a role. As this person, Lucy can be recognize and even act upon her feelings.

Because the garden occupied a space between public and private, as well as a prevailing position in Victorian culture, images of the garden carry far more symbolic meaning than the simple events portray. The rigid structure provides a sense of security and a veil of propriety denied to the wilderness, but the mere presence of plants and the seclusion of paths allows for a freedom denied the house. Furthermore, by achieving the ideal of the garden, Brontë creates a safe context in which Lucy’s character can emerge
and shift without condemnation. Because of the liminality of the space, her liminal position as governess receives an attention there that cannot be afforded by the house. The result is a clarified image of Lucy as a whole person. By allowing her to feel and form relationships within the garden, Brontë subversively reveals how repressed she is as governess within the Rue Fossette and society as seen in the paradox of her character in the two locations.

The garden was not confined to its borders, however; live flowers adorned every room of the home and floral décor dominated interior design. As these flowers entered the home, they brought with them a piece of the societal sphere and a relaxation of the confines of propriety within the home. In *Villette*, the greater the infiltration of flowers, the greater the sense of freedom and the greater Lucy’s sense of self and identity appear.

Typical Victorian décor is stereotyped by its repressive nature and structure. Most people think of the bright colors, combinations of fabrics, and over-stuffed furniture. Furthermore, knick-knacks adorned every surface, whether functional pieces such as vases or collections of natural items (eggs, rocks, leaves, etc.). The décor could easily become overwhelming and confining, both literally and figuratively. Literally, it could become difficult to move through the rooms. Figuratively, the combinations of textures and colors could become over stimulating and distracting visually, creating a sense of claustrophobia.

Because of this stifling atmosphere, the garden’s entrance into the home became a welcome breath of fresh air. In Victorian society, flowers appeared everywhere within the home, even to the point of absurdity, producing an almost overwhelming effect as explained by T. James, a social commentator, in 1842:
No dread of ‘noxious exhalations’ deters mammas from decorating their halls and staircases with flowers of every hue and fragrance... We would go one step further, and replace all artificial flowers with natural ones, on the dinner-table and in the hair. (243)

James illustrates how essential these flowers became in the home, and how even they were subject to the excesses of Victorian society. Not only did these cut flowers appear in stylish homes, but miniature live gardens also materialized in the form of Wardian cases, which were elaborately decorated and were considered a necessary piece of furniture; these cases, made of iron and glass, held miniature gardens in a protected space that basically cared for itself (Bisgrove 157). The garden firmly established itself in the home, and the lines between the spheres continued to blur.

In Villette, Lucy experiences the power of flowers within the home as power within herself. Lucy discovers a source of solace and self in the garden, and when that garden enters the Rue Fossette, similar events occur. Depression grips Lucy when she realizes her fantasies about a romantic relationship between she and John can never be realized. As Lucy gazes out of the dormitory window of the Rue Fossette thinking about this pain and her isolation, the garden seems to merge into the room; the window separating the two fades, and Lucy is captivated by “the winter sun, already setting, [gleaming] pale on the tops of the garden-shrubs” (Brontë 368). At that moment, Lucy decides to take control of her emotions and act: “A thought struck me—one of those queer fantastic thoughts that will sometime strike solitary people. I put on my bonnet, cloak and furs, and went out into the city” (368). She buys a “casket” and literally buries the source of her pain, John’s letters, which were a token of friendship rather than
romance. Although she had read those letters in the dormitory and spent time alone there often, only when the garden enters does Lucy act. The garden’s very presence gives her a freedom and determination not found elsewhere.

Without a doubt, Lucy is most powerful and least repressed when in her own school given to her by M. Paul. Her dreams of independence are realized, and she is able to escape the confines of the Rue Fossette. When they enter her school, Lucy first notices that, significantly, the school is filled with plants:

vines trained about the panes, tendrils and green leaves kissing the glass…the recess of the single window was filled with a green stand, bearing three green flower pots, each filled with a fine plant glowing in bloom…and a glass filled with violet in water…in the windows flowered a few hearty plants. (Brontë 604-5)

These plants surround her; the garden established itself with her home and school and she draws on its power. Even after M. Paul leaves to do his missionary work, Lucy continues to cultivate and tend the plants he left in her school: “I cultivated out of love for him (I was naturally no florist) the plants he preferred” (616). Symbolically, these plants represent the self he helped her to realize through the establishment of her school, and she continues to tend them and thus herself even when he is no longer there. Lucy regains the identity she lost at the Rue Fossette, and cultivates her soul as she cultivates those plants.

