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RESUMEN

Villette (1853) de Charlotte Brontë refleja cómo las mujeres eran consideradas el género débil en la época victoriana, una injusticia que comenzaban a cuestionarse y que daría lugar a los posteriores movimientos feministas. Tomando dicha novela como objeto de nuestro estudio, en este trabajo trataremos de indagar hasta qué punto ha cambiado la mentalidad de nuestra sociedad desde la época victoriana apoyándonos en diversos estudios críticos, entre los que destacan los que contribuyen con una mirada feminista. Analizaremos cómo la protagonista de la novela, Lucy Snowe, logra ir descubriendo y fortaleciendo su identidad a pesar de los numerosos obstáculos a los que mujeres como ella tenían que enfrentarse a diario desde el punto de vista social y educativo. En nuestra conclusión incluimos también nuestra reflexión sobre hasta qué punto hemos avanzado en diversos aspectos en nuestra sociedad con respecto a la mentalidad victoriana en los aspectos mencionados.

ABSTRACT

Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853) reflects how women were considered the weak gender in the Victorian era, an injustice that was beginning to be questioned and would lead to the subsequent feminist movements. Taking this novel as the object of our study, in this paper we will try to investigate to what extent has the mindset of our contemporary society changed from the Victorian era, based on various critical studies, which stand out those that contribute to the strengthening of a feminist outlook. We will analyze how the protagonist of the novel, Lucy Snowe, manages to discover and strengthen her identity despite the numerous obstacles that women like her had to face on a daily basis from a social and educational perspective. In our conclusion we also include a reflection on how far we have advanced in various aspects in our society with respect to the Victorian mentality in the aspects mentioned above.

Palabras Clave

Feminismo; crítica; época victoriana; igualdad de género; misoginia; discriminación; acoso sexual; opresión femenina

Keywords

Feminism; criticism; Victorianism; gender equality; misogyny; discrimination; sexual harassment; female oppression

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Dedications

To all the women who fought and lost their lives for the opportunities that have been given to our generation, to continue their legacy by fighting together against inequality and for a future society in which women, in the world, are not afraid and do not become victims of oppression.

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A FEMINIST CRITICISM AND ANALYSIS ON *VILLETTE*

Lucía González Pérez

1. Introduction

“Just as I passed a portico, two mustachioed men came suddenly from behind the pillars; they were smoking cigars; their dress implied pretensions to the rank of gentlemen. [...] They spoke with insolence, and, fast as I walked, they kept pace with me a long way. At last I met a sort of patrol, and my dreaded hunters were turned from the pursuit; but they had driven me beyond my reckoning.” (Brontë 1853: 64).

This quote can be found in Charlotte Brontë’s novel *Villette* (1853), it reflects one of the many injustices Lucy Snowe, the main character, suffers through the story because of being a woman in a patriarchal society. We wonder how much the situation has changed for women from the Victorian period to our present times. As we can observe with the quotation, it has not changed as much as it should have. This paper analyses *Villette* from a feminist perspective, for which the support of some feminist critical literature is used. Our study focuses on the main character, Lucy Snowe. We study her ability to find her true identity in a pretentious Victorian society, the numerous obstacles she finds along the way (mainly because of her gender) and the characters who help her achieve her motives. Finally we will try to answer how much has the mindset of our society changed from the Victorian era portrayed in *Villette*.

During the mid-19th century, the number of female writers grew enormously, also the number of female population reached its peak so giving them the opportunity to work would imply a more profitable society. We find the author Charlotte Brontë living in the same era as many other authors like Anne and Emily Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell or George Eliot. However, as Dutta writes, most of them (like the Brontë siblings) maintained their

anonymity and published their works under a male pseudonym in order to be respected and at least, read. Nevertheless, this introduced a feminist vision to literature: the idea of women being able to be self-sufficient and capable to choose how to shape their own lives gained popularity (Dutta 1991: 2311). Anderson affirms that this would be the beginning of what would become a big feminist movement and the basis of contemporary society's mindset, which is still being worked on in order to achieve a real gender equality. In contrast with this idea, we find the real Victorian situation they had to struggle with: Charlotte Brontë (and other numerous female writers) also had to work in the household area, so they needed to find an equilibrium between focusing on working on what they loved (writing) and taking care of the household (Anderson 2001: 35). It was unimaginable for them to quit their role as "the woman of the family" since if they left aside the household area, they would be seen as pitiful and repudiated elements from society. Furthermore, women were considered the only gender with a proper ability to focus on the domestic work. As Elizabeth Gaskell said:

"A woman's principal work in life is hardly left to her own choice, nor can she drop the domestic charges devolving on her as an individual for the exercise of the most splendid talents that were ever bestowed. And yet she must not shrink from the extra responsibility implied by the very fact of her possessing such talents." (Gaskell 1971: 238).

This idea was also applied in Charlotte Brontë's life. She was the third of six children raised in an Irish farming household. Brontë soon had to adopt the eldest sibling role and become protective of her younger sisters after the premature death of her oldest ones. Her father educated her in the best way he could provide with a poor income and soon she got into the teaching field in order to have another salary in the household. What she loved the most was spending time with her family talking about politics, literature and art, and especially, writing: *"Charlotte and Anne affirmed their abiding sense of peace within the four walls of the parsonage. (...) Clearly the parsonage was a place of extraordinary creativity and productivity."* (Lamonica 2003: 2). She decided to move to Belgium in order to improve her knowledge (with the help of her aunt) and this is where

she acquired the inspiration to write her last published novel, *Villette*, in which we will focus on:

“This confluence of longings, needs and duties sent Charlotte to Brussels, the ‘Villette’ of the novel, once her eager, persuasive letter to their aunt had secured the necessary means. [...] Charlotte explained how she expected to live cheaply in Brussels and get a superior education, [...] as well as social connections [...]. The aunt could not refuse. [...] In ‘Villette’, Charlotte is transformed into the orphaned Lucy Snowe.” (Bunchmann 1994: 164-165).

2. Methodology

For the research purposes, the database we have used the most is Jstor and the Webliography facilitated by the University of Almería to their students. We have focused on articles based on feminism, the Victorian period and the critical analysis of the novel *Villette*, which is the point of reference for this project, along with the biography of its author, Charlotte Brontë. The historical context referring to the Victorian era and its society has also been explained and analyzed with the knowledge acquired in the English history and culture lessons of the English Studies degree of the University of Almería. Also, we have used articles about feminist studies found in the database Researchgate for our research purposes.

3. Context of Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*

Villette, published in 1853 as said above, is an extensive novel which expresses numerous arguments on the idea of femininity, feminism, gender roles and the idea of the inner self. It is set in a small and imaginary city of Belgium during the Victorian period. Around 1830, most of women’s lives were limited to the household care and they were considered incapable of getting an education. However, as regards education for women,

the situation began to change with the help of a revolutionary woman: Zoé Gatti de Gamond (1806-1854), who claimed that:

“Education is the driving force behind woman’s liberation. Solid education is believed to eliminate the intellectual gap between man and woman. Mentality will change and equality between men and women will follow automatically. She phrases her ideas in “De la condition sociale des femmes au XIXe siècle” underlining that education is vital to improve woman’s situation.” (Annemie 2003: 1).

