

# Reckoning

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## ÖZET

Charlotte Bronte'nin *Villette* adlı romanı, yoksul ve genç Lucy Snowe'un İngiltere'den ayrılıp hayali bir krallığa giderek kaderine meydan okumasını ve elde ettiği başarıları anlatır. Bu makale erkeklerin geleneksel hakimiyeti altındaki 19. yüzyıl İngiltere'sinde bir kadının erkeklerin dünyasına girmeyi nasıl başardığını incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Lucy kadınının ve Charlotte Bronte'nin simgesi kabul edilebilir. Lucy hayattaki amaçlarına bu yabancı şehirde, "öteki"lerinin arasında bir "öteki" olarak ulaşır. Başarılı olmak üzere çıktığı bu yolculuk onu kaderiyle hesaplaşması için gereken paraya, statüye, güce ve aşka ulaştırır.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** hesaplaşma, öteki, başarı, beğimsizlik.

## ABSTRACT

*Villette*, by Charlotte Bronte, tells the story of young and poor Lucy Snowe who leaves England to go to an imaginary kingdom to reckon with her fate and succeed in life. This article, then, aims to seek answers to how a woman in the 19th century England succeeds in entering the man's world where the man is traditionally declared as the sole authority. Lucy, qua Charlotte Bronte, may be considered as a symbol of the Victorian woman who longed to unchain her boundaries without losing her womanhood. She achieves her goals in a foreign land where the habitants of *Villette* are "the other" for her while she is "the other" for them as well. The voyage she sets out allows her to gain money, status, power and love at the end. It also encourages her to challenge her fate.

**Key words:** reckoning, the other, success, independence.

*Villette*, the story of Lucy Snowe, begins Lucy's wanderings from her indeterminate home in England and ends with her success as the owner of a *pensionnatte de demoiselles* in the capital of an imaginary French-kingdom called Labassecour. We meet her for the first time at her godmother's home house in the clean and ancient town of "Bronte, 9). Eight years elapse. She then, her kindred, works as a companion to Mrs. Marchmont, for a year, and

goes to *Villette* where she begins work first as a governess and then as an English teacher for Madame Beck who owns a school for girls. In *Villette*, she also meets the Brettons who have lost their fortune in the stock market in England and who are making a new and prosperous living. It is in this *terra incognita* that Lucy develops such power that she does not have to choose between a self-sacrificing marital home and a self-serving educational establishment. She becomes the proprietor of her own school

marriage and reproduction, they were not fulfilling their proper role in the world (Ewbank, 10).

Exercise of power was the prerogative of men. The home was, nevertheless, the almost exclusive territory of the woman. Consequently, it was highly sentimentalized and idealized. The separation of the husband and home contributed to the polarization of sex roles that characterized the age. It was partly responsible for sexual stereotypes of men as strong and active and women as weak and passive.

It was in this general background- a society and social situation in which women's opportunities were limited, their freedoms carefully abridged, and their legal status clearly of a second nature- that Charlotte Bronte lived and worked. It is further within this background that the Lucy Snowe of *Vilette* is positioned.

Having nothing to lose is the antithesis of having everything. Lucy is in the former category, without home, kindred, job, or education. As an economically helpless person she is vulnerable in a highly class conscious society. "This leaves the self a free, blank, 'pre-social' atom: free to be injured and exploited, but free also to progress, move through the class structure, choose and forge relationships, strenuously utilize its talents in scorn of autocracy, or paternalism... the social status finally achieved by the *déraciné* self is at once meritoriously won and inherently proper" (Eagleton, 491). Yet, she is determined to live and to choose her life with dignity, integrity and pride. What she wants is freedom, justice, and self-accomplishment, which she terms as "independence." Along with the financial connotation of the word, "independence" for Lucy is breaking the ties of servitude, obligation and obedience to others. More importantly, it means being able to do what she wishes to do, i.e., please whomever she wishes to, choose what to do or not to do, and be her own master, something she cannot possibly dream of in her own land. (She will turn down an offer of companionship twice her salary for this aim). These are not, in any way, rational political beliefs but objects of intense desire for her. Thus she leaves herself in the hands of fortune, but though the saying goes, "Fortuna caeca est", it is fortune which sees to it that Lucy be admitted to Madame Beck's pensionnatte and be given a job there upon the recommendation of M. Paul, the arbiter of her destiny, on the first night of her arrival in Vilette. The pensionnatte proves to be for Lucy a mere stopping-off place *en route* to the grander

ownership of her own school and traditionally of course, a marriage to a rich husband.