Floral patterns within décor have a similar function; they embody a freedom that creates an emotionally safe environment and allows a greater independence for the characters within the room. Floral patterns dominated Victorian interior design. These
designs represent a sense of freedom with the rigid structure of the domestic sphere, similarly to the freedom of expression and thought experienced in the garden.

Lucy relies on this sense of freedom through the floral décor as a source of comfort in difficult situations. When Lucy begins to recover from her fainting spell brought on by the feelings of isolation and repression she finally recognizes during the long vacation, she awakes in a room described as:

pale walls over which a slight garland of azure forget-me-nots ran amazed and bewildered…the round centre-table, with a blue covering, bordered with autumn tinted foliage; and, above all, two little footstools with [embroidered] covers, and a small ebony-framed chair, of which the seat and back were also [embroidered] with groups of brilliant flowers on a dark ground. (Brontë 208)

In this room at La Terrasse, the home of her godmother and John, Lucy begins to literally and figuratively regain her strength, in part due to the matronly care of her godmother and her home and in part because the garden now surrounds her indoors, as well. Because the garden comes to represent Lucy’s true self—the self filled with passion and desire for human connection and love—the more it surrounds her the more whole she feels. In this floral environment, she is free to abandon the selfless ideal of the governess, recognize her fatigue, and heal. Furthermore, she draws closer to John than she could have dared at the Rue Fossette; they spend hours alone talking, again blurring the lines of propriety. The presence of the garden relaxes social norms and Lucy and John are able to intimately converse even though they are not social equals. The garden theme marginalizes the space and provides a space for Lucy to become more than a governess.
This home, which is filled with floral patterns stood in stark contrast with the “bare boards, black benches, desks, and stoves” of the Rue Fossette (342). The juxtaposition of the two décors establishes the two very different internal monologues Lucy relates in the safety of the floral La Terrasse versus the stifling Rue Fossette. At La Terrasse, Lucy freely admits to herself her emotions about herself, her role, and the people in her life. At the Rue Fossette, however, she represses these emotions and concentrates on what is expected of her. The presence of flowers presents a sense of freedom from the structures of propriety and the ideals in Lucy’s life. Just as the garden provides an opportunity for Lucy to be honest with herself, flowers within the home expose her vulnerability and provide her with an opportunity to overcome it. By bringing the wilderness into the confines of the home, Brontë is able to expose the inherent wilderness therein and provide Lucy with a space in which she can reclaim her identity.

Part of this domestic space and interior décor involved needlework in the forms of pillow tops, framed work, screens, and many others. The garden culture was so imbedded in society that needlework reflected its obsession. All ladies were expected to learn needlework and pass their spare moments with the needle. Charlotte Brontë herself spent evenings with her sisters doing, in her words, “a little fancy work” (Gaskell 91). This “fancy work,” however, represented far more than a simple pastime; instead, it symbolized a feminine voice and a cry for love and acceptance in the Victorian era.

The needlework itself took numerous forms: lace, silk, embroidery, patchwork, appliqué, and clothing trim (Caulfield). No matter what the form, all needlework was dominated by floral patterns. Berlin wools, especially, were noted for their use of flowers and marketed as such (Beck 103). Flowers represented the wildness and freedom women
of the era longed for, and therefore needlework became representative of their dreams. To society, however, these floral patterns and the art of needlework became “visible proof of prosperity;” its presence marked a life of leisure simply because of the time involved in its production (100). Because of this, needlework became an accomplishment necessary for young women in the middle and upper class in order to display and maintain their life of leisure.

Needlework as merely an accomplishment, however, remains extremely superficial. In The Subversive Stitch, Rozsika Parker, a social historian, argues that embroidery exists as an expression of femininity rather than art (5). This discourse revolves largely around the semantics of “needlework”:

Traditionally, women have called embroidery “work.” Although, to some extent, an appropriate term, it tends to confirm the stereotypical notion that patience and perseverance go into embroidery—but little else. Moreover, the term was engendered by an ideology of femininity as service and selflessness and the insistence that women work for others, not for themselves. (6)

Essentially, calling needlework “art” would signal selfishness and pride disallowed to Victorian women. By portraying needlework as “work,” they gained a sense of purity and purpose that might otherwise be lost—they remained feminine and safely domestic. Even the display of their needlework reflects this ideology. Some needlework was given to churches after Victorian historians used medieval ecclesiastical embroidery to prove all embroidery was “innately pious, pure, and spiritualizing” (32). This embroidery was thought to inspire the embroiderer to higher levels of morality and charity, and historians used this fact to imbue all embroidery with a moral quality. Not only did this allow
women to remain “pure” but it also allowed them to prove to the rest of society their social status and generosity.

