

“Condemned to Be Free”: Lucy Snowe and Existential *Angst* in Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*

Marija Reiff

“Anxiety is the dizziness of freedom.”
—Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety* (61)

After Lucy Snowe’s employer dies near the beginning of Charlotte Brontë’s tragic masterpiece *Villette*, the protagonist heads overseas to seek employment. Stopped in London before catching a ship that will take her to mainland Europe, Lucy Snowe thinks to herself, “What was I doing here alone in great London? What should I do on the morrow? What prospects had I in life? What friends had I on earth? Whence did I come? Whither should I go? What should I do?” (46).

This question about what a person is to do with his/her life is one that Brontë explored in all of her novels. In *Villette*, though, the question is answered quite differently than in Brontë’s previous works, and Lucy Snowe’s reaction to this *angst* stands in marked contrast to those of Brontë’s other protagonists. This anxiety is met with stoicism by Jane Eyre and with bravery by Shirley Keeldar, and it is fortuitously solved through marriage for Caroline Helstone and William Crimsworth (also, notably, for Jane and Shirley). However, for Lucy Snowe, none of these solutions apply. Lucy’s despair is not solved by marriage, and she does not have the same fortitude of spirit as many of Brontë’s other characters. For her, the anxiety surrounding the question “what should I do?” is not easily answered.

Remarkably, Lucy Snowe often chooses to be passive when confronted with choices that would help her to determine “What should I do on the morrow? . . . Whither should I go?” (46). Lucy, who narrates *Villette* in the first person, describes herself as not being of “a self-reliant or active nature,” and she frequently chooses to be inert and inactive unless “self-reliance and exertion were forced upon me by circumstances, as they are for thousands besides” (36). Robert A. Colby observes that whereas Brontë’s other heroines voluntarily take “up the challenge of a new life, Lucy is forced to” (414). Even when Lucy does make her own volitional choice—going to London, for example—she carefully tells the reader that she “ran less risk and evinced less enterprise than the reader may think” (45). She keeps the scope of her choices small because “there is nothing like taking all you do at a moderate estimate: it keeps mind and body tranquil; whereas grandiloquent notions are apt to hurry both into fever” (45). In short, Lucy rarely makes a choice, and when she does, she downplays its importance.

She does this because of the great anguish and *angst* that arise from making such decisions. As she says, these choices bring on a “fever,” and she is terrified by the freedom that accompanies the exercise of her free will. According to Jon Hodge, instead of embracing her liberty, Lucy Snowe “constantly mentions nerves” and faces her potential freedom with dread, anxiety, and despair (900). Lucy’s nervous temperament is no mere fleeting quirk, though—it is one of her main character qualities, with Harriet Martineau writing in an early review that Lucy is “in a state of chronic nervous fever for the most part” (591). More importantly, modern critics have connected Lucy’s anxiety with the need to make choices. For example, Karen Chase Levenson writes that Lucy’s nature “is repeatedly taxed beyond its capacity

for action and yet required to act,” and that Lucy appears to have a “dread of happiness” (162, 164). Jean Frantz Blackall agrees, and writes that Lucy is often in the “depths of spiritual anguish” and consequently responds with *angst* when a decision is demanded (21). Most specifically, Kathleen Blake writes that Lucy suffers from a “conscious paralysis of will” that leads to a “stagnation of the soul” (705). In other words, Lucy Snowe is an anguished character, and much of her anxiety surrounds the necessity of making choices.

This idea that despair and anguish accompany decisions was also a key component in the nascent philosophical field of existentialism. Though existentialist themes “can arguably be found in religious writers of many ages” (Pattison 8), it was only in the early nineteenth century that these threads became a unified theory. This philosophical invention was no accident. According to many scholars, existentialism rose in the early 1800s as a response to scientific rationalism and Hegelian idealism. Jon Stewart explains that there are two main schools of Continental philosophy—German idealism and phenomenology/existentialism—and that the “key break” lies in the transition between Hegel, an idealist, and Kierkegaard, the first existentialist (1). George Pattison more fully explains how existentialism arose in response to the optimism surrounding the modern advances in science and technology in the early nineteenth century. He writes:

Modernity is, in fact, a crucial element in any account of existentialism. On the one hand, existentialism itself is a profoundly modernist movement, embracing the modernist protest against submission to the authority of the social, religious and intellectual status quo. On the other hand, the existentialists (and the religious existentialists in particular) cast suspicious eyes on the modernists’ intellectual faith in scientific rationality, their moral faith in the principle of autonomy and their political faith in the pursuit of utopia. Existentialism is thus neither simply “modernist” nor simply “anti-modernist.” Rather, it is a movement from within modernity against modernity and involves a peculiar heightening of the self-critical tendency in modernity itself. All of this is pre-eminently true of Kierkegaard himself. (24)

In other words, existentialism was a reaction against scientific positivism, atheism, and Hegelian philosophy, and the religious existentialists rejected the notion that “the satisfaction of material needs and comforts and the fulfilment of political hopes . . . could satisfy the human quest for meaning” (Pattison 4). When Hegel died in 1831, the stage was set for a philosophical backlash that countered his scientific, analytic, and optimistic vision of the world.