Gatti de Gamond, along with Eugenie Poulet, took a revolutionary step and formed two schools for girls in 1835 where they educated and trained them to become teachers in order to change the imposed submission of women and improve their situation. However, that would not depict the entire society’s mentality of the times, many people (mostly men) would declare women as “angelic creatures, limited to the household and the husband’s desires” (main idea of the Victorian mindset). Another important feminist figure is the writer and philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) whose works focused on the importance of an equal education and society for the general virtue and a possible improvement of society (Frazer 2011: 610). In her work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) she explains that “*mind, reason and virtue cannot be sexed (...) against those arguments which claimed that there are different standards of conduct for men and women.*” (Frazer 2011:612), she also tried to recompile several evidence on the existence of women’s rationality and the training of the mind that “*would enable women to accomplish a virtuous and sound positioning in society.*” (González 1997: 178). Wollstonecraft along with Catherine Macaulay (1731-1791), a feminist writer and historian, criticized some of the statements of important figures of their times like Rousseau or Burke who reflected upon social hierarchy and the importance of sexual difference, they claimed that the girls’ presence on schools should be limited to learning how to be useful for men (Frazer 2011: 608). The fight for an equal education would lead to a normalization of the presence of girls and women in schools. As Langbauer explains, the 19th century feminist narratives are the inheritance from literary predecessors from the 18th century. Wollstonecraft critiques feminine ignorance “*as strategic, a way to keep women preyed upon and powerless as they are exchanged among men (...) contributing*

to woman's degradation." (Langbauer 1990: 112), it was because of feminists like them that it was possible for women like Charlotte Brontë to get an education and find a job in the academic field, which would inspire her in her novels (Tressler 2015: 4). We consider that Charlotte Brontë depicted the French society and its ideals of femininity as she perceived them (we should not forget we follow a British woman's thoughts: Lucy Snowe's, as a channel through Charlotte Brontë's mentality) (Fletcher 1992: 740). This paper will focus on how Lucy Snowe acknowledges her true identity: who she is, what she is able to accomplish and her impact on those who surround her. We will see, throughout the entire novel, several characters who will cause in more or less degree an impact on Lucy's self-awareness, some will be analyzed in the next section.

4. Lucy Snowe seeking her true identity, and how other characters of the novel portray her

As we have explained, the novel's narrative is written in first person, we are given the opportunity to get inside the mind of the main character, Lucy Snowe, but also limited to a single perspective of the story. Following Fletcher's theory, this type of narration opens a deeper understanding of the protagonist's purposes and thoughts, opposed to the mentality of rest of the characters who surround her and who are limited by her strange (and sometimes surprising) behavior in contrast of her real intentions or ideas:

"The waiter assumes that there must be a correlation between who Lucy appears to be visually and who she really is socially; hence, he automatically and unconsciously supplies Lucy with revised physical identity on the basis of Lucy's brief intimation of her connection, a practice which, as Lucy goes on to suggest, frequently leads to mistaken judgements." (Fletcher 1992: 728).

This quotation by Fletcher explains how Lucy is often limited by the gender roles imposed by society, pleasing the rest of characters. Little by little, Lucy enlightens us with some unexpected and impulsive actions that challenge and help her to know her true

self. Theoretically, to help us differentiate the imposed stereotypes of gender roles that might influence one's behavior from the manifestation of the "true self", we can follow Judith Butler's study on *The Identity formation*, explained by Elin Lind-Olsen, who claims that we can understand the self-identity as a social construction, "*dependent not only on the existence of the Other, but also on that Other's recognition of the subject [...]* And Lucy is often described as an opposition or a comparison between other characters of the novel." (Lind-Olsen 2016: 57).

As different projections of Lucy appear throughout the story, she is able to not let them confuse her and she continues seeking her true identity and does not allow them to influence her mindset or behavior. Lucy connects this self-identity with the inner-soul. As she gets to know the characters, she learns to behave in one way or another depending on who she interacts with but there is a constant question as to whether there is a correlation between how others see her and who she really is:

"The waiter assumes that there must be a correlation between who Lucy appears to be visually and who she really is socially; [...] a practice which, as Lucy goes to suggest, frequently leads to mistaken judgements. [...] The question of whether there is a relationship between appearance and some form of inner reality is considered repeatedly in this novel in all of its possible formulations." (Fletcher 1992: 728- 731).

We can assume how Lucy's identity is subjective and depends on the character observing her. These different projections of Lucy are expressed through letters or conversations she exchanges with the rest of the characters. Furthermore, she is conscious of how they see her:

"What contradictory attributes of character we sometimes find ascribed to us, according to the eye with which we are viewed! M.me Beck esteemed me learned and blue; Miss Fanshawe, caustic, ironic, and cynical; [...] Professor Paul Emanuel, to wit, never intimating his opinion that mine was nature adventurous, indocile and audacious. I smiled at them all. If anyone knew me it was little Paulina Mary." (Brontë 1853: 299-230).

5. Characters who influence Lucy on finding her identity

Madame Beck and the teacher Paul Emmanuel put Lucy in uncomfortable situations pushing her further her boundaries. However, they do it with different purposes: while Mr. Paul tries to take her out of her comfort zone, seeking her evolution and helping her to reach happiness, Madame Beck tries to minimize her, maintaining Lucy in a lower level than hers (Litvak 1988: 473-474).

5.1. Mr. Paul Emmanuel acceptance and support towards Lucy

Mr. Paul sometimes appears as a dominant figure –similar to Madame Beck-, although this two are differenced through Lucy’s perspective: Madame Beck’s authority is considered scarier while Mr. Paul’s is seen as harmless despite the constant disputes due to their different personalities and religious beliefs (Longmuir 2009: 173). We will see now two different quotations from the novel from the same chapter XXXVIII *Clouds*, where these two characters are described from Lucy’s perspective:

“M. Emanuel had been very kind to me of late days; he had been growing hourly better and kinder. It was now a month since we had settled the theological difference, and in all that time there had been no quarrel. [...] affection and deep esteem and dawning trust had each fastened its bond.” (Brontë 1853: 439-440).

“In the course of living with her too, I had slowly learned, that, unless with an inferior, she must ever be a rival. She was my rival, heart and soul, though secretly, under the smoothest bearing, and utterly unknown to all save her and myself.” (Brontë 1853: 446).

Mr. Emanuel and Mme. Beck are both teachers who accompany Lucy Snowe and guide her through the pensionnat. They also can be seen as two sides of the same coin and they represent the French society (since most of the rest of characters are English):

“*Mme. Beck, ‘wise, firm, faithless; secret, crafty, passionless,’ represents the raison of the French genius, as Monsieur Paul represents its sensibilité.*” (A. Colby 1960: 416). As Anne Longmuir claims, Mr. Paul wakes an interest on Lucy Snowe even if he is constantly mocking at her, she tries to impress him with her strong beliefs and principles and in the end they build a deep relationship:

“While Madame Beck’s despotism is to be despised, forming part of her system of surveillance that indicates to Lucy that she is “truly, in a foreign land” (p.95), M. Paul’s dominance is closer to the teasing and bullying of Rochester, in which Lucy, like Jane Eyre, takes a masochistic sexual pleasure.” (Longmuir 2009: 173).