Most needlework, however, remained in the domestic sphere: “Every stitch was directed towards domestic comfort” (Parker 154). In large part, this type of embroidery was meant not only to prove the household’s social standing but also to illustrate the mistress of the home’s love for her husband, and marketing reflected this phenomenon: “Purveyors of embroidery patterns assured their customers that embroidery made for domestic happiness, providing the comfort that would win a husband’s love and prove a wife’s devotion” (155). Again, this role of needlework placed the woman’s enjoyment of her work beneath pleasing her husband. Concurrently, the role instilled needlework with a significant power to preserve Victorian ideals.

It is no small wonder, then, that Victorian literature powerfully draws upon the image of needlework and the embroiderer. Often, embroidery takes the form of communication between women and men: “Embroidery in Victorian novels is a signifier of femininity which is revealed as a mode of behaviour demanded by masculinity” (Parker 165). Because Victorian women are often silenced, needlework allows female characters within novels to subversively communicate and reveal pieces of themselves with the assurance that readers will understand. Brontë expertly uses embroidery within her own work to expose contradictions within her female characters: “embroidery, and thus femininity, emerge as both self denial and self defence, as a means of establishing an inviolate female space and announcing female subservience and availability” (Parker 165). Superficially, this appears to steal power from her female characters, but it actually creates a space in which they have sole power and control because their work is purely
their own, and their stitches communicate in a language only understood by other women.

Although Parker bases her thesis on Shirley, perhaps this use of needlework in literature is most evident in Villette. Throughout the novel, M. Paul occupies the power position and Lucy constantly has power stolen from her. When she is occupied with needlework, however, this distribution of power reverses. Significantly, the needlework follows the floral pattern, introducing wildness into her very domestic life, and this pattern then gives her freedom and courage to leave her traditional, subservient role by placing “freedom” within her grasp and control.

The first time Lucy is seen sewing, M. Paul becomes consumed by jealousy. Although he is in the midst of a tirade about the lack of proper etiquette displayed by Lucy’s pupils, she resumes her needlework, unflustered and unabashed: “Something—either in my continued silence or in the movement of my hand, stitching—transported M. Emmanuel beyond the last boundary of patience; he actually sprung upon my desk” (Brontë 301). The mere presence of her needlework, her source of power, flusters him because she gives the same amount of attention to both her needlework and M. Paul. Even after they settle their dispute and Lucy sets her work down, “Many a jealous glance did M. Paul cast at [her sewing]; he hated [it] mortally, considering sewing as a source of distraction from the attention due to himself” (302). Her simple act of feminine expression places her in control of the situation and robs M. Paul of his typical authority.

Similarly, she regains this control on M. Paul’s fête day and the preceding events. As the day draws near, Lucy begins to embroider a watchguard “For a gentleman,” as she explains to M. Paul when he finds her working (Brontë 417). The gentleman is none
other than M. Paul, but the mere mention of a gentleman sends him into a rant, criticizing
Lucy as heartless, insensible, and a “coquette” (418). Lucy remains still, recovering the
position of authority once again as he crumbles, only correcting small bits of fact such as
the exact color of her dress, and otherwise keeping silent.

On the actual fête day, while the other pupils and employees of the school present
M. Paul floral arrangements, Lucy remains still. After the initial ceremony, M. Paul flies
into a rage, more because he is hurt by Lucy grudging “him a few centimes on a flower to
give him pleasure” on his special day, assuming she hates him (Brontë 433). She then
assures him she grudges him nothing and presents him with the embroidered gift after
delivering a lecture of her own: “this cost more than a few centimes, and I did not grudge
its price…if Monsieur had been rather more patient…I should have given it then” (434).
M. Paul becomes the pupil rather than vice versa, and Lucy once again assumes his
power. M. Paul admires the gift “artlessly, like a child” asking “For me?…You
commenced it with the intention that it should be mine?” (434). He becomes like a child,
and Lucy becomes the adult authority figure, reversing roles.

