

WOMEN'S CATEGORIZATION IN CHARLOTTE BRONTË'S *VILLETTE*

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Abstract : Although perceived as an era of progress, the Victorian Era (named after the monarch of the time, Queen Victoria) was marked by social inequalities based not only on class, but also and especially, on gender. This situation led Charlotte Brontë, a novelist of the period, to denounce women's alienation in her fourth and last novel, *Villette* (1853). Thus, the present reflection aims to examine women's categorization during the Victorian Era in *Villette*. The author shows that there exist four types of women in the novel: the woman subjected to her condition and destined for a family life (obtained through a marriage of convenience), the spinster, object of rejection and condemned to survive in society, the coquettish woman, who uses her charms to obtain whatever she desires from her suitors and the collaborating woman, who participates in the oppression of her gender. The author uses characters such as Paulina Home, Lucy Snowe, Ginevra Fanshawe and Madame Beck to make her case.

Keywords: Victorian Era, Patriarchal Ideology, Women's Alienation, Brontë, *Villette*.

LA CATÉGORISATION DES FEMMES DANS *VILLETTE* DE CHARLOTTE BRONTË

Résumé : Bien que perçue comme une ère de progrès, l'ère victorienne (nom tiré du monarque de cette époque, la reine Victoria) a été marquée par des inégalités sociales basées non seulement sur la classe, mais aussi et surtout sur le genre. Cet état de fait a conduit Charlotte Brontë, romancière de cette époque, à dénoncer l'aliénation des femmes dans son quatrième et dernier roman, *Villette* (1853). Ainsi donc, la présente réflexion vise à examiner la catégorisation des femmes pendant l'ère victorienne dans *Villette*. L'auteure montre qu'il existe quatre différents types de femmes dans l'œuvre : la femme soumise à sa condition et destinée à une vie de famille obtenue grâce à un mariage de convenance, la vieille fille, objet de rejet et condamnée à survivre dans la société, la femme coquette, qui use de ses charmes afin d'obtenir tout ce qu'elle désire de ses prétendants et la femme collaboratrice, qui participe à l'oppression des personnes de son sexe. Pour asseoir son argumentaire, l'auteure se sert des personnages tels que Paulina Home, Lucy Snowe, Ginevra Fanshawe et Madame Beck.

Mots clés : Ère victorienne, idéologie patriarcale, aliénation des femmes, Brontë, *Villette*.

Introduction

The Victorian period was marked by Queen Victoria's accession to the throne of England (1837-1901). The period was prosperous due to the advent of the Industrial

Revolution. However, such prosperity was stained by political, economic, and social turmoil. The inception of mechanization for example, fuelled anger among the working class who were left idle and thus driven to pauperization. Another downside related to the period was the issue of gender. Although *The Representation of the People Act*¹ was passed in 1918 to enable women's vote for the first time in Britain's history, women's rights and independence were not fully guaranteed. Such situation urged Charlotte Brontë, a female writer of the period, to denounce not only gender inequality, but also women's categorization in *Villette*, her fourth and last novel. In the light of the above, we are driven to the following interrogation: How does Charlotte Brontë treat women's categorization in *Villette*? The ensuing assumptions can be made from the preceding question: the authoress criticizes women's categorization. She believes that it generates ideological labels or stereotypical roles that women must play to ensure their survival in a patriarchal dominated society. Thus, women's categorization is a form of alienation which negatively affects women's behaviour.

The Feminist Approach according to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar has been selected for the scope of the present study. In their influential work, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (2000), both critics sustain that literary texts by women have for long conformed to men's vision, where the woman is categorized as either "*the angel*", the pure and tender being whose life is dedicated to satisfying the patriarch (father, husband, brother or son) of the house, or "*the monster*", the rebellious and insubordinate creature, who refuses to be the angel and who does not bow to the social conventions imposed on her by society (p. 17). The authors go further when they hold that authors sometimes use variations of the angel and monster images, and those varied forms are "*masks [...] that have been invented for women [s categorization and alienation].*" (Ibid., p. 18). Lastly, the critics are adamant that the woman writer should "*kill*" the dual, reductionist, and misleading images of the angel or the monster and work towards her self-definition. They assert: "*[...] a woman writer must examine, assimilate, and transcend the extreme images of angel and monster which male authors have generated for her*" (Ibid., p. 17). Brontë's fictional work can be recorded in such a feminist perspective because the female characters in *Villette* are confined to archetypes that prevent them from being themselves.

