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“An Unquiet Soul”: Despair and
Doubt of God’s Benevolence in the Novels of Charlotte Brontë

by
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Claremont Graduate University
2020

Approval of the Dissertation Committee

This dissertation has been duly read, reviewed, and critiqued by the Committee listed below, which hereby approves the manuscript of Heidi Zameni as fulfilling the scope and quality requirements for meriting the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English.

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Abstract

“An Unquiet Soul”: Despair and

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By

Heidi Zameni

Claremont Graduate University: 2020

As a nineteenth-century writer, Charlotte Brontë lived during a tumultuous time of challenges to previously incontrovertible mores, leading to a refashioning of societal beliefs and attitudes. Challenges to the Church of England, such as the split by the newly formed Free Church of Scotland and an increase in Dissent, disputes against the historical accuracy of the Bible, the loss of nature as a source for spiritual replenishment, and political and economic strife permeated the lives of the Victorians. All institutions within the British system—law, medicine, prisons, civil service, army—were subject to challenges during this period. The criticism led to a rebellion against fundamental institutions of society and fundamental cosmic elements of the universe. Of course, the oldest of institutions was the Church. J. Hillis Miller in his seminal work *The Disappearance of God* discusses what he sees as a gradual removal of a Christian God from nineteenth-century writers’ consciousness; Charlotte Brontë’s novels, published in the early Victorian period, seem to reflect the early stages of this void, for they are deeply tied to the *zeitgeist* of England during her lifetime. Applying feminist theory to Brontë’s works has been *de rigueur* in the last several decades of research, and textual cruxes tend to be identified with patriarchal concerns. While certainly there is merit in a feminist approach to her writing, the dominance of this approach in Brontë studies has precluded other, perhaps equally worthy, viewpoints and led to an incomplete understanding of her novels. In this study, I propose to

examine the novels Brontë published during her lifetime through a religious lens, connecting the despair and doubt of God's benevolence that Brontë herself experienced to similar elements in her books. Methods include close readings and analyses of texts, historical analysis of archival and published materials, an examination of Brontë's unpublished final manuscript, juvenilia, selected poems, and letters along with primary sources available at the Brontë Parsonage in Haworth, England. We shall observe the elements of religious incertitude beginning with *Jane Eyre* (with its moments of unbelief or uncertainty and a fear of Calvinist predestination to eternal damnation), moving through *Shirley* (with its increased doubt of the efficacy of the Church), to *Villette* (with its almost fatalistic view of events). As God seemingly disappears from Brontë's protagonists' worlds, they are left to fend for themselves; in Brontë's novels we glimpse protagonists' moments of atheism and doubts of salvation, encounters with hypocritical clergy, efforts to find true happiness in human rather than divine love, and moments of nihilistic affliction. These elements result in some shortcomings: the failure of key characters, namely Helen Burns and St. John Rivers, in *Jane Eyre*; in a cluttered plot in *Shirley*; and problematic *denouements* in all three novels. In evaluating these novels, I try to show that Brontë's crisis of faith causes a general doubt concerning which way to obtain assurance of God's benevolence in *Jane Eyre*, reasserts itself as a criticism of the Church in *Shirley*, and explodes in an argument of theodicy in *Villette*. I conclude that Charlotte Brontë is one of the few Victorian authors who attempted to understand the notion of God's omnibenevolence in view of the existence of suffering as nineteenth-century English society moved toward secularization. She is one of those authors whom E. M. Forster described as moving the novel forward by creating "a new system of lighting" that elucidates the Victorians' religious doubt.

Brontë offers up several characters who possess neither certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain, who are “swept with confused alarms of struggle and fight” like the speaker in Arnold’s “Dover Beach.” The struggles Charlotte Brontë faced were tremendous: illness, family shame and death, patriarchal constraints, and spiritual incertitude. Her faith, doubt, and gender have left us with a better understanding of the Victorian world, for the homely, diminutive writer succeeded against major obstacles: against those of a patriarchal society and those, perhaps even more dangerous, that threaten a fragile sense of spiritual assurance.

Dedication

Dedicated to Amin Zameni, my husband and rock during “unquiet” times.

With grateful thanks to the most supportive family in the world: Dad, Holly, Heather, Esteban, Shireen, Kamron, Hanna, Keyan, Kevan, Leila, Caleb, and Julie. I love you all longest day.

Acknowledgements¹

“No man is an island”—John Donne

In the middle of my teaching career, I decided that I wanted to pursue a PhD at a school wherein small seminars were run by faculty of excellence. I chose Claremont Graduate University, and I was fortunate to have made the right decision. The late Dr. John Halperin provided guidance and encouragement and made our times together stimulating, equitable, and worthwhile. Those classes, and classmates, provided years of intellectual stimulation that gave me a sense of fulfillment. Dr. Eric Bulson gave me a unique perspective on England, Empire, and the Novel. Dr. Sarah Raff, editor *extraordinaire*, offered the cheerleading (and incredibly quick turnaround of drafts) that I needed when I would occasionally despair of ever finishing; she is also a genuinely caring person. Finally, Dr. Lori Anne Ferrell has provided mentorship beyond anything I had expected. This dissertation is a result of her encouragement to apply for fellowships, to pursue my interest in religion, and to stretch myself as a researcher. The opportunities I have had at CGU would not have been possible elsewhere. I am indebted to the staff and faculty for encouraging my growth as a scholar and as a human being. From the encouraging classmate who gave me a “high five” for what he perceived was a brilliant argument during class; the Writing Center staff whose warm Earl Grey tea and vegetarian meals were so appreciated at bootcamps; the librarians who helped locate hard-to-obtain materials; the encouraging words from my fellow laborer Mary Nolan-Coffman; to the late-night café workers—all CGU worked together to help me succeed. As John Donne reminds us, “No man is an island.”

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Chapter 1: The Disappearance of God

J. Hillis Miller in his seminal work *The Disappearance of God* discusses what he sees as a gradual removal of a Christian God from nineteenth-century writers' consciousness: "To at least some of [the Victorians], . . . it seemed that God, while still existing somewhere, had withdrawn from the world and existed now as a pure unreachable transcendence" ("Preface to the Illinois Edition" xi). He does admit that there may have been some Victorian writers who still felt God was present; others may have been saddened to feel the absence or fading, but others noted the trend toward secularism yet were not sad about it at all (12). Miller demonstrates how the Reformation contributed to the weakening of sacramental and liturgical forms—the "do this in remembrance of me"² becomes not a transformative experience but a commemorative one. When this occurs, there is a separation or absence, between the participant and God: "instead of being a sharing in the immediate presence of Christ, the communion service becomes the expression of an absence" (6), and the Protestant memorial practice seems to parallel what occurs in English literature for the next several hundred years. For instance, prior to the nineteenth century, poetry was in one form or another sacramental or employed spiritual language: "the words of the poem incarnated the things they named, just as the words of the Mass shared in the transformation they evoked" (3). George Herbert's pattern poem "The Altar" (c. 1633), for example, invokes God to make the physical object one with his physical body to produce a spiritual quality. However, by the beginning of the 1800s, poets like William Wordsworth and most Romantics "still believe in God but find his absence intolerable" (13). The separation between poet and God brought angst that is demonstrated in Wordsworth's poem "Thanksgiving Ode, January 18, 1816." He earnestly entreats his soul not to forget God:

²Christ's words to his disciples as they shared the Last Supper are found in Luke 22.19 (NIV).

Preserve, O Lord! within our hearts
The memory of thy favour,
That else insensibly departs,
And loses its sweet savour! (84)

For the Romantics, only a distant memory of the Divine remains, and their poems tend to replace the ecstasies of God with the ecstasies of nature. For instance, in Wordsworth's "Ode. Intimations of Immortality" (1807) the speaker reflects on the recent past:

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.
It is not now as it hath been of yore;—
Turn wheresoe'er I may,
By night or day.
The things which I have seen I now can see no more. (321)

The glories of heaven are "no more." Why this detachment? Miller posits that it appears to writers that the communication between God and his people had broken down, or that God had withdrawn. He concludes that as we approach the twentieth century, the "covert nihilism of the nineteenth-century writers turns into overt atheism" ("Preface to the 1965 Paperback Edition" xxi).

The results of the perceived withdrawal are visible as early as the mid- to late 1800s. David Delaura anticipates the outcome: "In the light of St. Paul and Protestantism as a whole, as well as of [Matthew] Arnold's other religious writings, it is fairly clear what Christianity's 'true and ultimate development in this line' will be: the jettisoning of the entire metaphysical apparatus and methodology of traditional theology as literally meaningless" (88). In stanzas three and four of Arnold's poem "Dover Beach" (1867), the void left behind by this retreat is felt by many Victorians:

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.
Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night. (21-37)

While we may not decisively understand what causes the Victorians to live “as on a darkling plain,” Miller gives a very thorough overview of the social conditions present that perhaps instigate the break, largely the result of an unprecedented growth in population:

industrialization, the increasing predominance of the middle class, the gradual breakdown of the old hierarchical class structure, the building of great cities, . . . the dirt and soot and bad smells, the murk of fog and smoke, the somber prisons crowded with inmates, the dark rooms, . . . the labyrinthine streets, the crowds of people passing through these streets or over the bridges, each as isolated from all the others. . . . Everything is changed from its natural state. . . . Life in the city is the way in which many men have experienced most directly what it means to live without God in the world. (4-5)

This kind of pre-nihilistic emptiness seems to consume many nineteenth-century writers and is often reflected in their works, particularly as the nineteenth century progresses. The foggy world left—a world where God has withdrawn—only gives us a Jamesian impression of an impression.

Charlotte Brontë (1816-1855) writes at the cusp of this “withdrawing roar.” Her works, published in the early Victorian period, seem to reflect the early stages of this void. We can see the process of doubt evolve in the novels, beginning with *Jane Eyre* (moments of unbelief or uncertainty), moving through *Shirley* (increased doubt of the Established Church), to *Villette* (an

almost fatalistic view of events). Indeed, it seems as if God is disappearing from Brontë's protagonists' worlds, and they are left to fend for themselves; in her novels we glimpse protagonists' moments of atheism and doubts of salvation, encounters with hypocritical clergy, efforts to find true happiness in human rather than divine love, and moments of nihilistic affliction. These elements result in some shortcomings: the failure of key characters, namely Helen Burns and St. John Rivers, in *Jane Eyre*; a cluttered plot in *Shirley*; and problematic *denouements* in all three novels. In short, Brontë's crisis of faith causes a general doubt concerning which way to obtain assurance of God's benevolence in *Jane Eyre*, reasserts itself as a criticism of the Church in *Shirley*, and explodes in an argument of theodicy in *Villette*. While it might be heretical to find any fault in these works, particularly *Jane Eyre* or *Villette*, these great, powerful novels are nonetheless not perfect novels, and the shortcomings are explainable if we evaluate the works using a religious heuristic.

Modern scholars tend to blame the textual cruxes present in Brontë's novels on feminist concerns, and the focus on gender continues to be the *de rigueur* of Brontë criticism; few modern studies of the providential aspects of Charlotte's *oeuvre* exist.³ In part, this may be because we are too secular in our own modern culture to promote religion as a heuristic for literary criticism. Marianne Thormählen clarifies the problem:

The scholar who sets out to remedy his/her profession's comparative neglect of religion in the Brontë fiction faces a peculiar aggregation of difficulties. . . . [H]e/she [is] working in, and inevitably affected by, an intellectual climate which affords little scope for religious enquiry, as well as little readiness to allow for the potential power of religious feeling and experience in the context of artistic creation. (2)

³Surprisingly, the first full-length study of religion in the writings of the Brontës was recently published by Marianne Thormählen in 1999.

Also, it may not be particularly “sexy” to study the intersection between literature and religion in the twenty-first century. As J. Hillis Miller writes on 9 January 2000,

I believe that it is a severe limitation of literary and cultural study today that a good bit of it tends not to interest itself much in what might be called the religious or ontological dimension of writers’ and cultures’ ideologies in favor of a more or less exclusive infatuation with the three mythological graces of contemporary humanistic study: Race, Class, and Gender. . . . (“Preface to the Illinois Edition” xi)

Apparently, Charlotte Brontë has been a casualty of this “infatuation,” for a brief glance at criticism of the past fifty years demonstrates a focus on the latter “mythological grace” of her work—gender—and rarely discusses spiritual dimensions of Brontë’s *oeuvre* as potentially worth of study. Brontë’s sexual repression remains the focus of research—those “feelings of enclosure in ‘feminine’ roles and patriarchal houses, . . . [and] passionate desire to flee such roles or houses” (Barker 313). While certainly there is merit in a feminist approach to her writing, the dominance of this approach in Brontë studies has precluded other, perhaps equally worthy, viewpoints and led to an incomplete understanding of her novels. As Jerome Beaty argues, “Exclusively valorizing one voice, therefore, even that presumptively carrying the authorial intention as comprehended by the authorial audience [or modern scholars], *is a partial reading that in its omissions becomes, in effect, a misreading*” (136; emphasis added). In a note, he clarifies his meaning of “misreading” as “all attempts to reduce the constitutive polysemy of a novel to a monologic or monosemic ‘meaning’” (223), and I believe this is what has happened to scholarship of Charlotte Brontë: because of the preponderance of modern scholarship related to Brontë’s perceived sexual repression, “[t]he most ‘thorny’ of the ‘topics of the day,’ . . . the controversies in religion,” tend to be ignored (Tillotson 126).

Proof of this narrow gender-oriented focus is evident in the research of many well-known scholarly voices. For instance, Margaret Blom states, “I agree with the many critics who see

Charlotte's overt and poetic treatment of sexual passion as being her great contribution to the novel. I concentrate upon her heroines' sexual dilemmas, which form the focal point of her plots" ("Preface"). Mary Ann Davis postulates that "[t]he theoretical framework of sadomasochism can be useful for conceptualizing the eroticized power dynamics in *Jane Eyre*" (121). Additionally, Gilbert and Gubar's feminist treatise *The Madwoman in the Attic* attributes a Victorian woman's problems to a patriarchal world that fosters sexual and creative repression, so we discover after a reading of Brontë or any other text that the "personal was the political, the literary was the personal, [and] the sexual was the textual . . ." (Introduction xx). Elaine A. Showalter observes that a "strain of intense female sexual fantasy and eroticism runs through the first four chapters of [*Jane Eyre*]" (115).⁴ In his monograph *Charlotte Brontë and Sexuality* (1984) John Maynard crowns Brontë with the compliment of being the writer who "creates a full discourse on sexuality; indeed, she offers the fullest and most sophisticated discussion of sexual issues of any major Victorian writer before Hardy." Maynard adds that "Brontë makes major artistic use of new insights about sexuality" (*Charlotte* viii). In sum, these critics' excellent analyses lack a focus on the religious aspect of Brontë's work and give primacy to her sexuality. As Maynard sums up, Brontë "was as concerned with the problems of sexuality as Ford Madox Ford, James Joyce, or D.H. Lawrence" (3) and postulates that we may read "incest patterns, lesbian or heterosexual, into the relations of Anne, Emily, Branwell, and Charlotte, in any combination our fancy chooses" (12). While Ruth Jenkins demonstrates that Brontë indeed had a crisis of faith, it was not a crisis of belief in God; instead, she states her spiritual malaise stemmed from the conflict Brontë felt between her "God-given talents [and] cultural prohibitions

⁴Perhaps these scholars are following George Eliot's lead, who, as one of the earliest critics of the novel, simplifies *Jane Eyre*'s problem to allegiance to a "diabolical law [marriage] which chains a man's soul and body to a putrefying carcass" (163).

(often issued in God's name) against such activities for women" (65). Thus, for these and other modern Brontë scholars, the problems present in Charlotte Brontë's works are primarily related to feminine erotic ideology and/or patriarchal systems of power.

A few, and very few, scholars have provided a modified form of feminist criticism. For instance, Robert M. Polhemus attempts an intermediary view of Brontë's work—between the sexual and the religious—calling her vision that of "erotic faith":

That assertion of the power of passionate love by a despicable wretch exemplifies what I call erotic faith: an emotional conviction, ultimately religious in nature, that meaning, value, hope, and even transcendence can be found through love—erotically focused love. . . . Men and women in the hold of erotic faith feel that love can redeem personal life and offer a reason for being. (1)

In other words, human love replaces spirituality. Continuing this thought, Polhemus explains, "[W]e long to supplant a remote supernaturalism with a consecrating faith in tangible, personal relationships" (2), and for most nineteenth-century Victorian writers, "[b]eing in love, not marriage, success, piety, or God, is the source and requirement for faith . . ." (2-3). Certainly, Brontë's protagonists earnestly seek love—not faith—as the source of happiness, as we shall explore in our analysis, but they are not always consistent in this. For example, we must account for Protestant Lucy Snowe's visit to a Catholic Church in hopes of assurance and Jane Eyre's short-lived plan to become a missionary in India—both possible indications of fervent, but transitory, spirituality. Nonetheless, Polhemus believes love stories provide a sense of participation, which allows readers to feel as if they are "one of the elect" (4).

Is this what Brontë is trying to do? Substitute religious vision for love? Perhaps in part, but in her work that erotic faith never supplants moral integrity founded on a belief in the Protestant God and bound by Biblical precepts. Consequently, Jane, for instance, cannot initially marry Rochester: love cannot overcome the moral implications of bigamy—nor the religious

upbringing of the novel's author. Brontë does indeed focus on human love as a source for happiness, but her protagonists' search for love itself attests to what Margot Peters calls Brontë's "unquiet soul," for often the love of her heroines is unrequited, torturous, unhealthy, and shameful—conditions indicating the depth of Brontë's own spiritual conflict. Love becomes a realm for despair, doubt of election, and other phenomena we associate with religious adversity. If we recall John Stuart Mill's recognition of "the Protestant religion as a theoretical champion of the individual" (Jay, *The Religion* 7) and observe Charlotte's evangelical upbringing, we might be alerted to the potential importance of the spiritual elements in her work, for it is the soul left to fend for itself—without the trappings of the Established Church or the affirming presence of God—that is Brontë's concern, and this concern is ontological in nature. For Brontë, it is the "disappearance of God"—not female constraint—that is at the root of the despair so evident in her works and life.

Two decades after his treatise on *Charlotte Brontë and Sexuality*, Maynard wrote a chapter on "The Brontës and Religion," belatedly recognizing a critical gap left in Brontë scholarship:

Although the Brontës' lives are obviously inscribed within a world of Victorian religion, . . . critics of the twentieth century did not much view the Brontës within religious structures of understanding. Issues of psychology, sexuality [as Maynard himself focused on], feminism, social power, even the apparently far-removed worlds of colonial and imperial England preoccupied us far more.

On the whole, unless the religious issues were so central as to brook no avoidance, . . . we did not search with interest for religious themes. As the twentieth century turned away from those overstuffed Victorian memoirs of life and letters, they turned away from the obvious but rather unwelcome evidence of the age's obsession with religion. By contrast, nineteenth-century critics were obsessed with finding the religious meaning in works. No subject occupied the Victorians . . . as much. (192)

If, as Elisabeth Jay finds, "a man's religious life was so intimately bound up with his social existence and behavior that to ignore it was to sacrifice a major insight into the influences

forming a man's character" (*The Religion 2*), we must not forget that critical point when analyzing Brontë's novels.

Even though Victorians were obsessed with religion, the move away from God had been steadily gaining momentum. If we take note of which works, for instance, were popular throughout the nineteenth century, the trend becomes evident. Earlier in the century, the enormous popularity of spiritual tracts penned by Hannah More demonstrates that readers were greatly interested in the religious life. Later, the success of *Memorials of Captain Hedley Vicars* (1856) by Catherine Marsh, a novel with strong religious themes, adequately exemplifies the demand for these types of novels: it sold almost twice as many copies in the first year of publication as *Bleak House* sold in two years (Jay, *The Religion* 8-9). The demand for religious books mid-century seems to indicate an interest and common acceptance of religious belief by readers, but by the end of the Victorian period, there was widespread religious indifference, and we see this particularly in the novel's treatment of Evangelicalism. Jay finds that "it is difficult to establish whether Evangelicalism in the novel disappeared primarily because as a philosophy it held little relevance for the individual authors or because it no longer formed a central part of the readers' world" (11). Still, Owen Chadwick reminds us of the slow process of secularization: "Most Victorians always read Dickens much more than Hardy and Tennyson much more than Matthew Arnold" (2: 464), but it does seem that by the end of the Victorian period, readers' interest in novels with religious subtext was fading.

While it is difficult to pinpoint the beginnings of a secular worldview in England, many blame King Henry VIII's separation from Rome. On the Continent, visual culture had long registered profane elements. Beginning with Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (c. 1480s), we see in art what E.H. Gombrich calls a rendering more or less of a "non-religious subject with the fervor

and feeling usually reserved for objects of worship . . . [achieving] the opening up, to secular art, of emotional spheres which had hitherto been the preserve of religious worship” (qtd. in Polhemus 7). The iconoclasts’ hatred of images during the Reformation influenced the move toward a more stringent Protestant vision of Christianity in England and a move away from Catholicism, yet there remained many in England who were entrenched in Romanism.⁵ This was part of the problem for King Henry VIII and later rulers: how could an English monarch unite people of differing practices? King Henry VIII solved the dilemma by publishing “The Ten Articles” and proclaiming himself ruler of the Church, separating from Rome. He gave the English Church a distinct theology by authorizing Archbishop Thomas Cranmer’s creation of the Thirty-Nine Articles (begun by Henry VIII and finalized in 1571 by Queen Elizabeth I, providing the official religious position of the Church of England) and the Book of Common Prayer (begun during King Edward VI’s reign but revised by Queen Elizabeth I and written in English, not Latin, to move worshippers far away from Popish influence). While these demonstrated Calvinist influence, there was a moderate approach to certain doctrines, and since no one reformer “founded” the Church, such as was the case with Lutheranism, there seemed to be a freedom of interpretation with regard to some theological points, such as predestination and election, whereas others, such as a disbelief in the Transubstantiation or the use of the vernacular in church services, were binding.

⁵For an excellent evaluation of the challenges in moving toward a Protestant religion, see *Religion and Society in Early Modern England: A Sourcebook*. Even within Protestantism, there were divisive issues. For instance, initially Protestant leaders under Queen Elizabeth I were “attracted to Genevan Calvinism. . . . But some clerics were troubled by the most controversial of Calvinist doctrines, those relating to salvation. Article 17 of the Thirty-Nine Articles of 1563 describes the doctrine of predestination as ‘comfortable’, an adjective that seems apt only when we realize that the article defines predestination to salvation and conveniently overlooks Calvin’s considerably less-soothing doctrine of predestination to damnation” (5-6).

However, the break from the authority of Rome seems to have instigated the disruption of religious life in England that would result several centuries later in Miller's "disappearance of God." After King Henry VIII's death, Mary Tudor reversed all reforms and outlawed Protestantism. "Bloody Mary's" attempt to convert England back to Catholicism failed when the pendulum swung again back to Protestantism with the succession of Queen Elizabeth I, who took a more tolerant middle-of-the-road approach to Catholics in England—sometimes allowing them to worship privately in their own homes. The move away from Rome and toward a formalized British church continued evolving in the subsequent decades. After the English Civil War of the seventeenth century and the passage of the Act of Uniformity of 1662, Cranmer's original view of Anglicanism was held supreme, and those who refused to conform exposed as Dissenters (also known as Nonconformists).

By the late eighteenth century, the seemingly unified Anglican vision was once again fractured by theological disagreements. Theology was moving from a transcendent-based philosophy (more rationalistic, focusing on God's sovereignty and parishioners' worship of that transcendence) to immanence-based belief (more epistemological, focusing on God's loving nature and an individual's state of heart). George Whitefield and John and Charles Wesley led the reform efforts within the Church of England in the late 1700s. They felt the Church had become corrupt—the congregation disaffected. Espousing education as the key to social and moral improvement (a notion the Brontë family strongly adhered to), they were the early forerunners of an Evangelicalism that held to the essential tenets of 1) original sin; 2) conversion as a process and not a one-time event; 3) justification by faith alone;⁶ and 4) the authority of the Bible or "*sola scriptura*" (God reveals his purposes there and ordinary lay readers can interpret it

⁶Mr. Dempster in Eliot's *Scenes of Clerical Life* argues against this: "Tell a man he is not to be saved by his works, and you open the flood-gates of all immorality" ("Janet's Repentance," ch. 1).

themselves). Within Methodism were two different views of salvation. Those who followed Whitefield's teachings took a harsher view: only those who were predestined for salvation could enter heaven. This, of course, was a tenet of Calvin's teaching. However, John Wesley was more influenced by Jacob Arminius (whose adherents were known as Arminians) and firmly rejected Calvinist dogma and believed salvation was open to all. While John Wesley as an ordained minister of the Church of England had not intended to begin a new confession of faith, the surge of new believers, the lack of church buildings, the hiring and training of new priests, and the methods he used to preach could not assimilate into the existing Anglican church position (Wainwright 510). Consequently, in 1784 the Methodist church was created. Some Methodists "dissented" and left the Church of England, but many more evangelical reformers, such as William Wilberforce and Hannah More, remained within the Church of England; nonetheless, the controversies regarding predestination to eternal damnation or salvation continued throughout the eighteenth century.

As England entered the nineteenth century, theological arguments within the Church continued, and then, perhaps because of the prolonged dissension, something more insidious than doctrinal differences began to creep into Victorian life: distrust. No confession of faith was exempt from the spiritual doubt Victorians experienced in the nineteenth century, and Brontë's novels help us observe the period's rebellion against fundamental institutions of society and fundamental cosmic elements of the universe. That rebellion, often addressed to other entities, led to a rethinking of the tenets of the Established Church. Walter E. Houghton aptly sums up the period:

It was not . . . the mere existence of competing philosophies which called all in doubt. It was also the prevailing atmosphere. As one prophet after another stepped forward with his program of reconstruction, the hubbub of contending theories, gaining in number as the century advanced, and echoing through lectures, sermons,

and periodicals as well as books, created a climate of opinion in which, quite apart from any specific doubts, the habit of doubt was unconsciously bred. One had an uneasy feeling, perhaps only half-conscious, that his beliefs were no longer quite secure. (12)

The loss was palpable. Houghton adds, “[The Victorians] were not merely seeking repose; they were craving relief from the social fears and personal distress which religious doubt in particular was exciting” (97). These doubts were real, and they moved Victorians from a position of religious certainty to religious questioning.⁷

The first four decades of the nineteenth century were fraught with a refashioning of societal beliefs and attitudes. Challenges to the Church, such as the split from the Church of England by the newly formed Free Church of Scotland (18 May 1843),⁸ challenges to the Bible as historically accurate, the loss of nature as a source for spiritual replenishment, an increase in religious Dissent, and political and economic strife permeated the lives of the Victorians. As Chadwick points out, all institutions within the British system—law, medicine, prisons, civil service, army—were subject to criticism during this period, and of course, the oldest of institutions was the church (1: 34).⁹ As Houghton concludes, doubt for many Victorians became a habit, and as challenges increased to established systems and beliefs, a paradigm shift occurred.

Perhaps no challenge to previously established values exacerbated the situation for religious belief more than the Oxford Movement—a pivotal attempt to remake the Church from within. In the early to mid-nineteenth century, many influential Anglicans, such as John Henry

⁷C. Lane notes, “The number of Victorian treatises and novels . . . [that] writers composed on religious doubt alone easily reaches one hundred” (67).

⁸The split occurred primarily over issues of authority and lay patronage, increasing the real fear the Victorians had that the Church of England would become a relic of the past. See “Free Church of England.” The situation of the Church in Ireland was even more destabilizing.