Although he takes possession of her work, the act of giving restores the power she
might have lost had the needlework been taken from her. In essence, his acceptance of
her gift is as much a gift to her as the watchguard is to him; it symbolizes an approval of
her as a person and a recognition of their relationship—similar to the recognition of a
husband for a wife’s work. She realizes, “We are friends now” establishing a rapport on
her terms and in her language. Lucy’s floral needlework tames him rather than
domesticating her.
Although needlework is often associated with a loss of power, it can also restore authority to the embroiderer. The term “work” may limit needlework to a craft rather than an art, but it also suggests the amount of effort and self the embroiderer pours into the piece. Furthermore, floral needlework in literature frequently signifies an abandonment of domestication and an assumption of power. For Lucy, needlework becomes a way to control M. Paul rather than be controlled by him, placing her outside of the traditional roles of the domestic sphere and outside of the repressed character she generally assumes.

Whether within the literal garden or the figurative garden found in interior décor and needlework, the physical space and depiction of flowers becomes charged with a freedom from the confines of Victorian propriety. The marginality of the garden provides a justification for the events that occur there; rules do not apply within its walls. At the same time, because it is walled the garden provides enough of the domestic sphere’s security to remain a place where women, especially the governess, are safe. For Lucy, the garden provides her with a space in which she can explore her emotions and her identity outside of the role of governess. As other people enter that space, her two selves merge and relationship and bonds form. Furthermore, when the garden infiltrates the Rue Fossette or her needlework, Lucy reclaims her identity and power; she accepts Lucy Snowe the woman as well as Lucy Snowe the governess. The liminality of the garden and the governess provides a necessary link for Lucy and the reader to better understand her character and role.
Chapter Three: The Governess and the Garden

In *Villette* and Victorian society, the governess symbolically unites with the garden to find a sense of self and identity, by using the physical space as a psychological escape from her confining role. Both the governess and the garden occupy a liminal space, and Victorian society molds and tames both to fit its own purposes. Propriety subjugates the natural tendencies and states of both “objects,” walling them in and forcing them to conform to a set ideal. The governess and the garden become a symbol of social status for the employer or owner, but the governesses’ status disappears in the process. By identifying with the garden, governesses illustrate their own objectification and loss of natural identity for the sake of the ideal. At the same time, governesses regain a sense of identity within the garden walls because it allows them to embrace their marginality and escape temporarily from the confines of the domestic world. In *Villette*, Lucy Snowe intentionally cultivates this relationship with the garden as she escapes within its borders, revealing her passionate and uninhibited self and thoughts within its walls. Brontë uses her character to portray the status of Victorian governesses, rendering the novel a poignant social commentary and, in turn, revealing the forced duality of Lucy Snowe—role versus person.
Barbara Gates recognizes this idea of the governess appearing as an object, specifically as a piece of the garden, in Brontë’s writing. Victorian society saw women, especially governesses, as something “to be gazed at” and which need “tending and trimming to keep them vital” (Gates 37). The role of the governess and the garden elicits similar responses from other members of society; both become an object of surveillance and pruning in order to mold them into the ideal. Paradoxically, the garden also becomes a place where a “young woman can possess ‘herself’” (37). Although under the authority of a “gardener,” the garden allows her an escape; a piece of the innate wildness still remains and manifests itself in the garden and Lucy.

For Lucy, this wildness takes the form of a release of emotion; she escapes the confining role of governess by admitting into her own consciousness her true feelings and then admitting these thoughts to the powerful men in her life. On the night of Mme. Beck’s fête, Lucy meets Dr. John on the garden steps after she learns that he loves Ginevra, not herself, even though Ginevra treats him horribly and Lucy adores him. As Dr. John discusses his love and adoration of Ginevra, Lucy becomes angry, knowing Ginevra’s feelings, as well as her own. Finally, Lucy reveals her disgust for the whole situation, leaving Dr. John stunned by her severity. Still, Lucy remains adamant about her belief:

I am excessively severe—more severe that I choose to show you. You should hear the strictures with which I favour my ‘beautiful young friend,’ only that you would be unutterably shocked at my want of tender considerateness for her delicate nature. (Brontë 186)
Lucy not only releases tremendous emotion in this statement, but she also confesses that she does not naturally meet the ideal of governess; she chastises, rather than nurtures, and “crushes” a delicate young woman. Rather, Lucy has been pruned and tamed to fit within the ideal.