Scholarly works have served as a basis to the present reflection. The reader is warmly requested to consider the following: In *Female Reaction Against Patriarchal Oppression: Burial, Resistance, and Emancipation in Charlotte Brontë's Villette*, Seher ÖZSERT (2022) shows how Charlotte "*Brontë portrays the powerful female figure in the end of Villette through [...] Lucy who buries her feelings at first by resisting the patriarchal oppression through her intellect and reconstructs her female identity by the destruction of the suppressive male authority* (p. 513). Next is Hilde Rui Sandal (2019) from the University of Oslo, who submitted a thesis entitled *Searching for Identity in Villette: Charlotte Brontë, Lucy Snowe and the 21st-Century Woman Reader*, where the author draws a parallel between the situation of women today and Lucy Snowe in *Villette*. Published in 2015, Rebecca Fraser's *The 'Woman Question' and Charlotte Brontë* addresses Charlotte Brontë's feminism into its historical perspective, revisiting and

¹ The **Representation of the People Act 1918** was an Act of Parliament passed to reform the electoral system in Great Britain and Ireland. It is sometimes known as the Fourth Reform Act. The Act extended the franchise in parliamentary elections, also known as the right to vote, to men aged over 21, whether or not they owned property, and to women aged over 30 who resided in the constituency whilst occupying land or premises with a rateable value above £5, or whose husbands did. At the same time, it extended the local government franchise to include women aged over 30 on the same terms as men. :xxv. It came into effect at the 1918 general election. [Representation of the People Act 1918 - Wikiwand](#)

celebrating her response to the ‘Woman Question’ that engulfed Britain throughout the nineteenth century. In “*I seemed to hold two wives*”: *Disclosing Circumnarration in Villette and the Picture of Dorian Grey*, Helen H. Davis (2013) from Wilkes University, utilizes feminist narratology to examine the narrative strategies that Charlotte Brontë employed to create autonomous female selves that have both professional lives and personal relationships. In *Perception and Suppression of Identity in Villette*, Elizabeth K. Haller (2010) shows how Lucy Snowe’s shadowy existence serves as a defence mechanism against the agony of deprivation. Substantially, whereas the above writings focus on the reception of *Villette* or on the strategies employed by Charlotte Brontë to make her heroine resilient and autonomous, it remains that the main cause of women’s suffering has not been identified. The categorization of women, which to us, constitutes the basis of women’s alienation by the patriarchal oppressor should be thoroughly explored.

The present paper is structured into five main sections: the first section analyses the model woman. Here, one will interrogate her total subjection to the patriarch of the house (a task which will be achieved through Paulina’s actions). The second section scrutinizes the plight of the spinster through Lucy Snowe, who undergoes evils from a merciless patriarchal society. The third section questions the coquettish woman, who uses her charms to extort presents from the men who court her. Ginevra Fanshawe will be the focus of this section. One will see how she has been deprived by the Victorian society. The fourth section criticizes the collaborating woman’s autocratic surveillance, through Madame Beck who, like a prison ward, controls the actions and moves of the women under her authority. The last section exposes two collections of paintings named *The Cleopatra*² and *La vie d’une femme*³ to condemn men’s false representations of women.

1. Paulina, the Model and Submissive Victorian Woman

Paulina Mary Home De Bassompierre (known as Polly or Missy) is the first character from whom women’s categorization transpires. Charlotte Brontë presents her with the characteristics of the model Victorian woman, who has been born and bred to satisfy the patriarch of the house. Her attachment to the patriarch of the family and later to her husband, is symptomatic of the conventional role she has been ascribed in the novel. M. De Bassompierre has succeeded in instilling such a reverential behaviour into his unique daughter. On every occasion Paulina expresses excitement, he remains cold towards her. For instance, when he visits Paulina at the Brettons’, M. De Bassompierre is indifferent towards a child that he has not seen for a long time. The truth is that he is training her to endure the life of a wife, who must restrain her emotions and dedicate herself to serving the patriarch of the house. The method works as Paulina always applies herself to acting according to his pleasure. Illustrative is Paulina’s obsessive dedication