⁹John Wade wrote a series of attacks on the Church, rewritten as *The Extraordinary Black Book* which also assailed many Tory establishments. The first chapter was titled “The Church of England” and the second “The Church of Ireland.” See Chadwick 1: 33.

Newman and E.B. Pusey, felt the Church needed reform, and by reform, they meant increased adherence to ideals that mirrored High Church practices.¹⁰ John Keeble along with Pusey, Newman, and R.H. Froude published “Tracts for the Times” (thus, they were called Tractarians)—pamphlets advocating for more ceremonial practices in worship, better education for the members of the clergy (hoping that they would then have more empathy for their congregations and not just for the penny put in their pockets), and the creation of monastic communities for men and women. The essays by Tractarians were countered by works by other members of the Church, such as Rev. Edward Monro’s “Reasons for Feeling Secure in the Church of England” (C. Lane 73). Most Evangelicals, like Brontë, disliked High Church conventions because of the perceived connection with Roman Catholics. They had ample reason to be concerned: as Newman studied the teachings of the prominent early Church fathers, he moved from a High-Church Anglican position to a Roman Catholic one and converted to Catholicism in 1845. Newman’s statement in *Apologia pro Vita Sua*, a treatise defending his religious persuasion, points to the dogmatic position he adopted: “[T]here are but two alternatives, the way to Rome, and the way to Atheism: Anglicanism is the halfway house on the one side.” Newman’s arguments reflect some of the key doctrinal challenges for Church of England members. Christopher Lane lists a few critical ones: “internal rifts or [inability] to continue believing in its Articles of Religion,” and “some of the thorniest theological problems

¹⁰A national church, such as the Church of England, is known by the varieties of actual practice. The terms “Low Church,” “High Church,” and “Broad Church” are often used to define liturgical positions within the Victorian Church of England. In general, liturgical “highness” or “lowness” corresponds to the importance of the sacraments as efficacious to saving grace. Low Church and High Church positions are identified by the non-elaborateness or the elaborateness of their liturgical interpretations of the Book of Common Prayer, which, true to its title, is common to all. Broad Church practices represent most people, not too Low and not too High, who espoused a middle-of-the-road approach to Church liturgical practices. Evangelicals often followed Low Church practices whereas Anglo-Catholics espoused High Church practices, with an emphasis on outward rituals. It is interesting to note that socioeconomic class frequently defined whether one was Low Church (poorer, working class individuals) or High Church (typically, the elite of society).

of the age: baptismal regeneration, unconditional election, reprobation, vicarious atonement, and final perseverance” (65). For Newman, the answer to these dilemmas was to embrace the Roman Catholic Church.

If the Oxford polemicist and former Anglican priest Newman could convert (for surely, he had researched the issue thoroughly), what were other Anglicans to believe? As John Stuart Mill records in his diary (13 January 1854), “Those who should be the guides of the rest, see too many sides to every question. They hear so much said, or find that so much can be said, about everything, that they feel no assurance of the truth of anything” (qtd. in Elliott 359). Even the questioning was problematic: “[t]he very presence of doubt was to such Christians a sign that God had rejected the worshipper and thus a calamitous judgment that the mortal wasn’t sufficiently worthy to enter heaven” (C. Lane 65). The fear that one’s religious reservations might jeopardize salvation was alarming, and, for many, with all the doubt came a gradual move away from religious certainty. Susan Budd argues that this doubt potentially results in atheism. She posits that first one must move from certainty in Christian belief to “unbelief or uncertainty.” Then one moves from nonbelief to a position of “positive commitment to secularism” (qtd. in C. Lane 67).

Many Victorian authors wrote about the skeptical climate, including Alfred, Lord Tennyson (“In Memoriam”), Thomas Carlyle (*Sartor Resartus*), Matthew Arnold (*Culture and Anarchy*), John Stuart Mill (*On Liberty*), and Thomas Hardy (“God’s Funeral”). In Arthur Hugh Clough’s poem “The Latest Decalogue” (c. 1862), for instance, the speaker describes his distaste for the morality and behavior he has observed in the Victorian population. The lines “At church on Sunday to attend / Will serve to keep the World thy friend” pointedly refers to attending church for the sake of appearances only with no genuine spiritual purpose. Many other notable

contemporary figures spoke about the tenuous nature of religious belief and how it permeated nineteenth-century thought. In December 1846, Charles Kingsley, a prominent theologian, wrote, “[T]he curse of our generation is that so few of us deeply believe anything” (“The Letters” 105). However, even though doubt and a questioning of authority, including that of the Church, were prevalent, Victorians seemed unready to dismiss their beliefs entirely. As Houghton reminds us, “The truth is that to a large extent the will to believe overrode the desire to question . . .” (94). Thus, although the nineteenth century was an age of doubt, perhaps begun by the mechanisms of the Reformation, the move to a definitively secular worldview would wait until the twentieth century.

By Brontë’s own acknowledgement, several works—significantly *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*—are autobiographical. Augustine Birrel, one of the Charlotte’s earliest biographers, states in his introductory note that “no criticism of Miss Brontë’s novels is possible apart from the story of her life.” Thus, to understand her works more thoroughly, we will need to follow Ralph Waldo Emerson’s suggestion that it is impossible to escape from who we are—our “giant” always follows us in our writing; we must look at Brontë’s life¹¹ and what Polhemus calls a “death-cursed family history” (136).

Charlotte’s father Patrick Brontë was well known for his independence of thought and deep convictions. He was born to a large farming family in Southern Ireland, to a Protestant father and possibly a Catholic mother, but he left at twenty-five (apparently, with only £10 in his pocket) and was educated at St. John’s College, Cambridge. He excelled there, and as Juliet Barker finds, “the unorthodox and rather romantic circumstances of his arrival at Cambridge made him an impression and within a couple of years he was already a legend at the college” (7).

¹¹I am indebted to Juliet Barker’s excellent biography of the Brontës for much of the information used throughout this dissertation.

He was noted for his frugality, top academic record, and genuine religious piety—even earning him a financial sponsorship from William Wilberforce, the great politician known for his support of the abolitionists, education, and proto-Evangelicals. Eventually, Patrick’s hard work at Cambridge resulted in receiving ordination into the Church of England and his first curacy.

After working at several small parishes, he married Maria Branwell of Penzance in 1812. A short time later, Patrick Brontë was given the perpetual curacy in 1820 of St. Michael and All Angels' Church, Haworth—a rural, staunchly Puritan Yorkshire parish of a hard-working (but often unemployed) population. The “fathers” of British Evangelicalism (John and Charles Wesley, George Whitefield, and William Grimshaw) had preached at Patrick’s Haworth parish (Griesinger 40), and evangelical thought flourished in this Yorkshire region. Having mixed with the best Evangelical heads at Cambridge and at subsequent times (one of these heads was Henry Martyn who would become the model for St. John Rivers), Brontë was a firm believer in Low Church practices even though he worked with a variety of Low, High, Broad Church, and Dissenting¹² clergy and tried to keep the peace between the factions. He believed in the power of the heart to change lives over the more intellectual approach of High Church proponents. In one of his first sermons, he preached about inner conversion and about the power of the Holy Ghost to change lives—a radical conversion that results in good works and a changed person. He was a champion of the underdog in his parish, and he often wrote pieces in the local newspaper advocating for relief as more workers lost their jobs because of improved manufacturing methods. In short, to many he was a fair-minded but somewhat-opinionated Irishman.

One of the thorniest points of Evangelical belief was the notion of a person’s justification to God, and Patrick Brontë gave great thought to the issue. While many Arminians and some

¹²Dissenters (also called Nonconformists) were those who disagreed with the Church of England’s practices or theology to the point that official separation was necessary.

Calvinists were Evangelical, their approaches to salvation differed. Calvinists believed that God had already chosen the “elect”—those who were preordained for eternal salvation. Nothing could change God’s choice, yet believers still had to obey God’s law (the Bible) regardless of the possible outcome. They were required to attend church, do good works, and evangelize among other duties, but repentance was not possible; God’s judgement had already been decreed. Prior to the nineteenth century, the notion of predestination was not a problem for most Calvinists. They did their duty; the rest was up to God. However, during the nineteenth century, with its emphasis upon the individual as compared to the collective consciousness, the piety of Victorian Calvinists “continued to be pressed into shape by the quest for soteriological assurance implied in the doctrine of election. Such was the weight given to these questions that instead of encouraging pastoral assurance, as Calvin had employed the doctrine, election instead created widespread anxiety among Calvinists” (Goroncy 5). In contrast, Arminians believed that by adhering to the activities that God requires, the scale of judgement could be tipped in their favor. Repentance and heavenly grace were possible, justification by faith obtainable. However, Arminians also believed the opposite could occur: redemption could be lost. Arminians wanted people to remain vigilant lest they lose their salvation unlike Calvinists who believed once saved, always saved. Even so, Chadwick reminds us that while some Evangelicals were Calvinists, “more of them were not. Most of them had little use or time for doctrines of predestination and reprobation. But they loved the song of sovereign grace . . .” (441). Thus, the Arminian view may have seemed more comforting to Victorians who were looking for assurance of salvation from a merciful God in an age of doubt. While some might argue that the Calvinist view *did* provide assurance (in other words, God preordains a person to damnation or salvation because

that person deserved it), the general cultural judgment of the notion of predestination seems to have become less tolerant in the nineteenth century.

Mr. Brontë's theology sided with the Arminian notion of God's benevolence and salvation in general. He instructed his children to read the Bible and had daily prayers with them. Part of their required reading included Hannah More's *Moral Sketches*, which shared many of Wesley's theological views (Barker 145). More's writing "commanded as much authority for the Evangelicals as did any clerical teaching" (Jay, *The Religion* 43, 98), and it is important to note that Patrick provided his children with writings about the mercy of God. He was concerned about the notion of Calvinist predestination and frequently wrote against it. For instance, in one of his serialized spiritual tracts, his fictional character, an "awakened sinner," says, "I think I hear the sentence of eternal condemnation thunder in mine ears—But yet, there must be mercy in heaven: the groans of the dying Savior loudly proclaim there is" (qtd. in Jay, *The Religion* 84). Overall, Patrick Brontë seems to have instructed his parish and raised his family with more generous views of the benevolence of God in saving humankind.

However, he was not the only influence in the development of Charlotte's religious views. While Patrick provided his children with Bible study and catechism, it was his sister-in-law who spent the most time with the Brontë children (Barker 110-11, 146). Miss Elizabeth Branwell, Charlotte's maternal aunt, possessed a "repressive brand of Calvinistic Methodism, which pervaded the atmosphere of the parsonage as thoroughly as Mr. Brontë's more tolerant Anglicanism" (Peters 18). Miss Branwell imported "Calvinist tracts . . . into the parsonage" (48), and she supervised the Brontë children daily while Patrick prepared his sermons, penned religious pamphlets, and wrote fiction, so it would be natural to assume that Aunt Branwell must have had some sway in shaping her nieces' and nephew's beliefs. For instance, J. Hillis Miller

notes that in Emily's writing "all men are worthy of damnation, and there is no way to *choose* salvation" (185)—an indication of the possible influence of Aunt Branwell's beliefs that persist in Emily's work. These principles were in direct conflict with Patrick Brontë's more lenient views about the merciful nature of a Christian God.

In addition to Aunt Branwell's repressive brand of Calvinism, Charlotte also experienced the negative effects of this creed at a charity school for children. At the young age of eight, she attended Cowan Bridge School, led by a doctrinaire Calvinist Carus Wilson. Charlotte would write in *Jane Eyre* of these experiences and of her fear and hatred of Calvinism—fear because the concept of predestination might be true and hatred because the world would be unbearable if so. In a letter to Ellen Nussey (c. October/November 1836), Brontë's spiritual angst is clear:

I feel in a strange state of mind, still gloomy but not despairing. I keep trying to do right, checking wrong feelings, repressing wrong thoughts—but still, every instant, I feel myself going astray. . . . I abhor myself—I despise myself; if the doctrine of Calvin be true, I am already an outcast. You cannot imagine how hard, rebellious, and intractable all my feelings are. When I begin to study on the subject, I almost grow blasphemous, atheistical in my sentiments. (Smith 1: 154)

The kind of dogmatic Calvinism surrounding Charlotte was the kind that Emily Griesinger suggests "alienated intelligent women, many of whom left the church and some of whom, like George Eliot, lost their faith completely" (39), and we can see these influences in Charlotte's works. Thus, the pull between the two outlooks of Calvinism and Arminianism as they relate to God's mercy is critical in any understanding of her works.

By no means can anyone call her life (a short thirty-eight years) happy and carefree. In a letter describing a condition that Charlotte frequently experienced called "hypochondria," she writes to Miss Wooler (c. November/December 1846): "I can never forget the concentrated anguish of certain insufferable moments, and the heavy gloom of many long hours. . . . I felt my incapacity to impart pleasure fully as much as my powerlessness to *receive* it" (Smith 1: 505).

Her melancholy was a constant companion, beginning with the death of her mother when Charlotte, as the third child, was only five. She watched two older sisters die (Maria in May 1825, Elizabeth in June 1825) due to poor living conditions at Cowan Bridge School. Her brother Branwell seemed ill-equipped to provide for the family. He spent a good deal of time drinking alcohol, smoking opium, and flirting with his married employer's wife, eventually dying of tuberculosis and alcohol poisoning. Charlotte's two younger sisters died within quick succession (Emily in 1848, Anne in 1849), most likely from catching their ne'er-do-well brother's tuberculosis. Brontë's sufferings over the loss of her siblings, life in rural and obtuse Yorkshire, financial distress, the scarcity of publishing opportunities, and the general lack of good health kept her melancholy. After a short period of success with three novels published in short succession, she finally (at age 38) married Arthur Nichols, her father's curate, became pregnant, contracted some type of wasting disease, and died, leaving a bereft older father who had lost wife and children all before his own death. No fictional work could end so gloomily.

These events resulted in a thinly veiled skepticism in Brontë's writing, as some critics have acknowledged. Peters notes that "Charlotte inherited almost nothing of [her mother Maria's piety]" and had a "capacity for intense resentment and hatred" (3, 18). Matthew Arnold claimed that Charlotte's mind only held "hunger, rage, and rebellion" ("To Mrs. Foster" 34). The struggle to believe in God's benevolence became problematic for Charlotte, causing her to be caustic and judgmental of those whose opinions she did not (or could not) share. For instance, she writes to her friend Ellen Nussey (c. July 1842): "I consider Methodism, Quakerism, and the extremes of High and Low Churchism as foolish, but Roman Catholicism beats them all" (Smith 1: 289-90). While her works do show harsh treatment of Catholics, however—eventually excoriating them in *Villette*—they also show Brontë's unrelenting criticism of Calvinist predestination.

We must not forget that Charlotte was also the eldest surviving child of the family of a well-respected clergyman, and she took this role seriously. While her novels are not overtly didactic, nor is it likely that Brontë intended to create a *roman à these*, Brontë invites her readers into an exploration of Christian belief. Polhemus points out that “[n]ineteenth-century novelists assumed pastoral roles” (4), and the wide range of viewpoints available to Charlotte—some provided by her family and others from her own experience—provided her with many ideas for the pages of her novels: acrid commentary on various actions of the clergy, doctrinal differences, and practices of the Established Church or anti-Catholic sentiments jump from the pages of her novels. For example, the introductory scene in *Shirley* presents three Church of England curates who are the epitome of waste—a scene dripping with sarcastic, harsh criticism of the Church. The narrator warns the readers that she does not begin her story with romance or sentimental melodrama—instead, she is going to serve her readers “cold lentils and vinegar without oil; it shall be unleavened bread with bitter herbs, and no roast lamb” in her description of the “levitical” clergy, and she continues to describe the inertia and drunkenness of the “youthful Levites.” In other words, she is serving her readers “something real, cool, and solid” (5). As we shall discuss later, *Shirley* (and all her novels) cannot be properly understood without an understanding of Charlotte’s religious worldview.

In acting in a pastoral role, writers must be certain of their stance on the issue of God’s benevolence—a key Christian belief that could provide comfort during periods of suffering. In part, this explains Brontë’s dilemma: she feared eternal punishment yet lacked the assurance of salvation that a more merciful view of God would hold. While many scholars have noticed Brontë’s perpetually gloomy outlook and melancholy, most point to patriarchal repression as the source along with the sad events in her life, yet few acknowledge the abundant signs present to

suggest a spiritual struggle is at the root. Griesinger is an exception: “the evidence suggests that Charlotte spent an unhealthy amount of time obsessing over her sins and hardly any time enjoying God’s forgiveness, love, and grace” (42). Having a lack of assurance of God’s mercy, and at times perhaps even a belief in the Christian notion of God, Charlotte Brontë wrote works that often do not reflect God’s lovingkindness. Instead, tortured heroes, merciless villains, and depressed (and sometimes suicidal) heroines conflate to produce unsettling (M. Paul Emmanuel dies by shipwreck) and sometimes hasty (“Reader, I married him.”) endings. As we shall observe, in all of Charlotte Brontë’s works,¹³ there seems to be a lack of assurance in a benevolent God, and it is often the individual—not God—who decides what is right or wrong.

When scholars do note anything of Charlotte Brontë’s religious background, it is usually in terms of her conformity to Christian practices and morality. She was an active congregant (unlike her sister Emily or black sheep brother Branwell) and as was expected, Charlotte taught Sunday School. She was a dutiful daughter (even marrying her father’s curate), and her biographies generally represent a moral, upright individual. To suggest anything less often causes a strong reaction. For instance, in referring to the possibility that Charlotte had an affair with one of her former employers, one of the Brontë’s biographers offensively rejects the idea “[t]hat Charlotte with her iron self-control and her fervent desire to live a Christian life could ever have consciously intended to enter into an illicit relationship with a married man . . .” (Blom 25). However, Charlotte lived during a time of tremendous cultural and societal upheaval wherein religious certainty (and perhaps the rules of moral conduct therein prescribed) weakened, and Brontë’s work reflects the challenge of believing in an all-loving God against the

¹³Even in her earliest writings, Brontë’s tales were of Byronic characters in the made-up world of Angria. Charlotte along with her brother Branwell wrote these stories in extremely tiny print (to prevent others—probably her aunt and father—from reading) about adventures in this racy society. The main protagonist of Zamorna is adulterous, murderous, and, in short, a rake.

challenges of science, the notion of Darwinian evolution, higher criticism of the Bible, remnants of the Enlightenment, and even the Oxford Movement. Jeffrey J. Franklin adds to this “her upbringing by an Evangelical Anglican father, her schooling at the Cowan Bridge School, . . . and her own extensive reading in religious and secular texts” and finds that “Charlotte Brontë emerged with a very heterogeneous faith” (459). This “heterogeneous faith” sometimes made room for a heavy dose of skepticism, as we shall see in evaluating her novels.

Admittedly, my use of biographical criticism may seem somewhat transgressive. I am aware that this type of criticism was *once* taboo in the United States, when poststructuralism was the dominant mode of criticism in English departments. However, it seems to me that this type of academic approach is no longer repudiated by American mainstream academic criticism. Indeed, I see my project as a contribution to what Stephen Greenblatt has called the “poetics of culture,” wherein we can observe “fields of force, places of dissension and shifting interests, occasions for the jostling of orthodox and subversive impulses” (2254). While biographical criticism can show Brontë to be a kind of barometer of the Victorian era—and of the “disappearance of God” that period witnessed—it also reflects Brontë’s personal religious struggles and reveals how those struggles are illuminated in her novels, for Charlotte Brontë was a deeply autobiographical writer. This biographical/historicist approach, which I make with an eye to the full nuance of Brontë’s religious context, allows us to observe how Brontë’s religious doubt shows up both in the widely canvassed aesthetic failings of her works and in their arguments concerning theodicy. My aim is to contribute to Brontë studies with an investigation, hitherto unattempted, of the ways the novels address doubts of God’s benevolence.

Ultimately, religion is a useful lens through which we can interpret Charlotte Brontë’s work. We discover how her writings reflect the Victorian *zeitgeist*’s tremendous pressure on

religious beliefs heretofore assumed to be incontrovertible as we evaluate the trajectory of spiritual doubt in her novels.¹⁴ One of Charlotte's biographers says that the lasting attraction to the works of the Brontës is a result of "the glamor of fame deified by suffering. They are canonized, these sisters, by the tragedy of their lives" (Peters xiv). "Canonized" and "deified by suffering" are interesting choices of words, for they seem to hint at the importance of religion in the sisters' works. Indeed, when disaster is not mitigated by a belief in a better afterlife or a good God in an evil world, the result in these sisters' fictional worlds is reliance on the individual, and for Charlotte, the beginnings of a more doubtful, secular worldview. By the time we get to the end of the nineteenth century, God not only has disappeared but may be dead. Even so, as Paul de Man once told J. Hillis Miller, "Religious questions are the most important" (qtd. in "Preface to the Illinois Edition" xi), and this is the understanding we shall adopt as we analyze Charlotte's novels. Evaluating her *oeuvre* with what Thomas Vargish calls a "providential aesthetic"¹⁵ illuminates problematic areas and offers alternative answers. What do her protagonists, for example, do when faced with the troubles and evils of this world? What is the value of religious expression? Can love replace faith? Are only the "elect" saved? If so, what does that mean for a Christian who errs and sins? If clergy act in a contemptible manner, what does that say about their religion? Does morality depend upon religious belief? For Brontë's protagonists, the answers to these questions may not be satisfactory; for scholars, the answers are of utmost importance in understanding her writings.¹⁶

¹⁴Robert Bernard Martin is one of the few who also notice the trajectory: "It would be . . . valid to speak of her first two novels [*The Professor* and *Jane Eyre*] as exemplifying Miss Brontë's early optimism of hope, with *Shirley* showing her growing doubt and pessimism, followed by the autumnal resignation of earthly hope in *Villette*" (118).

¹⁵Vargish's concept evaluates "those devices or conventions characteristic of literary works in which the assumption of providential design and intention at work in the fictional world is a major premise or concern" (6-7).

¹⁶This study focuses on the novels of Charlotte Brontë published during her lifetime. Thus, *The Professor* is not included even though it was Brontë's first novel. By all accounts, the novel is inferior to its published and well-

Chapter 2: *Jane Eyre*: Which Way to God?

The second novel written by Charlotte Brontë, and the first to be published in 1847, was an instant success. Even though the initial three-volume set¹⁷ cost a guinea and a half to purchase,¹⁸ an estimated 2,500 copies of the first edition were published, and the popular novel was sold out within three months (see Barker 537; Tillotson 22). Even Queen Victoria read *Jane Eyre* “to my dear Albert” (qtd. in Allott 389), an important point since prior to adulthood the Queen had only been allowed to read Hannah More’s novels (Tillotson 15). G.H. Lewes, the famous literary critic and partner of George Eliot, was effusive in his compliments for the work:

‘We took up *Jane Eyre* one winter’s evening, somewhat piqued at the extravagant commendations we had heard, and sternly resolved to be as critical as Croker. But as we read on we forgot both commendations and criticism, identified ourselves with Jane in all her troubles, and finally married Mr. Rochester about four in the morning.’ (qtd. in Tillotson 19-20)

regarded descendant, *Villette*. Martin says, “The virtues that Miss Brontë found in *The Professor* have not always been apparent to her readers, who have frequently felt it to be an undernourished, if not starved, work” (23). Blom notes that “[a]fter the publication of *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte assessed *The Professor*, and concluded that the ‘whole narrative was deficient in incident.’ In *Villette*, she removed this deficiency, introducing drama and excitement by using and intensifying the mode of *Jane Eyre*” (154). Additionally, we know that Charlotte could not get her publishers to print *The Professor*. Martin acknowledges that even with Charlotte’s increasing reputation, they rejected the novel nine times. Finally, “she agreed to lock *The Professor* and ‘the monotony of his demure Quaker countenance’ into a cupboard and forget him” (23). After her death, however, through the encouragement of Mrs. Gaskell and Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth, Charlotte’s husband was persuaded that he should attempt its publication, and by that time, Smith, Elder, and Co. realized they could make money from a posthumous novel. Consequently, *The Professor* was published in 1857. The version produced was bowdlerized; sales were dismal, and reviews unenthusiastic. Both *Villette* and *The Professor* are similar in plot and theme and are based on Charlotte’s experiences teaching abroad at the Pensionnat Héger. Thus, it is sufficient to evaluate *Villette* as a more fully formed novel with a similar plot and autobiographical features.

¹⁷See Charlotte’s letter of 14 December 1847 to her publisher, wherein she refuses the suggestion that she should write a serial. While authors like Thackeray and Dickens used the serial form of publication to distribute their novels, this method required great determination to meet publication deadlines. See Guinevere Griest’s *Mudie’s Circulating Library and the Victorian Novel* for information on Victorian publishing practices.

¹⁸Rather than purchasing works, most people used subscription or circulating libraries to borrow one book at a time. Rates to borrow new novels were about one guinea per year, an amount easily affordable to middle-class readers.

Even Thackeray said that “some of the love passages made [him] cry” (qtd. in Barker 535), and his daughter Annie Thackeray Ritchie noted the novel “set all London talking, reading, speculating” (qtd. in Davies vii). While the bulk of reviews for *Jane Eyre* were positive, some claimed the work was flawed. Surprisingly, the dislike had nothing to do with the literary quality of the novel; instead, it was because the book (and by association its author) was perceived as immoral.

In June 1855, *Sharpe's London Magazine* noted that “the strange thing was, that no two people could agree in their opinions of [*Jane Eyre*], so full was it of contradictions” (339). The reviewer discusses the general gossip surrounding the novel: “Parties ran high about it; there were Jane Eyre-ites and Anti-Jane Eyre-ites: had the work been religious, two sects would have sprung up, hating each other for the love of God, as only sectarians can hate” (340). Sir George Murray Smith, Charlotte's publisher, was having lunch with Brontë and Lewes when Lewes casually told Charlotte across the table that “there ought to be a bond of sympathy between us, Miss Brontë, for we have both written naughty books!” (qtd. in Delafield 166). Brontë was livid as she did not agree with his assessment of her first published novel. However, Smith added that “by way of parenthesis, I may say that *Jane Eyre* was really considered in those days to be an immoral book” (166). Smith's mother had even offended a Lady Herschel when she found a copy of the novel in her parlor: “Do you leave such a book as *this* about, at the risk of your daughter reading it?” (166). Even if there were parts of the novel that could be considered immoral, more objected to what they saw as the work's anti-Christian tone. An unsigned review in *The Christian Remembrancer*, for one, charged that in *Jane Eyre* “all Christian profession is bigotry and all Christian practice is hypocrisy” (qtd. in Allott 91). Elizabeth Rigby in 1848 resolved that “[t]he auto-biography of *Jane Eyre* is pre-eminently an anti-Christian composition”

(109). After reading the novel, Brontë's friend Mary Taylor wrote (June to 24 July 1848), "You are very different from me in having no doctrine to preach. It is impossible to squeeze a moral out of your production" (Smith 2: 87). In *Jane Eyre*, we have one of the best examples of art imitating life. What I mean is that the autobiographical nature of the work allows us to observe a sort of disappearance of God in the pages of the text: the brilliant work is ambivalent and conflicted in its attempts to reconcile the divine with thematic elements, and the result is apparent in the failure of key characters to appear authentic and a problematic, incongruous conclusion.