Lucy begins to reckon with her fate primarily by her staunch determination to make a place for herself- first a place to stay and then a means to earn a living and a respectable name- in this terra incognita. She has the will to understand for purposes of co-existence and enlargement of horizons as well as the will to dominate for purposes of control, no matter how contradictory the two are. To this end, she needs "power" to enforce obedience, to influence action, to inspire belief, and above all, to observe in order to use. The last is the power of knowledge through surveillance. She thus refuses to be the object rather than the viewer as her gender renders her. She is "...the one whose thoughts the reader knows, whose constant reevaluation of male moods and actions make up the story line" (Stinow, 192-93). By merely observing Madame Beck and everything pertaining to her school, and not disclosing an iota of her feelings, thoughts, or plans, Lucy acquires the ability to dominate through surveillance and gains further power in the form of respect from Madame Beck and the students in the school.

On her first night Madame comes into Lucy's room while Lucy is sleeping and goes through her clothes "... to form from the garments a judgment respecting the wearer, her situation, her means, neatness ..." (Bronte, 78). She then takes the keys to Lucy's desk, trunk, and workbox; they are "... not brought back till they had left on the toilet of the adjoining room the impress of their wards in wax" (Bronte, 78). Lucy wakes up and feigning sleep, watches Madame whose face betrays no response as to the conclusion of her examination, neither does Lucy's face, not that night or throughout nearly all the time she works in that pensionnatte.

Playing the fool enables her to see the discrepancy between appearance and reality in overcoming difficulties in recognizing both the self and the others on the one hand and to remain *in camera* on the other. She "sees", but she herself is invisible in her spotting, her feelings and her judgments. It is this hankering for omniscience that provides her with substance or power to overcome cultural obstacles in the land of the people she secretly declares to be "the other". Hers is the attitude of the "Orientalist" as defined by Edward Said in his famous book, *Orientalism*, i.e, not as someone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient" (Said, 3), but as someone who sees the Orient as "one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other" (Said, 1).

By establishing a difference between herself and her "Englishness" and the others,

Lucy validates a sense of superiority (enhanced by Madame's having a respect for "Angletere" and her demand for the women of no other country about her own children if she could help it), a sense of possessing power. At the same time, by not giving away her difference, she denies the others an effective weapon that they can use against her. Madame's going about in her wrapping gown, shawl and soundless slippers until noon is not to be approved because it is not the English custom for "the lady-chief of an English school." She says she thought "... Madame was a very great and a very capable woman. That school offered her for her powers too limited a sphere; she ought to have swayed a nation" (Bronte, 83). The fact that Madame has the capacity to rule a nation is irrelevant. It does not change the balance of power in Lucy's mind. The apparent compliment on her governing ability is used merely to undermine her and to tacitly label her as inferior. Whatever Madame does or however Madame is she is "the other" to be careful with until Lucy is on the same social and financial level with her. By switching her inferior situation as a governess with that of a power-possessing *surveillante*, Lucy protects herself.