² Charlotte Brontë. (2016). *Villette*. Great Britain: Penguin Classics p. 224. *The Cleopatra* is based on a painting *Une Almée (A Dancing Girl)* by Edouard de Biefve, a nineteenth-century Belgian artist, which was on show at the Salon de Bruxelles in 1842 when Charlotte Brontë was in Brussels. In later referring to its subject as ‘this huge, dark-complexioned gipsy-queen’, ‘the indolent gipsy-giantess’, ‘the lioness’, ‘this dusk and overweight Venus of the Nile’ and ‘mulatto’, Brontë emphasizes Cleopatra’s African complexion and her sensuality (Venus is the goddess of love).

³ Ibid., p. 225. *The Life of a Woman*, based on *La vie d’une femme*, a series of three pictures painted by the Belgian artist Fanny Geefs (1807-83) depicting ‘Piety’, ‘Love’ and ‘Grief’. The individual pictures are ‘Jeune fille’-Young Girl; ‘Mariée’-Wife; ‘Jeune Mère’-Young Mother; and ‘Veuve’-Widow.

to her father during the afternoon tea. She insists that M. De Bassompierre should be near her as if “[they] were at home” (Brontë, *Villette*, 2016, p. 18). Paulina repeats her devotional attitude when she interrupts her father from preparing the tea himself. She gently reminds him: “I always did it for you at home, papa: nobody could do it as well, not even your own self” (Ibid., p. 18). In other words, household chores are a woman's (her) birthright, not a man's. Observing this episode, Lucy mocks Paulina's servitude. The text reads:

Throughout the meal she continued her attentions: rather absurd they were. The sugar-tongs were too wide for one of her hands, and she had to use both in wielding them; the weight of the silver cream-ewer, the bread-and-butter plates, the very cup and saucer, tasked her insufficient strength and dexterity; but she would lift this, hand that, and luckily contrived through it all to break nothing (Ibid., p. 18).

Visibly, though physically weak and unfit, Paulina bends double to satisfy her father. Her commitment sometimes turns to sacrifice. For example, as she threads the needle, Paulina gets injured but remains stoical. The narrator imparts:

[...] perched now on a high chair beside a stand, whereon was her toy work-box of white varnished wood, and holding in her hands a shred of a handkerchief, which she was professing to hem, and at which she bored perseveringly with a needle, that in her fingers seemed almost a skewer, pricking herself ever and anon, marking the cambric with a track of minute red dots; occasionally starting when the perverse weapon—swerving from her control—inflicted a deeper stab than usual; but still silent, diligent, absorbed, womanly (*Villette*, p. 19).

This occurrence proves that Paulina must satisfy the patriarch of the house whatever the cost. In the same worshipful vein, Paulina struggles to satisfy her husband, Graham Bretton, also known as Dr John and nicknamed Isodore (by Ginevra Fanshawe, Paulina's cousin). When M. De Bassompierre leaves Paulina for France at the beginning of the novel, she turns her attention towards Graham, the man of the Bretton House. Lucy deplores: “now that her father was taken from her, she nestled to Graham, and seemed to feel by his feelings: to exist in his existence” (*Villette*, p. 29). The transfer of emotions/devotion from her father to Graham seems so rapid and strange that it happens only three days after her father's departure. Seen from this perspective, one can surmise that Paulina is struggling to exist. She needs a surrogate to her father, a man whose whimsical tendencies she will be indulging.

On further reflection, from her behaviour, one can conclude that Paulina represents the “perfect lady” whose “sole function [is] marriage and procreation [...] All her education [is] to bring out her “natural” submission to authority and innate maternal instincts” (Vicinus, *Introduction*, x). She submits to her father because she is training to become a wife; she submits to her husband because as the Victorian logic stipulates: “the woman who proved herself unsuccessful in capturing a husband or who had the misfortune to lose him after marriage was dismissed with the comment, “she has

failed in business, and no social reform can prevent such failures” (ibid., xii). Clearly, Paulina refuses to fail in business. She acts reverently to secure her marriage. Significantly, Paulina’s devotional behaviour can be understood having recourse to Aycan Gökçek. The researcher explains that Paulina’s logic is the same as Victorian women’s, who used to revere marriage as their rising to autonomy. He expounds:

[...] Young girls were encouraged to view marriage as a route for liberation where they would achieve acknowledgment of adulthood and freedom to control their own lives. Actually, freedom was largely illusory, for most young women exchanged the control of a father for the control of a husband and passed straight from childhood to the responsibilities of being a wife or mother. (2021, p. 8)

Naively believing that they will assume independence through marriage, Paulina and her fellow creatures will soon understand that the Victorian environment is patriarchal. No privileges are granted to people of their sex. In leaving their father’s house for their husband’s, they are moving from one oppressor to another, and are subsequently moving from one prison to another. A life of obedience, mistreatment, solitude, and self-sacrifice is awaiting them.

2. Lucy Snowe: The Surviving Spinster

Paulina is not the sole character concerned with women’s categorization in the novel. Lucy Snowe, the protagonist, is set to be a survivor and a spinster. To better assess how much she has been affected by her classification, let us interrogate her origins. Lucy is an orphan. No account is given of her father and mother by the narrator, a useful detail which bears a paramount prominence regarding her prospects. Lucy is deprived of shelter. She depends on people’s hospitality and can turn homeless at any time. At the beginning of the novel, Lucy is presented living with her godmother, Mrs Bretton, and her son, Graham Bretton. She is the Bretton family’s centre of attention till Paulina’s arrival. Mrs Bretton and Graham naturally succumb to Paulina’s charms because she embodies the perfect Victorian woman, the kind of women favoured by the Victorian society. Seeing that she is of no use, Lucy decides to leave the Bretton house. In so doing, she becomes homeless.

This occurrence in favour of Paulina, but in the detriment of Lucy, urges Gilbert and Gubar to hold: “[*Paulina*] is, in fact, *Lucy Snowe born under a lucky star*” (p. 427). This profound assertion explains why Paulina ultimately wins Graham’s heart, and they marry. It equally demonstrates that marriage in the patriarchal society is conditioned by social class. Paulina is from the upper class. Graham is Paulina’s perfect match because he is/will be the master of the Bretton house. Lucy, however, is orphan, poor and plain. She is unmatchable and unmarriageable. She has no dowry that can attract a man into an interest-based matrimony. She must find a way out. The striking of the situation, when she finds an occupation to sustain herself, Lucy must sacrifice her freedom. Such is the case when she is hired as a companion by Miss Marchmont, a wealthy and crippled widow. She lives in seclusion, with no socialization. She laments: “*Two hot, close rooms thus became my world*” (*Villette*, p. 42). Lucy does not enjoy her life and lives like a

prisoner. Even worse, her claustrophobic space is taken away from her when Miss Marchmont dies. One more time, she turns homeless, on the brink of pauperization. She needs to find an exit.

Trapped and strangled by the Victorian society, Lucy departs for Brussels, hoping to improve her condition. Recruited as a teacher at Madame Beck's school, Lucy makes a bitter discovery: Brussels is also a patriarchal society, with stringent rules against spinsters. Her mode of life is yet again reclusive. Her desire to socialize and to be loved makes her ill. She experiences "*depression and despair*" (Helen Moglen, 1984, pp. 208-9). On top of her woes, she has been doubly rejected by Dr John, the man she loves (a first time when he chooses Paulina at the beginning, a second time when he chooses Ginevra). The preceding lines conclusively show that Victorian men would prefer the perfect lady as their first choice, and the frivolous woman as their second. The spinster was systematically rejected.

Coming back to Lucy's depression, Diana Peschier (2005) strongly believes it is not a surprise that Lucy falls ill. The critic compares Lucy's universe with a prison or an asylum. She states: *The school, the convent and the confessional are closely connected to the prison and the mental asylum by the way they function and in particular the way in which the students, nuns, inmates and patients are observed and controlled.* (p. 106). From the previous citation, the reader is informed that spinsters, like nuns, inmates and patients, are preys to mental disorders because of their reclusive environments. George Burrows proposes another analysis of the situation. He believes that Lucy's problem is simply sexual. He is clear that unmarried young girls under 30 years old like Lucy are highly likely exposed to such derangements (what he refers to as hysteria) because of their sexual unfulfillment. Peschier paraphrases him:

He describes this as a disease that occurs mainly in young, single women under the age of 30. He maintains that the nervous systems of immature, susceptible females are always 'highly irritable', the implication being that the reason for hysteria is often sexual repression. The fulfilled married woman is not so prone to such disorders (Ibid. 143).