As I have already begun to show, Victorian society was fascinated with religion. Between 1801-1835, 22.2% of the books published were religious in nature. Religious texts increased to 33.5% between 1836-1863 but declined to 9.2% by 1899 (Jay, *Faith* 7-8). Because early- and mid-century society was absorbed by the topic of religion, publishers had to choose materials that would meet that need and not offend their readers. As we have seen, Hannah More's religious writings were some of the bestsellers in the early nineteenth century. More also produced numerous cheap penny religious tracts over a three-year period. At peak, she sold over 2,000,000 in a single year ("Hannah More"). This demonstrates the profitability in publishing religious material. Religious topics in fiction sold well, also, and publishers were careful not to offend their readers with anti-Christian themes.

Surely, then, the publishers of *Jane Eyre* were amazed (along with the author) when the *Church of England Quarterly* (which never reviewed novels but made an exception due to the popularity of *Jane Eyre*) could find no "real sign of Christianity discoverable" (qtd. in Delafield 22) in the newly published novel. Additionally, *The Christian Remembrancer* attacked the book's perceived hypocritical religious cant. The reviewer describes Jane as

one to whom the world has not been kind. And assuredly, never was an unkindness more cordially repaid. Never was there a better hater. Every page burns with moral Jacobinism. 'Unjust, unjust' is the burden of every reflection upon the things and powers that be. All virtue is but well masked vice, all religious profession and conduct is but the whitening of the sepulchre. (qtd. in Allott 90)

Brontë responded to those who criticized the text as an “insult to piety” in the preface of *Jane Eyre*'s second edition: “I would remind [those critics] of simple truths. Conventionality is not morality.¹⁹ Self-righteousness is not religion. To attack the first is not to assail the last. To pluck the mask from the face of the Pharisee is not to lift an impious hand to the Crown of Thorns” (1). Even though her words do seem to affirm the pious stance of the novel, contemporary critics were concerned with *Jane Eyre*'s representation of Christianity. Griesinger disagrees with those reviewers; instead, she sketches Brontë as a “woman living through a period of religious controversy and reform who defended and practiced an authentic Christian spirituality, albeit on her terms” (34). However, even though Brontë was certainly living through a period of tremendous social upheaval, we do not see much defending and practicing of what Griesinger calls “an authentic” (if we could even define what that means) Christian outlook in *Jane Eyre*. On the contrary, as we will observe later in this chapter, the protagonist rebels against religious authority and questions Victorian rectitude; in general, Brontë's most famous novel offers a critical and unsettling picture of a Christian worldview.

In *Jane Eyre*, we observe Charlotte Brontë's attempts to reconcile misery with a belief in God, applying an early type of theodicy that will increase in depth when she writes *Villette*. The world Jane lives in is unjust and full of suffering, and those who claim to be practicing Christians

¹⁹Similar thoughts are expressed in *Shirley*. On feeling judged by the Symptons, Shirley surmises they feel that “[w]hat was *strange* must be *wrong*; what was *unusual* must be *improper*” (510), recalling Brontë's own words to her critics.

in the novel are often bigots (Mr. Brocklehurst and Mrs. Reed), demanding ascetic types (St. John Rivers), or they hold such an affinity with martyrdom and resignation to make this life seem pointless (Helen). Thus, one solution for Jane is to reject Christian doctrine, particularly Calvinist thought taught by Mr. Brocklehurst. Another is to reject Calvinism yet accept Helen's view of universal salvation, but like the doctrine of the elect, this seems too hard for Jane. She could reject Christianity in entirety and accept "living in sin" with Rochester once she knows he is married because this would allow her to finally gain what she has always wanted: the love and companionship of someone she loves dearly, but this is too much again to ask. Finally, a last choice is to accept St. John Rivers, but her spirit cannot imagine being married to a such "a cold, hard man" (432), particularly after having had a passionate relationship with Rochester, so she rejects St. John Rivers and in doing so risks, in St. John River's view, the displeasure of God. As readers, we are given a few options and asked what we might do if we were in Jane's place, and we shall explore each choice in detail: 1) we must accept the notion that we are probably already damned (Brocklehurst) if we cannot reconcile the suffering we encounter in this world with Christian belief; 2) we must accept the pain in this world and look for happiness only in the afterlife in Heaven (Helen); 3) we must reject moral precepts and make our own happiness, thus rejecting God's mandates (Rochester); or 4) we must accept suffering and find contentment in this life by doing God's work, no matter the personal sacrifices (St. John Rivers). In her novel, Brontë begins to grapple with the problem of misery and how it relates to the notion of a merciful God; however, Brontë never seems to answer the question with certainty, as her problematic ending demonstrates.

Calvinism

“For the wages of sin is death”—Romans 6.23

For Charlotte Brontë and her protagonist, dogmatic Calvinism posed the greatest threat to an acceptance of the benevolence of God. For instance, she writes of her fears to her close friend Ellen Nussey (c. 1836):

I often plan the pleasant life which we might lead together. . . . My eyes fill with tears when I contrast the bliss of such a state brightened by hopes of the future with the melancholy state I now live in, uncertain that I have ever felt true contrition, wandering in thought and deed, longing for holiness which I shall *never, never* attain—smitten at times to the heart with the conviction that ___’s ghastly Calvinistic doctrines are true—darkened in short by the very shadow of Spiritual Death! (Smith 1: 156)

The Calvinist notion of predestination to eternal damnation seems to have caused periods of hopelessness for Charlotte and for others struggling to understand the notion of the elect. As Thormählen notes, “It is impossible to derive consolation from a supreme authority whom you suspect of having marked you out for perdition” (64). Even if parishioners did attempt good works, according to Calvinism, those efforts would not change the outcome.

Since Charlotte Brontë was raised by a Calvinist aunt and an Arminian evangelical father, we can understand Charlotte’s conflict with the doctrine of predestination. As evidenced in a letter to her friend Ellen Nussey in 1836, Brontë’s melancholy over her own anguished lack of assurance of salvation is painfully poignant:

I am in that state of horrid, gloomy uncertainty, that at this moment I would submit to be old, grey-haired, to have passed all my youthful days of enjoyment and be tottering on the verge of the grave, if I could only thereby ensure the prospect of reconciliation to God and Redemption through His Son’s merits. I never was exactly careless of these matters [assurance of salvation], but I have always taken a clouded and repulsive view of them; and now, if possible, the clouds are gathering darker, and a more oppressive despondency weighs continually on my spirits. (Smith 1: 163)

John Wesley in *Rules for Lay Assistants* asks, “What inconvenience is there in speaking much of the wrath and little of the love of God?” He answers his own question: “It generally hardens them that believe not and discourages them that do” (qtd. in Jay, *The Religion* 84). Brontë’s angst reflects Wesley’s concern.

Since according to Calvin’s theology we are either “elected” to eternal salvation or damnation, what does that mean for young Jane who is accused by those in authority of constant error and sin? In the first chapter of *Jane Eyre*, we observe Jane as she struggles to live in what she perceives as an unjust and harsh world. At Gateshead, her Aunt Reed is distant, her cousins Georgiana and Eliza apathetic and self-absorbed, and, worse, her cousin John abuses her. Without any advocate, Jane to this point has learned to accept the torment, and the suffering she experiences is distressing. Constantly “bullied and punished,” Jane seeks refuge by avoiding her cousin John: “every nerve I had feared him, and every morsel of flesh on my bones shrank when he came near” (12). One day he tosses a book at her head, drawing blood, and when he attacks her, Jane, out of fear that he intends to murder her, finally rebels by defending herself. As punishment, she is taken away and placed in the cheerless Red Room. Before they lock her in for the night with no fire for warmth, the servants talk freely in front of Jane: “God will punish her: He might strike her dead in the midst of her tantrums, . . .” and turning to Jane one of them directly admonishes, “if you don’t repent, something bad might be permitted to come down the chimney and fetch you away” (16). Even though the servants hint that repentance is within Jane’s capacity, the threats of death and eternal damnation (and use of her every mistake as proof that she is not one of the elect chosen for eternal salvation) to an impressionable, depressed, and motherless child are indicative of Calvinist tendencies in the Reed household; Jane has tried to “commit no fault . . . to fulfil (sic) every duty; and [still] it was termed naughty and tiresome,

sullen and sneaking” (18). Jane’s perceived bad behavior is potential proof of reprobation. Thus, the first glimpse readers get of any religious expression is a repressive one.

Inside the Red Room, Jane works herself up into a frenzy of fright. She asks herself why she was always “suffering, always browbeaten, always accused, for ever (sic) condemned” (18). Still locked away in the dark, Jane’s fiercely independent spirit tries once again to break forth prior to her losing consciousness: “Unjust!—unjust!” and she resolves to escape her “insupportable oppression,” including the option, at ten years old, of suicide (19). When young Jane resists the injustice she experiences, she is railing against fate. Stevie Davies explains the narrative’s “violently subversive” rhetoric in the early chapters as a “dialogue between submission and rebellion, imprisonment and liberation, the struggle for justice and the duty to endure” (xiii). While Jane struggles for freedom from the confines of the abusive Reed household, Jane’s protests also depict the struggle to accept the notion that she is spiritually cursed.

One of Brontë’s first attacks of the pen targets the failure of Calvinist Christian charity schools as Jane goes to Lowood School. Initially, the charitable institutions were set up to help Evangelical ministers educate their children. Often, those clergy worked in less affluent areas, and they could not afford the costs of education. The doctrinal tenet of predestination to damnation or salvation, combined with a focus on the corrupt nature of man, often resulted in austere schooling for incredibly young children. Brontë and her two older sisters experienced first-hand the deprivations of attending these philanthropic (but often ill-run) institutions when they attended Cowan Bridge School; Charlotte was 8, her sisters 9 and 10. The harshness of

these schools cannot be understated.²⁰ Carus Wilson, the headmaster of Cowan Bridge, believed in the doctrine of predestination to damnation or salvation, and

such a doctrine left no place for the individual to earn a place in heaven through genuine piety, repentance, or the performance of good works. The emphasis of his religion was on sin and the certainty of punishment, not on conversion or the hope of salvation. Nor did he feel any necessity to soften or lighten this message for the children in his care. (Barker 136)

This Calvinist view of salvation made life miserable for the impressionable, vulnerable, poor charity children. At Cowan Bridge, the living conditions were atrocious, which contributed to the death of Charlotte's two oldest sisters during their first year of schooling, and Patrick Brontë removed Charlotte from the school. Barker suggests that Brontë must have felt a "bewildering sense of divine injustice in the deaths of sisters she considered so superior to herself" (140), and it is no wonder that Brontë created such a repulsive *doppelgänger* in the Lowood schoolmaster Mr. Brocklehurst, who has been universally demonized by critics and readers alike.

Brocklehurst's theology of rendering young, vulnerable girls at Lowood "hardy, patient, and self-denying" (75) is one that most stalwart Christians would have concurred with, but his dogmatic leanings are suggested early when he meets Jane for the first time. After the scene in the Red Room, readers might be hopeful for Jane when the clergyman arrives—usually in a Victorian novel a sign of hope, such as when Gaskell's Ruth first encounters the kind minister Mr. Benson. Perhaps Brocklehurst will be of some comfort to the wounded Jane. Instead, he interrogates and demeans her. When Aunt Reed tells Brocklehurst that Jane is not a good girl, he

²⁰While some schools were adequate, a cheap education sometimes produced horrific accounts of neglect. Barker notes several court cases, one in particular where a schoolmaster near Richmond in Yorkshire housed approximately 80 young boys: "Up to eight pupils at a time shared a single bed, sleeping on a straw mattress, with only one sheet, two blankets (one of which covered the mattress) and a quilt in winter. Three of the bedrooms had no ceiling or under-drawing so the boys slept under the slates of the roof with buckets set out to catch the rain and snow. Virtually all of them were infested with head lice and fleas" (119). Davies points out that "[b]eating and brutality were endemic in schools" (xv) in general. The conditions in many charity schools could rival those found in a novel by Dickens.

asks Jane where the wicked go, and she responds that they “go to hell” (39). The interview must add considerable damage to Jane’s already negative view of God; after a decade of trying to please her relatives, Jane’s sensitivity to anything unjust causes her to rebel against the notion that she is damned for all eternity. Brilliantly, she suggests to her aunt and Mr. Brocklehurst an alternative to avoiding the fiery furnaces: she declares that she will refuse to die. Brocklehurst’s mini sermon is futile. Jane admits that she only reads the Bible sometimes and likes certain parts more for their literary and apocalyptic quality than spiritual didacticism. She reads Revelations, Daniel, Genesis, Samuel, Exodus, Kings, Chronicles, Job, and Jonah. Worse—shocking!—she never reads the Psalms, the staple of comfort and assurance for most Christians. In response, Mr. Brocklehurst tells her of a little boy who memorizes the Psalms and receives a reward of two nuts “in recompense for his infant piety” (40)—certainly, a meager enticement for young Jane and definitely an indictment of Brocklehurst’s hypocrisy in extolling the cynical greediness of the little boy. Brocklehurst then uses his questioning of the ten-year-old Jane to prove that she has a wicked, unrepentant heart, and since she shows no indication to Mr. Brocklehurst of being a contrite sinner, he seems convinced of her damnation. He admonishes her aunt that Jane’s education must begin sooner than later *if* there is any hope for her redemption. Knowing Brocklehurst’s nature, it seems likely that he is more concerned for his pocketbook than the possibility of Jane’s redemption. He hands Jane a tract called *The Child’s Guide*,²¹ a story fixated on the violent deaths of young children with the goal of terrifying them into religious obedience. In the end, Mr. Brocklehurst’s presence brings no solace for his young charge, and Jane is shipped off to Lowood Institution.

²¹Davies in her notes to *Jane Eyre* points out that many Evangelicals published these types of tracts, full of gory and horrific details of young children dying. Carus Wilson, the model for Brocklehurst, was the editor of a series of such magazines. Davies says these magazines “fetishize” death. See note 9 on p. 549.

While Mr. Brocklehurst is a leader in his Christian community, and “is said to do a great deal of good” (60), his hypocritical character is evident in the austere conditions and manner of his rule over Lowood. Jane describes him as a “black column” and “piece of architecture” (73), and he models little of God’s benevolence toward others. For instance, during a conversation with Miss Temple, he notes one of the girls has curly hair—to him, a sign of vanity and a lack of spirituality. He reminds the teacher that his mission is to serve God and “mortify in these girls the lusts of the flesh, to teach them to clothe themselves with shamefacedness and sobriety” (76). He admonishes Miss Temple to cut the offending locks off. Amid this conversation, three women arrive “splendidly attired in velvet, silk, and furs,” possessing “gray beaver hats, then in fashion, shaded with ostrich plumes” and “light tresses, elaborately curled” (77). These are Mr. Brocklehurst’s wife and daughters. Ironically, they arrive dressed in splendor after he has just refused to give Miss Temple more thread for darning the students’ socks. While the Brocklehurst family are well-clothed, the children at Lowood lack boots or gloves to protect them from the harsh Yorkshire weather. Jane recalls trying every morning to stick her inflamed feet once again into her shoes, and the appearance of the well-heeled Brocklehurst family must strike her as odd.

If serving God, according to Brocklehurst, requires punishing the bodies of young children, the conditions Jane experiences at Lowood should almost guarantee her antipathy to Brocklehurst’s notion of Christianity. Prior to Lowood, she was housed in comfortable, warm quarters and given adequate sustenance. Once she enters Lowood, though, she experiences abject poverty. Her first full day at Lowood begins with a meal of burnt porridge that none could eat. With breakfast over, and “[t]hanks having been returned for what we had not got, and a second hymn chanted,” (55) the girls move to their classrooms. The only example of a kind-hearted adult is Miss Temple, the superintendent of the school. After learning of the children’s burnt

breakfast, she orders a lunch of bread and cheese—an extravagance that later Brocklehurst criticizes her for (“Oh, madam, when you put bread and cheese, instead of burnt porridge, into these children’s mouths, you may indeed feed their vile bodies, but you little think how you starve their immortal souls!” 75). Dinner has a “strong steam redolent of rancid fat” and “consist[s] of indifferent potatoes and strange shreds of rusty meat, mixed and cooked together” (61). Later, as a snack the young girls receive half a slice of bread and a small quantity of coffee. Jane goes to bed hungry. At one point in the story, Brocklehurst reminds Miss Temple that the children, when hungry, should be encouraged to “evince fortitude under the temporary privation” and tells her to remind them “man shall not live by bread alone” and ““If ye suffer hunger or thirst for my sake, happy are ye”” (75). His hypocrisy in this regard is perhaps unmatched in any character or institution save perhaps Reverend Casaubon in *Middlemarch* or the parish that harshly treats Oliver Twist. As Maynard observes:

A pious reader like Jane’s friend at Lowood, Helen Burns, may see [Brocklehurst] as a travesty of true religion; but the satire is often so strong and grotesquely abusive that other readers, in the rebellious spirit of Jane herself, may call into question his entire religious vision. Jane’s instinct, which keeps being opposed to Brocklehurst’s religious structure, is to opt out of the outrageous system entirely. (“The Brontës” 202)

Brocklehurst’s neglect of the children under his care is tantamount to abuse.

As Jane continues at Lowood, Brocklehurst promises “to apprise Miss Temple and the teachers of [Jane’s] vicious nature,” and his remarks will label Jane as one predestined for spiritual damnation according to Calvinist theology. His assessment marks her “as a bad child *for ever*” (73; emphasis added). He declares to Jane’s classmates and teachers, “Who would think that the Evil One had already found a servant and agent in her? Yet such, I grieve to say, is the case. . . . [I]t becomes my duty to warn you that this girl, who might be one of God’s own lambs, is a little castaway—not *a member of the true flock*. . . (78; emphasis added). He admonishes the

instructors: “Teachers, you must . . . punish her body to save her soul—*if, indeed, such salvation be possible*, for (my tongue falters while I tell it) this girl, this child, the native of a Christian land, worse than many a little heathen . . . this girl is—a liar!” (79; emphasis added). We doubt he means to imply that salvation is possible for Jane; that is too generous for his harsh characterization. Instead, he seems intent in humiliating her and using her as an example of proof of an unredeemable soul. From these passages, a case can be made that Brocklehurst’s comments indicate a Calvinist leaning. Brocklehurst seems to be setting himself up as the Calvinist God, and Jane is his representative of a predestined, damned soul. While it is difficult to state with certainty whether Brocklehurst is a Calvinist, he is prone to certain condemning remarks related to Calvinist predestination that could label him so. Additionally, because of the similarities between Carus Wilson and Brocklehurst, it seems as if Brontë was thinking “Calvinist” when she created the “black marble clergyman” (78), and Brocklehurst’s notion that Jane is already spiritually damned seems to reinforce that point.

As the children starve at Lowood, Brocklehurst displays nothing of God’s benevolent compassion. Instead, the students’ living conditions predispose them to weakened constitutions (at one point in the story, more than half of the eighty girls are ill) or, worse, early deaths. “Semi-starvation and neglected colds” (91) are the result of the lack of Christian charity provided by Brocklehurst and his ilk. As a result, Jane’s early encounters with Christianity are in the form of deprivation and damnation, and there is precious little assurance of a better life here or in the afterlife.

Renunciation

“Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven”—Matthew 5.11-12

What is the value of religious expression? Hitherto for our young protagonist, belief in God has not brought respite from a life of misery. If Brocklehurst teaches Jane that she is doomed, meeting the long-suffering, saintly Helen Burns is Jane’s chance to obtain a more merciful impression of the Christian faith. Helen’s doctrine is one of resignation and disassociation without much human emotional attachment, akin to Thomas à Kempis’s admonitions in *The Imitation of Christ*. She demonstrates that we must not seek happiness in this world—our life on Earth must embrace suffering. After death, we will receive our reward in the form of eternal salvation, which is open to all who have lived a holy life. Accordingly, Helen teaches a kind of universal salvation. This was a view held also by Charlotte’s sister Anne, most notably visible in her poem “A Word to the Elect:”²²

And when you, looking on your fellow-men,
Behold them doomed to endless misery,
How can you talk of joy and rapture then?—
May God withhold such cruel joy from me!

That none deserve eternal bliss I know;
Unmerited the grace in mercy given:
But, none shall sink to everlasting woe,
That have not well deserved the wrath of Heaven.

And, oh! there lives within my heart
A hope, long nursed by me;
(And should its cheering ray depart,
How dark my soul would be!)

²²Anne, Charlotte, and Emily published their poetry in one volume in 1846. Initially, Charlotte asked Aylott and Jones to publish the poems at their own cost. Anne and Emily contributed 21 poems, Charlotte 19. Sales were dismal, and in September 1848, Charlotte’s new publisher Smith, Elder, and Co. bought the remaining copies and then reissued (with some modifications) in November 1848.

That as in Adam all have died,
In Christ shall all men live;
And ever round his throne abide,
Eternal praise to give. (105-106)

While the notion of universal salvation has a beautiful appeal to it, Helen's goal of spiritual resignation on Earth is hard to swallow for Jane.

Charlotte had inherited an abridged translation of Kempis's work from her mother, but she had difficulty accepting an attitude of resignation mostly because, like Jane, she perceived her own imperfections as largely insurmountable. In a letter to Ellen Nussey written in December 1836, Brontë says (almost mirroring what Jane may have thought after hearing Helen's theology),

If Christian perfection be necessary to salvation, I shall never be saved; my heart is a very hot-bed for sinful thoughts. . . . I know not how to pray; I cannot bend my life to the grand end of doing good; I go on constantly seeking my own pleasure, pursuing the gratification of my own desires. I forget God, and will not God forget me? . . . I adore the purity of the Christian faith; my theory is right, my practice horribly wrong. (Smith 1: 156)

Charlotte strives to be pure but finds it impossible. Doubts of God's benevolent willingness to forgive her perceived sinfulness are a recurring theme in much of her correspondence. In most of the letters to Ellen Nussey, Brontë reveals a deep spiritual anguish. For example, Brontë writes (10 May 1836), "I know the treasures of the Bible. I love and adore them. I can see the Well of Life in all its clearness and brightness; but when I stoop down to drink of the pure waters, they fly from my lips . . ." (Smith 1: 144). While her letters offer a subtle indication of Charlotte's spiritual malaise, Peters suggests the degree may have been more severe. Brontë tempered her correspondence to Ellen and wrote far more revealing notes to her friend Mary Taylor. Taylor destroyed most of them, possibly because she felt that they might reveal too much. Peters surmises that "undoubtedly Charlotte's letters to Mary *would* have confirmed the Victorian

opinion that Charlotte Brontë was eccentric, crude, and not really a lady” (36). The *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* of 1856 (no. 91) endorses this view when it states that “[Charlotte Brontë is] the treacherous advocate of contempt of established maxims and disregard of the regulations of society” (qtd. in Allott 21). In exploring Brontë’s religious uncertainty, we might wish that Mary Taylor had not been so quick to toss the letters.

In *Jane Eyre*, while Helen dislikes Mr. Brocklehurst and his teachings, she is the only character who attempts to achieve the Wesleyan level of sanctification Charlotte writes about. Jane understands that “human beings never enjoy complete happiness in this world” (298), and certainly up to this point in the novel Jane has experienced tremendous deprivation, yet Helen tries to tell Jane that she thinks too much of earthly love: “Life is so soon over, and death is so certain an entrance to happiness—to glory” (83). For Helen, the sufferings of this world are small compared to the glory to come after death, and that is why she accepts the abuse at school—such as being allotted only a small ration of bread and water for dinner by Miss Scatcherd because she had smeared ink on an assignment—with such resignation. But Jane has difficulty believing in a God who offers only suffering prior to death. Indeed, she wants no part of that kind of deity, for Jane *must* have love from others in this world to sustain her; an otherworldly God is not enough. Even though Jane attempts to believe in Helen’s vision of eternal glory, Jane cannot accept her friend’s doctrine of endurance even though it also includes the attractive “doctrine of the equality of disembodied souls” (273). Ultimately, as Helen is dying, Jane wonders if Helen will “be taken to the region of spirits,” but doubtfully adds “if such region there were” (95). Even as Helen tries to assure Jane that she is “going to God,” Jane, always the questioner, asks what many of the Victorian readers of the time had begun to ask themselves: “Where is God? What is God?” and “Where is [the region of eternal happiness]?”

Does it exist?" (97). After the many religious discussions with Helen, Jane cannot accept Helen's doctrine of self-denial. Jane possesses too much fire and rebellion in her spirit against the injustices of this world for her to do so. As Beaty notes, "the indeterminacy—the heroine's religious doubt in the face of the most pious of scenes [Helen's deathbed]—forces the reader to entertain multiple possibilities of what the novel is up to, what it is 'saying' about death and dying, the soul and the afterlife . . ." (43). This scene demonstrates how religion is an important aspect of Brontë's novels.

For all her goodness, the key character of Helen is not exactly a success in the novel, and this is a result of Charlotte Brontë's own doubts in the benevolence of God. *The Christian Remembrancer* had this to state about the long-suffering Helen: "The feeble character in the book is that of Helen Burns, . . . conscious moreover of her own perfection. She dies early in the first volume, and our authoress might say of her saint, as Shakespeare said of his Mercutio, 'If I had not killed her, she would have killed me'" (qtd. in Allott 91). A modern audience might agree; Helen is one of the key characters in the novel who appears exaggerated—her saintliness and perseverance uncanny—and while our author appears to have great sympathy for Helen (after all, she was modeled after Charlotte's older sister, Maria Brontë), Helen's brand of religion seems hard to swallow for both Jane and readers²³ alike.

In the end, Helen's religious views fail to provide solace for Jane because self-abnegation, like that St. John Rivers will eventually require, cannot provide happiness or assurance of the benevolence of God for Jane. Jane wants some form of happiness in this life,

²³Almost a full century before *Jane Eyre*, Samuel Richardson had to defend his authorial decision to kill off the saintly Clarissa to his audience: "who that are in earnest in their profession of Christianity . . . will rather envy than regret the triumphant death of Clarissa; whose piety, from her *early childhood*; whose diffusive charity; whose steady virtue; whose Christian humility; whose forgiving spirit; whose meekness, and resignation, HEAVEN *only* could reward" (postscript).

and as Helen dies leaving Jane with an even greater sense of loneliness, it is not until Jane meets Rochester that she is forced to re-examine the providential care of God from a new angle.

Hedonism

“I said in my heart, ‘Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself.’ But behold, this also was vanity”—Ecclesiastes 2.1

Does morality depend upon religious belief? Can love replace faith? If predestination most likely guarantees Jane’s damnation, and Wesleyan sanctification is unapproachable, then Jane must turn to man, and not God, to seek some sort of succor in this world. When Jane obtains her position as governess at Thornfield and eventually secures the catch of the county, it seems as if an argument for the primacy of human love as the source for happiness has begun. Brontë continues to reflect the autobiographical influences here as she has done with Brocklehurst and Helen Burns by her creation of one of the most charismatic characters in all Victorian novels: the enigmatic Mr. Rochester. As we read the novel, we learn that if we want happiness, we must secure it in *this* life—not the hereafter—but as we shall see, human love is also tenuous and can lead to great sorrow.

Like the life story of Charlotte Brontë and her relationship to her employer Monsieur Constantin Héger,²⁴ the fictional Jane desires to connect to her lover in a desperate hunger for spiritual and emotional unity. Published only three years after Brontë’s return from Belgium and her separation from a man she deeply admired, *Jane Eyre* analogously demonstrates how Rochester’s sufferings cause him to curse God, reject God’s benevolence outright, and to enjoy the pleasures of the world while he can, and for a few chapters, it seems as if Jane may follow his lead.

²⁴We will explore the connection in more detail in the chapter on *Villette*.