Focusing for example on religion, Mr. Paul is a Roman Catholic and Lucy is a British Protestant but they are still able to maintain a profound friendship (and possible love interest, sadly interrupted by the death of him at the end of the novel) despite their differences. Lucy Snowe does not convert to his religion, in fact, *Villette* is one of the few novels that focus on the possibility of marriage or love between a Protestant and a Catholic without being sinful:

“Although historically neither the Anglican nor the Roman Catholic Church would have sanctioned intermarriage between Lucy and Paul, [...] Brontë envisions their union as a possibility and a fulfillment. Like many women whose fathers, husband, or brothers were ministers [...], Charlotte Brontë used the novel to explore religious and theological concepts that would have been forbidden to them in the pulpit, lectern or Parliamentary seat.” (M. Clarke 2011: 968).

This is something inconceivable during the Victorian period. Furthermore, Mr. Paul insists and supports Lucy to not convert to Catholicism. He loves her for the way she is, including their different religious beliefs: “*Remain a Protestant. My little English Puritan. I love Protestantism in you. I own its severe charm. There is something in its ritual. I cannot receive myself, but it is the sole creed for ‘Lucy’.*” (Brontë 1853: 490). From the beginning, Mr. Paul Emmanuel helps her into building the person she wants to become and after Lucy accepts his challenges, she feels proud of herself when she accomplishes

them, reaching her expectations (e.g. the scene of the theatrical performance in the pensionnat, where she portrays a hateful and rude man, completely the opposite to who she is in real life):

“What I felt that night, and what I did, I no more expected to feel and do, than to be lifted in a trance to the seventh heaven. Cold, reluctant, apprehensive, I had accepted a part to please another: erelong, warming, becoming interested, taking courage, I acted to please myself.” (Brontë 1853: 139).

On the other hand, she feels empty and ashamed when she does not reach her goals (e.g. when she hides her crafted present for Mr. Paul due to embarrassment, the constant interruptions by the students, and the shameful comments on England by Mr. Paul): *“A little pang of regret I underwent that the box had not been offered. I had meant to gratify him. Fate would not have it so.”* (Brontë 1853: 339). Mr. Paul helps her realize who she is and who she wants to become and most importantly, she is able to achieve her own happiness with the help of his constant work and his will to facilitate her prosperous future. He acquires the building of Faubourg Clotilde for her so she can become the director of this new school with the idea that both of them, as equals, instruct future students.

5.2. Madame Beck’s authoritarian character and her influence on Lucy

The pressure Madame Beck puts on Lucy, leads her (Lucy) to realize that she is capable of handling a school, after slowly and hardly learning about the educative world. Both of them play an authority vs submissive role. We can appreciate some similarities between Madame Beck and Lucy Snowe since they focus and share the same purpose in life, however, we can consider Lucy to be a younger and more naïve version of the first, Lucy tells the reader:

“Madame Beck’s commencement was – as I have often heard her say- from no higher starting point, and where is she now? All these premises and this garden are hers, bought with her money [...]. ‘Courage, Lucy Snowe! With self-denial and economy now, and steady exertion by-and-by, an object in life need not fail you’ [...].” (Brontë 473-474).

In this quotation, we observe how Madame Beck becomes an aspiring influence on Lucy. Madame Beck is the most successful and powerful character in the pensionnat and possibly, in the whole village. Nevertheless, these two characters represent two sides of the same coin: on one side we find Madame Beck, whose commands and desires are to be followed by anyone below her (students, workers and colleagues from the *pensionnat*), she is respected by the whole society of Villette and even if she seems intimidating through Lucy’s eyes, she does it to maintain her power, since the minimum sign of weakness in the Victorian society, especially for women, would signify the loss of her respect. On the other side, we find Lucy, who sees herself powerless, at least in the beginning of the novel. While Madame Beck usually acts according to what she believes is best for herself, Lucy often focuses on the other’s needs before hers and she tends to act according to the impression the other characters may have of her. This is the reason why we often see Lucy anxious or sad for not reaching her expectations after encountering other people. As the story goes on, she proves to herself and to the reader that she can handle the same troubles as Madame Beck:

“Although Lucy rightly views the mannish Madame Beck as her adversary, she in some sense resembles and even surpasses this simulacrum of both ‘first minister’ [...] mastering the art [...] of transforming theatrical spectatorship into a technology of surveillance. [...] By the end of the novel, Lucy sets up her own school, [...] she has already proven herself a formidable rival of Madame Beck, studied and internalized a complex ‘system of managing and regulating’ others...” (Litvak 1988: 473-474).

After reading this quotation, we can see that the relationship they have is mostly focused on the adversarial relationship, despite being at some extent a master-pupil type too. This is a reflection of the only way women could compete in order to reach success

in the Victorian period: only between women and in silence. The novel portrays this idea with them spying each other's behaviour and proprieties:

“For Lucy's famous “perversity”, however protomodernist a narrative it may appear to generate, derives its logic from the material exigencies of a more or less abject power- struggle archetypally enacted between women, who can overcome their disenfranchisement and claim some of the prerogatives of male authority only by battling each other in a game of silence and indirection.” (Litvak 1988: 474).

We can see how Lucy learns the methods Madame Beck uses to express authority upon her, which she in turn, uses on the reader to play with her narration. Sometimes she does not explain the events fully but instead gives simple hints and keeps the reader awaiting for further explanations or in confusion. To explain this we can mention the fragment in which she explains that Dr. John is actually Graham Bretton and that she realized it long ago: *“The discovery was not of today, its dawn had penetrated my perceptions long since [...] To say anything on the subject [...] had not suited my habits of thought [...] on the contrary, I preferred to keep the matter to myself.”* (Brontë 1853: 223). Through this words, she plays with the subversion of our position as readers “spying” her experiences. She narrates her confidences to us but in the way she wants to, playing that role of authority upon us. We can also relate this idea with how Charlotte Brontë writes the novel in a semi-autobiographical narration, choosing what she finds appropriate about her experiences and as a way to find her identity too.

6. Similarities between Lucy Snowe and Charlotte Brontë. A self-reliant woman writing a semiautobiographical novel in the Victorian era

As we have mentioned in the last section, the narrative of *Villette* is characterized by Lucy's heretic style: she chooses what she wants to narrate and in which perspective so we can understand the story only in the way she wants us to. She decides how she

wants to be seen by others. This idea is very well reflected in episode XXIII *Vashti*, when she writes two letters for Graham:

“The first, an impassioned outpouring of her feelings; the second, a properly reserved expression of friendly interest. This gives the reader a choice. Does the reader interpret the first letter as the “real” Lucy because of its uncensored outpouring of emotion? Or is the second letter, the public presentation, the truer expression of her personality?” (Johnson 1990: 617).