While existentialism was just developing during Brontë’s lifetime, it was to become *the* philosophical answer to the modern world and has attracted both academic and popular notice. “Of all modern philosophical trends,” write historians Johannes Hirschberger and Clare Hay, “Existentialism is the strongest . . . It has attracted the most attention. It has popularised a whole gamut of phrases, ideas and attitudes” (175). Undoubtedly one of the most popular expressions that arose from this new philosophical field is the term “existential *angst*,” a phrase that existentialist philosophers did not actually coin (they instead used words such as “dread,” “despair,” and “anxiety”). In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre defines existential anxiety as resulting from a feeling of limitlessness. As he writes, “If *nothing* compels me to save my life, *nothing* prevents me from precipitating myself into the abyss. The decisive conduct will emanate from a self which I am not yet. Thus the self which I am depends on the self which I am not yet to the exact extent that the self which I am not yet does not depend on the self which I am” (32). While Lucy Snowe would surely shy away from the suicidal tendencies inherent in Sartre’s conception, her brand of existentialism—indeed, this is the unifying feature of all types of existentialism—explores the

anxiety that arises from such feelings of freedom and boundlessness. This understanding of anxiety has been widely disseminated into contemporary popular culture, and a popular on-line reference work defines the colloquial term “existential *angst*” in a similar manner:

Existential *angst*, sometimes called dread, anxiety or even anguish, is a term that is common to many existentialist thinkers. It is generally held to be a negative feeling arising from the experience of human freedom and responsibility. The archetypal example is the experience one has when standing on a cliff where one not only fears falling off it, but also dreads the possibility of throwing oneself off. In this experience that “nothing is holding me back,” one senses the lack of anything that predetermines one to either throw oneself off or to stand still, and one experiences one’s own freedom. (“Existentialism” *Reference.com*)

This existential *angst*, though Brontë did not use the term, is one of the most prominent themes in *Villette*.

Brontë’s novel was first published in 1853, and the previous decade had witnessed the official birth of existentialism with Kierkegaard publishing seminal existentialist works such as *Either/Or* (1843), *Fear and Trembling* (1843), *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844), *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849), and *Practice in Christianity* (1850).¹ Brontë and Kierkegaard were contemporaries—he was born three years before her, and they died in the same year—and they had both experienced traumatic losses in their families. While there is no proof that Brontë ever read Kierkegaard, *Villette*’s depiction of freedom and anxiety echoes their treatment in Kierkegaard’s existential philosophy. While it is not impossible that Brontë had heard of Kierkegaard’s philosophies, he was relatively unknown outside of Denmark (Hill 355). Brontë’s work could contain existential themes because, as Stewart and Pattison show, the move towards existentialism was part of a larger nineteenth-century cultural development or *zeitgeist* that sought to address the limits of science and idealism; furthermore, Brontë and Kierkegaard came from remarkably similar backgrounds in terms of faith and family. Brontë famously lost her mother and all five of her siblings, and similarly, Kierkegaard lost his mother and all but one of his brothers (Pattison 25), events that shaped both of their outlooks. Finally, it is possible that Brontë’s novel echoes Kierkegaard’s philosophy because existentialism “has been independently invented by millions of people simply responding to the emergency of life in a modern world” (Carruth v-vi). Thus Brontë’s works could contain existential themes independently of Kierkegaard, with Brontë’s novel as an expression of the same cultural and psychological developments as Kierkegaard’s philosophical writings.

While this paper applies the concepts of existentialism in general to *Villette*, it will focus on Kierkegaard in particular for three reasons: one, he was the only existentialist who was a contemporary of Brontë; two, Kierkegaard is the founder of existentialism; and three, unlike later existentialists, Kierkegaard was, like Brontë and other early existentialists, a Christian. Relating Brontë’s novel to theories of existentialism, and Kierkegaard’s ideas in particular, is productive because it puts *Villette* in a line of literary works that includes such diverse texts as *Crime and Punishment*, *Nausea*, and *Waiting for Godot*, placing Brontë’s novel in the canon of existentialist literature while widening the scope and possibilities of that canon. It also creates a connection between these two contemporary authors and other subsequent writers whose thoughts and beliefs echo each other despite the barriers of language, time, and distance. This arguably makes *Villette* one of the first modernist novels not only in its use of innovative narrative techniques, but also, recalling Pattison’s account of existentialism quoted above, in the philosophy that it espouses.

¹ Kierkegaard published many of these books under pseudonyms. However, for the sake of clarity in this paper, all of these works will be attributed to Kierkegaard rather than to his various pseudonyms.

Finally, it provides a way of interpreting Brontë's disturbing and confusing novel without resorting simply to biographical explanations. According to Michael Schiefelbein and Eva Badowska, much criticism has focused on Lucy's interiority and her search for an authentic self, and many readers have concluded that Lucy is either "repressed" or "lost" (Schiefelbein 320; Badowska 1509-10). Unsurprisingly, "Generations of readers have found *Villette* troubling aesthetically, politically and emotionally" (Hughes-Hallett vi). However, Kierkegaard's theories help provide a literary and philosophical context for Brontë's novel, and ultimately, they show that Lucy's suffering, while not enviable, is *not* meaningless. In *Villette*, Lucy Snowe becomes a Kierkegaardian hero by showing that she is a "kindred soul to that household of millions who find themselves troubled by feelings that answer to the names 'anxiety' and 'despair'" while still retaining her dignity and faith (Marino 309).

As the first existentialist, one of Kierkegaard's seminal beliefs was that there is a relationship between anxiety and freedom, the belief which later gave rise to the term "existential *angst*." In *Christian Discourses*, Kierkegaard wrote, "Anxiety is about tomorrow" (80), and he authored an entire book, *The Concept of Anxiety*, on the topic of existential *angst*,² which he tied to human volition and original sin. Michael Watts succinctly explains Kierkegaard's lengthy discussion of this topic by saying, "Our awareness of the future triggers in us a feeling of anxiety. . . . [W]ith every choice or decision I make, I am creating my 'future circumstances' as well as my 'future self'" (165). He continues, "According to Kierkegaard, to be a human being is to exist in a state of *becoming*, and I have free will to choose *what I* become. . . . [T]herefore ultimately I am entirely responsible for who I am" (168). Anxiety, then, is embedded within freedom, and there is terror not only in possible failure but also in potential success. Kierkegaard explicitly said this in *Journals and Papers* when he wrote: "There is nothing of which every man is so afraid of as getting to know how enormously much he is capable" of choosing and doing (440). The idea that freedom and anxiety are inextricably intertwined is succinctly encapsulated in Jean-Paul Sartre's famous phrase from *Humanism is an Existentialism*: "We are condemned to be free" (29). In *Villette*, we see Lucy's terror and *angst* at her freedom reveal itself repeatedly, and this fear and anxiety result not merely from the perils of her choices but, as Kierkegaard suggests, from their possibilities.