According to Robert Martin, the relationship between Mr. Rochester and Jane, a reflection of Brontë's to Héger's, becomes a "microcosm of man's striving for Christian reward" (83). Martin develops this argument by postulating that "Miss Brontë's general position [is] that man's hell and heaven are sufficient on Earth without looking unnecessarily for them elsewhere. Religion is essential, but it is largely concerned with man's position in this world" (64). Like Charlotte's relationship to Héger, Jane's connection to Mr. Rochester mirrors that of a devotee of God: "My future husband was becoming to me my whole world; and more than the world: almost my hope of heaven. He stood between me and every thought of religion. . . . I could not, in those days, see God for his creature: of whom I had made an idol" (316). It is noteworthy that Jane and Charlotte both call the men they love "idols." In Christian theology, idolatry—excessive admiration for an entity other than God—is a sin. This could be an indication of Brontë's acknowledgment that human love had supplanted God's primacy in Jane's life—a movement toward the sensual and away from the supernatural. Griesinger also notices that "Brontë's heroine was quite frankly replacing a Christian theology of renunciation with a more hedonistic theology of love" (52). In her introduction to the *Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, Muriel Spark argues along this line by showing how Brontë's characters fall in love with their "masters." She suggests that "to Charlotte, the submission of a strong personality to one even stronger signified love on its highest level" (15).

We also see this predisposition toward dominant male idols in Brontë's unpublished stories about Angria, a world of amoral characters penned by Charlotte and her brother Branwell from adolescence until Charlotte's early twenties. While her sisters Anne and Emily focused on their created world of Gondal and its "dark world of persecution, murder, illegitimacy, adultery, suicide, and passion," Charlotte created a world whose characters were "swearing, drinking,

amorous men . . . [of] adulterous passions” (Peters 32; 86). Zamorna, one of her main protagonists, is quite the scoundrel; he has many amorous (and illicit) liaisons, including adulterous affairs, and has bastard children, including one from a “Negress” (Barker 203). These Angrian stories of secret worlds were only shared with her siblings. Why should Charlotte, a preacher’s daughter, write about such amoral characters? Since she did, however, we must conclude that Charlotte possessed a transgressive spirit, at least as a young woman. Peters advances the notion that Charlotte had “amoral fantasies” (85). While this cannot be proven, it does seem that Brontë must have been conflicted between her religious upbringing, her “evil wandering thoughts” as she penned Angrian tales, and the “corrupt heart” that she shared with Ellen Nussey²⁵ (Smith 1: 156).

In Edward Rochester, we encounter the epitome of the Byronic hero. When Jane and Rochester first meet, they both suffer great malaise: he from his unbearable life married to a madwoman and Jane from her life heretofore. Rochester struggles with moodiness while Jane quietly uses watercolors to paint horribly somber scenes of loneliness and death (“Sinking below the bird and mast, a drowned corpse glanced through the green water; a fair arm was the only limb clearly visible whence the bracelet had been washed or torn” 147). Jane has never experienced romantic affection, causing Rochester to claim that she has “lived the life of a nun” (144) and to note that she has “rather the look of another world” (143).

Jane is not in any way attractive, but neither is Rochester. Jane, never one to mince words, believes that “most people would have thought him an ugly man,” yet he is a man who possesses “other qualities, intrinsic or adventitious, to atone for the lack of mere personal attractiveness” (155). Like Jane, Rochester’s exterior is not the sum of his worth, but Jane’s

²⁵5 and 6 December 1836.

conscience is clear whereas his is remorseful and stained. In her relationship with Rochester, however, Jane will experience human love that potentially supplants religious desire as a source of happiness. Rather than depending on predestination, or martyrdom and resignation, Jane learns that contentment can be found here on Earth in the arms of a lover, and any discussion of God fades to the background in the novel until St. John Rivers appears.

Early in the conversations between Jane and Rochester, he brings up the philosophical question of what makes a person good. Is it circumstance? Fate? He argues he “might have been very different . . . almost as stainless” (158) as Jane if fate had not wronged him, and unfortunately, Rochester “had not the wisdom to remain cool” and “turned desperate,” eventually leading to degeneracy (159). Many of their discussions attempt to answer the question of how morality is determined and how happiness is obtained, but few discussions are religious in nature. For instance, Rochester’s desire for freedom at any cost mirrors the rebellious young Jane’s attitude in the Reed household. Fate, it seems, has cursed him for life: “[S]ince happiness is irrevocably denied me, I have a right to get pleasure out of life: and I *will* get it, cost what it may” (160). Jane tries to point out he will become even more degenerate if he follows that course of action, but he responds that “unheard-of combinations of circumstances demand unheard-of rules” (161). We know that Rochester recognizes the wounds Jane’s spirit has encountered and that “the shock is yet to be given which shall waken it” (166). The value of the godless and hedonistic philosophy of Rochester’s will be put to the test when Jane must eventually decide whether to marry him after learning of his relationship to Bertha.

Through a series of events, Jane does fall in love with Rochester although she cannot at first admit this because “[i]t does good to no woman to be flattered by her superior, who cannot possibly intend to marry her; and it is madness in all women to let a secret love kindle” (186).

When Rochester is absent from Thornfield, Jane experiences deep loneliness. She begins to recognize her attachment to Thornfield's master. During a large and lengthy party at Thornfield that includes the lovely Blanche Ingram, Jane surreptitiously observes Rochester and finds that his features captivate her. Unwittingly, and helplessly, she acknowledges, "He made me love him without looking at me" even though she has tried "to extirpate from my soul the germs of love there detected" (203). As if to emphasize the immediate attraction, Jane switches to the present tense during this scene: "while I breathe and think, I must love him" (204).

The party is a success, but Jane believes that Rochester is avoiding her. At some point in the long stay of the Ingrams and their friends, a fortune teller arrives *en habillé* and isolates herself in a separate room. Jane is invited to have her fortune told after all the other single ladies have entered. She sees a gipsy-like woman's face covered as she is bent over a fire, apparently reading "a little black book, like a Prayer Book." Jane hastens to tell the fortune teller that "she has no faith" (227). Jane seems to be referring to her lack of belief in fortune telling, but it is odd that the Prayer Book is mentioned just a few sentences before. This may indicate Jane's lack of religious belief at this point in the plot to careful readers, or at least indicate doubt in the efficacy of it. She certainly wishes to adhere to a more secular philosophy of worldly happiness, for she *is* in love with Rochester even though she has little hope of his reciprocating the feeling. Shortly after this scene, however, the anticipated romance does commence even as Rochester's past threatens to terminate the nascent love affair. Jane will learn that as painful as eternal damnation might be, while we live and breathe on Earth, there is potentially no greater source of happiness than human love. However, there is no guarantee of the outcome in any relationship. Thus, Jane and Rochester's pleasure-seeking ideology of love mimics in a small way Calvinist fears of predestination: there is no guarantee of the happily-ever-after for either.

Jane's love for Rochester is tested when Bertha attacks Mr. Mason, sucks his blood, and threatens to drain his heart. Surely, this strange episode should send warning signals out to our rational Jane. Even Rochester is leery of the danger: "To live, for me, Jane, is to stand on a crater-crust which may crack and spue fire any day" (250). He refuses to enlighten her as to the problem with Mason, but afterwards he asks what she would do if someone she knew had committed an error that was disastrous. He outlines his argument thus: "To attain [happiness], are you justified in overleaping an obstacle of custom—a mere conventional impediment which neither your conscience sanctifies nor your judgement approves?" Of course, unbeknownst to Jane, his "obstacle of custom" is his marriage to Bertha. He argues earnestly that if a person has a chance at happiness in this life despite an obstacle, that person is "justified in daring the world's opinion" (252). His argument is a morally charged, hedonistic challenge that will ultimately defend offering Jane happiness even though he would be a bigamist.

When Jane returns to briefly see her Aunt Reed as she is dying, we must acknowledge how far God has disappeared from Brontë's discourse. The deathbed scene provided captivating, dramatic material for writers to expound on religious topics. After all, according to Evangelical doctrine, this was the place where a sinner would squirm and die horribly for the sins committed or where a saint would die peacefully having achieved victory over death—either manner taken as possible proof of damnation or salvation. Many believed in a possible last-minute redemption of the sinner, no matter how reprobate the life lived was.²⁶ However, Charlotte Brontë does not

²⁶ In a sermon, Patrick Brontë admonishes against "the transactions of a dying bed as exclusively a safe criterion to judge of a man's character. If we would know whether a man has died in the Lord, we ought, in the first instance to ask, has he lived in the Lord? Some, I fear, have greatly and dangerously erred on this head, and an error here, would be as fatal as irretrievable" (qtd. in Jay, *The Religion* 161).

give us a restorative deathbed scene.²⁷ Instead, Aunt Reed's demise is an explanation of behavior rather than a confession; the deathbed coldness is a missed opportunity for uniting with God.

It must have come as a surprise to contemporary readers that Brontë offers no religious didacticism in this section.²⁸ Victorians witnessed death often. Almost 15% of newly born infants died within their first year, many people died after weeks of suffering at home instead of a hospital, and families had to prepare their dead for burial without the help of an undertaker (Jay, *The Religion* 167). The close relationship Victorians had with death required almost a day-to-day evaluation of their own mortality, and novels offered writers a unique opportunity to provide readers with assuring Christian messages of hope when a character died; Brontë avoids this. Jane's demeanor toward Aunt Reed is cold, and she feels "a determination to subdue" her aunt (266). Even after Aunt Reed's treachery is acknowledged—her falsification of Jane's death in order to cheat her of an inheritance and a financially secure life with her uncle—Jane offers her aunt her cheek and her forgiveness, but Aunt Reed continues to repudiate Jane. Her aunt has only confessed out of what seems to be a fear of perdition. The deathbed scene shows us that little has changed between aunt and niece. Both persist in calculated, obdurate behavior. Jane perhaps needs to be forgiven as her aunt does, for Jane had been a willful, difficult child, often rebellious, yet when Aunt Reed refuses to press Jane's hand in return, Jane feels "pain" and then "ire; and then a determination to subdue her" (266). Why does Charlotte Brontë miss an opportunity to examine true repentance and forgiveness? It seems as if Brontë is determined that

²⁷Anne Brontë also refuses to allow Helen Huntingdon's husband to redeem himself as he is dying in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

²⁸Unlike nineteenth-century English citizens, we are not as familiar with death, and we might miss the significant absence of religious moralism by Brontë.

Aunt Reed's actions should not go unpunished; God was not merciful to Jane growing up, and Aunt Reed's by-the-book confession seems unworthy of spiritual redemption. While Jane may openly state she forgives her aunt, there is a hardness in her heart (reminiscent of Jane's childhood cries of "Unjust! Unjust!") that refuses to accept the type of God who could forgive the coldhearted, unremorseful, and neglectful aunt. If Calvinism were true, Aunt Reed, no matter what her past behavior, could still be predestined to salvation. That is something Jane cannot accept.

Instead of receiving a spiritual epiphany at the deathbed of Aunt Reed, Jane returns to Thornfield and to the arms of Rochester. Jane endeavors to reach happiness through her own means after returning from Gateshead. She argues that she is "a free human being with an independent will," and Rochester responds that her will—not God or fate—shall decide her destiny (293). In their discussion, the justification of acting outside of God's law (i.e., embracing bigamy) is conspicuous. Rochester gives us the full argument here:

Have I not found [Jane] friendless, and cold, and comfortless? Will I not guard, and cherish, and solace her? Is there not love in my heart, and constancy in my resolves? It will expiate at God's tribunal. I know my Maker sanctions what I do. For the world's judgment—I wash my hands thereof. For man's opinion—I defy it. (295)

Rochester overrules Biblical mandates and instead implements his brand of philosophy. His argument is an interesting parallel to that of Calvinist predestination: if Rochester already believes he is one of the "elect," nothing that he does matters; he will be vindicated at God's tribunal.

As for Jane, the thought of happiness with Rochester seems unfathomable, and the dialogue between the two intensifies in chimerical tones. She fears that "[h]uman beings never enjoy complete happiness in this world" and "to imagine such a lot befalling me is a fairy-tale—a day-dream" (298). Rochester assures her of their good fortune and tells his petulant young

ward Adèle that he will fly Jane to the moon and care for his young bride there. Jane and Rochester use words in their conversations indicating fancy and not reality: “fairy,” “ogre or a ghoul,” and a “witch.” He sings her a “sweet air” of their love, but it is “dangerous” and “haunted.” He defies omens and is careless about forebodings. Later, the housekeeper tells Jane to be on her guard: “It is an old saying that ‘all is not gold that glitters;’ and in this case I do fear there will be something found to be different to what either you or I expect” (305). Jane ignores her advice. Mrs. Fairfax increases the urgency of her warnings, intimating that Rochester may have wanted Jane for a mistress, “a sort of pet” (305). Jane continues to brush aside the admonitions. Neither does she pay attention to nightmares about a little child, nor the lightning-wrecked chestnut tree, nor her wedding apparel that is “wraith-like” that “gave out certainly a most ghostly shimmer” (317). Rochester has become Jane’s entire hope of happiness: he was “an eclipse [that] intervenes between man and the broad sun” (316), and we might add, and of God. Indeed, Rochester notes that Jane gazes at him with “earnest, religious energy . . . the very sublime of faith, truth, and devotion” (325). He has become her deity.

The marriage day approaches and with it the revelation that Rochester is married. He cannot overcome convention and apparently cannot overcome Providence,²⁹ either. Later, as the wedding guests are taken to see the madwoman in the attic—to compare the foul creature with the innocent Jane—Rochester reverts to religious language and becomes holier-than-thou, challenging his guests to “remember with what judgment ye judge ye shall be judged” (339). He wishes “to exert a fraction of Samson’s strength, and break the entanglement like tow!” (348). Jane feels all her hopes are dashed, struck down like “the first-born in the land of Egypt” (341). In the novel, scriptural diction generally increases when hopes are crushed; more worldly

²⁹Throughout this study, “providence” or “Providence” refers to the *Oxford English Dictionary’s* definition of “God . . . as exercising prescient and beneficent power and direction.”

language is used between the two lovers when hopes are increased. Scripture is present in the novel during disruption and despair is absent during periods of happiness. This seems to indicate Brontë's ambivalence about God's role in human happiness: she returns to religious phrasing when troubles appear, but she just as quickly abandons any spiritually purposive suffering when mortal love triumphs.

After the crowd learns of Bertha's relationship, the lovers retreat to Thornfield. Jane and Rochester revert to religious language—so plainly absent from their courtship—in their conversations. Jane wishes to be dead, but the only idea that keeps life in her is “a remembrance of God” and a verse from the Psalms.³⁰ She is utterly lost: “I had lifted no petition to Heaven to avert [trouble]: . . . The whole consciousness of my life lorn, my love lost, my hope quenched, my faith death-struck” (342). While her recollection of God should be comforting, it is not. Her conscience “turned tyrant, held Passion by the throat” and she hears a voice within her that tells her to tear herself away from Rochester and leave: “you shall yourself pluck out your right eye; yourself cut off your right hand: your heart shall be the victim, and you the priest to transfix it” (343). Human love for Jane has resulted in disaster and in instructions that are so punitive that the Calvinist notion of predestination seems almost merciful by comparison. Jane and Rochester continue to struggle against their future, but there is no possibility for hope. Jane resignedly entreats Rochester to “trust in God and yourself. Believe in heaven. Hope to meet again there” (364). She reverts to a theology of renunciation because when she had last trusted in herself, she almost committed bigamy. His response is more grim: “We were born to strive and endure” (364), and while he argues that it is not “better to drive a fellow-creature to despair than to transgress a mere human law” (and Jane seems to agree with this), she states that she must “keep

³⁰If we recall, as a child, Jane had confessed to disliking the Psalms to Mr. Brocklehurst. The scripture does not seem to offer any succor here.

the law given by God; sanctioned by man. Preconceived opinions, foregone determinations, are all I have at this hour to stand by: there I plant my foot” (365). Her decision to leave Rochester seems to be blessed by an apparition that tells Jane to “flee temptation” (367), and she does. She leaves him in despair, and the door closes on Jane’s chapter of life at Thornfield.

Distraught, Jane hopes for death, but as she travels despondently away from Rochester at the beginning of chapter 28, the theological language of the narrative increases. Bereft of human love, Jane must return to scriptural ventriloquism—the only lifeline available to her. Jane says her evening prayers. She provides her readers with a transcendent religious theology:

We know that God is everywhere; but certainly we feel His presence most when His works are on the grandest scale spread before us. . . . His infinitude, His omnipotence, His omnipresence. I felt the might and strength of God. Sure was I of His efficiency to save what He had made; convinced I grew that neither earth should perish, nor one of the souls it treasured.³¹ I turned my prayer to thanksgiving: the Source of Life was also the Saviour of spirits. Mr. Rochester was safe: he was God’s, and by God would he be guarded. (373)

This is the most religious, didactic passage of the novel,³² spoken two days after Jane has left Thornfield. However, much later, we find out that Rochester was not as safe as Jane assumed him to be and that God did not protect him, for Rochester is maimed³³, blinded, and scarred. Nonetheless, it seems as if Jane has experienced conversion from worldly reliance on her lover to holy dependence on God at this moment.

³¹Again, a belief in universal salvation brings comfort; judgment of sin is absent.

³² Perhaps the increasingly religious narrative reflects the events occurring in Brontë’s life as she was writing the novel. She began writing while she was away from home in August 1846. Charlotte returned to a household in upheaval. Her sister Anne was terribly ill, her brother Branwell ravaged by alcohol and opium usage, the sisters discouraged by having their attempt at publishing three tales (Charlotte’s *The Professor*, Emily’s *Wuthering Heights*, and Anne’s *Agnes Grey*) rejected, and her family’s faithful servant Tabby infirm. The additional distress had an effect on Charlotte, and perhaps she experienced a change in outlook. When she once again picks up the pen to continue *Jane Eyre*, it seems to have been with a more decidedly religious voice.

³³Richard Chase calls this “symbolic castration” (119).

Prior to Jane's emotional departure from Thornfield, she had tried to find fulfillment by rejecting Brocklehurst's Calvinist notion that she was preordained to damnation, by attempting to emulate Helen's martyr-like approach to life, and finally by foregoing trust in the benevolence of God and supplanting it with human love, but all of these paths had only created uncertainty for Jane. As she makes her way away from the love of Rochester, she approaches yet another possibility of happiness: that as a missionary of God.

Asceticism

"Thou therefore endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ"—2 Timothy 2.3

It is worth noting that after Jane has left Thornfield, she spends a few miserable days on the moors before receiving succor at Moor House. Cold and hungry, bereft of all human comfort, Jane is refused entry in the Rivers' home by the servant Hannah. At this moment, instead of having a death wish, as she has in the past, Jane meekly sits, acknowledges her belief in God, and awaits the outcome: "I believe in God. Let me try to wait His will in silence" (386), a statement she verbalizes out loud. All-encompassing resignation and a belief in God (the kind that would allow her to wander for three days, heart-broken, famished, isolated, and near death?) seems to indicate Jane's return to Helen's philosophy of martyrdom. Jane needs to be roused from her stupor. St. John overhears her words, and his uncomfoting response is that, yes, all must die but not all under such a "lingering and premature doom" (386). His coldness foretells the nature of their future relationship, for while she is possibly dying at his doorstep, he wants to deliver a sermon. Ignoring Jane's obvious physical distress, he takes time to discuss the situation with his sisters while Jane stands in the entrance of the home, dripping wet and cold. He is exacting in his aid, allowing her only a few sips of milk and bread at precise intervals even though his sister asks him to give Jane more due to the "avidity in her eyes" (387). Like

Brocklehurst, he interrogates her.³⁴ What kind of a picture of a minister of God is this? In St. John Rivers, then, when Jane has rejected human love and pleasure and is attempting to return to a faith of resignation such as Helen possessed, she is abruptly faced with a new kind of spirituality: that of an austere belief. St. John is like Brocklehurst in his leanings toward Calvinism, but St. John is no hypocrite, and any duty or condition he demands of others, he is quick first to demand of himself. As such, his type of faith is an abstemious blend of Calvinist thought mitigated by the more optimistic work of evangelism. As Jennie-Rebecca Falcetta finds, St. John Rivers denies “[e]arthly comforts and sensual delights [because they] only interfere with the attainment of holiness” (152). He, then, is Jane’s new guide. Jane finally gains entrance to the Rivers’ home, and a new chapter of her life begins.

Does God demand that we put away all earthly desires and choose to follow a rigorous and harsh path? If we lack earthly love, can spiritual activity compensate? Since hedonism has failed for Jane, perhaps a form of abnegation will suffice. Perhaps—finally—by living ascetic principles she can gain assurance of the mercy of God and find solace at last. But then again, after Brontë’s readers learn of Jane’s desertion of Rochester and fortuitous meeting of her cousin St. John Rivers, it would be difficult to imagine any reader satisfied with the potential change in lovers even though St. John makes the ultimate argument: if we truly believe in God, we must sacrifice earthly pleasure in an attempt to please him. While St. John is like Brocklehurst in this regard, St. John seems to accept a more muscular Christianity³⁵: one that is aggressively active in

³⁴Interrogation seems to be a common theme with the men in Jane’s life since Rochester also does the same when he first interviews her in his library.

³⁵In the nineteenth century, the term Muscular Christianity defined a movement that advocated masculinity and physical athleticism (producing stamina to do God’s work and preventing indulgence in less-than-holy pastimes) alongside spiritual development for Christians. Two of the major figures associated with the movement are Thomas Hughes (and his novel *Tom Brown’s School Days*) and Charles Kingsley (and his Broad Church essays).

its pursuit of salvation. However, Brocklehurst's and St. John Rivers' forms of Christianity are despotic. Thus, understanding St. John Rivers as Jane's new mentor is another beacon to understanding how religion operates thematically in Charlotte Brontë's works.

Rather than stoically accepting one's destiny, as Jane attempts to do on the doorstep of Moor House, St. John Rivers believes in a life full of aggressive activity in manipulating people to do what he wants, albeit for the greater good: "[H]e lived only to aspire" and the "humanities and amenities of life had no attraction for him" (453). God's assurance of salvation is absent; instead, his zealotry will force the unconverted (and unloved such as Jane) to acquiesce to his demands. His God is a demanding taskmaster, as he is himself. In listening to one of St. John's first sermons, Jane is astonished:

Throughout there was a strange bitterness; an absence of consolatory gentleness; stern allusions to Calvinistic doctrines . . . were frequent; . . . When he had done, instead of feeling better, calmer, more enlightened by his discourse, I experienced an inexpressible sadness: . . . I was sure St. John Rivers . . . had not yet found that peace of God which passeth all understanding: he had no more found it, I thought, than had I with my concealed and racking regrets for my broken idol and lost elysium. . . . (405)

In St. John, Jane finds a lack of human love, and in his beliefs, Jane finds a lack of God's benevolence. This seems to indicate that Jane, if not Charlotte, associates Calvinism with harshness.

What are Jane's choices, now, at Moor House? She has left Rochester, seemingly for good, and has no money to provide for herself. When she is offered the position of teacher, St. John is testing her ability to put down pride and material gain for godly duties. Jane is ready for this degradation of teaching "heavy-looking, gaping rustics" with "faculties quite torpid" (422): "Much enjoyment I do not expect in the life opening before me: yet it will, doubtless, if I

regulate my mind, and exert my powers as I ought, yield me enough to live on from day to day” (413). Jane continues a resigned and bitter belief in God’s guidance.

Jane realizes St. John would make a poor husband because he will require the sacrifice of human passion for his notion of divine love. Indeed, he has already sacrificed his own love for Rosamond because he realizes she would never make a missionary’s wife. Of Jane, he says that she was “formed for labour, not for love” (464). As Jane notes, he was “one who, in the discharge of what he believed his duty, knew neither mercy nor remorse” (464). Jane tries to follow the advice of her dear friend Helen, learned when young at Lowood, that one must sacrifice oneself for God on this planet to achieve a heavenly gain. In fact, Helen Burns would have made the perfect mate for St. John Rivers! Like Helen, St. John Rivers nullifies the need for human love.

St. John does try to make Jane agree to his marriage proposal, and indeed Jane is remarkably close to acceptance after she has received her inheritance and distributed it amongst her now-acknowledged cousins. His observance of Jane’s qualities (“docile, diligent, disinterested, faithful, constant, and courageous”) cause Jane to hesitate, and an “iron shroud” (465) envelops her. She argues with herself that the role he offers as a wife and missionary in India is surely “the most glorious man can adopt or God assign” (466). However, she realizes that in accepting him she must understand that he has “no more of a husband’s heart for [her] than that frowning giant of a rock” (467). She comes to realize that his religion is one that binds and shackles the spirit: spiritual work—even for God—does not suffice. As John Halperin notes, “To love God *alone*, even for the right reasons, is for Charlotte Brontë a suicidal denial of man and therefore of life itself” (60). Jane must have love if she is to be happy. Thus, she begins to

finally reject for good the belief in a God who is demanding, unfeeling, austere, and despotic—the type of God that St. John Rivers represents.

Jane feels that if she were his wife, “this good man, pure as the deep sunless source, could soon kill me” (474). In the end, she refuses St. John Rivers and begins to understand that “God did not give me my life to throw away” (477), and while he tries to persuade her—even using a theological argument, stating that he thought he recognized she was “one of the chosen” (477)—she is able to resist him. He is persistent, however, and uses every argument against her. Jane is confused: “Religion called—Angels beckoned—God commanded . . .” (482). Just at the moment of near capitulation, she hears a ghostly voice in the room as the two are alone: “Jane! Jane! Jane!” (483), and she flees from St. John as she recognizes Rochester’s voice calling her.³⁶ Once again, we recognize Jane’s independence, even in matters of religion, as she takes control: “It was *my* time to assume ascendancy. *My* powers were in play and in force” (484). She tells St. John Rivers to leave her and she goes to her bedroom, locks herself in, and falls to her knees in prayer (“a different way to St. John’s, but effective in its own fashion” 484). Once she seems to acknowledge a more merciful God, one that would not demand that she marry such an unfeeling puritanical master, Jane’s life has new meaning: she must seek out Rochester. Only that road will lead to fulfillment.

For many critics and readers alike, the character of St. John Rivers is an aesthetic failure. We are uncertain whether we should admire or despise him. It appears from the text that Brontë had no intention to paint St. John Rivers as a failed human being. After all, he sacrifices much for his beliefs, and Brontë ends her novel extolling him. We may not like his notions of marriage,

³⁶Rochester’s call (or as Jane perceive it to be) might signify a deliberate allusion to the “still small voice” of 1 Kings 19.12, perhaps signifying Jane’s rejection of St. John’s demanding God and an acceptance of a more merciful deity.

but we are led to believe we must respect his evangelical efforts. Nevertheless, even with St. John Rivers' strong sense of purpose and missionary fervor, we are unattracted to his message. In short, we reject his zeal as a kind of false fanaticism, and his usage of scripture and doctrine to manipulate Jane is discreditable. For instance, when Jane rejects him, he tells her bluntly that she will be damned for rejecting him and, by correlation, God. Are we meant to respect such a man? Mary Taylor wrote (June to 24 July 1848) to Charlotte of the failure of this apostle of Christ: "I do not believe in Mr. Rivers. There are no *good* men of the Brocklehurst species. A missionary either goes into his office for a piece of bread, or he goes from enthusiasm, and that is both too good and too bad a quality for St. John" (Smith 1: 87). Perhaps the character of St. John reflects on Charlotte's own ambivalence about the nature of God. While we might disagree with Taylor and find that St. John Rivers seems to have good intentions, he is not a man to marry. This points to Brontë's rejection of sacrifice as a value—in religion or marriage. Given that the Church of England, following tradition, employs the metaphor of marriage to describe spiritual vocation, it seems that Jane's refusal of St. John Rivers underscores her rejection of an ascetic life devoted to God. Furthermore, several critics have taken Brontë's apparent ambivalence about St. John as an indication of the author's rejection of Christianity as a whole. A notice in the *Mirror of Literature, Amusement, and Instruction*, for instance, "accused the novel of attacking Christianity in its portrayal of Mr. Brocklehurst and St. John Rivers" (Davies 543). With all the many representations of religious failure in *Jane Eyre*, our heroine must create her own hybrid spirituality—one that will enable her to return to her former lover.