Similarly, Lucy reveals her true self and emotions to M. Paul in the garden. He attempts to apologize for one of his irritable moods, stating that he “can hardly expect [forgiveness] at [Lucy’s] hands…you know neither me, nor my position, nor my history” (Brontë 505). Rather than accept his apology like a demure young woman and an ideal governess, Lucy lashes out:

No, monsieur…Of course, as you say, I know neither your history, nor your position, nor your sacrifices, nor any of your sorrows, or trials, or affections, or fidelities. Oh, no! I know nothing about you; you are for me altogether a stranger. (505)

Even when M. Paul looks at her in shock and is struck speechless, Lucy continues: “All we, with whom you come into contact, are machines, which you thrust here and there, inconsiderate of their feelings” (506). M. Paul’s simple response reflects his shock at the passion Lucy displays: “I am judged” (506). Again, Lucy steps out of her role of governess to display her emotion as Lucy the woman who feels neglected and hurt.

These displays of emotion and revelation of identity restore Lucy’s power, both over her own emotions and also over her relationships. Literary critic Angela Hague studies this gain of power through the disclosure of the unconscious: Lucy demonstrates “a passivity of consciousness that in turn infuse[s] [Lucy] with power, energy, and strength” (587). For Lucy, her conscious mind remains within the role of the governess.
When this mind relaxes, her true self and passions emerge from her unconscious. The resulting power lies in the ability to “know” the unconscious and fuse self and other (591-2). This fusion of self and other occurs when a relationship forms that reveals a part of the self previously hidden. Lucy demonstrates this ability time and time again within the garden, fusing herself with John, M. Paul, and the garden itself as she reveals her passion and true self. Essentially, she recognizes her sexual feelings for the two men—passion—and her symbiotic relationship with the garden—her true, freer self. By placing the locus of power on emotion, Lucy illustrates that the role of logic in the ideal of the governess confines young women rather than strengthens them by silencing the emotional part of their selves.

Although Lucy finds an escape and a sense of power within the garden, it remains an enclosed space; the garden does not provide total freedom. While alone with her thoughts, Lucy contemplates this idea frequently. Lucy realizes that even when she retreats to the “the alley and the seat which were called [hers]” the garden still belongs to Mme. Beck (Brontë 372). Her space is an extension of Mme. Beck’s space, the school. Lucy recognizes this ownership and the enclosure of the literal walls of the garden:

Those who live in retirement, whose lives have fallen amid the seclusion of schools or other walled-in and guarded dwellings, are liable to be suddenly and for a long while dropped out of the memory of their friends, the denizens of a freer world. (332)

The garden is walled and guarded by the surveillance of Mme. Beck, and Lucy often feels forgotten when she sits alone in the allée. The walls of the garden remind Lucy of the walls placed around her by her role as governess; this knowledge curbs the extent to
which the garden provides an escape. Its very structure reminds Lucy that the release of emotion can only be temporary because she ultimately must return to the walls of the Rue Fossette and her position therein.

Lucy’s position is not uncommon among governesses in the Victorian era. The garden illustrates a relationship on a much larger level that appears in many forms. Perhaps one of the most ironic illustrations of the relationship between governesses and gardens lies in the link between governesses and gardeners. In Villette, M. Paul cares for the garden rather than a professional gardener, but when a gardener was employed, his role closely mirrored the governess’s. Both had little opportunity for personal growth. According to an article from Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine published in 1834, just like a governess, a gardener had little opportunity to learn, and what knowledge he did gain came from his employer’s bookshelves (Loudon 693, 700). Furthermore, society called the gardener to a life of self-sacrifice to improve the garden: “[they should] deny themselves the usual gratification of food, clothing, and rest” (696). However, the gardener’s role becomes that of artist; the garden is not an escape but an accomplishment, winning him acclaim. Despite their similar economic positions, gardeners and governesses exist in different social spheres; therefore, the garden becomes different spaces for different people. While the gardener tames the garden to win fame for himself, the governess escapes to the garden to find a refuge for herself. Furthermore, just as the gardener prunes and shapes the garden for his own purposes, an employer limits and molds the governess in order to meet his or her own needs. Although the garden and gardener may seem to be the most natural pair, the garden and the governess are the more compatible pair.
In order to reveal this relationship, Brontë overtly associates Lucy with the garden. As Lucy’s relationship with M. Paul grows, he begins to give her lessons, leaving her books and then discussing their contents with her. As Lucy prepares for her lesson one evening, she watches from the window as M. Paul works in the garden. As the evening wears on and M. Paul remains in the garden, Lucy realizes, “[her] lesson…must to-night be very short; but the orange-trees, the cacti, the camellias were all served now. Was it [her] turn?” (Brontë 516). As Lucy wonders when the “gardener” will tend to her, she becomes a piece of the garden. Lucy then states, “Alas, in the garden were more plants to be looked over” (516, emphasis mine). The phrase “in the garden” emphasizes the image of Lucy as flower because it insinuates that “plants” exist outside of the garden that require M. Paul’s attention. Lucy and the garden become essentially synonymous.