We will never know the answer to the question given by Johnson, but it is up to the reader to decide which one they should believe in. As Johnson says, there is also a third option where both letters offer an equal view of Lucy’s character. The technique of the heretic narrative is portrayed in many of Charlotte Brontë’s novels as it expresses the struggle between the two extremes of the inner soul:

“The doubleness of her narratives is a problem that critics have been drawn to over and over again. Whether (it) is read into characters (...) or into warring sides of the narrative itself: Reason versus Feeling, the temptation is to see one side of the narrative as the chastened public presentation (...) and the other as the “real”, though suppressed expression of the self.” (Johnson 1990: 618).

This represents the doubleness of the Victorian society, people were very focused on how they were perceived, opposite to who they really were in the private sphere. The main conflict of the novel is for Lucy to understand who she really is, but in the end this question remains unanswered. This heretic narrative technique continues through the whole story but Brontë is able to bring more of her character into surface:

*“Writing the success story of a Victorian woman is not the same overdetermined act as writing the success of a Victorian man, it still implies a basic adaptation to a system based on an ideal of individual competition. Therefore, important elements in *Villette*’s narrative resist this one-sided reading. (...) We have to admit that even*

Brontë refuses to choose. (...) Instead, we should momentarily pause to ask what it is that we critics want.” (Johnson 1990: 620- 621).

Brontë wrote this novel in her last years as a way of coping with the loss of her beloved sisters. She was afraid of isolation and was enormously affected by the death of her siblings, Emily and Anne. To understand the major effect this had in her life, we quote one of the letters she wrote to her friend William Smith Williams, a lithographic publisher who pointed out Charlotte Brontë’s artistic talent: *“The two human beings who understood me, and whom I understood are gone.”* (Lamonica 2003:185). Their deaths lead her to a struggle on her identity as a woman, a sister and as a writer:

“Her psychological and imaginative dysfunction can be viewed as a symptomatic of the loss of an internal security provided by the sibling bond. Throughout her life, Charlotte had been a writer dependent upon the gentle spur of family discussion, and she now had to reconstitute herself as a solitary author.” (Lamonica 2003: 185).

This is one of the main ideas that connect Lucy Snowe with Charlotte Brontë, both cope with the process of the macabre death: the mourning, seeking of the self-identity and a necessity of reaffirmation of the self. Both focus on writing to reach their salvation and to express their grief. In fact, some critics explain we should understand how Brontë expresses symptoms of a Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder through Lucy Snowe’s character and we should focus on *Villette* as *“placing the disordered consciousness in the narrator’s role. (...) Brontë allows a woman not distinguished by wealth, beauty, illustrious heritage, or sparkling wit to make her perspective as central in art as it is peripheral in society.”* (Braun 2011:199). Furthermore, we can see the necessity Brontë had to express her inner-struggles through her novels from her youth: growing up as a woman in the Victorian era forced her to repress her opinions or ideas. She did not count with a ‘womanly or motherly figure’ during her youth either, so during her adolescence the questionings of the world and her own body could not be solved by her father, causing their bond to be even more separated. *“A more normal girl would have kept a diary. Charlotte’s self-repression was too great for this. She poured her energy and her outraged feelings into objective forms,*

refusing to use even her own name.” (Dooley 1920: 235). Brontë had to face this lack of information and guidance due to her gender and the many taboos regarding the women’s body and psychology (limited to hysteria when it did not resemble the ideal of femininity). This would be reflected in many of her works where the main character is completely alone and does not count with a parental figure:

“in part this inner experience is to be deduced from her self-depreciation, her excessive shyness, her lack of freedom of expression, at this time, but more from the moral consequences later observable and in the subject matter of her books.(...) The heroines are invariably orphans obliged to make their own way, often misunderstood and unappreciated.” (Dooley 1920: 236).

This represents how Brontë really felt and writing was the only mechanism she could use as a liberating self-expression in the oppressed female Victorian society.

7. Oppression of women. Obstacles Lucy face while looking for her independence and happiness. The merge of the new woman along the ideal femininity of a Victorian society

In chapter XXIII *Vashti*, Lucy accompanies Graham to the theatre and describes in detail the performance. She gives a somewhat contradictory description of the main actress: she is captivating but transmits a devilish spirit through her eyes:

“For a while [...] I thought it was only a woman [...] who moved in might and grace before this multitude. By-and-by I recognized my mistake. I found upon her something neither of woman nor of man: in each of her eyes sat a devil. [...] It was a marvelous sight: a mighty revelation. It was a spectacle low, horrible, immoral.” (Brontë 1853: 337).

Some critics like Gilbert and Gubar claim how it could be analyzed as a symbolism of female rebellion: she seduces the audience with her great performance and right after it, the theatre is set on fire, awaking the anxiety and fear of the audience:

“Vashti puts on an inflammatory performance which so subverts the social order that it actually seems to set the theater on fire and sends all the wealthy patrons rushing outside to save their lives. Even as her drama proposes an alternative to patriarchal culture, then it defines the pain of female artistry and the revengeful power of female rebellion.” (M. Gilbert and Gubar 2000: 425).

Women were limited in their career paths, they could only focus on education or the household area in contrast with the limitless options men could opt for. This is why it is surprising how the actress from Vashti is described, by Lucy, as the most acclaimed European actress regardless of her religion, her career path and her gender. She opposes the Victorian ideal of femininity and the public applauds her for it, probably due to her ability to seduce the audience with her mesmerizing performances, breaking those boundaries that society imposed on women.

“Vashti also figures into the ‘splits’ in the novel: she is a Romantic artist performing before a Victorian audience, she is a Jewess in the midst of Christians, she is a woman who has rejected the private sphere for the public stage; and she is one of the most famous successful women in Europe, and yet also, Graham suggests, a ‘branded’ woman.” (E. Johnson 1990: 624).

Can this idea be related to Lucy’s role as a woman in society? Even if her mind and actions do not follow the imposed societal norms, she is not applauded by it but left aside and disrespected. However, she does not succumb into what it is expected for her, it makes her realize who is worthy of her loyalty, her friendship and support. Furthermore, it makes her act even more like herself:

“Lucy’s cultivation of detachment traces to her critique of contemporary gender roles, not simply as a defense against the narrowly romantic aspirations allotted to women (...), but also as a complex mirroring, and aesthetic appropriation of the forms of surveillance, impersonality and neutrality that marked Victorian discourses of femininity and professionalism.” (Anderson 2001: 48).

7.1. Oppression of Lucy as a self-sufficient independent woman

Marit Fimland explains how Lucy represents the opposite of the Victorian ideal femininity: she speaks her mind, she is true to her own-self, and most importantly she works for herself to become independent, far from what women had to be: a wife, a mother or a domestic woman:

“Lucy herself falls outside the socially accepted norm set up for women. She, on the other hand, is a representative of what Victorian society labelled ‘superfluous’ or ‘redundant’ women. Single women were looked upon as social problems, partly because the problems that they face were so much greater than today.” (Fimland 1996: 156).