Nevertheless, this is not enough for her. She impresses Madame with her success in teaching Madame's eldest daughter English and she is, one day, asked to substitute for an ill English teacher of what is termed the second division, which in Lucy's words is like the House of Commons, i.e., misbehaved, to the House of Lords, i.e., the well-behaved. Although she feels insecure with her limited mastery of French, she accepts the challenge; anticipating a collective effort on the part of the students to have her dismissed as a weakling incapable of controlling a class, she reads the composition of the oldest student, declares it stupid, and tears the page into two. Next, she locks another girl into the closet. Thus, she secures her authority with a preemptive attack, crushing the confidence of the students in their ability to manipulate teachers to show them who the boss is. Lucy justifies her behavior by saying, "... I never knew them rebel against a wound given to their self-respect: the little they had of that quality was trained to be crushed, and it rather liked the pressure of a firm heel than otherwise" (Bronte, 93). Shaming the students is not all, though. There is also reward in that she chooses a select few and walks with them during recesses, creating both competition and a chance for them to change in the direction Lucy sees fit. Furthermore, Lucy knows

Madame will not side with her in case of failure for "... her righteous plan was to maintain an unbroken popularity with the pupils, at any and every cost of justice or comfort to the teachers" (Bronte, 92). Fate offers her the chance in the form of a teacher's illness, but Lucy earns the position by proving her ability to manage a class of French-speaking girls without knowing the language very well. "*Audaces Fortuna juvat*" goes the saying. Indeed, fortune favors the courageous.

This has a twofold effect in Lucy's progress. She gains respect in Madame's eyes for one thing, and for another, she gets a promotion into the post of teaching which brings her into formal contact with M. Paul, the arbiter of her destiny on her first night in Vilette.

M. Paul Emmanuel is a Spaniard, a foreigner like Lucy herself, with a tragic love story in his past that has made him swear to celibacy. Lucy says of him, "To pursue a somewhat audacious parallel, in love of power, in an eager grasp after supremacy, M. Emmanuel was like Bonaparte" (Bronte, 384). His face "bears a close and picturesque resemblance to that of a black and sallow tiger" (Bronte, 357). Therefore, Lucy has to tame him, and she tames him in a manner highly reminiscent of Petruchio taming Kate in **Taming of the Shrew**. She deprives him of the thing he hungers after, i.e., his "power" by simply refusing to do what he expects of her.

It is the birthday of Madame Beck. A play (vaudeville) is being prepared for this occasion under the directorship of M. Paul. The student to play the part of a lover falls ill, and M. Paul demands that Lucy learn the part in a few hours and act her part. Lucy will not say, "Yes" until the proud man bows his head and says, "I apply to an Englishwoman to rescue me" (Bronte, 148). Now that M Paul has acknowledged her superiority, and she is in control, Lucy agrees to participate. However, it is to be in her terms. She will not dress like a man. Retaining her woman's clothes, she wears a little vest, a collar, and cravat, and a paletôt of small dimensions. Thus, the message she gives to M. Paul is that she will submit to him only on her own terms. Symbolically, she will not give concessions from her womanhood. She is, primarily a woman. She can aspire to have "male qualities" of the time, which are greater intelligence, independence, courage, fitness for cerebral activity, and capacity for abstract reason. Thus, she gives the message that she will circulate in intellectual spheres.

Her "education" starts some time later with M. Paul as the teacher. He teaches her all subjects, especially mathematics. Thus, Lucy enters the world of "science in the abstract", the prerogative of the male world. When she has a breakthrough in her education, her teacher becomes stern, and the harder she works, the less content is M. Paul. Here is a man who feels threatened by the power of knowledge he bestows upon a woman. Yet by so doing, he actually enables Lucy to further discoveries of her abilities and herself. Lucy's reaction to this is, "Whatever my powers- feminine or the contrary- God had given them and I felt resolute to be ashamed of no faculty of his bestowal" (Bronte, 387). Lucy turns discouragement into encouragement. She now plans to open her own school "...when she (I) will have saved one thousand franks... She (I) will take a tenement... and begin by taking day pupils, and so work her (my) way upwards" (Bronte, 396).