When we consider Lucy as a part of the garden, she embodies the compatibility of gardens and governesses. Society tames both, wrapping them around the lattices of its ideals. Lucy’s submission to Mme. Beck’s surveillance and loss of personal space and sense of identity reflects just how tightly the confines of society remain for her. Both gardens and governesses remain trapped within walls, even as they “escape” the confines of the home into the more “natural” garden; the household perceives the garden as an extra room: “in the summer, the pupils almost lived [in the garden] amongst the rose-bushes and the fruit-trees” (Brontë 92). This creation of a domestic space imposes a social order on the natural world, forcing Lucy to consciously remember her role. Even when she reveals her true feelings in the garden, she knows “[she] was going beyond [herself]” (187). Just as society confines the garden, society represses the governess in order to meet an ideal and achieve a higher social status.
However, the extent of the governess’s repression remains unclear. Because the garden by its very composition blurs the borders between spheres, the repression of the governess deviates between spheres. The physical space remains outside of the home, pushing it into the societal realm, but the design of the garden symbolizes an extension of the home. Moreover, homeowners draw the garden into the home, further blurring the division between private and public. In the Rue Fossette, even the distinction between interior and exterior becomes imprecise, especially near the schoolroom: “[Lucy] was not sorry to see [M. Paul], soon after, gardening in the berceau. He approached the glass door; [Lucy] drew near also. We spoke of flowers growing round it” (Brontë 505). Although the “berceau” technically lies in the garden, only a glass door separates the world from the home, and flowers grow “around” it rather than on one side or the other. Significantly, this margin exists in Lucy’s space—the schoolroom. Similarly to the garden, the governess occupies a space between both spheres, as well; the liminality of the physical space represents the liminality of her position. While Lucy begins in the societal sphere as a stranger in Villette, she enters the domestic sphere when she becomes a governess and a part of the household.

While the garden and the governess draw in the societal sphere, the home remains staunchly domestic, resisting the outside world and its freedoms. The garden and the governess linger on the margins of the home, shown only when convenient and fashionable. Just as a homeowner replaces or rearranges flowers when they have served their purpose, an employers could easily dismiss and replace a governess at any given moment. Although Mme. Beck never dismisses Lucy, she does change her position in the
home frequently without consultation with her. The governess is objectified as though she is a garden to be pruned and shaped to the “gardener’s” will.

Although the governess becomes an object, she gains power from her relationship with the garden. The garden represents a freedom not found within the home, and when the garden enters the home it brings that freedom in as well. By identifying with the garden, the governess gains the sense of freedom and thus power. Since the garden dominates culture, this freedom pervades the domestic spaces, creating a space for the governess even within the home. For Lucy, this provides her with a sense of solace and gradually restores her identity as the garden enters the Rue Fossette.

What does this culture mean for *Villette*? If the critics are correct and *Villette* is a dry, “emotion-driven” novel with no plot or acts simply as a psychological study of Lucy as a voyeuristic woman, what does the connection between Lucy and the garden, or governesses and the garden, lend to a reading of the novel? This connection between a person and an object actually focuses a new reading on the text: *Villette* is an elegant and subversive social commentary. The novel critiques the treatment of the Victorian governess by employing the familiar language of the garden culture.