While multiple scenes in *Villette* explore the perils and possibilities of Lucy's choices, this paper will focus on three in particular: her participation in the *vaudeville*, her decision to wear the pink dress to the concert, and her confession to the Catholic priest. In all of these, the dual nature of Lucy's choices—that they are simultaneously full of danger and yet full of opportunities—is examined, and their connection to existential *angst* is revealed. Moreover, each of these choices also exposes a different aspect of existential philosophy as well. Not only is it shown that Lucy's despair is a form of existential *angst*, but Kierkegaardian themes of ethics, reason and passion, subjectivity, loneliness, and true religious faith are also discovered.

In the first of these three scenes, the *vaudeville*, Lucy feels great *angst* about taking part in the theatrical production. When Monsieur Paul first approaches Lucy and asks her to fill in for the ill Louise Vanderkelkov and play the part of the amorous suitor, her immediate reaction is negative: "A thousand objections rushed into my mind. . . . Inclination recoiled, Ability faltered, Self-respect (that "vile quality") trembled" (134). As is her custom, Lucy prefers to stay passive; however, M. Paul's "vexed, fiery, and searching eye" compels her to comply with his wishes (134). As Lucy resigns herself and begins

² The term existential *angst* is being used here only for clarity for the contemporary reader as it was not a term that Kierkegaard used. However, this term is anachronistically useful for describing Kierkegaard's views of despair, anxiety, and freedom.

preparing her role, she fears that she will find it “impossible to perform” and is “resigned to fail” at acting (135). Ostensibly, Lucy objects because she fears she will disappoint. This is easy to understand, but soon, Lucy’s attitude towards acting starts to change. Almost immediately, she is surprised to learn that “one part in so short a piece was not more than memory could master at a few hours’ notice” (135), and she delves into her role and makes her suitor “as fatuitous [*sic*] as I possibly could” (136). As this recognition that she might have theatrical talent comes so swiftly after she expresses her fears about acting, it is possible to speculate that Lucy’s stated doubts are performative as she is not inspired solely by her dread of failing, but also by her fear of succeeding. This idea—that Lucy’s stated reasons are false or incomplete—gains credence because Lucy is famously an “unreliable” narrator, and she has a “duplicity” that is designed to “provoke a complex response” from the reader (O’Dea 43). Thus the reader cannot trust Lucy’s stated reason for her anxiety, and her obvious interest in acting is at odds with her stated objections.

Lucy *does* perform wonderfully: she “recklessly altered the spirit of the role,” and she “played it with relish” (141). Moreover, Lucy divulges that she “acted to please myself,” and she admits that “a keen relish for dramatic expression had revealed itself as part of my nature; to cherish and exercise this new-found faculty might gift me with the world of delight” (141). Furthermore, Lucy reveals that acting lifted her “in a trance to the seventh heaven” (141). Lucy’s newfound joy in acting has revealed to her the possibility that she has the freedom to metaphorically throw herself off this theatrical cliff and indulge her love for performing. In true existential fashion, though, Lucy recoils from this possibility. Instead of embracing her dramatic possibilities, she realises that “the strength and longing must be put by; and I put them by, and fastened them in with the lock of a resolution which neither Time nor Temptation has since picked” (141). She claims she does this because “it would not do for a mere looker-on at life” (141).

However, the text hints at an interesting reason as to why Lucy must abandon the theatre: the necessity of living the ethical life, which was the type of life promoted by Kierkegaard. Christian historian Jonathan Hill explains that “the key question in Christianity, for Kierkegaard, is how we respond to [God]. Life is about choices—not simply between different courses of action in the here and now, but between different lifestyles” (355). In his seminal book *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard juxtaposed the ethical and the aesthetic lifestyles. He wrote, “The act of choice is essentially a proper and stringent expression of the ethical” (170), and according to George J. Stack, Kierkegaard’s ethical choice is one that “requires self-control, self-mastery, self-discipline, [and] a kind of spiritual ascetism” (112). Expectedly, the aesthetic life holds the opposite qualities, and Kierkegaard displays his disapproval of it in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* by writing, “Fortune, misfortune, fate, immediate enthusiasm, despair—these are what the aesthetic life-view have at their disposal” (434). Michael Watts goes on to explain that, for Kierkegaard, “[T]he most undeveloped aesthetic lifestyle is defined by a coarse, instinct-driven pursuit of personal pleasure. . . . every level of aestheticism is defined by *immediacy*. Typical of *all* forms of ‘immediacy’ is the failure to reflect seriously upon the nature of one’s own living” (192). While the ethical life is one that looks forward to the future, the aesthetic life is rooted in the pleasures of the immediate present.