It is now the birthday of M. Paul. The tradition is that every student and teacher in the school gives him a present in the form of flowers. (He will not accept anything of value.) Nevertheless, Lucy chooses to be singled out by not giving him anything in front of the crowd, which mortifies the man. "M. Paul was so tragic, and took my defection so seriously, he deserved to be vexed. I kept, then both my box and my countenance, and sat insensate as a stone" (Bronte, 373). This is another example of the taming process. She first denies him what he needs, i.e., recognition, care, and affection, but then (in the afternoon) she gives him a box with his initials she has made especially for him. Thus, she is in control of the relationship. The outgoing message is that she is special, he is special, and she cares for him. At the same time, this feminine behavior, in a stage of flirtation both are not aware of, encourages the man to chase her. He wants to be "friends" with her. "Difficult of management so long as I had done him no harm, he became graciously pliant as soon as I stood in his presence a conscious contrite offender" (Bronte, 360). Lucy will justify her general treatment of him thus. She is now getting strong and losing her early impulse to recoil from M. Paul.

Since her arrival in Vilette and meeting the Brettons who have also emigrated there, Lucy has had feelings for John Bretton with whom she lived in the same house from time to time in her childhood. After M. Paul's birthday, she says goodbye to her feelings. The only barrier between Lucy and M. Paul is their religion now for she is Anglican, and he is Catholic. M. Paul asks Lucy to convert to Catholicism. She says "No". In rejecting Catholicism, Lucy comes to terms with her need for an external authority. She completes the move toward independence begun when she left England and continued in

the *pensionatte demosilles*. As to her reckoning with fate and securing her future, she gives M. Paul the message that he is not her master and that she wants to be accepted as she is. "It is clear that Charlotte Bronte believes that human relationships require... a transaction between people which is "without painful shame or damping humiliation" and in which nobody is made into an object for the use of anybody else" (Rich, 475).

Now that Lucy is educated and her religion is no barrier between her and M. Paul, it is time for romance. For the first time, he holds her hand, and Lucy wonders if he is more than a friend or a brother. Her attitude toward love has been, in her own words, "Loverless and inexpectant of love, I was safe from spies in my heart-poverty, as the beggar from thieves in his destitution of purse" (Bronte, 132). For her "marriage is... in no sense merely a solution or a goal. It is not patriarchal marriage in the sense of a marriage that stunts and diminishes the woman; but a continuation of this woman's creation of herself" (Rich, 475). Lucy wins the love of M. Paul because she is like the student who studies only to learn the subject and not to get high grades. Yet, she gets the high grades because she knows a lot. Lucy, now that she is strong enough or has "power", does not try to capture the heart of M. Paul but aims at attaining a relationship based on friendship where both parties are on the same level. Thus, she wins his heart. Fate rewards her purity. M. Paul, the arbiter of her destiny, takes her to a building, which he has prepared and furnished as a school. He gives her prospectuses announcing the school and Lucy as the directress. He goes away for three years, and by the time he comes back, Lucy's school has prospered and she has opened a second school with the hundred pounds given to her upon the will of Mrs. Marchmont for whom she has worked as a companion back in England. She joins her man only when she is financially self-sufficient. *Finis coronat opus*. The end indeed crowns the work.

If "fate" is what is given to us and, thus, what we cannot control and "life" is what we do in the face of the given, Lucy's life begins with a voyage out. She refuses what her contemporaries understood as the "normal" pattern of development of Victorian women and as the woman's "natural" desires and ambitions for domestic bliss, but she does not attempt to solve them. Instead, knowing it will be a losing battle to fight for her rights in England, she gets what she cannot get in her native land from foreigners who are the "other" for her. She first makes a place to stay,

then creates a means with which to earn a living, proves herself to be a good teacher, impresses a rich man with her character, tames him, gets him to educate her, and, finally, becomes financially successful enough to open a second school before she unites with her partner for life. She "... is not annihilated by her subordination to the patriarch; she also assumes some power over him since his great power is harnessed to one woman- the heroine" (Armstrong, 191). She establishes cordial relations with the Brettons, her compatriots, and gets their friendship and tacit approval, but the Brettons, like the British, are not people "who, in appreciating the gem, could forget its setting" (Bronte, 406). Thus, Lucy qua Charlotte Bronte creates her own world where the woman is not confined to the home, where she can own property and where her true worth is adequate enough to acquire wealth and status, which are external symbols of her true value. This is her reckoning with fate.

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