The Problematic Conclusion

When Jane decides to seek out Rochester, she does not know if he is still married. We might, then, assume that she is ready to have him on any terms after a near-miss marriage to St. John Rivers. Indeed, before seeing the burnt-out ruins of Thornfield, she wonders what she will do if she sees Rochester: “Surely, in that case, I should not be so mad as to run to him? I cannot tell—I am not certain. And if I did—what then? God bless him! What then? Who would be hurt by my once more tasting the life his glance can give me?” (488). But when she sees the ruins, she is shocked. She fortuitously learns of Bertha’s death and that Rochester is alive, though injured, and immediately demands to be driven to Ferndean, his manor house. When they meet, their discourse reverts to Biblical vernacular as she says he looks like a “sightless Samson” (498), and Rochester teases that if “Saul could have had you for his David, the evil spirit would have been exorcised without the aid of the harp” (505-506). Brontë finally combines scriptural language with earthly happiness—a spiritual hybrid of sorts.

Rochester passionately exclaims that his “very soul demands” Jane (502). Their reunion is touching, and Brontë writes with great poignancy. Falcetta finds that “in the moral terms of the novel, Rochester’s restored belief softens the blow of Jane’s rejection of mission work. She has not refused a missionary for an unbelieving adulterer, but for a redeemed sinner” (157). The reunion seems apt.

“Reader, I married him.” Would not the world be perfect if, after such suffering as Jane has endured, a person did achieve some happiness in this life? Surely, she is rewarded when she accepts Rochester’s proposal of marriage: “[I]f ever I did a good deed in my life—if ever I thought a good thought—if ever I prayed a sincere and blameless prayer—if ever I wished a righteous wish—I am rewarded now. To be your wife is, for me, to be as happy as I can be on

earth” (513). God has “in the midst of judgment . . . remembered mercy” (516), and the two lovers seem ready to spend a lifetime happily married, reconciled to each other, to the world’s moral code, and to a merciful hereafter.

However, many scholars find the resolution of the plot problematic and offer varying observations. Peter Grudin observes,

If the *dénouement* of the story, Jane’s enrichment, liberation, marriage, and maternity, demonstrates the practicality of her earlier decision [to leave Rochester], the validity of the principle that underlies this decision [not to be a bigamist] is never substantiated. The novel never really justifies its premises; . . . modern readers [are] forced to accept a rather unconvincing and limited vision. (145)

In a feminist response, Esther Godfrey finds the ending problematic because of its “sentimental norms” that reinforce “conservative affirmations of class and gender identities that seemingly contradict the novel’s more disruptive aspects” as “Jane resigns herself to the domestic sphere in her subservient role as wife and maid, and child for Rochester and exchanges her former child-rearing position as a paid governess with the new unpaid feminine status of mother” (853, 868). Contrarily, Maynard approves the ending wherein Jane and Rochester have achieved a mutually fulfilling sexual relationship; Jane’s sexual awakening is complete (*Charlotte* 137-44). Micael M. Clarke, like other critics, is surprised by a narrative that presents an “immense and powerful ideological dialectic that seems to ‘close down’ at the novel’s conclusion to an apparently thin monological stream” with “an ending that often leaves readers wondering what happened to the woman who once so stirringly declared women’s desires for independence, replaced by a Jane now apparently living only for Rochester” (695). While it is important to analyze the happy-ever-after conventional ending to the rocky relationship of Rochester and Jane, the focus on their conjugal bliss misses the mark: the conclusion is not about the happy couple.

The ending of the novel jumps ten years into the future; the lovers are still happily married, Rochester has regained sight in one eye, and Jane has borne a son. But this is not the concluding word with which Brontë wraps up *Jane Eyre*. Instead, her final three paragraphs are about St. John Rivers. We know from Gaskell, Brontë's biographer and friend for the last four years of her life, how careful Charlotte was in her choice of diction:

Anyone who has studied her writings . . . must have noticed her singular felicity in the choice of words. . . . One set of words was the truthful mirror of her thoughts; no others, however apparently identical in meaning, would do. . . . She never wrote down a sentence until she clearly understood what she wanted to say, had deliberately chosen the words, and arranged them in their right order. (2: 8)

Since Charlotte was fastidious in her choice of words, we need to pay attention to the concluding paragraphs of the novel. What is the author saying to her audience by interjecting St. John Rivers? It was not to satisfy her publisher, for we know she wrote stern responses to her editors if they ventured to suggest a change and often ignored their suggestions. For instance, Smith Williams wanted Charlotte to read Jane Austen's *Emma* to understand what Brontë was lacking in her writing. She responded (12 April 1850) quite critically after reading Austen's novel:

Her business is not half so much with the human heart as with the human eyes, mouth, hands and feet; what sees keenly, speaks aptly, moves flexibly, it suits her to study, but what throbs fast and full, though hidden, what the blood rushes through, what is the unseen seat of Life and the sentient target of Death—*this* Miss Austen ignores. (Smith 2: 383)

Why, then, after the most joyous and satisfactory reunion of Rochester and Jane, are readers returned to the asceticism of St. John Rivers?

We learn that St. John is unmarried and ill, apparently of a terminal illness. He has been a missionary in India for a decade, and while he "may be stern . . . [or] exacting, . . . his is the . . . exaction of the apostle, who speaks but for Christ, when he says 'Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me'" (521). The last letter Jane receives

from him indicates he is approaching death, “anticipat[ing] his sure reward” (521). The last lines of the entire novel mirror the concluding words in the book of Revelations: “Amen; even so come, Lord Jesus!” (521). Why does Brontë insert so much religious phraseology—to the extent of quoting the final line of the final book of the New Testament—at the end of what largely has been a novel devoid of spiritual admonishments? Since Christian religion has held only discomfort and anguish for Jane in all its forms (and she has already rejected her devout cousin and perhaps the God he represents), the abrupt conclusion seems puzzling.

The scholars who do address the reference to St. John Rivers in the conclusion note Brontë’s religious uncertainty as a possible cause. For instance, Maynard suggests that “[t]he novel inscribes this central ambivalence about Christianity and religious *men* on its final page, as Jane tells us, in language that may or may not be taken as ironic, . . . of the celibate missionary’s assurance of ‘his sure reward, his incorruptible crown’” (“The Brontës” 204), and Maynard hears forewarnings of Kurtz’s words: “noble, empty, words, especially for this ‘pioneer’ missionary imperialist” (204). Allison Hoddinott agrees that the ending is barren: “The concluding paragraphs of *Jane Eyre* suggest, with equal irony, that St John’s hopes may also be illusory” (170) and that the ending “destabilizes some of the conventional expectations of the happy ending by devoting the final page, not to the happy married life of Jane and Rochester, but to the lonely ascetic life of St John Rivers and his missionary life in India” (169). Thormählen says that “the ending of the novel poses a seemingly insoluble problem. Does that ending [the spiritual rewards anticipated by St. John Rivers] announce the imminent apotheosis of the man whose human and pastoral shortcomings have been so acutely portrayed in the hundred or so preceding pages?” (205). Clearly the ending is enigmatic.

When we consider the novel from the point of view of Charlotte Brontë's own religious doubts, Brontë seems incapable to reconcile herself to the coexistence of God's benevolence and the Calvinist notion of predestination to damnation. Also, while she attempts to understand disparate theological positions of happiness in the novel through the characters of Brocklehurst, Helen, St. John Rivers, and Rochester, she seems unable to resolve the difficulty. Even though Brontë provides the happy ending for Mr. and Mrs. Rochester, she does not want to conclude with a sense of vice well-rewarded. After all, Rochester has committed many sins—and has considered many more. Ending on a note of marital joy probably seemed like casting all morality to the wind; instead, Brontë gives us three didactic paragraphs on why evangelism is good, martyrdom well-rewarded, religious duty beneficial, and self-sacrifice a goal to be emulated—qualities that St. John Rivers possesses in abundance. The conclusion is baffling because Brontë is herself suffering spiritual confusion.

If Brontë had not added the last three paragraphs,³⁷ our final impression of St. John Rivers would be the last time he was together with Jane, and that scene warrants a brief reappraisal. St. John warns Jane not to see Rochester, and she rejects his advice. He callously and piously retorts with a warning: “It remains for me, then, . . . to remember you in my prayers, and to entreat God for you, in all earnestness, that you may not indeed become a castaway. I had thought I recognised in you one of the chosen. But God sees not as man sees. *His* will be done” (477). His anger continues through the night and he reads the family Revelation 21 (which concludes in verse 27: “Nothing impure will ever enter [Heaven], nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life”). As

³⁷In addition, she might have been anticipating her father’s reading of the novel and worried about her critical depiction of St. John Rivers prior to the novel’s conclusion, particularly since Henry Martyn, Patrick’s friend and martyred missionary, was the model for the pious character.

evening devotions end, his sisters kiss him and he turns to Jane: “I cannot give you up to perdition as a vessel of wrath: repent—resolve, while there is yet time” (481). His powerful conviction almost changes Jane’s resolve, but she asks him to leave. The following morning, St. John Rivers has departed, but he has left her a note:

Had you stayed but a little longer, you would have laid your hand on the Christian’s cross and the angel’s crown. I shall expect your clear decision when I return this day fortnight. Meantime, watch and pray that you enter not into temptation: the spirit, I trust, is willing, but the flesh, I see, is weak. (485)

St. John Rivers’ final attempt to produce guilt and to exercise control over Jane is the last encounter we have of the two. By reintroducing him at the end of the novel, Brontë alerts us to the spiritual aspects of the novel: the focus quickly moves from secular love to religious devotion. His presence also mitigates Brontë’s harsh rendering of him in the last scene together with Jane, potentially validating religious activity and belief which to this point have left Jane little comfort.

With St. John at its conclusion, the story eulogizes Henry Martyn and other missionaries. Brontë’s exploration of answers to human suffering within Christian Evangelical beliefs comes full circle, incorporating aspects of Brocklehurst, Helen, and St. John Rivers; it seems as if Brontë exalts Calvinism, renunciation, and asceticism once again as she minimizes the pleasure-seeking aspects of life (including those of human love). Brontë re-emphasizes the spiritual life, and the priority of the religious in the finale bolsters the novel’s examination of God’s benevolence and what it means to have assurance of salvation. By focusing on the spiritual questioning of God’s benevolence so evident in Brontë’s works, life, and letters, we might observe that it is Brontë’s “unquiet spirit” that is at the heart of *Jane Eyre*.

Chapter 3: Dissonance and the Failure of the Church in *Shirley*

“What grounds has [his wife Helen’s death] given me for doubting all that I believe? I knew already that these things, and worse, happened daily. I had been warned—I had warned myself—not to reckon on worldly happiness. We were even promised sufferings. They were part of the program. . . . I’ve got nothing that I had not bargained for. Of course it is different when the thing happens to oneself. . . . I thought I trusted the rope until it mattered to me whether it would bear me. Now it matters, and I find it didn’t”—C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*

Grief often forces us to re-examine beliefs previously held incontrovertible, and this seems to have been the case for Charlotte Brontë as she wrote *Shirley, A Tale*, from January 1848 to August 1849.³⁸ Charlotte’s belief in a benevolent God seems to have been shaken, possibly shattered, by the tragedy of the death of her siblings: Branwell in September 1848, Emily in December 1848, and Anne in May 1849. Shortly after Anne’s death, she wrote to W.S. Williams (13 June 1849), her reader and friend at the publisher’s house: “Had I never believed in a future life before, my sisters’ fate would assure me of it. There must be Heaven or we must despair—for life seems bitter, brief—blank” (Smith 2: 220). Although she is insisting on her certainty, Brontë’s language seems doubtful, as if she is trying to convince herself that an afterlife exists. Martin finds that her letter to Williams demonstrates “[a] belief in personal immortality [that] is quite different, however, from an abiding sense of divine immanence, and from this time forward, Miss Brontë’s work is full of the awareness of the bitterness, the brevity, and the blankness of life. It is an awareness that is hardly tempered by joy in the hope of heaven” (118). Brontë was also exposed to new thoughts that challenged long-held tenets. For instance, two years after *Shirley* was published, Charlotte read *Letters on the Nature and Development of Man* by Henry George Atkinson and Harriet Martineau, a treatise supporting, among other things, atheistic naturalism. It seems as if Brontë was impressed by the book, particularly its

³⁸Published by Smith, Elder, and Co. in three volumes in October 1849.

notions about phrenology—a pseudoscience she believed in,³⁹ as evidenced by the related commentary in all her works—yet she is shocked by the “instinctive horror” that a life apart from a belief in a benevolent God creates.

Perhaps resonating with Brontë’s own concurrent feelings, thematic elements in *Shirley* display significantly more questioning and attacking of various establishments, most notably the Church. The Established Church’s failures that Brontë exposes in the novel contribute to an atmosphere of spiritual dissonance that puts *Shirley* midway between the relative optimism of *Jane Eyre* and the prolonged despair in *Villette*. Martin also notices that in Brontë’s second novel God appears “oblivious of the suffering of man” and points to the novel’s “increased emphasis on a humanistic creed and morals, with man making his own fate as he lives among the dead forms of Christianity” (144, 147). In *Shirley*, Brontë creates a world where religion has “less power to console, reconcile or justify” (Boumelha 89). Once the Established Church fails to adequately address the needs of the population, the path widens to more secular morals, dissent (disagreement with an established authority or orthodoxy), and disbelief. By the time Brontë writes *Villette*, any semblance of religious solace has been replaced by religious angst; belief provides little consolation and, in fact, augments the suffering of Lucy Snowe.

Shirley is a novel of firsts for Brontë: it is the first published as a well-known author; it is the first written primarily using a third-person narrator (presumably, the aging gentleman Currer Bell); it is the first completed without her siblings’ critique; it is the first that assails the many faults of the Church of England; it is the first that criticizes the state of matrimony and

³⁹In the fragment “Emma,” Charlotte Brontë’s unfinished manuscript, she once again uses this method to provide characterization: “Had [Emma] been a poor child, Miss Wilcox herself would not have liked her physiognomy at all: rather, indeed, would it have repelled than attracted her . . .” (Thackeray 827).

spinsterhood alike for women; it is the first that focuses on the failures of society;⁴⁰ it is the first to present two heroines, one of whom is wealthy. Most importantly, it is the first that moves Brontë from a position of resolved religious acceptance to marked religious questioning. In short, dissidence prevails in the world of *Shirley*. In her introduction to the novel, Lucasta Miller notes that “conflict is the dominant mood,” and astutely adds that this includes discord “between the author and the reader” (xii), meaning that the novel “affronts readers’ expectations of Charlotte Brontë” (xi). Interestingly, in a novel that involves so much dissonance, it is also the only one of Brontë’s that, with some modifications, could approach Gaskell’s level of didacticism: the many Biblical references and moral aphorisms make *Shirley* a treasure trove of correct conduct.⁴¹ But do these maxims improve the reader’s understanding of God or in some way undermine it? And what happens when Christian spirituality becomes mere social propriety? *Shirley*, while considered the least by many critics of the three major works, is worthy of exploration, for the novel expresses Brontë’s doubt in the Church’s—and perhaps by implication God’s—ability to adequately respond to the problem of suffering—a doubt that becomes unified in a full-fledged argument challenging the notion of God’s benevolence in *Villette*. *Shirley* exposes three areas of Church failure: priestly inefficacy, socioeconomic distress, and patriarchal concerns, resulting in spiritual starvation for the inhabitants of the West Riding in Yorkshire and Caroline specifically. In Brontë’s penultimate novel, the scope of criticism in her writing has moved from a general

⁴⁰In evaluating British novels of the 1840s, Kathleen Tillotson states that “*Jane Eyre* has the least relation to its time. . . . [I]t is not . . . a novel of contemporary life, nor . . . a novel of a recent and specific past, impinging on the present. Such social commentary as it may offer is oblique, limited, incidental. It is both in purpose and effect primarily a novel of the inner life, not of man in his social relations; it maps a private world” (257). In *Shirley*, social commentary is overt, copious, and deliberate, framed within the failures of the Established Church.

⁴¹For instance: “Cheerfulness, it would appear, is a matter which depends fully as much on the state of things within, as on the state of things without and around us” (33); “Nothing refines like affection. Family jarring vulgarizes—family union elevates” (85); “To respect himself, a man must believe he renders justice to his fellow-men” (508).

critique of Protestant Christianity to a critique of the Church of England as an institution, and when the questioning of one's own faith results in no certain path, as Budd reminds us, nonbelief is only a step away.

Popular anticipation for the next novel of Currer Bell was significant, but instead of receiving the general approbation *Jane Eyre* had received, *Shirley* received significant censure. The general plot deals with the changes in manufacturing methods that left many unemployed in Northern England. Roger Moore is the owner of Hollow's Mill, and as he tries to improve his methods, many workers believe that he is apathetic to their needs and means to bankrupt them. Their discontent results in threats and riots. His neighbor Caroline Helstone loves him, but he decides he must have more money; instead of pursuing the less-endowed Caroline, he temporarily pursues a wealthy heiress who has just moved into the territory, Shirley Keeldar. However, Shirley loves Louis Moore, Roger's poor brother who works as a tutor to a local family. Even though the novel is titled *Shirley*, the eponymous heroine does not appear until we are one-third through the novel. She begins, at that point, to share centrality along with the love concerns of Caroline and the plight of Roger Moore.

Besides this basic plot line, there are many ancillary subplots and people involved. Many readers griped about the enormous scope of the novel and its hodge-podge collection of events and characters. For instance, in an unsigned review (December 1849) from *Fraser's Magazine*, the writer describes how he and his friends had refused an invitation to attend a gathering and instead decided to stay home to read the much-anticipated next novel of Currer Bell. They were "determined on a sleepless night. But, no, about eleven o'clock we began our habitual series of yawns, then lighted the bed-candle, went to bed, fell asleep, and did not resume *Shirley* even in

our dreams” (qtd. in Allott 152-53). The author goes on to mention that the “stage is overcrowded with characters” and proceeds to count them:

Over and above the four young people whose marriage, somehow or other, is the object of the book, we have the Yorke family, seven; the Symptons, five, the Nunnelys, four; the Sykeses, eight (we believe); three vicars; three curates; three Methodist preachers; three old maids; one governess; one patiently suffering operative and family; five or six riotous ditto; besides gardeners, grooms, housekeepers, housemaids, &c. Nearly a hundred characters to be disposed of! It could not be done, even with the ‘resources’ of Covent Garden. . . . (qtd. in Allot 153)

While Valentine Cunningham reminds us that “Victorian literature as a whole frequently welcomes clutter” (2), Brontë’s novel reflects a more disorienting product rather than a coalescent plot. Heather Glen lists some of the “clutter” found in *Shirley*:

Robert Moore’s entrepreneurial ambitions; the dispute between masters and men; the story of Caroline Helstone’s lonely decline, and of the aristocratic heiress, Shirley; the Yorke family and their concerns—interspersed with extended reflections upon such themes as the effects of the war with France and the sufferings of old maids. . . . There are chunks of text in foreign languages, old ballads, hymns, poems, even a school essay. (123)

Lucasta Miller adds to Charlotte’s “eclecticism” in the novel:

We have passages of highly charged historical argument, . . . intimate diary entries, . . . quotations from Shakespeare, . . . Yorkshire dialect, [and] meditative nature description. Sometimes we are addressed directly in teasing tones; sometimes the characters are directly addressed; at other times the voice is that of a neutral omniscient narrator. (xvi-xvii)

Surely, the detritus of almost seven hundred pages of characters, plots, and sub-plots present in *Shirley* rivals Thackeray’s weighty *Vanity Fair*, yet the coherence Thackeray achieves seems to be missing in *Shirley*. Another avid contemporary reader, Henry Crabb Robinson, kept a diary of all his readings: “I have unluckily entangled myself into reading *Shirley* which I do not much like” (qtd. in Tillotson 19). Ultimately, many found her latest novel cumbersome and uninteresting, and the clutter causes shortcomings in the novel. However, Sara L. Pearson

suggests, and I concur, that if we read *Shirley* through the lens of the Church's failures, the "novel's notorious lack of coherence all but disappears" (291).

Beyond complaints of disorder and boredom, other critics disliked the novel because of Brontë's attack on the Church—and perhaps by association Christianity. In January 1850, an unsigned review of *Shirley* in the *Church of England Quarterly Review* (a High Church periodical) found Brontë's "irreverent use of scriptural phrases and a wresting, to common-place purposes, the examples in Scripture history" are faults "impossible to pass without grave condemnation." The reviewer found that "[t]he author's acquaintance with religion is of the most superficial description; or, if its truths are in his heart, they do not, from any evidence furnished by the pages before us, find their way to his lips" (qtd. in Allott 156). Modern critics have also noted the balance between "a flippancy and devoutness" in the appropriation of scripture in the Brontë sisters' works (Thormählen 160-61).⁴² We must wonder what the editors of the *Quarterly Review* felt after learning, as most of the public did soon after the publication of *Shirley*, of the identity of Currer Bell and her affiliation with the Church as a vicar's daughter and member of the Anglican community.

Even contemporary critics who were effusive about Brontë's previous work found *Shirley* inferior. Algernon Charles Swinburne was excessive in his praise of Charlotte Brontë's work. However, he agreed that "*Shirley* is doubtless a notable example of failure" (qtd. in Allott 410). G.H. Lewes supported Brontë's writing, and she considered his criticism invaluable to her growth as a writer. In fact, he praised her intellect and called her "one of the most remarkable of female writers" (qtd. in Allott 162). Nonetheless, it seemed that in *Jane Eyre*, Lewes noted too much melodrama, and Brontë seems to have considered his suggestions in her attempt at a less

⁴²Thormählen notes that "all three employed Biblical phrases to make a humorous point or to heighten absurdity, and this does not appear to have caused them the slightest uneasiness" (160-61).

passionate and more straightforward writing of *Shirley*. Lewes's critique in the *Edinburgh Review*, January 1850, however, demonstrates that she was not successful:

Shirley is inferior to *Jane Eyre* in several important points. It is not quite so true; and it is not so fascinating. It does not so rivet the reader's attention. . . . It is even coarser in texture, too and not unfrequently flippant; while the characters are almost all disagreeable, and exhibit intolerable rudeness of manner, . . . [t]he book may be laid down at any chapter, and almost any chapter might be omitted. (qtd. in Allott 164)

In turn, Brontë provided her response to Lewes the same month as his review was written: "I can be on guard against my enemies, but God deliver me from my friends!" (Smith 2: 330). While she may have felt betrayed by Lewes's criticism of *Shirley*, Brontë gave serious consideration to all reviews. If she thought a critique was exceptionally unfair, she took umbrage, often responding via introductory remarks in subsequent editions or novels. For instance, in *Shirley*, Brontë wrote a preface that responded to Eleanor Rigby's harsh analysis of *Jane Eyre*.⁴³ Even though her editors (correctly) perceived that Brontë's response to Rigby's criticism went against norms of "literary etiquette" (L. Miller xiv-xv), Brontë refused to remove or revise the preface.⁴⁴ Thus, *Shirley*, a novel that threatens such dissonance, commences with a combative preface.

⁴³Rigby's language in her unsigned, unfavorable review of December 1848 is querulous. For instance, she sarcastically calls *Jane Eyre* "a very remarkable book: we have no remembrance of another combining such genuine power with such horrid taste" (qtd. in Allott 106) and finds that "almost every word [Jane] utters offends us . . . in either her pedantry, stupidity, or gross vulgarity" (107). She attacks Brontë's partisanship [a criticism made by others of *Shirley*]: "We do not hesitate to say that the tone of the mind and thought which has overthrown authority and violated every code human and divine abroad, and fostered Chartism and rebellion at home, is the same which has also written *Jane Eyre*" (109-110). The author possesses "a total ignorance of the habits of society, a great coarseness of taste, and a heathenish doctrine of religion" (111). Brontë's response is biting yet playful at the same time, but there is no doubt that Charlotte had barbed words in her retort.

⁴⁴A year before *Shirley* was published, Brontë wrote a Biographical Notice to the second edition of Emily's *Wuthering Heights*. In the note, Charlotte addresses the novel's critical reception by those who perceived Emily's novel as unrefined—a similar complaint made about her own work: "Whether it is right or advisable to create beings like Heathcliff, I do not know: I scarcely think it is. But this I know; the writer who possesses the creative gift owns something of which he is not always master—something that at times strangely wills and works for itself. He may lay down rules and devise principles, and to rules and principles it will perhaps for years lie in subjection; and then, haply without any warning of revolt, there comes a time when it will no longer consent [quoting Job 39.7,10] 'to harrow the vallies, or be bound with a band in the furrow'—when it 'laughs at the multitude of the city, and regards not the crying of the driver'—when, refusing absolutely to make ropes out of seasand any longer, it sets to

Priestly Inefficacy

While there are many causes of the religious disillusionment present in *Shirley*, the Church of England's clergy (as representatives of Christianity) are at the crux of the problem. Unlike *Villette*, where Roman Catholics are excoriated, in *Shirley* Brontë criticizes the English Protestant Church.⁴⁵ Immediately after Brontë's contentious preface, one of the most biting scenes of clerical self-complacency appears. In the chapter titled "Levitical,"⁴⁶ readers are presented with the three curates—Mr. Malone, Mr. Donne, and Mr. Sweeting⁴⁷—as they eat their dinner:

[These gentleman] possess all the activity of that interesting age—an activity which their moping old vicars would fain turn into the channel of their pastoral duties, often expressing a wish to see it expended in a diligent superintendence of the schools, and in frequent visits to the sick of their respective parishes. But the youthful Levites feel this to be dull work; they prefer lavishing their energies on a course of proceeding, which, though to other eyes it appear more heavy with ennui, . . . seems to yield them an unfailing supply of enjoyment and occupation.

What attracts them [to gather], it would be difficult to say. . . . It is not religion; the thing is never named amongst them: theology they may discuss occasionally, but piety—never. (6-7)

The curates take advantage of Mrs. Gale's hospitality by sharing meals frequently at the cost of her own pocket. She calls them "so high and so scornful," for "they treat her with less than civility" (8). If there is any doubt of the condescending nature of these curates, Brontë paints Mr.

work on statue-hewing. . . . Be the work grim or glorious, dread or divine, you have little choice left but quiescent adoption" (qtd. in Allott 287). It is possible that Charlotte, also, set unknowingly on "statue-hewing" in her novels; that is, her spiritual doubt remained subdued for many years, exploding with force in *Villette*.

⁴⁵Rev. Cyril Hall may be an exception to her censure. See further discussion of clergy to follow.

⁴⁶A reference to the third book of the Bible, Leviticus.

⁴⁷ The clergy in *Shirley* reflect the real life figures of Rev. Joseph Brett Grant, head of Haworth grammar school (as Mr. Donne), James William Smith, curate from 1842-1844 for Patrick Brontë (as Mr. Malone), and Rev. James Chesterton Bradley, a curate near Haworth (as Mr. Sweeting). Even though Brontë assures Ellen (16 November 1849) that the characters only represent "qualities" she has "loved and admired," many people were able to recognize themselves in the novel, including the distastefully depicted curates. Certainly, elements of a *roman à clef* are visible.