Brontë’s own experiences drive this critique. Even in a wonderful home, Brontë was miserable as a nursery governess (Gaskell 149). Brontë also served as a school governess at Roe Head, and she despised that position as well, even though she was only responsible for teaching rather than the “menial” tasks of the nursery governess (Barker 224). No matter what the position, Brontë was not content as a governess, and she became increasingly aware of the social position of governesses in general. Her unpleasant experience as governess provided Brontë with the needed material and skills
to create a realistic portrayal of an “ideal” governess and the multiplicity of her roles. Although she disliked being a teacher at Roe Head, as a student there she learned to think: “[Charlotte] had been taught to think, to analyze, to reject, to appreciate” (Gaskell 82). Brontë utilized these skills throughout her lifetime in her examination of the role of the governess. She recognized the liminality of governesses: “I see now more clearly than I have ever done before that a private governess has no existence, is not considered as a living and rational being except as connected with the wearisome duties she has to fulfill” (Barker 310). She not only recognized this in her own life, but she also criticized others who thought that simply standardizing and employing governesses would change their status within society. During the era, concerned, well-established society members founded the Governess Benevolence Institution as a clearinghouse for governess positions and to provide for governesses’ education, welfare, and retirement, as Barker explains:

It seemed to [Brontë] “both absurd and cruel” to raise the standard of governesses’ acquirements still higher, when they were already not half nor a quarter paid for what they are taught and, in most instances, not a half nor a quarter of their attainments were required by their pupils. (602)

Brontë recognized the economic and psychological misuse of Victorian governesses; furthermore, she recognized their lack of personal space. She and her sisters believed society saw a “vacancy” when they looked at the governess, and “this apparent vacancy was the space [governesses] made their own” (Gordon 1). In Villette, Brontë expands upon this idea of the governess claiming space; Lucy, as the ideal governess, claims the garden, not only establishing a personal space but also reclaiming her identity as a
woman. In this way, *Villette* becomes a social commentary on the status of the governess based upon Brontë’s experience.

Lucy Snowe, as the ideal governess, becomes a representative for the entire governess class and the focus of Brontë’s social critique. Furthermore, the ideal garden at the Rue Fossette provides a critical link between Brontë and her audience. Because garden culture dominated Victorian society, many readers would recognize the symbolism and structure of the garden. Moreover, they were familiar with the language of the garden, allowing Brontë to describe an entire range of emotions and events by simply describing or having them occur in the garden. With this knowledge, Lucy’s relationship with the garden becomes more poignant and representative. Because many readers recognize the similarities between the garden and the governess, Brontë is able to criticize this repressive role without having to explicitly denounce society and its views.

By linking a person to an object, Brontë illustrates how society strips governesses of their identity as people. They become subhuman, robbed of emotion and will. Even when able to leave their employers’ homes, the title of governess clouds their actions. Governesses lose their selves in order to gain employment. Only by escaping to a marginal area, the garden, can governesses escape their own marginality. As they find a sense of identity with an object, they ironically regain a portion of themselves within those walls. Only by finding identity and taking comfort in their liminality can governesses escape.

Because Brontë personifies the liminality of governesses through Lucy, *Villette* becomes a powerful critique on Victorian society’s view and use of the governess. Lucy’s character illustrates the repression governesses endure rather than the emotionless, dry
character perceived by Syd Thomas. Instead of being emotion driven, as thought by John Hughes, the novel is change driven; it illustrates the changes society must make within itself rather than in the governess. *Villette* is not only an object of criticism, but it is also an apparatus of critique.

If the novel is read as social criticism, *Villette* is no longer a dismal failure. But is Lucy still a one-dimensional character? Is she still rigid and emotionless? Culturally, the role of governess forced her to repress her emotions and become the stoic woman many readers observe. However, Lucy’s personality contains a duality that drastically alters the reading of her character. Her passion and true emotions appear briefly throughout the novel, but when those passions are given equal consideration as her actions as governess, the reality of the novel’s ending becomes apparent and Lucy evolves into a strong, vibrant, and independent woman.

As she walks in the garden, Lucy reveals her desire to take a tenement with one large room, and two or three smaller ones, furnish the first one with a few benches and desks, a black tableau, an estrade for [herself]…begin with taking day pupils, and so make [her] way upwards…be content to labour for independence. (Brontë 452-3, emphasis mine)

Lucy perceives the ownership of her own school as freedom, even though she would still be confined by the role of the governess. Because she recognizes the liminality and oppression of the role, she is able to move beyond those constraints by working within them. Lucy envelops the ideal while creating a space for her identity. By opening her own school, her role within society will remain the same, but she will experience the
freedom of choosing her own course. This duality of roles reflects the duality of Lucy’s personality.