This statement is thoughtful because it demonstrates how men used to formulate bewildering theories on women. Believing that under 30-year-old single women would be fulfilled if they were sexually active is mistakenly putting men (and their sexual organ) at the centre of women's lives. Charlotte Brontë vigorously challenges such belief of a man's omnipresence in a woman's life when she makes Lucy independent and manages to suppress Mr Paul in Lucy's life. Moglen outlines the author's gambit:

After Paul's death, [Lucy] receives at last the inheritance from Miss Marchmont. She is responsible for her school. She is of use. She pursues her talents and maintains relationships. Without hope, she is not happy, but she is strong. Virginal, she has still experienced passion. Childless, her life is full of children and will not be sterile. Alone and lonely, she is not alienated. Surviving, she need not live as a survivor. She does not have to tell the story of another. Now she can tell and understand her own (p. 229).

In reserving such an ending to her narrative, Charlotte Brontë refuses that her heroine be entrapped by the patriarchal enclosure. She makes Lucy financially independent (inheriting from a person with whom she has no kinship), have her build her school, keeps her virgin, childless, and unmarried because she wants to break the codes of the patriarchal order. She wants people to understand that marriage and its effects are not the only way out for the woman. She can remain single and pursue her aspirations.

3. Ginevra Fanshawe: The Coquettish Woman

In *Villette*, women are also represented as coquettish creatures by Charlotte Brontë. Such is the case of Ginevra Fanshawe, M. De Bassompierre's niece, Paulina's cousin, and a pupil at Madame Beck's School. Unlike Paulina, Ginevra is not from the upper class. Her uncle pays for her school fees. The only way out for Ginevra would be a marriage to a wealthy man. Unlike Paulina, the perfect lady or Lucy, the surviving spinster, Ginevra counts on seduction and manipulation to obtain whatever she desires from her friends and her admirers.

Her life is punctuated by the parties that she must attend to secure a match. She is monitored by a “*chaperon*” (*Villette*, p. 96) in the name of Mrs. Cholmondeley, who invites her to every party at her house or at the houses of her acquaintances. Taking part in those parties requires Ginevra to have an extensive wardrobe. The narrator informs: “[Ginevra] was obliged to be well dressed, and she had not money to buy variety of dresses. All her thoughts turned on this difficulty; her whole soul was occupied with expedients for effecting its solution.” (*Villette*, p. 96). Appearance is a key component for catching a prey (match) in Ginevra's universe. A repetitive wardrobe may discourage the potential suitors. To evict the dress inconvenience, Ginevra appeals to Mrs. Cholmondeley, from whom she requests: “*My darling Mrs. C., I have nothing in the world fit to wear for your party next week; you must give me a book-muslin dress, and then a ceinture bleu celeste*”⁴ (*Villette*, p. 96). The dresses are so critical to Ginevra's future in the Victorian arena that when Mrs. Cholmondeley ceases to supply them, Ginevra confesses to Lucy that she needs a new sponsor. She shamelessly declares:

I need [...] SOMEBODY who heard me (quite by chance, I assure you) complaining to Mrs. Cholmondeley of distressed circumstances and straits I was put to for an ornament or two: somebody, far from grudging one a present, was quite delighted at the idea of being permitted to offer some trifle. You should have seen quite a blanc-bec he looked when he first spoke of it: how he hesitated and blushed, and positively tremble from fear of a repulse (*Villette*, p. 99).

Dr John is the “somebody” Ginevra is alluding to. She is sure that the doctor will buy the dresses and ornaments for her because he is in love with her. The poor doctor does not know that Ginevra loves someone else. She tells Lucy: “*Je suis sa reine mais il n'est pas mon roi*”⁵ (*Villette*, p. 100). Gravely, albeit she does not feel reciprocal

⁴ Ceinture bleu celeste=A heavenly bleu sash.