In *Villette*, Ginevra Fanshawe exemplifies the immediacy of this aesthetic lifestyle, and Lucy Snowe abhors her vanity, coquetry, and capriciousness. Lucy and Ginevra play opposite one another, and like Lucy, Ginevra is a talented actress. As Lucy observes, “I became sufficiently composed to notice my fellow-actors. Some of them played very well; especially Ginevra Fanshawe, who had to coquette between two suitors, and managed admirably: in fact she was in her element” (140). Onstage together, Lucy and Ginevra perform marvelously and both change the nature of their respective parts by “gilding it [the part each plays] from top to toe” (141). What is revealed is that Lucy is more like Ginevra than

originally supposed, and it is possible that she too has the capacity to live what Kierkegaard labelled an aesthetic lifestyle by acting in the immediate moment and disregarding consequences and propriety. The theatre awakens Lucy's desire to charm and coquette, and like Ginevra, Lucy, too, is "acting *at* some one" (140). As she says, the "language in Dr. John's look . . . animated me" (141). However, Lucy suspects that this ephemeral pleasure is false and deleterious. Lucy's judgment is clear when she says disparagingly of Ginevra, "She was the child of pleasure" (142). Later, Lucy tells Ginevra that she would not trade places with her because she is "but a poor creature" (145). Lucy rejects the theatre because she realises she has the potential to become a shallow and hedonistic aesthete like Ginevra who lives for ephemeral pleasures, and in Kierkegaardian existentialist fashion, she recoils from this possibility.

Another passage that examines the perils and possibilities of Lucy's choices is the scene wherein Mrs. Bretton presents her with a pink dress to wear to a concert. As Lucy examines the gown, she thinks to herself that "no human force should avail to put me into it. A pink dress! I knew it not. It knew not me" (207). Soon, though, Lucy finds herself "led and influenced by another's will, unconsulted, unpersuaded, quietly over-ruled," and she dons the dreaded pink dress (207). Lucy's deep anxiety and *angst* regarding this decision is revealed when she looks in the mirror. "I did so with some fear and trembling," Lucy reports, and "with more fear and trembling, I turned away" (207). While the decision to wear the dress is seemingly inconsequential and should not garner such anxiety, for Lucy it encompasses the perils and possibilities of romantic love itself. Even though "Lucy affects scorn for following fashion or beautifying herself, she obsessively recounts the dress of others. . . . [And she often gives] lengthy and emotionally-loaded accounts of her clothes, as well as those of people around her" (Hagan and Wells 149-50). Hitherto, Lucy has spent the majority of *Villette* as a woman without romantic possibilities, and Ginevra frequently comments on Lucy's lack of femininity by pointedly calling her by the male names of "Diogenes" and "Timon." Notably, Lucy's preferred dress is gray, a color that denotes restraint and maturity rather than feminine youth and vigor. However, Lucy is, perhaps above all else, a woman who desires to be loved, and her unfeminine nature is calculated so that she does not appear "absurd" (208). The pink dress represents femininity, and it visibly tells others that Lucy is a young woman who could have romantic prospects, a perilous prospect for a woman who fears she will never be married. This is clearly shown when M. Paul, after seeing Lucy wear her pink dress at the concert, jealously demands, "What fatal influence had impelled me lately to introduce flowers under the brim of my bonnet . . . and even to appear on one occasion in a *scarlet gown*" (332). As M. Paul hints, pink dresses are for eligible women like Ginevra, Paulina, or Rosine (who wears a dress that is "jaconas rose" [103]), and Lucy feels that for her to wear one is preposterous since she is "nobody's daughter" who is "no beauty" and, therefore, cannot possibly attract suitors (146). As Ginevra spitefully points out to Lucy, "As to admirers, you hardly know what they are; you can't even talk on the subject when the other teachers quote their conquests" (146). Because she fears that Ginevra is speaking truthfully and that she will appear ludicrous, Lucy has an intense "fear of ridicule" while wearing the dress, which greatly contributes to her anxiety (208).

However, once again, the decision to wear the dress also presents possibilities. Ginevra is wrong in stating that Lucy will "never be in love" (146), for she is in love with Dr. John, Mrs. Bretton's son. Since she has always presented herself as a sexless spinster, she has never entertained the possibility that he could love her back. Wearing the pink dress to a concert while accompanied by Dr. John, however, changes this: she proceeds to have one of the best nights of her life as Dr. John presents her with flowers (208), recognises Ginevra's flaws (217), and brings her home far later than expected (226). On this night, Lucy Snowe's burgeoning femininity opens the slight possibility that Dr. John may someday love her back, and Lucy writes that "I took off my pink dress and lace mantle with happier feelings than I had experienced in

putting them on” (226). Most important, after Dr. John drops her back at the Rue Pensionnat, he promises to write to her. “Good, gallant heart!” Lucy thinks to herself (228), and questions if he will follow through. However, Dr. John keeps his word, and for a time, he writes often to Lucy. For Lucy Snowe, then, the night at the concert when she wears the pink dress represents both terrible perils and awesome possibilities. Her anxieties about wearing the dress are therefore a type of existential *angst* as her anguish stems from both of these.

Lucy’s renewed sense of romantic hope, however, brings about one of the most startling passages in *Villette*: as soon as Dr. John leaves the school after promising to write to Lucy, she engages in a mental battle with “Reason” (229). Reason (which Lucy habitually personifies as indicated by the capital R) sternly warns the lovelorn Lucy to “hope no delight of heart—no indulgence of intellect: grant no expansion to feelings—give holiday to no single faculty: dally with no friendly exchange: foster no genial intercommunion . . .” (229). Lucy shudders at “this hag, this Reason, [who] would *not* let me look up, or smile, or hope: she could not rest unless I were altogether crushed, cowed, broken-in, and broken-down” (229). For Lucy Snowe, Reason can crush hopeful passion.