Charlotte Brontë’s defense on self-reliance is based on her necessity to be independent and her desire to reach a spiritual and social fulfillment. In fact, Lucy Snowe reaches her success when she becomes the director of the school in Faubourg Clotilde, even if she cannot fulfill her desire of marrying Mr. Paul. We are left in an ambiguous state regarding the prosperity of her inner-soul:

“She may achieve economic independence through Paul’s aid and through her own application transform a day school into a pensionnat. (...) Even so, the suffocation of her narration has been determined by these apparent triumphs. (...) In terms of personal revelation, is itself but one more ‘Vanity of vanities’.” (Breen 1996: 255).

This idea explains how her personal triumphs dominate her unfulfilled desires and this might be the reason why Lucy ends her narration with: *“There is enough said. Trouble no quiet, kind heart; leave sunny imaginations hope. (...) Let them picture union and a happy succeeding life.”* (Brontë 1854: 492) she tries to escape reality and tries to convince herself that she can be happy after succeeding only professionally, even though we do not know what actually happens in Lucy’s late years of life. Some critics were not amused by the ambiguous content of this novel and its symbolism:

“Many Victorian critics of ‘Villette’ were disturbed by what they perceived to be Lucy Snowe’s illegitimacy (...) not wife or mother, helpmeet or slave, the ‘self’ forged over the course of Lucy’s autobiographical musings both exceeds and calls into question the narrative frameworks in which these legitimate figures of Victorian femininity are so deeply embedded”. (Ciolkowski 1994: 220).

We can observe a sequence of the novel that emphasizes how Lucy reacts against that Victorian feminine modesty in episode XIX *Cleopatra*, when Lucy visits a museum. She is mesmerized by the portrait of a naked woman who represents the figure of the famous gypsy queen, Cleopatra, she has a big, fleshy, dark body and transmits an erotic aura:

“Lucy is ordered to look away. (...) Lucy temporarily recedes back into the feminine visual cloister to which she should naturally have been confined in the first place. Lucy’s violation of feminine modesty of vision elicits from Mr. Paul nearly instantaneous retaliation. (...) Her transgressive plotting of female identity succeeds in confusing the gender-coded rituals of subjectivity according to which women (like the figure of Cleopatra) are the objects of vision and men are the lustful masculine spectators.” (Ciolkowski 1994: 220).

This rebellious and scandalous attitude coming from a woman would cause the bad talks of those surrounding her. As the last quotation claims, those women who observe these type of paintings would be considered as outrageous as contemporary women who openly enjoy explicit pornography, which is usually (or mostly) focused on the pleasure

of men. This would lead us to the second type of oppression Lucy has to deal with because of her gender: the oppression of sexual desire.

7.2. Oppression of sexual desire

While Lucy struggles to find her true identity, she must confront another type of gender oppression: the suppression of sexual desire. Women's sexuality was non-existent because they were forced to suppress their desires. They were considered objects of pleasure for men and sex was something they had to endure in order to have children. We can mention one of the most famous Victorian poems, *The Angel in the House* (1854) by Coventry Patmore, which offers a great example of how "the perfect woman" had to be: "*virtuous, modest, sweet, demure and submissive girls, (...) always depicted as beautiful in exactly the same virtuous, sweet and demure way, who won the hearts of gallant, handsome, well-placed young men.*" (Weisser 2013: 40). Brontë wanted to subvert this idea with an alternative representation of love based on the Romantics, a more realistic one and closer to the one from our contemporary times. She tends to portray in her novels a "*romantic love which entails intense feeling, uncontrollable longing even in the face of rejection, (...) and a strong erotic desire in women as well as in men.*" (Weisser 2013: 41). The critic Beverly Forsyth claims that Lucy projects this oppression on her personal life and narrative with a sadomasochistic behavior, she constantly forces herself to endure events that she does not enjoy. For example, Lucy rejects any type of public display but accepts to perform in the school play: "*A thousand objections rushed into my mind [...] but looking up at M. Paul, [...] a sort of appeal behind all its menace, my lips dropped the word 'oui'.*" (Brontë 1853: 132) She accedes to do so even though she knows it will cause her pain:

"Initially when Lucy accepts new challenges she exhibits a masochistic need for pain. [...] To accept the challenge will assure her attention even though she believes she will fail in the attempt. Even negative attention is attention. [...] the most powerful motivations of our psyche often turn to be those we have most deeply repressed'." (Forsyth 1997: 19).

Lucy follows this pattern based on self-sabotage, trying to satisfy her suppressed desires. This stops when she starts to portray these desires on Mr. Paul. They are both attracted to each other because of their similarities and they play a mutual game of “gazing and being gazed at”, in which Mr. Paul spies her pertinences (like her desk) and her actions. Lucy is aware of this but still maintains a submissive role, she does not stop him. They both come from oppressive origins and they are able to find that harmony between each other, fulfilling that emptiness of sexual desire:

“Anger and loneliness shaped their worlds. When these two people look at each other they don’t look away. [...] Their behavior allows them to function as best they can in their oppressive environment. Mr. Paul would not have repressed Lucy. [...] He is the catalyst that helps her to find herself.” (Forsyth 1997: 23).

Furthermore, we can compare this rebellious behaviour, present in most of Brontë’s heroines, with the ideal, pure and angelic Victorian woman. Charlotte Brontë fell in love with a teacher while she taught in Belgium, he was already married so she had to repress those prohibited feelings. The reason why she tends to use the same male prototype (rude, strong, intelligent...) as the main heroine’s love interest is because she could not fulfill her desires towards the man she fell in love with, who had those features. Nevertheless, even if Brontë affirmed the possibility of women reaching happiness without the imposition of men, her psyche was still shaped by a religious environment so she never wrote anything that could go against her religious morality:

“One of Brontë’s concerns is social, a rebellious desire to protest the keeping down of women, including their sexual repression, without sacrificing her moral concern that this sensual element of love be sanctified in the eyes of God (...) Brontë’s critique of romantic desire is grounded in Christian morality, but a fear of loss of feminine power seems equally powerful”. (Weisser 2013: 48).

As we can appreciate after reading this quote, Charlotte Brontë is considered by many feminist critics as very devoted to the sense of duty, her heroines become submissive for their hidden passion and desires. “*While they display considerable power, deal less with the need for liberation than with the desire for willing self-immolation*”. (D. Stone 1972: 72). In the end, Lucy knows she will always be miserable and will not always be completely satisfied with all the aspects in her life: “*By killing off the hero on the last page of the book- after very nearly crowning Lucy’s desire and her own wish-fulfillment with success- the novelist demonstrated a final proof of the vanity of human wishes*”. (D. Stone 1972: 73).

7.3. Oppression of the ideal female beauty

Most of Charlotte Brontë’s heroines are usually young women who do not conform the ideals of Victorian beauty or the “angelic” femininity, they are plain, ugly and pale... therefore, not appealing for men (Weisser 2013 :49). One of the main goals of Victorian women was to attract good men because they could not be self-sufficient. Since women were considered a propriety of their husbands, marriage was the only choice they had to make their families proud. They had to constantly express their “inferiority” or submission to their husbands. Lucy Snowe is unattractive in the eyes of any man, in contrast with other young female characters that appear in the novel:

“The man whom Lucy Snowe’s imagination grows to reject as its male ideal, John Graham Bretton, etherealizes both of the women to whom he is attracted. The one is a ‘grateful angel’ (referring to Ginevra Fanshawe); the other is ‘divine’ (referring to Paulina de Bassompierre). In contrast to narrator- protagonist Lucy’s own insights, these assessments only register the surface of the women’s character. Dr. John, in other words, does not adore these women so much as the conventional image of femininity that they evoke for him.” (Breen 1996: 243).