Malone with a face “better suited to the owner of an estate of slaves” (9).⁴⁸ Later, Caroline asks Mr. Donne “what he had entered the church for, since he complained there were only cottages to visit, and poor people to preach to?—whether he had been ordained to the ministry merely to wear soft clothing, and sit in kings’ houses” (113). These are the kinds of curates tending the parishioner’s souls in Yorkshire. We begin the novel on a note of clerical abuse—and waste—of privilege; the curates seem to be more concerned about their dinner than their devotions.

Brontë’s publishers objected to the content of the first chapter, rightly guessing that some readers would take offense at her description of the curates.⁴⁹ However, Brontë refused to alter the scene, as she refused to alter her preface, telling Williams (c.10 February 1849) that “the first chapter shall be duly weighed—At present I feel reluctant to withdraw it—because as I formerly said of the Lowood-part of ‘Jane Eyre’—it is true—The curates and their ongoings are merely photographed from the life” (Smith 2: 181). She also acknowledged the controversy by telling Lewes (1 November 1849) that “[a]ll mouths will be open against that first chapter—and that first chapter is true as the Bible—nor is it exceptional” (2: 275). Her publishers were right: disparaging representation of the three curates caused strong responses by critics,⁵⁰ including Lewes who found the three curates “offensive, uninstructional, and unamusing. For nothing but a strong sense of their reality could have seduced the authoress into such a mistake as admitting them at all. We are confident she has seen them, known them, despised them . . .” (qtd. in Allott

⁴⁸Again, Brontë’s interest in phrenology helps reinforce meaning here.

⁴⁹The same problem occurred in *Jane Eyre* with the representation of Lowood School and Mr. Brocklehurst; Brontë refused to change her representations because she felt they were accurate.

⁵⁰From an unsigned review (31 October 1849) in the *Daily News*: “There are few things more forbidding than the commencement of a novel by the author of *Jane Eyre*. Like people who put dwarfs and monsters to keep their gates, or ugly dogs to deter idle folk from entering, so doth this writer manage to have an opening chapter or two of the most deterring kind. . . . The three curates and their junketting, with whom *Shirley* commences, is quite as vulgar, as unnecessary, and as disgusting” (qtd. in Allott 117).

164). Not only does Brontë know them, as evidenced by the real-life parallels, but *Shirley's* depiction of the clergy in the opening chapter foretells the thematic importance of religion in the book in entirety, as Brontë was quick to point out. Responding to criticism of the three curates by Mr. Williams and Mr. Taylor, Brontë writes to the former (2 March 1849):

You both of you dwell too much on what you regard as the artistic treatment of a subject—. Say what you will—gentlemen—say it as ably as you will—Truth is better than Art. Burns' Songs are better than Bulwer's Epics. Thackeray's rude, careless sketches are preferable to thousands of carefully finished paintings. Ignorant as I am, I dare to hold and maintain that doctrine.

You must not expect me to give up Malone and Donne too suddenly—the pair are favourites with me—they shine with a chastened and pleasing lustre in that first chapter—and it is a pity you do not take pleasure in their modest twinkle. Neither is that opening scene irrelevant to the rest of the book—there are other touches in store which will harmonize with it. (Smith 2: 185)

Since Brontë indicates that the curates are material to the rest of the book, we would do well to recall that while the novel opens with harsh criticism of the clergy, it also ends with their dismissal; Brontë uses the curates as bookends to her story. Her criticism of the vices of the clergy chimes back to the Earl of Rochester's criticism that the priesthood "hunt good Livings, but abhor good Lives" ("A Satyr Against Mankind" line 200), and she examines their deficiencies with vigor.

Shirley outlines the inefficacy of the curates to Mr. Yorke, a freethinking country gentleman:

When I hear messrs Malone and Donne chatter about the authority of the Church, the dignity and claims of the priesthood, the deference due to them as clergymen; when I hear the outbreaks of their small spite against Dissenters; when I witness their silly narrow jealousies and assumptions; when their palaver about forms, and traditions, and superstitions, is sounding in my ear; when I behold their insolent carriage to the poor, their often base servility to the rich, I think the Establishment is indeed in a poor way, and both she and her sons appear in the utmost need of reformation. (349)

Shirley concludes that when she recalls these flaws, doubt consumes her “whether men exist clement, reasonable, and just enough to be intrusted (sic) with the task of reform” (349). Brontë’s depiction of the curates causes us, like Shirley, to doubt the very Establishment that created and supported them. Mr. Yorke seems to speak for the inhabitants of Yorkshire⁵¹ when he says, “What chance was there of reason being heard in a land that was king-ridden, priest-ridden, peer-ridden . . . where such a humbug as a bench of bishops—such an arrogant abuse as a pampered, persecuting established Church was endured and venerated . . . and a host of lazy parsons and their pauper families were kept on the fat of the land?” Mr. Helstone, the vicar of Briarfield—a man responsible for supervising the behavior of curates—warns Mr. Yorke “that blasphemy against God . . . was a deadly sin, and that there was such a thing as ‘judgement to come.’” By disagreeing with Yorke’s opinion, Helstone indicates solidarity with the “lazy parsons.” Yorke responds that he

believed that there was such a thing as judgment to come. If it were otherwise, it would be difficult to imagine how all the scoundrels who seemed triumphant in this world, who . . . abused unmerited privileges, were a scandal to honourable callings, took the bread out of the mouths of the poor, browbeat the humble, and truckled meanly to the rich and proud—were to be properly paid off, in such coin as they had earned. (53)

Brontë, through Mr. Yorke, rebukes the Church’s actions and paints a dreary picture for the future of England’s clergy.

Why does *Shirley* begin with the famous scene of the inept curates? If we recall her letter to Williams, we might remember that the “opening scene [is not] irrelevant to the rest of the book—there are other touches in store which will harmonize with it.” These “other touches” are the accusations throughout the novel of the Church’s failings. As Glen finds, “the novel opens,

⁵¹His name—Yorke—seems to indicate Brontë’s intention that he shall speak for all of Yorkshire throughout the novel.

with . . . a sharply satirical view of those ‘present successors of the apostles’ who in other novels of the period were far more solemnly portrayed” (124). Maynard also notes the commencement of certain themes in the beginning of *Shirley*, such as the

industrial problems and the role of women in this men’s society. Yet it is the case that the novel looks at these matters for many chapters through the darkening glass of the country’s priestly class. It seems implicitly to be asking: how have its spiritual leaders allowed England to slip into a situation where each man’s hand is against his brother. . . . [R]epresentations of religious life only replicate the picture of the social strife everywhere. (“The Brontës” 201)

As we shall see, Brontë does not ignore the Condition of England and Woman Question in the novel,⁵² but these are only symptoms of the real disease for Brontë; the ailment is the Church, its cure dubious. As Perkin finds, “In relation to both the class conflicts of the day and the issues facing a middle-class young woman, the Church of England is seen [by Brontë] as inadequate” (403). Brontë underscores her displeasure with the clergy when she writes to her friend Margaret Wooler (14 February 1850): “I confess [*Shirley*] has one prevailing fault—that of too tenderly and partially veiling the errors of ‘the Curates’. Had Currer Bell written all he has seen and knows concerning those worthies—a singular work would have been the result” (Smith 2: 343). Charlotte’s introductory chapter, which reveals thematic concerns, produces an incisive criticism of the Church of England.

Even the sacrosanct position of the priestly members does not protect them from criticism. In addition to the inept curates Mr. Malone of Briarfield, Mr. Donne of Whinbury, and Mr. Sweeting of Nunnely, we are presented with their respective vicars, Mr. Matthewson Helstone, Dr. Boulby, and Mr. Cyril Hall. In general, all reflect poorly on the Church. The most prominent clergyman is the Rev. Matthewson Helstone, the military-like uncle to Caroline, and

⁵²Sara L. Pearson suggests that “[p]erhaps the Church has previously been overlooked in this historical novel [by most modern critics] because other historical issues, such as industrial relations or the condition of women, are more prominently featured” (295).

while he is a force to be reckoned with in the novel, Helstone displays little that is admirable. Even when brandishing his pistol to protect Robert Moore's mill (and perhaps life), he represents a more gladiatorial force than spiritual one. Early in the novel, *Shirley*'s narrator informs us that Mr. Helstone has missed his calling; he should have been a soldier because of his warlike personality. He also has hypocritical tendencies, invalidating him for a religious calling. For instance, he chides the curates for their drunken "'carousing' . . . yet at his hierarchical table he ever liked to treat them to a glass of his best . . ." (105). He is a stern man, with little warmth displayed toward his niece or his long-dead wife—or for any woman in the story. As a leader in times of duress, and as a man of authority in the parish, he is a poor example for the Church of England.

Brontë's critique of this Established Church minister is most poignant when we observe Helstone's behavior during Whitsuntide, the Feast of Pentecost. Twelve hundred students from three parishes have gathered to celebrate with a meal and a parade. As Helstone leads the group around the town, they encounter rowdy Dissenters blocking their way. Instead of demonstrating actions that exemplify the gifts of the Holy Spirit more appropriate for the spiritual holiday (love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control⁵³), Helstone turns the parade into a marching army against the Dissenters in Royd-lane. Along with Shirley, he takes the lead and marches through the crowd, encouraging the children to sing "Rule, Britannia" loudly while "the enemy was sung and stormed down." While the curates are thrilled at Helstone's martial-like attitude as he pushes the Dissenters back, Rev. Hall suggests that it might be better to give the Nonconformists "[a] lesson in politeness, . . . not an example of rudeness" (288). Instead, Rev. Helstone makes his way through the crowd, and the

⁵³See Gal. 5.22-23.

Nonconformists bolt in fear. The vicar has succeeded in pushing back the enemy. In opposition to the Golden Rule, Helstone, “the would-be-warrior, throws the leader of the Dissenters into the ditch” (Lawson 735). The problem with Helstone is the problem explored in *Shirley*: “religion no longer instills the principles of charity and humility . . . but has become the source of internecine conflict; in fact, theological differences are used both to foment and justify strife” (Blom 111). The mock battle demonstrates this as the Feast of Pentecost turns a spiritual holiday into a fiasco.

The secular flotsam of the Church’s practices, such as parades and holiday dinners, seem to be the only reflection of religious practices in the novel. Spiritual substance is lacking, resulting in “dead forms of Christianity.” As the parade begins just prior to Helstone’s encounter with the Dissenters, the narrator muses that it was a “joyous scene, and a scene to do good: it was a day of happiness for rich and poor; the work, first of God, and then of the clergy,” and the narrator offers this advice: “Let England’s priests have their due: they are a faulty set in some respects, being only of common flesh and blood, like us all; but the land would be badly off without them: Britain would miss her church, if that church fell. God save it! God also reform it!” (285).⁵⁴ The optimism displayed by the narrator concerning the Church’s importance is utterly ruined, however, by Helstone’s subsequent behavior in the mock battle. Later, Helstone’s actions are once again called into question after he aids Roger Moore in repelling the crowd of rioters at Hollow’s Mill. Yorke reproves Helstone since he does not believe the vicar’s participation is fit for a clergyman: “The Church . . . was in a bonnie pickle now: it was time it came down when parsons took to swaggering amang (sic) soldiers, blazing away wi’ bullet and

⁵⁴Over the reform of the Church, there were great “complaints and cries of pain, utilitarian or dissenting, radical or self-critical, . . . mingled in the vaster national agonies of a society where the bonds were loosening, through agricultural oppression and wages near subsistence level, attack upon tithe, hatred of the machinery of government, and agitation whipped up by local factions” (Chadwick 1: 32). However, Chadwick reminds us that “churches are awkward institutions to reform. They have functions which the principle of utility cannot easily test” (1: 126).

gunpowder, taking the lives of far honest men than themselves” (346). Helstone, as the shepherd of Briarfield, is a failure.

The other two vicars rarely appear in the novel. We know this about Dr. Boulton, Vicar of Whinbury: “[He] was a stubborn old Welshman, hot, opinionated, and obstinate, but withal a man who did a great deal of good, though not without making some noise about it” (256). Other than his raucous personality, we are to assume he is an asset to the community for his ostentatious good works, yet Brontë reminds us that he grumbles about performing those kind acts. On the other hand, Rev. Hall, Vicar of Nunnely, seems to be Brontë’s ideal priest, and he is the only praiseworthy example of any Church of England minister in *Shirley*. For instance, he gives William Farren, a fair-minded but impoverished worker, some coins and agrees to talk to some friends to get a loan to help the poor man set up a small shop (136). He has “sympathy and loving-kindness for his fellow-men” (255), and he is referred to as “a smiling Melancthon” (266), referring to a conciliatory sixteenth-century German Protestant reformer. He gives sermons that are “sincere” and “friendly” as compared to Rev. Helstone’s “pungent speech” that is “all sense for the Church, and all causticity for Schism” (302). Since Rev. Hall is the best example of a clergyman in *Shirley*, we should pay attention to his actions and the doctrine he preaches as these might give us an indication of Brontë’s intentions. In one of his longest speeches to Caroline and Shirley, he discusses original sin: “*none* are pure.” Humanity needs “the blood of [God’s] Son to cleanse, and the strength of His Spirit to sustain.” He reminds the young ladies that women like the elderly spinster Mary Ann Ainley, “a woman whom neither glass nor lips have ever panegyricized,” is the best example of goodness in God’s eyes. He concludes, “You young things—wrapt up in yourselves and in earthly hopes—scarcely live as Christ lived: perhaps you cannot do it yet, while existence is so sweet and earth so smiling to

you; it would be too much to expect: [Miss Ainley], with meek heart and due reverence, treads close in her Redeemer's steps" (270-71). While he seems to be the best example of an Established Church priest in the novel, he encourages celibacy—a characteristic akin to monastic life, a lifestyle discouraged by the Established Church. Unlike Helstone's presence, Hall's appearance in the novel seems tangential and dispensable to the plot. Perkin disagrees that Brontë is attacking the entirety of the Establishment and uses Hall as the exception: "*Shirley* cannot be seen as attacking the church root and branch; the portrayal of Cyril Hall alone would prevent such a reading. . . ." (402-403), yet for all his kindness, Rev. Hall is an ineffectual spiritual guide to Caroline, and he advocates tenets (such as resignation) that we know Brontë discountenances. While Perkin does not see Brontë "attacking the church root and branch" in *Shirley*, we must agree that throughout the novel Brontë vigorously assaults the diseased nature of the vine.

While the bulk of Brontë's choler involves Church of England ministers, Dissenters⁵⁵ are not immune from criticism in *Shirley*. Dissenters (also called Nonconformists) disagreed with the Established Church on various points of practice, belief, or opinion, and many had separated to create their own independently funded congregations. These included Baptists, Independents, Wesleyans, Quakers, Ranters, Antinomians, and other factions. One could argue that if the Church were ineffectual, the resulting dissension could also be the fault of the Establishment. John Stuart Mill writes about this "odium theologicum" present in his treatise *On Liberty* (1859):

⁵⁵The Act of Uniformity of 1558, passed by Parliament in 1559, was created by Queen Elizabeth I to unify religious worship in England under a Protestant Church. While Queen Elizabeth I generally allowed for private conscience dissent, all were required outwardly to conform, including attending Church at least once a week, agreeing with the Thirty-Nine Articles, and performing other requirements. After the Civil War ended and the monarchy was restored in 1660, the revised Act of Uniformity of 1662 required all clergy to receive ordination through the Church of England. Because of this, many Dissenters formally withdrew from the Established Church. There seems to be a toleration of Dissenters by most members of the Church of England after the seventeenth century with a few exceptions. However, the theological debates continued over issues of sanctification, original sin, and separation of church and state.

Those who first broke the yoke of what called itself the Universal Church, were in general as little willing to permit difference of religious opinion as that church itself. . . . One person will bear with dissent in matters of church government, but not of dogma; another can tolerate everybody, short of a Papist or a Unitarian; another, every one who believes in revealed religion; a few extend their charity a little further, but stop at the belief in a God and in a future state. (14-15)

The quadrupling of the British population in the nineteenth century amplified the division; Dissenters typically came from industrial areas where cities lacked enough parishes to serve the inhabitants, particularly in Northern England. The 1851 census exemplifies the problem, reporting that 30.5% of the population attended Church of England services with 44% attending Nonconformist chapels.⁵⁶ Anglicans were concerned that by not having enough churches, they were encouraging parishioners to migrate to Nonconformist groups. To address this concern, the Church began a massive program to build new churches (McLeod 24) and to increase the number of clergy.⁵⁷ But who would pay for the cost?

Historically, the British government charged the local rate, a form of taxation to fund Church endeavors. While monies were collected from all parishioners, Dissenting chapels received no benefit. Nonconformists had to raise their own funds from within the congregation for support, yet those same congregations also had to pay for Anglican Church maintenance. The issue was clouded by the fluidity of church attendance in some areas. For instance, if the weather was bad, Anglican church-goers might attend a closer Dissenting chapel for convenience. Others might attend Anglican church in the morning out of habit (and perhaps to conform to society) and then attend a Nonconformist chapel at night (Valentine 107) for spiritual sustenance. While this type of dual attendance was an exception, the issue of taxation of Dissenters to pay for

⁵⁶See p. 27 of McLeod and Appendix, Table 1, for 1851 census information. Previously, non-Anglicans were excluded in census taking. When the General Registrar Office (GRO) was created in 1836, all births, deaths, and marriages were counted. See Vernon p. 54.

⁵⁷Church of England clergy grew from 11,625 in 1830 to 17,969 by 1856 ("Church of England").

Anglican expenses brought discord. Brontë provides an excellent commentary on local rate in a letter to Ellen Nussey (7 April 1840?):

Little Haworth has been all in a bustle about Church-rates since you were here—we had a most stormy meeting in the School-room—Papa took the chair and Mr Collins [a curate in nearby Keighley] and Mr Weightman [Patrick Brontë's second curate] acted as his supporters one on each side—There was violent opposition. . . . We had two sermons on Dissent and its consequences preached last Sunday. . . . [A]ll the Dissenters were invited to come and hear and they actually shut up their chapels and came in a body; of course the church was crowded. . . . Mr Collins delivered from Haworth Pulpit last Sunday Evening. . . . I was sorry when it was done[.] I do not say that I agree either with him or Mr Weightman in all or half their opinions—I consider them bigoted, intolerant and wholly unjustifiable on the grounds of common sense—my conscience will not let me be either a Puseyite or a Hookist nay if I were [a] Dissenter I would have taken the first opportunity of kicking or horse-whipping both the Gentlemen for their stern bitter attack on my religion and its teachers—but in spite of all this I admired the noble integrity which could dictate so fearless an opposition against so 'strong' an antagonist. (Smith 1: 213-14)⁵⁸

Other issues increased discord between the two groups.⁵⁹ Since Dissenters tended to be from a lower socioeconomic class and were less educated, Chartism and revolt were associated with Nonconformists.

⁵⁸Smith cites *The Bradford Observer's* (2 April 1840) description of a debate about local rate for over three hours: "Nearly the whole of the gentlemen, tradesmen, and many of the ratepayers of the chapelry came together, and a very spirited discussion took place. There were three clergymen belonging to the Church of England and one Dissenting minister.' The outcome was a compromise: 'A motion was passed by a very great majority that no church rate be granted for the chapelry. To extricate the churchwardens, who have bills against them to the amount of 21£, it was agreed that collections be made in the church, and that dissenters help to pay off the debt.' The debate took place at a time of 'peculiar distress' in Haworth, 'owing to the great depression of trade and the want of employment for the poor'" (See Smith, vol. 1, footnote 3 on p. 214). Taxation was a contentious problem.

⁵⁹At the heart of Nonconformist discord were five complaints. First, births were registered in the local Anglican churches, so Dissenters had to take their children to the local parish in order to be registered for civil purposes; second, other than Quakers or Jews (these two groups were authorized to perform their own marriages), couples could only be married by the Anglican Church priests and not by the clergy of their choice; third, graveyards belonged to Church of England parishes, so Dissenters would be buried with rites they potentially rejected; fourth, as mentioned before, every citizen was charged a local tax rate; fifth, university students were obliged to adhere to the Thirty-nine Articles—no Dissenter could obtain a university degree in England in the early nineteenth century. It seems that Dissenters were in a no-win position. See Chadwick's *The Victorian Church Part I*, pp. 80-81.

Shirley's most prominent Nonconformist is Mr. Yorke. He lives at Briarmains and is a freethinker and outspoken country gentleman—not the wealthiest but one of the oldest families. He is described as “not irreligious, though a member of no sect; but his religion could not be that of one who knows how to venerate. He believed in God and heaven; but his God and heaven were those of a man in whom awe, imagination, and tenderness lack.” Yorke is a harsh man with “[r]evolt in his blood” (45), and his religious philosophy is described by his son Martin later in the novel:

His father and mother—while disclaiming community with the Establishment—failed not duly, once on the sacred day, to fill their large pew in Briarfield church with the whole of their blooming family. Theoretically, Mr. Yorke placed all sects and churches on a level: Mrs. Yorke awarded the palm to Moravians and Quakers, on account of that crown of humility by these worthies worn: neither of them were ever known, however, to set foot in a conventicle. (550-51)

Once, when snow prevented the family from going to church, the Yorkes read John Wesley's sermons at home: “John Wesley being a Reformer and an Agitator, had a place both in her own and her husband's favour” (551). Yorke is known for his tempestuous behavior, and he has chosen Dissent not for its spiritual qualities but more for its rebellious, anti-Establishment core.⁶⁰ There is nothing sacramental about his choice.

Moses Barraclough, a Methodist one-legged preaching tailor, is another example of Brontë's attack on Dissenters. As a lower-class, uneducated preacher, Mr. Barraclough represents the hypocritical (and criminal) perception of the Dissenters by many Church of

⁶⁰While Nonconformists were frequently depicted by outsiders as unrefined, rebellious individuals, the notion of Dissent was sometimes perceived as a positive, providential movement as George Malcolm Young envisions: “Active, zealous, and resourceful, [the Wesleyan body] gave a personality to the somewhat formless individualism of earlier Dissent, and it satisfied, and steadied, thousands of men and women who, but for the Wesleyan church, would, in the breakup of the old society, have drifted without direction or restraint, into vice, or crime, or revolution. By providing a far larger sphere of action for the laity than the Church or the older denominations furnished, it brought romance and ambition into a class which, under the pressure of the new civilization, was losing both purpose and aspiration” (65). In most Victorian novels, however, Dissent is rarely depicted as heroic.

England members. Barraclough is the leader in the battle of Stilbro' Moor and the attack on Sykes's property. Roger Moore's servant girl Sarah "would have nothing to say to [Moses]. . . . [S]he'd some notion about his being a hypocrite" (124). Barraclough is a Methodist preacher but also a well-known boozier and swindler, as well, who is sometimes "dead-drunk by the roadside," and while he preaches peace, he makes "it the business . . . to stir up dissension." Roger Moore tells him, "You no more sympathize with the poor who are in distress, than you sympathize with me: you incite them to outrage for bad purposes of your own. . . . You [and Noah o'Tim] are restless, meddling, impudent scoundrels, whose chief motive-principle is a selfish ambition, as dangerous as it is puerile" (131). There is no admirable quality in this Nonconformist minister, either.

Another aspect of Dissent was its insistence on freedom of individual thought, and Brontë attacks the extreme version of this tenet in her characterization of Michael Hartley, the "mad Calvinist and Jacobin weaver." While he is not a clergyman, he is nonetheless an authoritative voice of Dissent and a representative of Calvinism. His hypocritical actions and carousing behavior reflect poorly for the group he represents. He is an inebriate, appearing "hatless, in his shirt-sleeves—his coat and castor having been detained at the public-house in pledge" and is sometimes found "in a state bordering on delirium tremens" (224-25). He interprets events and signs as prophecy of doom for Moore. For instance, Moore tells Shirley about a conversation: "[Hartley] solemnly informed me that hell was foreordained my inevitable portion; that he read the mark of the beast on my brow; that I had been an outcast from the beginning. God's vengeance, he said, was preparing for me, and affirmed that in a vision of the night he had beheld the manner and the instrument of my doom" (225). Hartley's strange prophetic ramblings demonstrate the extent individual interpretation of signs and wonders was permissible

within Dissenting groups. Houghton explains the conundrum: “[W]hatever the exact relationship between Protestantism and freedom of thought, there was nothing Protestant about the notion that *everyone* was to rely on his own judgment, that the common man, so to speak, should be free to ‘select his own credo, construct his own opinions’” (95-96). Hartley’s last words, as he shoots Moore, once again demonstrate the danger of individual interpretation of scripture. Moore hears a voice that we later learn is Hartley’s: “‘When the wicked perisheth, there is shouting,’ it said; and added, ‘As the whirlwind passeth, so is the wicked no more’ (with a deeper growl): ‘terrors take hold of him as waters; hell is naked before him. He shall die without knowledge’” (508). Brontë disdains this aspect of Dissenting practices, and their use of religious cant, conflated with politics, results in “political opinions [that] can then become a basis for damnation and religious pressure . . . [to] enforce a dubious form of government” (Rockefeller 108). The Nonconformists, then, represent a rowdy, dangerous presence in *Shirley*. Pearson concurs that “[a]ll disorder and political unrest are associated with the Dissenters” (294). In short, there is no representation of any Dissenter in *Shirley* that is admirable. Since the Church of England fails to produce competent clergy, and dissent only produces malaise, Brontë challenges the efficacy of the Church in its ability to provide spiritual sustenance.

The Condition of England

Brontë also illuminates the Church’s failure to address economic hardships brought about by industrial and manufacturing changes. The plot of *Shirley* is loosely based on the Luddite uprisings in Yorkshire and Lancashire of 1812, and the attack on Cartwright’s mill at Rawfolds is the model for the riot at Hollow’s Mill.⁶¹ The narrator describes the distress present in *Shirley*:

⁶¹Attacks against mill owners occurred periodically during the early nineteenth century as workers lost jobs due to improved manufacturing methods. Thomas Carlyle warns of the dangers in *Chartism* (1840): “A feeling very generally exists that the condition and disposition of the Working Classes is a rather ominous matter at present;

The ‘Orders in Council’ . . . had, by offending America, cut off the principal market of the Yorkshire woollen trade, and brought it consequently to the verge of ruin. . . . [C]ertain inventions in machinery were introduced, . . . greatly reducing the number of hands necessary to be employed. . . . A bad harvest supervened. . . . The throes of a sort of moral earthquake were felt heaving under the hills of the northern counties. But, as is usual in such cases, nobody took much notice. . . . [E]fficient aid could not be raised: there was no help then; so the unemployed underwent their destiny—ate the bread and drank the waters of affliction. (29-30)

For the most part, the Church was responsible for addressing poverty in the parishes through the tithes and funds it received. Since 1601, the poor could apply to the local parish (which defined political as well as religious boundaries) for relief, and the wealthy landowners were expected to donate generously to the Church for that purpose. The law was revised in 1834, attempting to discourage the poor from applying. The amendment created workhouses to alleviate the conditions of the poor, but the measure, which intended to make the “idlers” work for their money, was a failure, resulting in prison-like conditions for many. The Poor Law Amendment of 1834 took the responsibility of care for the poor, an essential responsibility of the Church of England, and largely placed it in the hands of the government. Patrick Brontë wrote to the *Leeds Intelligencer* in 1837, advocating for the repeal of this bill that he saw as “inhuman, harsh, and ‘antisciptural’” (Pearson 294). Similarly, at the time of the amendment, the Established Church (a system ostensibly set up to provide charitable relief to many) had splintered into factions, and many parishes lacked the funds to provide basic support, such as feeding the poor, for the cost of maintaining the old churches had become burdensome. Thus, as the parochial system faltered, perhaps so did trust in the Church.

that something ought to be said, something ought to be done, in regard to it, . . . a matter in regard to which if something be not done, something will *do* itself one day, and in a fashion that will please nobody” (1).