Like Lucy, Kierkegaard also struggled to reconcile reason and passion. Kierkegaard wrote in *Fear and Trembling* that the “authentically human factor is passion” and that the “highest passion in a man is faith” (108). For Kierkegaard and Brontë, reason was usually the personification of negativity, as indicated by the fact that it is usually capitalised in both of their works (i.e. Reason). On the title page of *Either/Or* (Part 1), Kierkegaard cynically asks, “Is reason then alone baptized, are the passions pagans?” Kierkegaard viewed passion as necessary in human life, and railed against a Hegelian totalitarian embrace of reason. In *The Concept of Anxiety*, he explicitly critiques Hegel, writing, “No science can state what the self is without again stating it quite generally. And this is the wonder of life, that each man who is mindful of himself knows what no science knows, since he knows who he himself is, and this is the profundity of the Greek saying *gnothi seauton* [know thyself], which too long has been understood in the German [i.e. Hegelian] way as pure self-consciousness, the airiness of idealism” (78-79). In fact, Kierkegaard “vigorously attacks Hegel’s belief in the supremacy of the rational mind” (Watts 136), and in an attempt to “escape from the tyranny of reason” (Hill 354), Kierkegaard “emphatically rejected traditional rationalism as artificial . . . [since it] was a way of tricking men into an avoidance of the reality of their human situation” (May 66). Clare Carlisle explains that Kierkegaard believed that passion was “the most essential feature of the human being” and that it was responsible for giving “meaning and value” to lives. For Kierkegaard, then, reason must be accompanied by passion so that a person can fully live.

Similarly, Lucy Snowe also has a dual need for both reason and passion, and this exacerbates her *angst* in *Villette*. Like Kierkegaard, Lucy fears oppressive Reason because, as she says, “Often has Reason turned me out by night, in mid-winter, on cold snow, flinging for sustenance the gnawed bone dogs had forsaken: sternly has she vowed her stores held nothing more for me—harshly denied my right to ask better things” (229-30). However, when Lucy indulges passion, she is allowed the freedom to hope and imagine, and she is able to temporarily conquer authoritarian Reason. This freedom serves as her “sweet Help, our divine Hope” (229) and provides succour to the oft-despairing Lucy. However, Lucy feels there is a “terrible revenge that awaits our return” from entertaining optimistic passion (229), and thus often seeks “to master her emotions with simple reason” (Heady 347). The negative effects of too much hope and passion are evidenced when Lucy does not receive a letter from Dr. John for seven weeks. She writes: “I underwent in those seven weeks bitter fears and pains, strange inward trials, miserable defections of hope, intolerable encroachments of despair” (268). Likewise, later in the novel after Lucy begins to entertain hopes that M. Paul loves her, she falls into despair when she fears she has lost him.

During a desperate midnight walk through the streets of Villette, Lucy comes across M. Paul with his ward whom she hears he is intending to marry. While the unseen Lucy observes their courtship, she writes that “something tore me so cruelly under my shawl, something so dug into my side, a vulture so strong in beak and talon, I must be alone to grapple with it. I think I never felt jealousy till now. . . . This was an outrage” (468).

The potential for emotional—and even physical—devastation after indulging passion and hope are most spectacularly seen through Brontë’s portrayal of Vashti. The character of Vashti is “passion incarnate” (Blackall 24), and Vashti’s passionate rebellion is “destroying her” through the “annihilating power of the libidinal energies unleashed by artistic performance” (Gilbert and Gubar 47). As Vashti rages on the stage in a “low, horrible, immoral” performance, the theatre literally erupts into flames, symbolising the destructive power of passion (Brontë 258). While Vashti’s rebellion entrances Lucy, her passion is pyrrhic and results in devastation. The lesson from both Vashti’s devastation and Lucy’s own despair is obvious: too much passion is dangerous and has the potential to destroy.

Therefore, throughout *Villette*, Lucy Snowe tries to strike a balance between reason and passion, but she has great difficulty in doing so. Passion brings life and hope to Lucy’s barren world, but it also has the potential for devastation. Like Kierkegaard, Lucy knows that passion must be accompanied by reason and vice versa, but she cannot easily find the balance, and, in fact, it might be that there is no balance to be found. As Lucy herself writes near the beginning of the novel, she “had wanted to compromise with Fate: to escape occasional great agonies by submitting to a whole life of privations and small pains,” but this is not to be because “Fate would not be so pacified” (38). Instead, “another decree was written” (38). Strictly adhering to reason or indulging in passion—or even merely trying to balance the two—offers both possibilities and perils that intensify Lucy’s anxiety. For Lucy Snowe, like Kierkegaard, reason and passion are both necessary, but ironically, in the world of *Villette*, they cannot be united.

Lucy’s existential *angst* perhaps reaches its apex in the scene in which she goes to a Catholic church and confesses to a priest. Having been left alone with a *cretin* in the abandoned Rue Fossette during an eight-week-long vacation, Lucy loses fortitude and strength of mind as her “heart almost died within me; miserable longings strained its chords” (156). Lucy recognises the danger she faces as she says to herself, “I really believe my nerves are getting overstretched: my mind has suffered somewhat too much; a malady is growing upon it—what shall I do? How shall I keep well?” (159). This familiar anguish leads the Protestant Lucy to take the astonishing step of going to a Catholic church and confessing to a priest. This decision is not made lightly; Lucy does it only because “this step could not make me more wretched than I was” (161). And, indeed, the action does offer a type of anodyne to the despairing Lucy; almost immediately, Lucy realises that her confession “had done me good. I was already solaced” (162). Although a Protestant, Lucy agrees to return to the priest, but she does not keep her promise because of her anxiety over the possibility of renouncing her own religion. She relates, “I know not how it would all have ended” when “he would have shown me all that was tender, and comforting, and gentle, in the honest popish superstition” (163). Lucy does not keep her word because she is afraid that the temptation to convert to Catholicism will overcome her, despite her stout Protestant prejudices.