This quotation exemplifies what we have explained at the beginning of this subsection. However, there is a deeper reason behind this: Charlotte Brontë never considered herself an attractive or appealing woman and she did not belong to a wealthy family either, so she felt she did not have anything to offer to men. She was not interested in marriage so she looked for other ways to bring sustainability to her family:

“We know that Charlotte Brontë insisted over her sisters’ objections that her heroine must not be beautiful, as convention required for romance; according to her biographer Elizabeth Gaskell, she told her siblings confidently, (...) “I will show you a heroine as plain and small as myself, who shall be as interesting as any of yours.” (Weisser 2013: 39-40).

The Victorian audience was more attracted to beauty (especially female beauty) and would despise anything outside the attractive canonized ideals in a woman. This would be triggering for authors like Charlotte Brontë who had to gain the attention of the readers through other techniques:

“By choosing an ugly woman as heroine, authors could theoretically open up for themselves the discursive space needed to construct a response to the prevailing narrative structure, resisting its hegemony. Since the body is not merely an object in the social realm but is also ‘drenched with symbolic significance’ (Turner 54), any deviations from the ideal should not be read as incidental but rather as purposeful. Bodily deformities are stigmatic and have stigmatizing effects”. (Worley 1991: 369).

As Worley claims through this quotation, ugliness causes the immediate rejection of the reader. This idea has its origin on the belief of beauty being linked to “good” and ugliness to evil. However, for some artists and writers, it brought the freedom that beauty could not offer: whereas ugliness is individual, diverse and changing, beauty is considered a generality and mostly influenced by a specific model (Worley 1991). This could also inspire Charlotte Brontë’s writings and her ability to experiment with techniques and methods for the mere purpose of art itself, which would show her talent and how efficient she was in her area. But, overall she wanted to express how non-idealized women were

capable of reaching success and finding love too, she gave a voice to that marginalized group of women who were ignored due to their lack of sensuality and beauty.

We can relate the concepts of ugliness, evil and sexuality with the painting of Cleopatra as a big dark-skinned woman from chapter XIX Cleopatra of *Villette*. While the canonized femininity preferred white skin over dark bodies, it is straightly stated that the painting was created to fulfill the repressed sexual desires of men, but Lucy ends up gazing at it too. Female sexuality was considered a devilish perspective of love during the Victorian era, in contrast to the perfect pure romance: “*The black woman is the image of raw sexuality in the late nineteenth century. (...) ugliness is now no longer linked to character flaws but to untamed sexuality*”. (Worley 1991: 375). Furthermore, only the young and beautiful female characters of *Villette* have more opportunities to achieve their happiness, whereas Lucy is left into solitude without her lover. Even if Charlotte Brontë helps this “ugly character” making her become the protagonist of the story and being worthy of living an interesting life, she shows the mistreatment she suffers for not conforming that canonized ideal beauty, and tends to not see herself as capable of being loved as Ginevra Fanshawe or Justine Marie, for example:

“‘Ah! I am not pleasant to look at?’ I could not help saying this: the words came unbidden: I never remember the time when I had not a haunting dread of what might be the degree of my outward deficiency; this dread pressed me at the moment with a special force. (...) ‘Do I displease your eyes so much?’ I took the courage to urge: the point had its vital import for me. He stopped, and gave me a short, strong answer; an answer that I knew what I was for him; and what I might be for the rest of the world, I ceased painfully to care. Was it weak to lay so much stress on an opinion about appearance? I fear it might be; I fear it was; but in that case I must avow no light share of my weakness. I must own great fear of displeasing, a strong wish moderately to please M. Paul”. (Brontë 1856: 627).

Nevertheless, if we focus on the other two girls, they are also more intelligent than they appear to men: Ginevra Fanshawe takes advantage of her charms, attractiveness and delicate gestures, she is able to manipulate any man she meets and makes them act however she wants to. Lucy despises this attitude but also admires her for possessing what she lacks of:

“Selfish, coquettish, unscrupulous and competitive, Ginevra’s character is repulsive to Lucy, but she is nonetheless fascinated by powers she herself does not possess. Ginevra is able to use her sexual charms to manipulate men for her own purposes. While men are usually blind to Lucy’s very existence, Ginevra can blind men to who and what she really is, making them believe she is the embodiment of their dreams”. (Hunt 1982: 61).

Paulina Mary de Bassompierre, Ginevra’s cousin, represents the other side of the same coin: she is beautiful but also gentle, warmhearted and always accomplishes her duties. She is aware of how the Victorian society considers women proprieties of men so she centers her existence on fulfilling the commodities of the two men who are the most important for her: her father and John Graham Bretton. She seeks their approbation and proudness:

“Even as a child, Paulina centered her existence upon her father or Graham, pouring tea for her father, bringing Graham his toast, deriving her identity from their approbation. As a woman she has dignity, intelligence, and strength of character, and Lucy both likes and respects her, (...) as Paulina says of herself ‘God has caused me to grow in sun, due moisture and safe protection, sheltered, fostered, taught by my dear father; and now- now- another comes. Graham loves me’ Lucy’s experiences have simply been too different”. (Hunt 1982: 62-63).

John Graham Bretton is the great example of a good man whose main objective is to avoid solitude, he wants to fall in love with a decent and beautiful woman but still falls into Ginevra’s love games. However, he ends up with Paulina and also accomplishes her desires for becoming a good wife and they both accept that ideal husband-wife role common of the Victorianism:

“The man whom Lucy Snowe’s imagination grows to reject as its male ideal, John Graham Bretton, etherealizes both of the women to whom he is attracted. The one is a ‘graceful angel’ (222); the other is ‘divine’ (529), In contrast to narrator-protagonist Lucy’s own insights, these assessments only register the surface of the

women's characters. Dr. John, in other words, does not adore these women so much as the conventional image of femininity that they evoke for him". (Breen 1996: 243).

Women were more complex and intelligent than what it was expected for them and the Victorian society limited them with less opportunities than men. But they were able to fight and fulfill their own purposes through different methods. These three characters: Lucy, Ginevra and Paulina are three young girls living in an oppressive society, trying to find their way in the harsh world they lived in. However, Lucy still suffers for more difficulties for not fitting in the labeled category of a beautiful lady.