In 1849, contemporary readers of *Shirley* are placed in the unique position of knowing all that transpires related to the Condition of England during the novel's temporal setting of 1811-1812. Readers are forced to reassess the Church's performance when it, not the government, had the responsibility to address economic distress in parishes. If, as Pearson sees, the novel presents "an idealized picture of the past in which charity is firmly situated in the Church of England's domain," (294) the Church fails in its charitable responsibility in *Shirley*. Only Shirley, the pantheistic protagonist, makes any concerted effort to mitigate the destitution that is a result of the economic changes present in the township. She sees the distress (in fact, it is the plight of the working class that lead to the riots and near-death of Roger Moore) and addresses it. Shirley tells Caroline, "[T]here are some families almost starving to death in Briarfield. . . . I must and will help them." Caroline is concerned: "Some people say we shouldn't give alms to the poor, Shirley," but Shirley calls those people "great fools. . . . [I]t is easy to palaver about the degradation of charity, and so on; but they forget the brevity of life. . . . We have none of us long to live: let us help each other through seasons of want and woe" (252). Shirley possesses a masculine name and demonstrates masculine traits; these allow her to take charge when the leadership of the Church fails.

Impulsive donations of charity were not viewed favorably.⁶² Organized collection and distribution by the Church was the norm. However, since there is no assistance from the clergy to address the poverty in the Yorkshire parishes, Shirley steps in. She enlists Miss Ainley's help and gives her £300 to start a fund. Only later are the clergy consulted, and Shirley manipulates

⁶²Charlotte once gave a poor family a sovereign after learning of their hardships, and she donated annually to a blind girl near her village. Her father said, "I observed to [Charlotte] that women were often impulsive in deeds of charity. She jocularly replied, 'In deeds of charity men reason much and do little; women reason little and do much, and I will act the woman still'" (qtd. in Delafield 238).

them into thinking the idea is their own to avoid any appearance of female superiority.⁶³ Shirley even gets the vicars to donate £50 each and to head the subscription list, hoping others in the village will follow their example. We are told that the three rectors “to their infinite credit, showed a thorough acquaintance with the poor of their parishes,—an even minute knowledge of their separate wants. Each rector knew where clothing was needed, where food would be most acceptable, where money could be bestowed with a probability of it being judiciously laid out” (258), yet apparently none of the priests of England, not even the kindly Rev. Hall, had previously made any effort, as Shirley does, to alleviate the economic distress present.⁶⁴ Mill’s perception of Christian behavior might identify the problem with these clergymen:

All Christians believe that the blessed are the poor and humble, and those who are ill-used by the world; that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven; that they should judge not, lest they be judged; that they should swear not at all; that they should love their neighbour as themselves; that if one take their cloak, they should give him their coat also; that they should take no thought for the morrow; that if they would be perfect, they should sell all that they have and give it to the poor. They are not insincere when they say that they believe these things. They do believe them, as people believe what they have always heard lauded and never discussed. But in the sense of that living belief which regulates conduct, they believe these doctrines just up to the point to which it is usual to act upon them. (76-77)

The Church is no longer “an instrument of social cohesion” (L. Miller xxv) in *Shirley*, and Brontë attacks its lack of charity toward the mill workers and to the poor in general.

⁶³Initially, Helstone, acting as the leader of the vicars, dislikes Shirley’s suggestion because of her gender: “Well—you are neither my wife nor my daughter, so I’ll be led for once; but mind—I know I *am* led: your little female manoeuvres don’t blind me” (258).

⁶⁴We might recall that after Jane Eyre leaves Rochester, starving and cold, she approaches a parsonage to gain succor. She remembers “that strangers who arrive at a place where they have no friends, and who want employment, sometimes apply to the clergyman for introduction and aid. It is the clergyman’s function to help—at least with advice—those who wished to help themselves. I seemed to have something like a right to seek counsel here” (377). However, she is turned away.

The Woman Question

Brontë's expostulations in *Shirley* also highlight the Church's omission to improve the condition of women, and while criticism of the novel has concentrated on the Woman Question,⁶⁵ scholarship infrequently locates the religious epicenter of Brontë's argument. Kate Lawson is one of the few who identifies the repression of women in *Shirley* with "the attitude which institutional Christianity adopts towards women" (730) and supposes the discord present "is part of a larger narrative awareness of the tremendous cost in human suffering, especially female suffering, which is engendered by certain Christian ideas" (741). To get an idea of the importance of the Church's influence with regards to women's issues, we might remember that "[w]omen were the object of sermons, the distributors of sermons, and the consumers of sermons," and that sermons "with titles such as 'A Woman's Place' were preached with regularity . . ." (*The Oxford Handbook* 617). These Church homilies supported patriarchal notions. As Mark Pattison, the nineteenth-century rector of Lincoln College, observes, "[t]he pulpit does not so mould the forms into which religious thought in any age runs, it simply accommodates itself to those that exist. For this very reason, because they must follow and cannot lead, sermons are the surest index of the prevailing religious feeling of their age" (64). While Blom finds that the novel "fully reveals the inferior status of women, the injustices consistently practiced upon them, and their consequent misery" (110), Brontë examines those issues from within the context of the Church of England.

Since the Church operated as authority in terms of conduct, as well as spiritual truths, the interpretation of scripture was of utmost importance. Protestants generally adhered to the

⁶⁵Caroline and *Shirley* do provide excellent material to evaluate the role of women in public and private spheres, and many scholars have read *Shirley* as a proto-feminist treatise. For instance, Blom finds that "[t]he novel elaborates fully upon the fact, the causes, and the consequences of male domination of the female" (113).

guidance found in Psalms 119.105: “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path” (*KJV*). Although individual interpretation was allowed, the Church (unlike Dissenting ministers who allowed for a broader range of explanations) clarified certain sticky points of theology as parishioners attempted to live by the code set forth in the Bible; the Church’s elucidations were generally acknowledged as the correct ones. Certain verses relating to female conduct, however, proved challenging when interpreted with a literal meaning, such as Ephesians 5.22-24: “Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything” (*NIV*).⁶⁶ Perkin observes that “the Bible, as it is interpreted by men, is a problematic guide for a young woman’s life” (400). To this point, the Church’s teachings bring little comfort to the women in *Shirley*.

In the novel, specific Biblical passages are used by men to substantiate the perceived inferiority of women. For example, in Chapter 18, titled “Which the Genteel Reader Is Recommended To Skip, Low Persons Being Here Introduced,” Joe Scott (Moore’s foreman) argues with Shirley about a woman’s place according to scripture. He adheres to Paul’s admonitions to women in 1 Timothy [c.f. 2.11-13]: “Let the woman learn in silence, with all subjection. I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man; but to be in silence” (311). He claims, “Adam was not deceived; but the woman, being deceived, was in the transgression” (311). His general line of argument is that women should be submissive since

⁶⁶Of course, some tend to forget the verse that follows: “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (*NIV*), placing heavy responsibility on the husband, as well, to properly care for his wife.

they are the cause of sin. When Caroline and Shirley disagree with his interpretation, Caroline asks him if he agrees that everyone has a right to “private judgement”:

“My certy, that I do! I allow and claim it for every line of the holy Book.”

“Women may exercise it as well as men?”

“Nay: women is to take their husband’s opinion, both in politics and religion.” (312)

Naturally, the women are affronted. Shirley calls his observation a stupid one: “You might as well say, men are to take the opinions of their priests without examination. Of what value would a religion so adopted be? It would be mere blind, besotted superstition” (312). Caroline argues that St. Paul’s words were meant for a certain time and culture and “that many of the words have been wrongly translated.” If she could read the original Greek, she argues, “[i]t would be possible, I doubt not, with a little ingenuity, to give the passage quite a contrary turn; to make it say, ‘Let the woman speak out whenever she sees fit to make an objection;’—‘it is permitted to a woman to teach and to exercise authority as much as may be. Man, meantime, cannot do better than hold his peace,’ and so on” (312). The entire argument demonstrates an understanding by Brontë of the German-inspired higher criticism of the Bible and an attack on masculine-oriented Church axioms that filter down to the likes of Joe. As Sally Greene notes, “Brontë invites her readers out of the fiction and into the contemporary debate about women’s place in the Christian scheme” (363).

Besides the use of scripture to keep women in a submissive position, the behavior of Church community leaders in *Shirley* reinforces a general sexism. Lawsons finds that “Christianity, according to *Shirley*, views women as especially sinful, deceptive, and dangerous” (732), and Brontë does not hesitate to point out the misogynistic tendencies present in Church leadership. If we look at, for instance, Rev. Helstone’s conduct, he displays an abundance of chauvinism; the relationship of Rev. Helstone to the female protagonists is a palimpsest upon

which the criticism of the Church is engraved. For example, when Shirley reveals her plan to the vicars to relieve parish poverty, Helstone is suspicious “that something in petticoats was somehow trying underhand to acquire too much influence, and make itself of too much importance” (256). Mr. Helstone “could not abide sense in women: he liked to see them as silly, as light-headed, as vain, as open to ridicule as possible; because they were then in reality what he held them to be, and wished them to be,—inferior: toys to play with, to amuse a vacant hour and to be thrown away” (112). When the young Hannah Sykes might be considered an acceptable match by Helstone, even with his fifty-five years and his “bend-leather heart,” we are told that had Hannah married him, “inversing the natural order of insect existence, [the second Mrs. Helstone] would have fluttered through the honeymoon a bright, admired butterfly, and crawled the rest of her days a sordid, trampled worm” (113). Brontë’s language is harsh. The narrator calls him “that little man of bronze,” (97) recalling Brocklehurst’s description as a “piece of architecture” and a “black marble clergyman” in *Jane Eyre* (73, 78)—words that we understand to indicate a personality devoid of feeling. Later, as Caroline pines away for Roger Moore after the mock battle on Whitsuntide, we might note, as Gubar does, that “a girl surrounded by selfish men has no reason to believe that paternal benevolence exists. Christ, the cornerstone of the Church, has not sustained Caroline” (245). Her uncle’s misogynistic view of women does not elevate the women’s positions; instead, his treatment reinforces negative scriptural interpretations such as that held by Joe. Blom reiterates that “[t]hroughout *Shirley*, Charlotte suggests that although men insist that their desire to obey Bible doctrine impels them to limit and restrict women, men are in truth motivated by a deep and innate dread of the female sex” (116). Helstone, as parish vicar and community leader, is the epitome of the failure of the Church in

this regard. Clearly, he is not meant to be a sympathetic character, yet he is the leading voice of the Church of England in the community.

Part of the sexism deployed by the Church leaders in *Shirley* involves its perpetuation of what it considered proper roles for women. Few options were available, but marriage seems to be the preferred model, moving a woman from under the control of a male relative to that of her husband. For independent-minded women, such as the wealthy Shirley, marriage is not desirable. Instead, she finds marriage constraining: “A terrible thought!—it suffocates me!” (204). Most of the examples of married women in the novel are not happy ones, either. For instance, Mary Cave Helstone dies ostensibly from Rev. Helstone’s coldness. Mrs. Pryor’s husband abuses her. Caroline implores the men of England (and perhaps Brontë admonishes the Church in the same manner through the voice of her protagonist) to raise their daughters according to King Solomon’s example: by giving the women “something more to do than spin and give our portions,” by encouraging fathers to “be proud of their daughters” by seeing “an interest and an occupation which shall raise them above the flirt, the manoeuvrer (sic), the mischief-making tale-bearer,” and by cultivating their minds and giving them “scope and work” (371). Ultimately, Shirley relinquishes her “scope and work” to Louis Moore in the end, and Caroline marries Robert. Neither men have been known for their liberality of thought, and it seems that marriage as a sacramental rite will fail to bring either woman happiness.

If women did not marry, the Church encouraged them to act the part of the charitable old maid, but in *Shirley*, this role is not estimable, either, as we see in the well-respected Miss Ainley. She is a Helen Burns-like character in her “self-abnegation and her constant endeavour to think well of her fellow men and not at all of herself” (Thormählen 147), but Caroline wonders how Miss Ainley is never despondent: “she looks, I suppose, to the bliss of the world to

come. So do nuns—with their close cell, their iron lamp, their robe strait as a shroud, their bed narrow as a coffin. She says, often, she has no fear of death . . . no more has the Hindoo votary stretched on his couch of iron spikes” (369). Like Helen Burns’s life to Jane Eyre, Miss Ainley’s life to Caroline does not seem imitable. Midway through the novel, we encounter “Shirley Seeks To Be Saved by Works,” a chapter that demonstrates a woman’s attempt to find value in life through her own efforts, albeit via charitable actions sanctioned by the Church. In this section, Brontë lambasts wasteful (but perceived as charitable) feminine activities, such as collecting for the “Jew-basket.”⁶⁷ In “Old Maids,” Caroline ponders the life of spinsters, finding them “devoted and virtuous,” yet Caroline questions the meaningfulness of their activities: “I have to live, perhaps, till seventy years. As far as I know, I have good health: half a century of existence may lie before me. How am I to occupy it? What am I to do to fill the interval of time which spreads between me and the grave?” (168). Caroline’s fears of the worthlessness of spinsterhood are genuine. As Greene reminds us, “Christian teaching assures her no higher calling exists than to live the life of charitable service that old maids do . . .” (361). Even so, Caroline wonders if there is not “a terrible hollowness, mockery, want, craving, in that existence which is given away to others . . .” (169). The spinsters depicted in the novel represent a joyless life—one of purposelessness and cloister-like conditions—that is reinforced by the attitudes of the Church.

What is the advice given to young women who do not marry in *Shirley* by the Church?

For this, we might turn to Rev. Helstone’s advice to his niece. Helstone advises Caroline,

⁶⁷Also known as the “missionary basket.” This was a large willow basket that was passed around from lady to lady, “dedicated to the purpose of conveying from house to house a monster collection of pincushions, needle-books, cardracks, work-bags, articles of infant-wear, &c. &c. &c., made by the willing or reluctant hands of the Christian ladies of a parish, and sold per force to the heathenish gentlemen thereof, at prices unblushingly exorbitant. The proceeds of such compulsory sales are applied to the conversion of the Jews, the seeking up of the ten missing tribes, or to the regeneration of the interesting coloured population of the globe” (108-109).

“[S]tick to the needle—learn shirt-making and gown-making, and pie-crust-making, and you’ll be a clever woman some day” (95-96). He advises her to remain single, following St. Paul’s admonition,⁶⁸ because married couples “tire of each other in a month. A yokefellow is not a companion; he or she is a fellow-sufferer” (99). He refuses her desire to be useful by engaging herself as a governess; instead, she should find satisfaction in “her meals, her liberty, a good house to live in, and good clothes to wear” (183). Thus, other than marriage (which does not seem forthcoming due to Caroline’s perceived rejection by Roger Moore), spinsterhood is the only option available.⁶⁹

Spiritual Starvation

To this point, we have looked at the failures of the Church that are part of the fabric of *Shirley* and how those shortcomings amplify the dissonance present in the novel. Now, we shall observe how the overall failure of the Church culminates in spiritual starvation and despair for Caroline. Once the Church fails to provide spiritual sustenance, the space for religious doubt opens.

In every novel of Brontë’s, there is a protagonist who experiences a religious crisis. When a protagonist experiences the perceived loss of God’s affirming presence, the despair causes mental and physical decay—often to the point of death. For Jane Eyre, spiritual

⁶⁸See 1 Cor. 7.32-34: “The unmarried woman careth for the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and spirit: but she that is married careth for the things of the world, how she may please her husband” (*KJV*).

⁶⁹Some monastic communities within the Church of England were experiencing a comeback. For instance, the Sisterhood of the Holy Cross, “the first Anglican religious community since the Reformation,” was founded in 1845 (Perkin 398). These gave unmarried women a home, independence, and a purpose, but these communities were controversial and generally discounted by the Anglican Church as a whole. Peter Allan Dale reminds us that “for Brontë, [singleness] was a very serious doctrine, doctrine that seems to have haunted her throughout her life. She cannot get round the fear that St. Paul has correctly interpreted our fallen nature, that the desire to love and be loved by the creature is a kind of idolatry that must end in the loss of one’s eternal soul” (5). The notion is interesting if we apply it to all the endings of Brontë’s novels. A marriage is the conclusion in *Jane Eyre*. Hastily concocted marriages are arranged for Shirley and Caroline. By the time we reach *Villette*, no marriage occurs.

incertitude is most notable with her choice to accept or reject St. John Rivers, but as we have observed, there are many moments in the novel that depict Jane's religious questionings. As we shall find in *Villette*, the religious crisis for Lucy Snowe is prolonged throughout the entire novel, and in *Shirley*, Caroline is always trying to escape "the solitude, the sadness, the nightmare of her life" (373), most notably described in the pivotal chapter titled "The Valley of the Shadow," a reference to Psalm 23.⁷⁰ Before we examine Caroline's forlornness in this section, we might first recall Caroline's spiritual attitudes to this point in the novel.

In "Coriolanus," Caroline tells Moore that Shakespeare, not God, is the cure for his somberness: "Your heart is a lyre, Robert; but the lot of your life has not been a minstrel to sweep it, and it is often silent. Let glorious William come near and touch it." It will "stir you; give you new sensations, . . . make you feel your life strongly, not only your virtues, but your vicious, perverse points" (87). Rather than recommend that he go to church, convert to Protestantism from his implied atheism, draw closer to God, and so on, Caroline recommends the Bard. Additionally, in the chapter titled unprepossessingly "The Curates at Tea," when disappointment appears in life, the narrator advises us to

[t]ake the matter as you find it: ask no questions; utter no remonstrances: it is your best wisdom. You expected bread, and you have got a stone;⁷¹ break your teeth on

⁷⁰This famous psalm of David begins, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want," and verse 4 states, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me" (KJV).

⁷¹An allusion to the words of Jesus in Matthew 7.7-11: "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!" (NIV). The same story is retold by another Apostle with slightly different wording: "Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion?" (Luke 11.11-12, NIV).

it. . . . You held out your hand for an egg, and fate put into it a scorpion.⁷² Show no consternation: close your fingers firmly upon the gift; let it sting through your palm. Never mind: in time, after your hand and arm have swelled and quivered long with torture, the squeezed scorpion will die, and you will have learned the great lesson how to endure without a sob. For the whole remnant of your life, if you survive the test—some, it is said, die under it—you will be stronger, wiser, less sensitive. (101-102)

The grim perspective seems to anticipate Lucy Snowe's moroseness in *Villette*. Nevertheless, the narrator abruptly ends the discussion by telling the reader "what has been said in the last page or two is not germane to Caroline Helstone's feelings. . . . [I]t was she that was to blame. . . . She had loved without being asked to love . . ." (103). Hence, are we to blame Caroline, now, for receiving a scorpion instead of an egg? Are the Biblical promises alluded to false? Does God only provide gifts in a capricious manner and expect one to endure the sting of the scorpion without a sob? In this scene, the narrator's about-face seems to allow for such a grim interpretation. Perkin believes that "this split voice arises from the fact that Brontë was striving for the impression of authoritative masculine objectivity that characterizes the Thackerayan omniscient narrator while her close identification with Caroline's plight led [Brontë] to subvert her own attempt" (396). It could also be that Brontë cannot leave her readers with the level of angst first expressed by the narrator; after all, despondency was a sin. Lawson stresses the importance of hope for the Christian life: "One of these unforgivable sins is the sin of despair—the loss of trust and faith in the ultimate goodness of God and His promises. Christians know they have to suffer in this world—'Whom He loveth He chasteneth,' Caroline Helstone repeats—but they must believe in ultimate good, ultimate salvation" (735). A belief in a merciless God would be required for any person to adopt the type of resignation the narrator

⁷²The same story is retold by another Apostle with slightly different wording: "Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion?" (Luke 11.11-12, *NIV*).

initially suggests, so Brontë must divert the reader from discouragement, and in doing so, she moves the reader to a position of ambivalence: like Brontë, we do not know how to deal with the ambiguity between religious faith and human suffering.

A few chapters later, we are told that “[Caroline] wished she could be happy: she wished she could know inward peace: she wondered Providence had no pity on her, and would not help or console her” (182). A while later, Caroline questions her purpose in life: “God surely did not create us, and cause us to live, with the sole end of wishing always to die.” Often, the thought of suicide or a wish to cease painful existence pervades her thoughts. For instance, Caroline asks herself, “[W]hat am I . . . ? I am one of this world, no spirit—a poor, doomed mortal, who asks, in ignorance and hopelessness, wherefore she was born, to what end she lives; whose mind for ever runs on the question, how she shall at last encounter, and by whom be sustained through death?” She concludes, “Truly, I ought not to have been born: they should have smothered me at the first cry” (222). The morbidity of Caroline’s despair, and the powerful metaphysical statement potentially being made by Brontë, reminds us of what Anne Brontë must have felt when she wrote these lines from her poem titled “Despondency”:

And Hope within me dies:
Even Faith itself is wavering now;
Oh, how shall I arise?⁷³

Later, Caroline tries to justify human suffering by reciting trite phrases that seem catechetical: “My consolation is, indeed, that God hears many a groan, and compassionates much grief which man stops his ears against” (369). She is, however, unsuccessful in finding solace.

Caroline’s declining spiritual state is also apparent in the chapter “To-Morrow.” Moore is injured from the attack on Hollow’s Mill. Shirley and Caroline retreat to the rectory. Shirley,

⁷³When Charlotte was preparing to reissue her sisters’ novels in 1850, she altered some of the poems, usually removing passages of suffering, perhaps wishing to protect their memories from harm (Alexander).

characterized by pagan beliefs, quickly recovers and sleeps; Caroline, the more religious of the two, is troubled. She says a prayer

after the Christian creed; preferred it with deep earnestness; begged for patience, strength, relief. This world, however, we all know, is the scene of trial and probation; and, for any favourable result her petitions had yet wrought, it seemed to her that they were unheard and unaccepted. She believed, sometimes, that God had turned his face from her. At moments she was a Calvinist, and, sinking into the gulf of religious despair, she saw darkening over her the doom of reprobation. (332)

We are reminded by the narrator in the next paragraph, however, that most people have similar periods of doubt, but we should hold on to hope:

[Feeling forsaken] is a terrible hour, but it is often that darkest point which precedes the rise of day. . . . The perishing birds, however, cannot thus understand the blast before which they shiver; and as little can the suffering soul recognize, in the climax of its affliction, the dawn of its deliverance. Yet, let whoever grieves still cling fast to love and faith in God: God will never deceive, never finally desert him. 'Whom He loveth, He chasteneth.' These words are true, and should not be forgotten. (332)

The narrator (and perhaps, Brontë) obfuscates the meaning: should we believe what Caroline is saying or believe the narrator? Has God “turned his face” from humanity? Is the Calvinist notion of predestination to damnation true? Or are we to keep hoping that God is a benevolent and immanent God even though he “chasteneth” us? Brontë’s words are not comforting.⁷⁴ Brontë asks questions that will be answered in part (although, perhaps, unsatisfactorily for the reader) in *Villette*. These scenes of doubt set the stage for the climax of Caroline’s spiritual trial in “The

⁷⁴Melancholy ran deep in the Brontë household. Anne Brontë’s poem “The Doubter’s Prayer” seems to echo Charlotte’s sentiment:

What shall I do, if all my love,
My hopes, my toil, are cast away,
And if there be no God above,
To hear and bless me when I pray?

If this be vain delusion all,
If death be an eternal sleep,
And none can hear my secret call,
Or see the silent tears I weep! (98)

Valley of the Shadow.” By the time we reach this point in the novel, we are not sure whether the hope the narrator advocates will save Caroline’s life.

Caroline, bereft by the loss of Roger Moore’s love, has become ill to the point of death. “The Valley of the Shadow” begins with a warning: “The future sometimes seems to sob a low warning of the events it is bringing us. . . . Ere you are aware, you stand face to face with a shrouded and unthought-of Calamity—a New Lazarus” (392). The image of Lazarus rising as a calamity (instead of a miracle) is an important one in *Shirley*, for it demonstrates the possible upending of scriptural meaning by Brontë and an increasing vein of doubt of God’s benevolence in her works. In two gospels, Matthew and Luke provide assurance of the beneficent gifts, for whoever asks, shall receive. God promises only good, yet Brontë seems to question this belief. Lawson finds the narrative in “The Valley of the Shadow” subverts the notion of Christianity, presenting it as “disturbing, frightening, and even horrific,” and posits that “the narrator goes on to show that Christianity is itself implicated. . . . At a still deeper level of the narrative lies the ultimate fear—that the promises of Christ may be untrue, that after a long deferral the Father may give not bread but a stone, not an egg but a scorpion” (732, 742). This unspoken fear is at the heart of Caroline’s despair.

Caroline must rely on her own will to survive, but she lacks the vigor to do so. Ostensibly due to her unrequited love for Moore, she experiences lassitude. However, the loss of love is not the cause of her demise, only an accelerant; she has no spiritual well to draw from. The Church has failed to instill “the peace of God, which passeth all understanding”⁷⁵ in Caroline. Earlier, *Shirley*’s narrator says, “People never die of love or grief alone; though some die of inherent

⁷⁵Phil. 4.7.

maladies, which the tortures of those passions prematurely force into destructive action” (185).⁷⁶ Caroline’s ordeal is one of faith as much as unrequited love.

In the following chapter, “The West Wind Blows,” Caroline is at the point of death. Mrs. Pryor, her mother, attends Caroline and is praying “like Jacob at Peniel”⁷⁷ (411) for her recovery, but the chapter begins with a grim passage that seems to foretell Caroline’s doom:

Not always do those who dare such divine conflict prevail. Night after night the sweat of agony may burst dark on the forehead; the supplicant may cry for mercy with that soundless voice the soul utters when its appeal is to the Invisible. ‘Spare my beloved,’ it may implore. ‘Heal my life’s life.’ . . .

Then the watcher approaches the patient’s pillow, and . . . knows that it is God’s will his idol shall be broken, and bends his head, and subdues his soul to the sentence he cannot avert, and scarce can bear. (412)

Abruptly, the next line reads, “Happy Mrs. Pryor!” as Caroline miraculously awakes, partially recovered from her illness. Once again, Brontë intervenes to remove the reader from cheerless despair to miraculous hope. We might interpret these disruptive, diametric moments in the narrative as indicative of spiritual beliefs that are also unraveling for Brontë. Caroline’s hope has been destroyed, her faith found inadequate to sustain. Like Lucy Snowe in *Villette*, Caroline finds herself in “the condition of simply being without an end, without a shape to life. It is the condition of living perpetually in the ‘blank’ that is never completed, the ‘pause’ that never quite comes to a meaningful conclusion” (Dale 21), and this recalls the “Derridean prospect of a radically decentered universe” (22) that is secular in nature. Gubar agrees that “*Shirley* is very much an attack on the religion of the patriarchs. Caroline, in her illness, searches for faith in God, the Father. She finds instead the encircling arms of her mother” (246). Only the love and discovery of her mother prevent Caroline’s untimely death, not any spiritual reservoir of hope.

⁷⁶Branwell had died by this time. Perhaps Brontë was writing with her brother’s wasted life in mind.

⁷⁷Gen. 32.30: “So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.”