⁵ I am his queen, but he is not my king.

sentiments for Dr John, Ginevra does not hesitate to use him to afford her new clothing. She succeeds in fooling him so easily because society has inculcated her to simulate and conceal her true emotions from the men with whom she flirts. On the matter, Kate Millet describes Ginevra as *"the flirt, an idiot beauty callously using men to acquire what she has been carefully taught to want: admiration, money, the petty power of dominating a puppy."* (p. 257). Clearly, Ginevra has understood the power of her pulchritude over Victorian men and will not hesitate to make use of it to have them at her feet. Interestingly, however, the character of Ginevra enables the perspicacious reader to understand how women are commodified by the patriarchal ideology. Thinking that she wields power over the men she flirts with because of the material she gains from them, Ginevra is actually the victim of a pernicious system that has objectified her. She has been transformed into an entertainment tool by the patriarchal system. The money she gains from them does not serve any noble cause. It just helps her to polish her appearance to be appealing to men. Consequently, Ginevra uses the money given by the patriarch for the patriarch's pleasure.

4. Madame Beck as the Representative of Patriarchal Oppression

Save for being characterized as the perfect lady, the spinster, or the coquette, the woman was also represented as the collaborator of the patriarchal system. Such is the case with Madame *"Modeste Maria Beck, née Kint"* (*Villette*, p. 79), the headmistress of a boarding school for girls and Lucy's employer. The old lady is considered as the representative of patriarchy because she spies on her employees. The first time Lucy meets with Madame Beck, she straightforwardly perceives the old lady's spying character. As Lucy is waiting for Madame Beck by the regular entrance, the directress surprisingly arrives from another, unnoticed. Lucy recounts: *"I almost bounded, so unexpected was the sound; so certain had I been of solitude"* (*Villette*, p. 71). Gravely, Madame Beck's spying is so compulsive that it makes her behave like a secret agent in her house. Lucy informs: *"she would move away on her 'souliers de silence,' and glide ghost-like through the house, watching and spying everywhere, peering through every key-hole, listening behind every door"* (*Villette*, p. 81). Like a prison ward, the old lady delights in searching people's possessions. For instance, the same night she hires Lucy, Madame Beck breaks into Lucy's room and undertakes to inspect her belongings, an initiative which does not find Pauline Nestor's consent. The thinker strongly believes that *"[Madame Beck's search constitutes] gross invasion [of Lucy's] privacy [and] a violation of her person"* (1987, p. 89). Of more importance, Madame Beck's control is extended to the other female employees in her residence. Mrs. Sweeny, for example, is an alcoholic nursery-governess, who deceived Madame Beck on her origins. Thanks to her spying obsession, Madame Beck was able to discover her employee's addiction and deceit. These incidents consistently show how far the patriarch can go to keep the woman in a cage.

Madame Beck's establishment is managed through the same secretive weapon. Some pupils and teachers are solicited for the success of the operation, providing daily reports to her. To better understand Madame Beck's relentless spying, let us appeal to the critic Sally Shuttleworth. She meditates: *"The 'system of management' employed by Madame Beck in running her school is linked [...] to the practices of political and industrial control (and Madame Beck herself to masculine figures of authority)* (p. 223).

Plainly stated, Madam Beck's spying echoes political and industrial large-scale surveillance of individuals. In other words, the way Madame Beck wields power over her female employees and pupils is the same way the patriarchal society exerts control on its citizens. Kate Millett completes Shuttleworth's theory when she maintains that patriarchal surveillance would be inoperative without a key component for its implementation: its collaborators (such as Madame Beck). She expands: "*No system of subjection could operate for two seconds without its collaborators, and Beck is a splendid example of the breed*" (p. 259). Because of Madame Beck's oppressive features, Lucy fails to perceive any feminine traits in her. She observes: "*[Madame Beck] did not wear a woman's aspect, but rather a man's (Villette, p. 86)*". She has surrogated her husband in the running of the patriarchal house and is behaving in the same way the patriarch would do. Paradoxically, however, Madame Beck's excessive surveillance proves ineffective on her eldest child, Désirée, who steals and tells lies. The narrator presents her as a "*vicious child*" (Villette, p. 102), and both servants and teachers decry her actions. The narrator reveals:

Amongst her other endowments she boasted an exquisite skill in the art of provocation [...] She would steal to [the servants'] attics, open their drawers and boxes, wantonly tear their best caps and soil their best shawls [...] get at the buffet of the *salle-à-manger* [...] smash articles of porcelain or glass—or to the cupboard of the storeroom [...] plunder the preserves, drink the sweet wine, break jars and bottles, and so contrive as to throw the onus of suspicion on the cook and the kitchen-maid (Villette, pp. 102-3).