8. Final comparison with our present-day society

After analyzing female oppression in Charlotte Brontë's era (the Victorian era, in the 19th century) portrayed through *Villette* and its female characters, we can sympathize with them and relate their sufferings to similar situations that still happen in our present times. Contemporary women have suffered at least one of the last three oppressions we have mentioned above (either beauty, sexual or related to the professional life) and we can see that in some cultures and countries (mostly third world countries) the situation has not changed at all. Misogyny existed since ancient times, from Greek writings by Aristotle or Plato who depicted women as the inferior gender or as "deformed males", to the Bible where women, represented as Eve, were considered a tempting figure whose main objective was to corrupt men's souls (Sekeröz 2018:1). After the three waves of feminism, changes started to appear: the first wave, in the 19th and early 20th century, focused on the fight for the right to vote; the second, in the 1960s and 1970s, on the workplace sexuality and education rights; and the third, in the beginning of the 1990s, on finding an individual identity and being independent of men (Drucker 2018). These revolutionary movements would lead to the accomplishments we live nowadays (Sekeröz 2018: 3). In our present times, these ideas are more normalized due to the constant fight and cooperative work between men and women, who struggled to solve this conflict concerning us all, as society. However, we still must handle some difficulties and we

should not take any advance for granted as it will always be hanging by a thread. We will proceed to analyze the mentioned three types of oppression women faced in *Villette*, but in the perspective of our present-day society.

8.1. Oppression of women in the work field in our present times

In the late 20th century and early 21st century, gender difference has related women to the traditional feminine qualities: nurturance, empathy..., but never to men. These beneficial qualities were limited to the female gender and were rejected by society, relating them to “weak people or men” too: *“These qualities were being used against them in the workplace where capitalism continued to demand individualism, competitiveness and a cool ambition.”* (Lucas 2015: 499). This separation of qualities by gender is related to the psychology of biology, which claims that some characteristics are related to a specific gender from birth due to genetics. However, it has been proved that none of these are naturally possessed, in fact either men or women may have the same qualities if society did not influence upon them (Lucas 2015: 499). To consider women more sentimental than men by nature should be considered a fallacy:

“It follows from biological determinism that if it was adaptive for women to be more nurturing than men, then the relative degree of nurturing found in women and men cannot be changed. Another misunderstanding based in the naturalistic fallacy is that whatever is natural is good. Therefore, if men are more hostile and aggressive than women by nature, then men are justified in asserting dominance over women”. (Lucas 2015: 499-500).

Psychological studies have influenced society’s mindset and it could be one of the reasons why this mistreat on women by men has been permitted for ages. First, we will focus in the work area, limited to the male gender throughout history, claiming that women are not capable of handling it as efficiently as men. Following Rajamani’s statement, the constant harassment most women face nowadays in the work place is

caused merely by the normalized social standards on gender. This harassment is basically the “reminder” for women to maintain their imposed role in society as wives and mothers, basically the household area:

“Harassment at the work place by male superiors, colleagues and even subordinates is the reality of the working woman’s life. Conventions are ratified, legislations are passed and targets are achieved, yet for the average working woman a polluted work environment is still the order of the day.” (Rajamani 1996: 387).

As Rajamani claims, this harassment can be manifested through different ways: through sexual harassment in order to get job benefits, through subjection of women with verbal or physical abuse of sexual nature; or imposing a male dominance unrelated to sexual desires but emphasizing misogynistic sexual stereotypes and female submission like getting a lower salary for the same work which after researching on studies focused on this issue, we have seen how in our present-day times, it is not that common than women are paid less than men for the same work but that men are given more opportunity (and less obstacles) to gain experience and practice specialization on any field and the lack of it would be associated “*with slightly but significantly lower salary*” (Koeske & Krowinski 2004 :315), along with other factors. These three mentioned types of harassment in the work area will trigger “*the same psychologically debilitating effects.*” (Rajamani 1996: 387). She explains there is an existing legal framework that would criminalize these mistreatments towards women however, it is written in a way that “*the trial might be devoted to determining whether the woman had any modesty to speak of. It is the victim who is put on trial, not the offender.*” (Rajamani 1996: 388). The objectification and sexualization of women can also be manifested towards women who apply for jobs, “*at the same time, the shaming inflicted by Internet objectification spills back into the real world, damaging women’s employment prospects and their self-esteem.*” (Nussbaum 2010: 75). Considering how most of the mistreatments women face in the work area are related to sexual harassment, we will continue analyzing this great and second problem per se: the problem with female sexuality in our present times.

8.2. Oppression of female sexuality in our present times

As we have explained in this paper, female sexuality in the Victorian period was merely focused on the pleasure of men. The wife was under the dominance of her husband and her role in marriage was to fulfill his desires and giving birth. In contemporary times, we are still working on the normalization of women's sexual desire and pleasure. It has been considered for decades that it is not necessary for women to enjoy sexuality for a relationship or marriage to prosper as long as they are able to give birth or give pleasure to their partners. At times, some men go beyond that and impose their dominance towards women, following that first pattern of women being simple objects of desire, committing sexual harassment or rape. Because of it, "*The process of proving a sexual harassment claim exemplifies how hard women who experience sexualized aggression must work to overcome the general presumption that women are receptive to this type of conduct*" (Fraser 2015: 160) and the affected women are pushed into limits, where they have to prove that they did not welcome or gave reasons to cause that attitude on men. We also find the great influence of the media on our society, as Fraser claims, being under a constant impact of the media leads us to adopt the attitudes portrayed in it. In fact, in these movies and TV shows, women in romantic or sexual contexts lead us to believe that "*the denial of her agency imputes her consent to whatever her male interactional partner does.*" (Fraser 2015: 154). These attitudes are romanticized and normalized and could lead to a forced and non-consensual sexual or love relationship between couples, in which 'no' or remaining silent means "yes", and it implies accepting to proceed with the sexual act:

"These artifacts of current American culture show in painful clarity an ideology that locates a woman's consent to sexual activity in the mind of the man pursuing her and not in her own communicative attempts. (...) This permeate a community of men who purport to follow the teachings of evolutionary psychology to achieve sexual success (...) who believe that women are fundamentally and essentially the same: submissive, attracted to confidence and outer appearance, and hard-wired to be picky in terms of sex partners. Consequently, it follows the premise that the female brain is naturally disposed to respond favorably to a certain set of traits and maneuvers, dominance and persistence chief among them. (...) It purports that any man can enjoy the success of 'opening' any woman if he can cultivate and display what she is programmed to accept." (Fraser 2015: 156).

Going beyond this issue, we can focus on how pornography is accessible nowadays to anyone with Internet access. These scenarios are created with the mere purpose of fulfilling society's sexual desires fast and with multiple options and tastes. However, most of the pornography that we can find on the internet are focused on the desires of men towards female submission:

“the more common pornographic scenario represents women as an agent, attempting to control her own destiny, and the man removes that freedom; sexual pleasure is found in the ability to exert control over the woman's options, removing her ability to refuse consent, to depart from the situation and so forth. (...) A great deal of the harm caused by pornographic Internet attacks on women involves subjectivity-violation.” (Nussbaum 2010:73).

We might think there is not any problem if we limit those attitudes to the media and Internet, where everything is allowed and does not necessarily conform reality, nevertheless, it becomes a problem when anybody at any age can have access to them. As we have already mentioned, the most we watch something, the easier our brain will familiarize with that action. If we standardize these sexual relationships or we limit the youth's sex education to pornography, a great number of young men will believe that rape is a perfectly normal thing to do and sometimes is necessary to fulfill one's desires. These young men will impose themselves over their partners or over anyone they find attractive and rape them.