Again, Lucy’s existential *angst* is amplified because there are both possibilities and perils entailed in this choice. For Lucy Snowe, conversion would offer comfort during her time of distress and give her a fellow community of believers in Catholic Labassecour. Additionally, this conversion would ameliorate Lucy’s overwhelming loneliness by replacing “the familiar agony of alienation [with] the self-contained world of religious fanaticism” (Moglen 19). But herein lie the perils of Catholicism for Brontë’s protagonist. She

fears that she would end her days “counting my beads in the cell of a certain Carmelite convent” (Brontë 163) because “she equates its [Catholicism’s] apparent excesses of feeling with loss of self” (Moglen 19). Lucy refers to this possible peril of Catholicism several times throughout *Villette*: she says that Romanism forced every mind to be “reared in slavery;” that “the CHURCH [*sic*] strove to bring up her children robust in body, feeble in soul . . . ignorant, unthinking, unquestioning” (127); that “Catholics rose in panic and prayed to their saints” in a misguided attempt to allay a terrifying thunderstorm (109); and that the Catholic pamphlets that M. Paul leaves for her preach conversion in a “honied voice” that appealed “not to intellect” but to emotions in a “canting, sentimental, shallow” way (413). Brontë even has one of Lucy’s Catholic students, Isabelle, thoughtlessly say to her that “[t]o guarantee your salvation up there, better to burn you alive down here” [translated from French] (85), thus proving Lucy’s dictum that Catholicism is integral to the “incapacity” and “ignorance” of her pupils (83).

This belief that Catholicism subjugated personal freedom and created mindless fidelity was a common criticism by Protestants. In an article published in 1850, George Henry Lewes wrote, “The master-principle of Protestantism . . . is the liberty of private judgment. It is the protest of the free Soul against the authority of man. . . . The great battle that is to be fought is between Authority and Liberty, and men must declare themselves either for the Pope or for Free thought” (qtd. in Clark-Beattie 823). Karen Chase Levenson further explains that Protestantism, unlike Catholicism, particularly “demands action and responsibility from its adherents” (162). Thus many Protestants, including Brontë, thought that Catholicism lacked a subjective, individualised truth and that it created a mindless devotion in its followers.

Similarly, the importance of subjective truth and personal freedom and responsibility are some of the main tenets of existentialism. In existentialist thought, individuals are free to act as they choose, but this puts the burden of responsibility for one’s actions on the individual. This anxious relationship between freedom and responsibility is further exacerbated because truth is subjectively experienced rather than objectively known. As Hayden Carruth writes, existentialism is “a free transmutation of living experience” because “the self is not submerged, it is present, here and now,” and therefore “reality is only what he himself knows and experiences” (vii, viii, viii). Kierkegaard, the original existentialist, was the first to describe this existentialist belief in inner, personally experienced truths. He writes in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments, Vol. 1*: “Truth is inwardness; objectively there is no truth, but the approximation of the truth” (77). Michael Watts clarifies this view by writing that “Kierkegaard regards subjective truth as the highest truth available to mankind” (82), and Harold Fromm concurs by explaining that “for Kierkegaard, Truth is Subjectivity” (79). Inwardness and subjectivity were a common topic in many of Kierkegaard’s works, and in *The Concept of Anxiety*, he wrote, “In modern times, there has been enough talk about truth; now it is high time to vindicate certitude and inwardness. . . . certitude and inwardness are indeed subjectivity” (138, 141). In this statement, Kierkegaard opposes Hegelian objectivism by arguing for the subjective truth of individual experience.

Kierkegaard takes this view of subjectivity further, though, by asserting that this inwardness makes it difficult to gain objective insight into other individuals. As Kierkegaard writes, truth is “an objective uncertainty,” and “objective knowledge is suspended” (*Concluding Postscript* 203). Consequently, it is difficult to gain true knowledge of others. Again, Michael Watts helps to clarify Kierkegaard’s views on how subjectivity affects personal relations. He writes: “Our actual *existence* and our human values do not have *objectively* measurable properties or characteristics. Also, my existence is ‘hidden’ from other people’s view, for it exists *inside* me, not *outside* of me. This is why no one else can ever know the truth of *my existence*—only I can *know* the truth of my existence” (81).

The view Kierkegaard postulates, that truth is subjective and hidden from others and thus affects relationships, plays a large role in Brontë's work, too. Lucy's belief in the subjectivity of experience goes beyond her critique of Catholicism to include a critique of people who try to objectively judge her: she scorns the surveillance methods with which Madame Beck and M. Paul try to ascertain information; she becomes indignant when Ginevra judges her based on her outer qualities; and she mourns Dr. John's inability to see beyond her external characteristics. This scorn for objective judgments and belief in the importance of subjectivity was a theme throughout Brontë's earlier novels as well. In *Jane Eyre*, the titular character famously cries out to Mr. Rochester:

Do you think I can stay to become nothing to you? Do you think I am an automaton?—a machine without feelings? . . . Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless?—You think wrong!—I have as much soul as you,—and full as much heart! . . . I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh:—it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal—as we are! (253)

For Brontë's heroines, forming true bonds with others is difficult because few characters can truly understand them, and this leads to separation and isolation. Quite early in *Villette*, for example, Lucy compares herself to a "life-boat, which most days of the year lies dry and solitary in an old, dark boat-house, only putting to sea when the billows run high in rough weather" (181). As she directly contrasts her lifeboat with a "stately ship . . . with its full complement of crew," the metaphor is clear that Lucy is separate and alone and that she must metaphorically sail by herself (181).

Later in the novel, Lucy ponders the reason for this separation as she critiques others' perception of her. Upon discovering M. de Bassompierre's impression of her, she muses, "What contradictory attributes of character we sometimes find ascribed to us, according to the eye with which we are viewed!" (301). Most notably, she later narrates the ways people inaccurately assess her: "Miss Fanshawe there regards you as a second Diogenes. M. de Bassompierre, the other day, politely turned the conversation when it ran on the wild gifts of the actress Vashti, because, as he kindly said, 'Miss Snowe looked uncomfortable.' Dr. John Bretton knows you only as 'quiet Lucy'—'a creature inoffensive as a shadow;' . . . Such are your own and your friends' impressions . . ." (333-34). To almost everyone Lucy encounters in the novel, she is, as Ginevra Fanshawe rudely points out, a "nobody" (308).