When she is reported on her child's mischiefs, Madame retorts: "*Désirée a besoin d'une surveillance toute particulière.*" (Villette, p. 103). Noticeably, through Désirée's creation, Charlotte Brontë wants the patriarch and his proxies to understand that keeping women in close surveillance is not the solution because instead of breeding more angels, the system is producing more monsters.

5. The Categorization of Women Through *La Vie d'une femme* and the *Cleopatra* Paintings

To better grasp women's categorization in the novel, let us invoke to two collections of paintings: *La vie d'une femme* and *the Cleopatra*. The episode involves Lucy Snowe and her colleague teacher and lover, M. Paul, who openly disapproves of *the Cleopatra* painting that Lucy is contemplating. He thus undertakes to conduct her to more "feminine" artwork. He enjoins Lucy: "*Let me conduct you to your party.*" (Villette, p. 224). Nevertheless, as he notices Lucy's reluctance to leaving the *Cleopatra* painting, Mr Paul outrageously exclaims: "*How dare you, a young person, sit coolly down, with the self-possession of a garçon, and look at that picture?*"⁶ (Villette, p. 225). With a despotic air, he orients Lucy towards a collection of paintings named *La vie d'une femme*, which Lucy detests because of their alienating features.

⁶ Garçon=Boy.

The types of women in *La vie d'une femme* are the kinds that the patriarch affectionates, because modelled for his pleasure. They are the daughter, the wife, the mother, and the widow. As a daughter, the woman must be obedient to her father/brother and wait for a marriage of convenience. As a wife, a woman must dedicate her life to satisfying to her husband. She is equally the loving mother who must take care of her children. A widow, the woman is in the twilight of her life. Having gone through the previous stages of a woman's existence, she stands by her adult child's blossom. Through these varied images of the angel in the house, one can see that such women live in a prison-like environment, without any prospects in life.

The Cleopatra-like woman is sensual, provocative, in Geneva's fashion. The representations of women in both *The Cleopatra* and *La vie d'une femme* have sparked reactions from feminist critics among whom are Kate Millett and Gilbert and Gubar. Millett for example, protests: "[the social schizophrenia within masculine culture] has converted one woman into sex symbol, flesh devoid of mentality or personality [...]" (p. 260). Gilbert and Gubar decry: "The paintings are meant to examine the ridiculous roles men assign women." (p. 420). From the above citations, one can go further into asserting that women's ascribed roles are destined to ensure their subjection.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let us say that women's categorization is one of the most debated themes in *Villette*. Throughout the novel, the authoress has endeavoured to expose the stereotypical roles Victorian women were assigned in society. Her first criticism is levelled through Paulina, from whom the reader has been able to discover the model woman, her universe, and her fate in society. Women in the fashion of Paulina are enclosed in the patriarchal house, moving from girlhood (under the authority of their father) to womanhood (under the control of their husband). In so doing, they leave an oppressor for another. Through the characterization of Lucy Snowe, the authoress has succeeded in showing how trapped is the spinster. Isolated, she is doomed to rejection, loneliness, and prey to depression. Through Geneva Fanshawe, an acrimonious criticism has been voiced against the commodification of the woman. In other words, the patriarchal society actively participates in the devaluation of women, transforming them into entertainment tools, who make use of their physical attributes to obtain futility like dresses and ornaments from men. Equally instructive, the authoress has proved ingenious with her creation of Madame Beck, thanks to whom the collaborating woman has been analysed. Women of her rank oppress people of their gender through excessive surveillance, an illegal control that proves inoperative. Desirée constitutes the Trojan horse injected by the authoress to counterattack such patriarchal abuse. Charlotte Brontë's final standpoint about the topic is pinpointed in *La Vie d'une femme* and *the Cleopatra*, two collections of paintings that criticize the misrepresentation of women by men. The authoress is adamant that the patriarchal society misconstrues the woman in seeing her as a sexual object severed with personality, a dutiful daughter, a submissive wife, a devoted mother, or a lonely widow. The woman is a free being who does not need a man's definition of her to know who she truly is. She can define herself.

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