8.3. Oppression of female beauty in our present times

In the late 19th century, beauty magazines grew enormously. These were consumed by young women with the idea of escaping their daily domesticity. They portray an image of female beauty that would influence their audience into thinking that using the products they advertised would make them more beautiful:

“Young women’s bodies were imbricated in creating the spectacle associated with merchandise, as symbols of consumption and objects of desire for the reader. (...) Women’s bodies and faces infused both descriptions and depictions of idealized femininity. (...) One form, of ideal female self that rose to prominence in women’s magazines was the celebrity who served as a model of beauty.” (Smith 2019: 220).

After reading this sentence by Smith, we can see how not much has changed since then. The media of our present times, magazines included, bombards us with plenty of images of beauty perfection for both genders (but mostly women) claiming that those who do not achieve this canonized beauty are not working enough to get it, this standardized beauty has constructed the ideals of femininity *“For those who wish to be recognized as women, norms of outer appearance and standards of feminine beauty play a crucial role in accomplishing this task.” (Liebelt 2016:15).* It is easier to completely transform our bodies or our faces in order to achieve perfection than the acceptance of natural beauty, referring with natural beauty to the body we are born with and its acceptance regardless of how it looks, without forcing it under aesthetic norms:

“As exemplified by Terrence Turner’s seminal work on the ‘social skin’, a kind of socialization of the naked human body through cosmetics and body adornment, practices of (aesthetic) body modification and beautification are embedded in a symbolically loaded normative social order. The bodily adornments and modifications described in this issue are tied to collective shared, yet place-specific imaginations of modernity, glamour and the nation in a variety of social settings.” (Liebelt 2016: 19-20).

This constant reminder leads women to believe that the best thing they can achieve is being pretty, regardless of their professional achievements, their intelligence or any other trait. We all have been consumers of these products and we know how it can affect your attitude, the way you see yourself and how you behave towards society. Even nowadays, magazines follow an apparent “feminist mindset” claiming that we should feel empowered and strong but they still insist we should look pretty fighting for equality. A solution Gengler offers for reaching a real feminist influence would be *“to offer girls the*

more radical message, learned and lived by earlier generations of feminists, that true empowerment comes not through consumption, but solidarity, critical-consciousness and collective action.” (Gengler 2011: 69) in order to continue the evolution towards a real equality. The real problem with insisting that young women should achieve an unreachable canonized beauty is the damage it can cause to their self-esteem. It makes women go through pain and sacrifices for the impossible, to never be satisfied with their looks, and to limit their success to their appearance:

“Women become obsessed with controlling their bodies, and feel compelled to meet certain standards of appearance, they are the same time expected to do so ‘naturally’, effortlessly and without artifice. Beauty rituals are usually performed in secret. For the feminist, this becomes a double trouble. Chapkis (1986, 2) notes on her own experience: ‘I am a feminist. How humiliated I then feel. I am a woman. How ugly I have been made to feel. I have failed on both counts.’”(Davis 1991:27).

Davis then admits how hard it is for a feminist (through Chapkis words) to live according to their principles of equality and as a woman. It seems like these two are not compatible. Going back to the idealization of female beauty and the exhausting norms women must follow in order to be accepted, we wonder if we will ever reach an equality and freedom in a society where technology is in constant evolution and facilitates people to transform and modify their bodies in order to reach that false perfection *“Psychological and feminist accounts of beauty tend to link women’s suffering to low self-esteem combined with an inaccurate perception of what their body ‘really’ looks like. (...) How can some part of the body be experienced as unacceptable?”* (Davis 1991:37). Furthermore, believing that some parts of our body are abnormal is the main cause of the most common mental illnesses people struggle with in our present society: depression, bulimia, body dysmorphia, etc... attacking women into making them see imperfection and ugliness on their body. Is it possible for a society to realize that a false perfectionism should not be the main objective for anyone? We must accept any type of body as it would avoid causing a lot of the mental illnesses caused by a low self- esteem:

“The link between self-esteem and happiness is strong. People with high self-esteem are significantly, substantially happier than other people. They are also less likely to be depressed, either in general or specifically in response to stressful, traumatic events. (...) The findings consistently suggest that low self-esteem leads to poorer outcomes, including depression and possibly physical illness, under some circumstances.” (Baumeister; Campbell; Krueger; Vohs 2003: 28).

After reading this citation, we assume that a low self-esteem, usually caused by a self-comparison with celebrities or modified images which show an unreachable beauty, can make people –mostly women- to fall into mental illnesses and a lower lifestyle. After understanding this statement, we can comprehend better Lucy Snowe’s mentality. She clearly has a low self-esteem and constantly repeating how ugly she is, which could explain the lack of confidence she has and how prone she is to fall into madness or mental illnesses, for example, when she falls ill out of isolation in chapter XV of *Villette*: *“I hardly knew how I was to live to the end. My spirits had long been gradually sinking; now that the prop of employment was withdrawn, they went down fast.”* (Brontë 1853: 155).

Conclusions

Lucy Snowe represents the opposite of the Victorian woman, since her main purpose in life is not to get married nor motherhood. She is able to find a prosperous professional life and takes a step forward into acknowledging who she is, finding her role in society after pushing herself further her boundaries in situations out of her comfort zone. In *Villette*, Charlotte Brontë narrates the many injustices Lucy Snowe faces because of being a woman and the obstacles many women had to struggle with in order to survive as a self-sufficient woman (just like Brontë did). The reason why *Villette* was chosen as the work of reference for this project is because not only it does not have that much recognition in nowadays society despite its’ quality and great variety of issues treated, but because Lucy Snowe’s mindset and narrative resemble the mentality of an ordinary girl of the 21st century, which brings us closer to the story and makes it easier to empathize

with her and the characters who surround her. Every female character in *Villette* follows a different way of thinking, they all have different purposes in life and different personalities. However, these characters (Genevra Fanshawe, Madame Beck, Paulina de Bassompierre and Lucy Snowe) struggle with what it is expected for them to accomplish because of their gender: being a perfect woman in order to succeed in life (whichever their goal is, either work, being a good mother, or marrying out of love) and the possibility of being rejected at the slightest mistake they commit. However, they simply want to live without being judged by their choices. As we learn from the novel, everyone should be able to reach happiness regardless of their society, the time period or country they live in, but, in my view, it is unfair when we have to struggle through obstacles due to our gender, sexual orientation or any other significant characteristic, which sadly still happens nowadays.

After the feminist analysis of *Villette* and the brief comparison with our contemporary society, we can conclude that unfortunately, and in this respect, not much seems to have changed for many women since then. It is true that in most of the first world countries women have gained more rights than in the Victorian times. Women are allowed to vote regardless of ethnic or social class and crimes against women like rape, sexual assault or harassment are more penalized and denounced. However, these situations still happen a lot and lead us to believe it is natural for some men to portray dominance towards women. Something we have commented in subsection 7.1. is that some people believe in the existence of a genetic behaviour based on gender, which has been proved to be false, and unless this idea is erased these misogynistic beliefs and actions will not stop occurring, because they would give some men the excuses they need to rape and sexually harass other people (women in this case) acting according to what is expected of them to maintain their dominance.

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