However, throughout the course of *Villette*, the reader learns that Lucy Snowe is, in fact, a "somebody" (308). Nevertheless, it is almost impossible for others to regard Lucy as a person of worth or importance because of her outer, objective qualities. As Lucy herself writes, others have an "incapacity to conceive how any person not bolstered by birth or wealth, not supported by some consciousness of name or connection, could maintain an attitude of reasonable integrity" (309). Even Lucy questions her own worth when she says that "the World is very right in its view [to see her as worthless], yet believe also that I am not quite wrong in mine" (309). For Lucy Snowe, this inability of others to see her subjective worth leads her to conclude that hers will be a life of "solitary confinement" (273). Most importantly, "the key to Lucy's human misery . . . is her solitude and her lack of hope" (Blackall 18). Therefore, Lucy's solitude and loneliness are inextricably intertwined with her outer, objective worthlessness and her inner, subjective worthiness.

Similarly, existentialism claims that subjectivity unavoidably results in isolation and loneliness. In a "familiar existentialist theme," the self is shown to be "estranged . . . from the world" ("Existentialism,"

Stanford Encyclopedia), and “Existentialist literature deals extensively with the theme of alienation, because existentialists believe that each individual human being is fundamentally alone” (Bernardo). The existential view on alienation is summarised in the following passage: “I am not alone in the world: there are others. When I encounter the Other, I feel alienated as the Other knows me as an object in his world. I can never experience myself the way the Other experiences me. . . . Because I am objectified by the Other and feel alienated, relations with others will be tainted: conflict is the essence of our relations with others” (Daigle 85). In the existential assessment of life, deep alienation and isolation permeates all relationships.

In *Villette*, though, Lucy Snowe’s isolation and loneliness are finally broken by her connection to M. Paul. While he certainly has misunderstandings in regard to Lucy, M. Paul alone ultimately sees her inner, subjective worthiness and breaks through her alienation. He is the one who recognises her love for Dr. John (332), her fierce intelligence (351), and her desire to be mistress of her own school (484). After he proposes to her, he leaves on a three-year journey that will secure their fortune and future. While he is away, Lucy is buoyed by “a wonderfully changed life, a relieved heart,” and happiness seems, at last, to be in Lucy Snowe’s future (494).

Alas, in Brontë’s astonishing ending, M. Paul does not return to Lucy. Instead, in an ending that mirrors the fate of Miss Marchmont’s doomed *fiancé*, it is implied that M. Paul dies in a furious storm and that Lucy Snowe is left “praying in agony on waiting shores” for a man who will never return (495). Whether their marriage could have succeeded in bringing Lucy her long-awaited happiness is left unknown because in the “dismayingly bleak” ending, “the kind of relationship that Lucy craves, one based on disinterested, passionate love is, literally, unimaginable” (Hughes-Hallett xxv, xxi). Brontë leaves her heroine to a life of loneliness and forlorn isolation.

Brontë’s depiction of this loneliness was not just theoretical, though, as Brontë herself personally experienced the isolation she so agonizingly depicted in her characterisation of Lucy Snowe. While she was writing *Villette*, Charlotte Brontë wrote the following passage about herself in a letter to her friend Ellen Nussey: “The evils that now and then wring a groan from my heart—lie in position—not that I am a single woman—but because I am a lonely woman and likely to be lonely. But it cannot be helped and therefore imperatively must be borne—and borne too with as few words about it as may be” (1852, qtd. in Barker 701). Like Brontë, Lucy is able to steel herself and bear her excruciating loneliness. This is made explicit to the reader near the beginning of the novel when she writes, “I speak of a time gone by: my hair which till a late period withstood the frosts of time, lies now at last, white under a cap, like snow beneath snow” (45). Lucy may never be happy, but she keeps living. According to Jean Frantz Blackall, she is able to do this because she is trained “by her earnest Protestant fatalism to accept unflinchingly what life offers” (26). While this may be true, there is another reason as well: she endures because, in the thoughts of Christian existentialists, “the religious life is . . . essentially a life of suffering” (Evans 128).

In Kierkegaard’s Christian conception of existential philosophy, suffering was not just an absurdity wherein the sufferers were to be “baffled and frustrated” in their attempts to “make the events mean something” (Worthen 426). Instead, suffering was to serve as an educating experience to bring the sufferer closer to God. In *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, Kierkegaard wrote: “Wherever the eternal is, there is rest. . . . At first the rigorous earnestness of suffering is like a discipline that increases the unrest, but if the sufferer will learn, then he is educated for the eternal. . . . let God rule in everything, because making satisfaction is indeed God’s plan from eternity” (258-59). In Kierkegaard’s philosophy, suffering prepares the soul for eternal peace, and endurance and fortitude will ultimately be rewarded.

Since Lucy narrates *Villette* in the first person many years after the events of the novel have occurred, it is clear that she has suffered but endured. Her desire to find rest in her suffering and let God rule everything is apparent throughout the novel. Lucy begins the novel by writing that her visits to her godmother “resembled the sojourn of Christian and Hopeful” (6), and like those of the protagonists of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, Lucy’s journey is marked by deep misery. More importantly, this reference implies that she, too, will find some rest and consolation in everlasting salvation. While Lucy’s sorrowful journey contains multiple scenes of rebellion, there are also sections of great resignation, where she sees her suffering as being part of God’s plan for her. As she writes in one of the most despairing chapters, “The Long Vacation”: “How I used to pray to Heaven for consolation and support! With what dread force the conviction would grasp me that Fate was my permanent foe, never to be conciliated. I did not, in my heart, arraign the mercy of God for this; I concluded it to be a part of his great plan that some must deeply suffer while they live, and I thrilled in the certainty that of this number, I was one” (157). This passage parallels Kierkegaard’s dictum to “let God rule in everything,” and Lucy even finds a perverse pleasure in knowing that God is demanding that she suffer. Later, she says that she believes some good will come of her suffering:

These struggles with the natural character, the strong native bent of heart, may seem futile and fruitless, but in the end they do good. . . . Take it to your Maker; show Him the secrets of the spirit He gave—ask Him how you are to bear the pain He has appointed—kneel in His presence, and pray with faith for light in darkness, for strength in piteous weakness, for patience in extreme need. Certainly, at some hour, though perhaps not *your* hour, the waiting waters will stir; in *some* shape, though perhaps not the shape you dreamed, which your heart loved, and for which it bled, the healing herald will descend. (179)

While Lucy cannot say what good will come of her earthly trials, she believes that God *does* have His reasons. For Lucy Snowe, God is a mystery, but He has His own motives for making her suffer so profoundly.