Nowhere is this duality more apparent than in the ending of the novel. Critics have long debated whether M. Paul’s shipwreck ends in death or if he returns to Villette and Lucy. Gaskell wrote that Brontë wanted M. Paul to die in the shipwreck, but her father, Patrick, disliked melancholy endings and asked that the novel end with a happy marriage (392). However, “all [Brontë] could do in compliance with her father’s wish was so to veil the fate in oracular words, as to leave it to the character and discernment of her readers to interpret her meaning” (392). Because so much of Gaskell’s work has been proven inaccurate, this explanation of the ending cannot be taken as absolute truth. However, the duality of the ending does add another layer to the cultural influence on the novel, though. Brontë herself spent many years as a governess attempting to please others; with this in mind, the duality of the ending only further emphasizes the duality of the governess—to some extent, perhaps Brontë herself internalized the governess ideal.

For Lucy, the ending emphasizes the twofold nature of her personality. The last two pages of the text are written in present tense, insinuating she is writing the ending as she waits for M. Paul to return. Previously, she has stated the three years of his absence “were the three happiest years of my life,” although it is unclear if the source of her joy is his absence or the expectation of his return (Brontë 614). Now, as Lucy waits for M. Paul, she states, “my house is ready: I have made him a little library, filled its shelves with the books he left in my care: I have cultivated out of love for him (I was naturally no florist) the plants he preferred, and some of them yet bloom” (616). On the surface, Lucy continues to embody the self-sacrificing governess ideal. Everything she has done has
been for his benefit rather than her own joy. However, the link between Lucy and the
garden expresses the dual meaning of this passage: the plants she tends represent her self,
and she thrives on the independence she now enjoys. Where M. Paul once tended to her,
Lucy now cares for herself. Her freedom within her own school has enabled her to
flourish and become both the garden and the gardener. Now, Lucy claims M. Paul as
“more [her] own,” reversing the roles yet again. She belongs to no one—her identity is
reclaimed.

The ending is not entirely the happy ending Patrick wanted, but it does “leave
sunny imaginations hope” (Brontë 617). For some, this hope lies in the prospect of a
happy marriage. For others, the hope is that Lucy truly has gained independence and the
freedom she sacrificed as a governess. Either way, Lucy becomes a much more complex
character. Not only does the connection between the governess and the garden transform
Villette into social commentary, but it also transforms Lucy from a static governess into a
complex, passionate woman. While those passions may be subdued and repressed by her
role, Lucy gradually allows those emotions to take precedence as she establishes her own
identity apart from her role. Lucy’s actions and silences frequently embody the Victorian
governess ideal, but her thoughts, relationships, and ultimately her own school illustrates
her rebellion against the repressive role she is forced to accept. These breaks in her
character, this duality, reveal glimpses of the fire found in Jane Eyre, proving Lucy
Snowe is not the rigid and reserved main character many critics and readers originally
perceived.
For this and other biographical information on the Brontë family, see Juliet Barker’s *The Brontës*, Elizabeth Gaskell’s *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, Lyndall Gordon’s *Charlotte Brontë a Passionate Life*, Charlotte Brontë’s letters, or Christine Alexander and Jane Sellar’s *The Art of the Brontës*. Complete bibliographic information can be found in the Works Cited section of this essay.

Information regarding the role, condition, and status of governesses can be found in Trev Broughton and Ruth Symes’s *The Governess: An Anthology*, “Hints on the Modern Governess System”, Kathryn Hughes’s *The Victorian Governess*, “On the Social Position of Governesses”, Jeanne M. Peterson’s *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*, Alice Renton’s *Tyrant or Victim?: A History on the British Governess*, or Susan B. Ridout’s *Letters to a Young Governess: On the Principles of Education and Other Subjects Connected with her Duties*. Complete bibliographic information can be found in the Works Cited section of this essay.

Information regarding the form, style, and cultural significance of Victorian gardens can be found in Thomasina Beck’s *Gardening with Silk and Gold* or *The Embroiderer’s Story*, Richard Bisgrove’s *The National Trust Book of the English Garden*, Jennifer Davies’s *The Victorian Flower Garden*, Elizabeth Drury and Philippa Lewis’s *The Victorian Garden Album*, Brent Elliot’s *Victorian Gardens*, T. James’s “The Flower Garden”, or “Loudon on the Education of Gardeners”. Complete bibliographic information can be found in the Works Cited section of this essay.
Works Cited


Works Consulted


Appendix of Selected Images
The Victorian Governess

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