This acceptance of God’s mystery is crucial for understanding Lucy’s Christian faith and Kierkegaard’s Christian existentialism. As Kierkegaard says, “If there were no eternal consciousness in a man . . . what then would life be but despair? . . . How empty then and comfortless life would be! But therefore it is not thus . . .” (*Fear and Trembling* 11). Similarly, Lucy explicitly states near the end of *Villette*:

Some lives *are* thus blessed: it is God’s will: it is the attesting trace and lingering evidence of Eden. Other lives run from the first another course. Other travellers encounter weather fitful and gusty, wild and variable—breast adverse winds, are belated and overtaken by the early closing winter night. Neither can this happen without the sanction of God; and I know that, amidst His boundless works, is somewhere stored the secret of this last fate’s justice: know that His treasures contain the proof as the promise of its mercy. (377)

Having her faith thus tested and confirmed marks Lucy as a true Christian. Her faith withstands trials and tribulations, and she cultivates a firm faith in a loving God who will ultimately offer her eternal salvation.

Likewise, Kierkegaard believed that a faith tested through suffering is a true faith. He wrote in *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*:

Woe to the person who wants to be excused from suffering! That apostolic expression does not indicate only the forsakenness, the suffering of separation, which is even more terrible than the separation of death, since death only separates a person from the temporal and therefore is a release, whereas this separation shuts him out from the eternal and therefore is an imprisonment that again leaves the spirit sighing in the fragile earthen vessel, in the cramped space, in the status of an alien, because the home of the spirit is in the eternal and the infinite. (337)

For Lucy Snowe and Kierkegaard, suffering leads to true Christian faith. This faith is important because, for them, it ultimately leads to eternal salvation. In Lucy and Kierkegaard's conceptions, Christian faith in a loving God ameliorates the pessimism of existentialism while stopping short of being a palliative. While Lucy Snowe does not often revel in her suffering, neither does she completely recoil from it because she believes it has a purpose. The lesson in *Villette*, then, is one of Christian endurance. As Lucy herself writes, "His will be done, as done it surely will be, whether we humble ourselves to resignation or not" (438).

For Lucy Snowe, the reward will have to come in heaven because she has been chosen to suffer here on earth. To this end, *Villette* chronicles Lucy's struggle with painful existential *angst* and tests the limits of her faithful endurance. However, unlike the later existentialists who philosophised that life was "without the comfort, solace or guidance of some transcendent, predetermined worldview" (Worthen 426), Kierkegaard and Brontë do take comfort that God will ultimately reward them for their suffering. As Brontë writes in one of the last chapters of *Villette*:

Sufferer, faint not through terror of this burning evidence. . . . Dark through the wilderness of this world stretches the way for most of us: equal and steady be our tread; be our cross our banner. For staff we have His promise, whose "word is tried, whose way perfect;" for present hope His providence, "who gives the shield of salvation whose gentleness makes great;" for final home His bosom, who "dwells in the height of Heaven;" for crowning prize a glory, exceeding and eternal. Let us so run that we may obtain; let us endure hardness as good soldiers; let us finish our course, and keep the faith, reliant in the issue to come off more than conquerors: "Art thou not from Everlasting mine Holy One? WE SHALL NOT DIE!" (438)

For Lucy Snowe, life is full of suffering, but she believes she will ultimately be rewarded for her faith. Though there has seldom been a novel with such "agonizing experiences" of grief and sorrow (Dolin xii), the ultimate lesson of *Villette* is not one of "terrible nihilism" (Hughes-Hallett xxiv). Instead, Lucy learns that "separation and sorrow must be endured and lived within this life" because God has a plan for His creation (Colby 419). While life may be marked by suffering and pain, she believes God will ultimately bring her to "His bosom" (438). Kierkegaard says, "The home of the spirit is in the eternal and the infinite" (*Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses* 337), and Lucy Snowe must likewise endure until she returns to her heavenly home.

Christian existentialism in the mid-nineteenth century thus provided consolation and succour without serving as a panacea. For both Kierkegaard and Brontë's heroine, life is full of suffering and terrifying freedom, but ultimately, there is meaning in the pain, no matter how difficult it is to see in the immediacy of the moment. Existentialist thought accounted for the suffering present in the modern world, while Christian faith made life bearable and gave meaning to the anguish. As Lucy Snowe witnesses and as Kierkegaard suggests, the lesson of both Christian existentialism and the novel *Villette* is to practise endurance.

Dr. Marija Reiff is an assistant professor at the American University of Sharjah, and former Presidential Graduate Research Fellow at the University of Iowa. Her research revolves around Victorian literature, religion, and theatre, and she is currently editing a book manuscript on late-nineteenth century commercial theatre and its ties to religion, particularly focusing on the works of Henry Arthur Jones, Arthur Wing Pinero, and Oscar Wilde. She has published various book chapters and biographical entries, and she has peer-reviewed articles published in *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, *Coleridge Bulletin*, and *Victorian Review* (forthcoming).

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