We know that Charlotte wrote “The Valley of the Shadow,” the opening chapter for the third volume, shortly after Anne’s death,⁷⁸ and the section seems to mark a change in *Shirley* toward what Tom Winnifrith calls “a less confident attitude to divine justice” (54) in the remaining chapters. Roger Moore’s morose view of life may reflect Brontë’s: “we are sickened, degraded; everything good in us rebels against us; our souls rise bitterly indignant against our bodies; there is a period of civil war; if the soul has strength, it conquers and rules thereafter” (507). By the time we reach the conclusion of the novel, we find that Established Church tenets do not salve the soul. There is no exhortation of Christ’s assurance in John 10.10: “I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly” (*NKJV*). Christ’s promise appears to hold little truth for our protagonists; in *Shirley*, the blame is put squarely at the Church of England’s door.

A Conclusion of Incertitude

What is the outcome of the Church’s failures as described in the novel? *Shirley* seems to end on an ambiguous note of triumph, but an unsettling feeling remains as the future appears bleak. The novel begins with the entrance of the three “Leviticals”; likewise, the conclusion commences with the exit of those same curates in “The Winding-Up.” It seems that religion, represented by the preachers, has not been conducive to growth, and the narrator turns our attention briefly to each parson and just as quickly dismisses him. Maynard says, “That true religious feeling might exist is not necessarily denied by the comic/satirical representation [of the curates]. But what progressive forces there are . . . by the end of the novel do not emanate from the religious world” (“The Brontës” 202). Religion has failed to provide a hopeful future.

⁷⁸See footnote from Smith p. 208.

Brontë describes an idyllic picture in the end. We are told a beautiful spring is followed by the “burning weather” of summer that “fits the time; . . . age; [and] the present spirit of the nation” (597). The Orders in Council are repealed; the citizens celebrate. Shirley, after delaying the wedding date, agrees to move forward with plans to marry Louis Moore. Caroline learns of Robert’s love for her, and he proposes. Two months pass, and the war ends. Caroline and Shirley are married. All seems well. Years pass. However, the aging narrator takes a walk up the Hollow one day and observes the industrial scene before him of “manufacturer’s day-dreams embodied in substantial stone and brick and ashes. . . .” He sees “a mighty mill, and a chimney, ambitious as the tower of Babel.” He tells his housekeeper of the change, and she remembers when the fields were green and alive. She even recalls her mother having seen fairies in the Hollow fifty years ago—“the last fairish that ever was seen on this country side” (607). No sprites exist now; the imagination seems dead in Yorkshire. Glen also notes the stagnation and emphasis “on despoilation and loss: not on possibility, but on a process of disenchantment” (132). The final words of the novel are directed to the reader: “The story is told. I think I now see the judicious reader putting on his spectacles to look for the moral. It would be an insult to his sagacity to offer directions. I only say, God speed him in the quest!” (608). What are we to make of this abrupt, ambiguous conclusion?

The final chapter is about fifteen pages in length—one of the shortest sections in the novel, and its abruptness is the subject of much disdain. For instance, Blom says, “The novel’s depiction of frustration, terror, and hatred is too powerful to be outweighed by the brief, almost laconic, conclusion . . .” (126). An unsettling feeling is present: “the reader is not permitted at the end to sit back with the complacent feeling of every loose end having been tied up” (L. Miller

xvi). Glen compares the ending with that of Dicken's or Gaskell's novels of 1848⁷⁹ that conclude "with muted optimism, . . . [and] a clear moral project, 'to make the world a better place!'" (132). In contrast to those novels, *Shirley's* last words do not seem to indicate any didactic purpose. However, Brontë may be misleading us, for the novel has presented an abundant smorgasbord of theological entrées for the reader to chew on.

No doubt, Brontë believed reform of the Church was needed because of the failures discussed, but the ability of the Church to progress was uncertain. This conclusion is prefigured earlier in "Noah and Moses." Robert Moore argues with the rioters against a non-progressive stance. If, he tells them, they burn down his mill and all its contents, will that stop someone else from continuing to build? The answer is no: "Another and better gig-mill would rise on the ruins of this, and perhaps a more enterprising owner come in my place" (132-33). Later, he discusses progress with William Farren. Moore understands that the workers' families are poor and many unemployed. Farren suggests implementing the manufacturing changes slowly, but Moore is stubborn and ill-equipped to listen to requests from his workers: "If I stopped by the way an instant, while others are rushing on, I should be trodden down. . . . I should be bankrupt in a month; and would my bankruptcy put bread into your hungry children's mouths? William Farren, neither to your dictation, nor to that of any other, will I submit" (133). Moore's point is that progress is inevitable; however, whether it will benefit mankind is left up to conjecture in the conclusion. Like the need for industrial progress, Brontë seems to be indicating in *Shirley* that while reform of the Church is needed, the upheaval of long-held beliefs and practices was difficult to accomplish.

⁷⁹*Dombey & Sons* and *Mary Barton*.

The narrator's vision of the Tower of Babel is a startling one, signifying confusion and disruption for the Yorkshire citizens. Brontë uses nature in her novels to represent a source of spiritual sustenance, and when nature is harmed, belief is, as well. The image of the beautiful Yorkshire countryside being turned into a street of soot and ashes with the Tower of Babel potentially foretells further harm for the Church of England, and many Victorians realized the potentially devastating effects of industrialization on Christian belief. For instance, in 1847, a writer for *Frazer's Magazine* expresses a most Wordsworthian notion:

[Our ancestors'] religion was a deep-seated principle; their worship came from the soul. . . . Can it be . . . that, in proportion as we win an increased mastery over visible nature, we necessarily cease to acknowledge our dependence on the Invisible? ("A Day on the Moors" 360)

The loss of reverence for the natural world depletes spirituality, and there is an indication that spiritual dissonance is unchanged at the end of *Shirley*. As Martin finds, *Shirley* is unique in that "there is so much talk of churches, parish schools, clergyman, and the religious affiliations of characters, and in no other [novel of Brontë's] is there so little sense of Christianity having any effect upon its adherents" (115). There is only economic gain at the cost of nature—and perhaps religious belief itself.

There is a small incident just before the conclusion that is worthy of attention. Several families, including the Yorkes, remain home because of inclement weather. Surprisingly, Martin Yorke, who has never been a church-goer, decides to attend:

The church was cold, silent, empty, but for one old woman. As the chimes subsided, and the single bell tolled slowly, another and another elderly parishioner came dropping in, and took a humble station in the free sittings. It is always the frailest, the oldest, and the poorest that brave the worst weather, to prove and maintain their constancy to dear old mother Church: this wild morning, not one affluent family attended, not one carriage party appeared—all the lined and cushioned pews were empty; only on the bare oaken seats sat ranged the grey-haired elders and feeble paupers. (553)

We can only imagine that this was what Charlotte Brontë saw many times in her father's parish church, and the vision seems to portend stagnation and a barren future for the Church.

Marriages are also unimproved in the resolution. Robert vows he has learned “the necessity of doing good, . . . the downright folly of being selfish” (604). He plans on tearing up the copse and making firewood in its place: “the green natural terrace shall be a paved street . . . [and] the rough pebbled track shall be an even, firm, broad, black, sooty road bedded with the cinders from my mill” (605-606). However, he promises Caroline that “the houseless, the starving, the unemployed, shall come to Hollow's mill from far and near; and Joe Scott shall give them work, and Louis Moore, Esq., shall let them a tenement, and Mrs. Gill shall mete them a portal till the first pay-day.” His utopian vision seems at odds with the Moore that we know and the state of Yorkshire as the novel closes. Caroline finds his industrial vision distasteful: “Horrible! You will change our blue hill-country air into the Stilbro' smoke atmosphere” (606). The picture is not a happy one. We begin to understand what their life will be like earlier when Moore proposes. He asks, “Why must you always go, Lina, at the very instant when I most want you to stay?” She accurately diagnoses the problem: “Because you most wish to retain when you are most certain to lose” (571). What kind of marriage will they have?

Shirley's marriage to Louis Moore is also unpromising, and, if possible, he is even more unworthy of Shirley than Robert is of Caroline. Earlier, Shirley explained to her uncle that she “will accept no hand which cannot hold me in check” and that “any man who wishes to live in decent comfort with me as a husband must be able to control me,” a man she “shall feel it impossible not to love, and very possible to fear” (516). Louis understands Shirley's passion, her energy, but “exult[s] in stilling the flutterings and training the energies of the restless merlin.” He says, “In managing the wild instincts of the scarce manageable ‘bête fauve,’ my powers would

revel” (491). As Shirley becomes “vanquished and restricted,” she must endure a controlling marriage, “like any other chained denizen of deserts. Her captor alone could cheer her; his society only could make amends for the lost privilege of liberty; in his absence, she sat or wandered alone; spoke little, and ate less” (599). This is quite a change in Shirley. Louis seems analogous to Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s person from Porlock,⁸⁰ and Shirley’s husband will only stifle, not amplify, her potential. Neither Robert nor his brother Louis seem to offer any position to their wives other than that of the traditional Victorian housewife—a position supported by the Church. Lewes disparages Brontë’s heroes in *Shirley*: “They have both something sordid in their minds, and repulsive in their demeanour [. . .] A hero may be faulty, erring, imperfect; but he must not be sordid, mean, wanting in the statelier virtues of our kind. Rochester was far more to be respected than this Robert Moore! Nor is Louis Moore much better” (qtd. in Allott 166). Lewes’s criticism is well-founded; even though the novel adumbrates the need for other avenues of opportunity for women, the conventional ending holds little hope that this will be forthcoming.

As the novel closes, fifty some years after Moore makes his promises to Caroline, there is a sense of loss. Blom finds that

Charlotte has provided no answers to the complex problems with which she deals, for she believes there are no answers to give. The mills will continue to be mechanized, . . . the mill works will go unemployed; the desperate situation of women, . . . justified by the weight of the entire social and religious tradition of Western civilization, will remain unaltered. (125-26)

While this is true, seen from another angle, we might add that Brontë, rather than believing “there are no answers to give,” *cannot* accept the answers she finds. The Church has failed, and

⁸⁰Coleridge, in an introductory note to the poem “Kubla Khan,” explains his frustration when, after a dream produces the ability to form no “less than from two or three hundred lines,” he is interrupted from his writing by “a person on business from Porlock,” (214) thus interrupting his creativity, terminating the inspiration, and forcing him to leave the piece unfinished.

while economic and female distress are augmented because of this, the ultimate result is a move away from God. Glen says,

The Hollow has become a mill town. Yet the sense is less of achievement than of extinction and desolation. There is no sign, here, of that succour once promised. . . . Progress is figured as loss. And this sense is underwritten in the closing paragraphs of the novel, where the future to which the characters looked becomes the completed past. . . . Those who have occupied the foreground become mere vanishing memories, as the process of 'alteration' moves imperviously on. (131)

The notion of "desolation," "progress figured as loss," and "vanishing memories" recall to mind J. Hillis Miller's notion of the disappearance of God in Victorian society.

The core of *Shirley* is religious and its problems theological; more specifically, it is a novel that underscores the disease present in the Church of England, the resulting despair, and the spiritual implications. Perkin aptly defines *Shirley* as a "novel of religious controversy" (390), for the novel reaffirms Brontë's censure of the Church of England for its inaction to improve the difficulties faced by the citizens of Yorkshire. Eventually, as we progress to Brontë's final novel *Villette*, dissent is turned inwards, as the interiority of the work demonstrates, and doubt becomes rooted in the thorny theological problem of theodicy and moves from an institution to God himself. The doubts expressed in *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley* multiply, resulting in anguished attempts to justify God's benevolence in a world of little grace in the last novel Brontë published before her death.

Chapter 4: “In Fire and in Blood”: Stoical Acceptance and the Problem of Suffering in *Villette*

“About the present, it was better to be stoical; about the future—such a future as mine—to be dead”—Lucy Snowe

Ian Watt studied the inception of the novel and provided scholars with an important definition: “the novel is a full and authentic report of human experience” (32). Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* (1853) is a prime example in Victorian literature of Watt’s “authentic report of human experience,” albeit a somber one. Often characterized as Charlotte Brontë’s best work, *Villette*’s unique introspective approach to the protagonist’s development perhaps even foreshadows the stream-of-consciousness point of view later used by the likes of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. *Villette*’s narrative clearly demonstrates a move away from romanticism to realism, away from exteriority to interiority. Certainly, if we compare, for instance, the novels of Walter Scott in the early decades of the nineteenth century with the novels Charlotte Brontë published in her lifetime (between 1847-1853), we can observe the difference in narrative style.

Some scholars suggest popular religious tracts and novels of the previous years fostered the change. For instance, Tillotson observes that by the 1840s “[r]eligious novels [e.g., Newman’s *Loss and Gain* or J.A. Froude’s *The Nemesis of Faith*] enforced, and perhaps even initiated, the growing tendency to introspection in the novel” (131). While most early Victorian writers were not penning didactic religious novels per se, Charlotte Brontë included, many kept thematic elements related to religion, such as deep introspection, leading to almost confessional-type works. This holds true for *Villette*. In addition to the reflective aspect, Polhemus identifies other religious thematic elements present in the novel: “Charlotte . . . steeped her books and her protagonist-narrator Lucy Snowe in the language, typology, and cadence of the Bible, religious tracts, sermons, confessional narratives, and moral testimony . . .” (110). Lisa

Wang adds that “*Villette* constructs a framework of specific theological reference through the appropriation of certain predominantly eschatological Biblical tropes and topoi, which are used in close connection to the novel's depiction of Lucy Snowe's struggle to understand her own experience of alienation and profound loss” (342). As with Brontë's other novels, this “alienation” is expressed by the protagonist in spiritual terms, and “profound loss” is encountered when the heroine's spiritual life fails to bring comfort. The message is amplified by Brontë's choice of first-person narration; we are intimately drawn into Lucy's sorrows.

Although we find the interiority of *Villette*'s narrative prominent, its introspective nature has also led to the main criticism leveled against the novel: the funereal and sometimes frenzied state of its narrator. One of the most famous criticisms of any novel by Brontë came from Matthew Arnold, and his criticism was not written about her most popular novel, *Jane Eyre*, but surprisingly about her final one, *Villette*. Writing to Mrs. Foster on 14 April 1853, he asks, “Why is *Villette* disagreeable? Because the writer's mind contains nothing but hunger, rebellion, and rage, and therefore that is all she can, in fact, put into her book” (34). Arnold accurately pinpointed the focus of scholarly criticism of the novel (and according to Arnold, its author): the intensely emotional aspect of the narrative. What Arnold is primarily concerned with, however, is the tone of the introspection.

The “hunger, rebellion, and rage” are emblematic of deeper concerns in the novel, and as we shall identify, those relate to theodicy. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, theodicy is a “vindication of the divine attributes, esp. justice and holiness, in respect to the existence of evil; a writing, doctrine, or theory intended to ‘justify the ways of God to men.’” In Christian theology, theodicy attempts to explain how God can possess the trait of lovingkindness even when humanity experiences suffering—how a good God can allow evil to exist. For many

Victorian Evangelical Christians, such as the Brontës, human misery was a natural result of disorder in the world, caused by the Fall; one must trust that God is in control and accept problems as a kind of chastisement.⁸¹ Biblical verses such as Job 1.21 express the type of resignation expected of a believer: “Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised” (*NIV*).

However, what happens, when a soul becomes adrift *without* belief in the affirming presence of a merciful God? In no other novel of Brontë's does the search for a persuasive theodicy appear so urgent—or does her protagonist experience such sustained and unmitigated suffering—than in *Villette*. If we evaluate the narrative of *Villette* as an attempt by Brontë to “justify the ways of God to men,” and if we agree with Arnold that the introspective elements of the novel illuminate the author's troubled mind, we are forced to evaluate the vicissitudes in Lucy Snowe's life through a religious heuristic. No doubt, Charlotte Brontë believed that there is a God, but because she doubted that there is a God who is (always) good, the endings of her novels reflect this struggle.

Many critics cannot get over *Villette*'s moroseness. Harriet Martineau wrote a particularly disparaging undated review of the work. She hated “the novel's overwhelming ‘subjective misery’” (Allott 28). Vargish sums up other contemporary critical responses to the somber tone of the novel: “The *Observer* [February 1853] called *Villette* ‘half atheistical and half religious.’ The *Athenaeum* . . . warned that ‘her books will drive many minds out among the breakers,—they will guide few to safe havens’” (qtd. in 70-71). One of the best contemporary reviews of the angst present in *Villette* comes from an unsigned review in *The Spectator* (12 February 1853):

⁸¹Hebrews 12.6 reinforces this concept: “For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth” (*NIV*).

While [Lucy's] eyes turn upward with the agony that can find no resting-place on earth, . . . [s]he seems to think that the destiny of some human beings is to drink deep of [the cup of misery], and that no evasions . . . will turn aside the hand of the avenging angel, or cause that cup to be taken away one moment the sooner. We doubt the worldly philosophy of this view, as much as we are sure that it is not in any high sense Christian. (qtd. in Allot 183)

Modern critics have also noted the disconsolate proclivity of *Villette*. Martin calls the work “autumnal, full of resignation and acceptance” (143). Helen Cooper sums up critical opinions of Lucy Snowe as narrator: “one ‘destined to wither away into old maidenhood with no chance to fulfill the burning desire’; . . . ‘almost intolerably painful’; with ‘needlessly tragical apostrophes’⁸² and ‘every now and then, in a determined way, some dirge to the burden of “I can’t be happy” sound[ing] from within’; who ‘took a savage delight in refusing to be comforted, in a position of isolation and hardship’” (xxviii). A few critics have attempted to evaluate the depth of suffering presented by considering Vargish’s providential aesthetic. For example, Martin states that “Christian faith and endurance are so embedded into this novel that it is difficult to abstract passages to illustrate Miss Brontë’s thesis without relying on the more conventional exhortations of the text” (148). Blom calls *Villette* “the spiritual autobiography of a deeply neurotic woman, . . . the blackest of Charlotte Brontë’s novels” (128). Finally, Polhemus calls *Villette* a “novel of religious yearning”⁸³ and that the “narrative needs to be read like a passage from Revelations, an evangelical autobiography, and a Freudian case history all in one” (110). Since *Villette* is acknowledged to be the most autobiographical⁸⁴ of Brontë’s novels,

⁸²These are called “spasms of heart-agony” and “the hunger of the heart which cannot obtain its daily bread” by an unsigned review in *The Spectator*, 12 February 1853. See Allott p. 182.

⁸³If we recall, he defined *Shirley* as a “novel of religious controversy.”

⁸⁴Charlotte was so afraid that readers would recognize the fictional characters for their real-life counterparts that she begged her publishers to publish the work anonymously. They disagreed, but that did not prevent many from recognizing events and people, or from an unsigned review in *The Spectator* (12 February 1853) calling *Villette* “transcripts of a morbid but no less real personal experience” (qtd. in Allott 182).

drawing connections between the real-life attitudes and experiences of its author and the plot of *Villette*, particularly seeing how these intertwine in an attempt to reconcile suffering with the notion of a benevolent God, is essential.⁸⁵

When we fail to analyze *Villette* through a religious lens, it is tantamount to “listening to a major symphony from which great sections of the orchestration have been omitted or to standing too close to one corner of a large painting. Such failures of comprehension and perspective . . . diminish and impoverish experience of the art” (Vargish 2-3). However, when we do pay attention to the religious themes present, our focus “leads immediately to issues of causality in narrative (sequence, coincidence, determinism, will)” (2), and to theodicy. This “causality in narrative” points to Brontë’s gradual adoption of a more ambivalent position with regards to Christian assurance. As Maynard clarifies, “She merely accepts, with Calvinist gloom but without Calvinist faith in God’s ultimate plan, the clear non-appearance of any metaphysical order in the world,” and as many Victorian writers would do before the end of the century, “Charlotte’s last novel thus shows her moving decisively . . . toward a secular vision of human destiny, a vision that takes away possibilities of life beyond the everyday to restore meaning to ordinary experience” (“The Brontës” 209-10). In *Villette*, then, we have the best example of Brontë’s inability to reconcile a merciful God with human suffering, resulting in a depressing narrative and a baffling ending—an ending that Hoddinott calls “one of the most famously ambiguous endings in the English novel” (172). We shall examine several features of *Villette* to

⁸⁵There is a “small but significant” body of criticism concerning *Villette*’s religious discourse (Wang 342). Wang mentions the following: “B. Quails, *The Secular Pilgrims of Victorian Fiction: The Novel as Book of Life* (Cambridge UP, 1982); T. Vargish, *The Providential Aesthetic in Victorian Fiction* (Virginia UP, 1985); I. Tayler, *Holy Ghosts: The Male Muses of Emily and Charlotte Brontë* (Columbia UP, 1989); Marit Fimland, “On the Margins of the Acceptable: Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*” (*Literature and Theology* vol. 10, no. 2, 1996); Marianne Thormählen, *The Brontës and Religion* (Cambridge UP, 1999). Thormählen’s book is one of the best on the treatment of the Brontës and religious discourse.

substantiate the importance of evaluating the novel within a framework of theodicy. First, we shall look at Lucy Snowe's attitudes toward life's sorrows and disappointments; next, we shall look at Lucy's struggles with Catholicism and Protestantism; then, we shall examine her potentially life-changing amorous relationship with M. Paul Emanuel; finally, we shall evaluate the conclusion of Lucy's story—all with a religious heuristic. As Susan Nieman observes, "Focusing on points of doubt and crisis allows us to examine our guiding assumptions by examining what challenges them at points where they break down: what threatens our sense of the sense of the world" (2). In applying these concepts to *Villette*, we will observe that much of the narrative is reflective of an interior journey of faith and doubt involving the notion of God's mercy, or as Wang elucidates, "a vigilant search for the unveiled face of the 'hidden' God" (342).

The Sufferings of Lucy Snowe

Graham Bretton: "Solitude is sadness."

Lucy Snowe: "Life . . . has worse than that. Deeper than melancholy, lies heartbreak."

Charlotte Brontë's original surname for Lucy Snowe—Frost—provides a clue that Lucy is not meant to be a sympathetic character. In a letter to her publisher George Smith (3 November 1852), she has this to say about her protagonist: "I am not leniently disposed toward Miss Frost—from the beginning I never intended to appoint her lines in pleasant places" (Smith 3: 78). The phrase "lines in pleasant places" refers to Psalm 16.6, and the full section reads as follows: "LORD, you alone are my portion and my cup; you make my lot secure. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance (Ps. 16.5-6, *NIV*). The Psalm begins, "Keep me safe, my God, for in you I take refuge" (Ps. 16.1, *NIV*), and it is a reminder of God's protection and presence during times of trouble. From Lucy's surname, Brontë's letter, and the allusion to the Psalm, we might conclude that Lucy Snowe will not have a happy life.

Perhaps the somber tone in *Villette* reflects the author's state of mind as she wrote her final novel. As she was writing *Shirley*, Charlotte's typical melancholic state was increased by her brother Branwell's behavior. He was her closest confidante amongst the siblings and co-author of the juvenile Angria stories, but his life brought much sorrow to Charlotte. As the only male of the next generation of Brontës, Branwell was overindulged by both aunt and father, who had hopes for him of a successful future. Going from one job to another, Branwell continued his habit of abusing drugs and alcohol. As Peters puts it, "The minister's son is often the wildest boy in town, and Branwell did his best to live up to tradition, and surpass it" (33). Peters describes the situation toward the end of Branwell's life: "Like his sister, he plunged into a mental crisis. He had forsaken everything of religion except its horrors; now sin and damnation came to haunt him with lurid vengeance. His health was failing, his literary ambitions were stalled" (121). Consequently, Charlotte and Branwell's relationship eroded. Imagine Charlotte's horror and despair when Branwell's affair with Mrs. Robinson, his pupil's married mother, was revealed, forcing him to return to the family home in disgrace. In September 1848, Branwell died from tuberculosis, augmented by a life of dissipation. His death and unsavory lifestyle caused Charlotte great distress, for if the Calvinist tenet of predestination were true—a notion Charlotte struggled to deny—Branwell's actions could have been indicative of a soul predestined to damnation. In a letter to Williams (2 October 1848), she describes her bereavement:

[Branwell's] wreck of talent, the ruin of promise, the untimely dreary extinction of what might have been a burning and shining light . . . have perished mournfully. Nothing remains of him but a memory of errors and sufferings. There is such a bitterness of pity for his life and death, such a yearning for the emptiness of his whole existence as I cannot describe. (Smith 2: 122)

Such anguish at the death of a loved one, filled with hopelessness, must have been unbearable, particularly since the Brontës did not believe in last-minute deathbed conversions.

Charlotte's trepidation at the thought of the afterlife is noteworthy. Gaskell quotes a friend of Brontë's who noted that Charlotte would "turn pale and feel faint when, in Hartshead church, [and] someone accidentally remarked that [they] were walking over graves. Charlotte was certainly afraid of death. . . . [S]he dreaded it as something horrible. She thought we did not know how long the 'moment of dissolution' might really be, or how terrible" (1: 111).⁸⁶ While we might understand that Charlotte's innate fear was probably increased by the tragic deaths of her two older sisters (Maria and Elizabeth) at Lowood School and the loss of her other siblings later in life, Peters demonstrates Charlotte's fearfulness was peculiar to her: "Emily, Anne, and Mr. Brontë lived comparatively serene lives even in the face of these hardships. Charlotte's unhappiness must then have stemmed largely from internal conflicts . . . never allowing her rest" (xiv). Charlotte's phobia of death might indicate spiritual unrest.

Soon after Branwell's death, her beloved sister Emily died. Anne became ill a few months later. At last bereft of all her siblings after Anne succumbed to illness, a grieving Brontë writes to Williams (4 June 1849): "Why life is so blank, brief and bitter I do not know—Why younger and far better than I are snatched from it with projects unfulfilled I cannot comprehend—but I believe God is wise—perfect—merciful" (Smith 2: 216). Brontë seems to adopt a kind of Christian resignation as the proper response to the problem of suffering. However, as she writes *Villette* several years later, the bleak and dubious tone in the novel announce a change in thought, particularly noticeable when compared to Brontë's previous works. Others noticed the change in Charlotte's emotional state. For instance, Mrs. Gaskell, who only knew her during the last years of Brontë's life, attests that "[s]he never saw [Charlotte] otherwise than in mourning, and

⁸⁶In the earliest edition of Gaskell's work, the quote ends with "walking over graves" on p. 111 of vol. 1. Temple Scott as co-editor in a later edition, published in 1907 by John Grant in Edinburgh, adds a note with the continuing extract.

indelibly marked with the grief that hastened her own physical decay” (Gérin v). As a tale with many autobiographical features, then, *Villette*’s narrative reflects much of the turmoil that Brontë experienced in trying to reconcile human suffering with a merciful God.

As *Villette* commences, we learn little about Lucy Snowe’s background. The opening chapters describe a peaceful existence as she visits her godmother Mrs. Bretton. Lucy enjoys her friendship with Mrs. Bretton’s son Graham John, and Lucy spends time with the peculiar child Paulina (known as Polly) and her father Mr. Home. Little Polly is a sensitive child, and Lucy wonders, “How will she get through this world, or battle with this life? How will she bear the shocks and repulses, the humiliations and desolations, which books, and my own reason tell me are prepared for all flesh” (38). In the next chapter, we encounter one of the first of many “shocks and repulses” that Lucy will encounter throughout the novel.

The narrative skips forward eight years from Lucy’s time with the Brettons. Any explanation of those missing years is equivocal. Lucy asks the readers to use their imagination to picture her living a life of leisure aboard a ship during this time: “It will be conjectured that I was of course glad to return to the bosom of my kindred. Well! the amiable conjecture does no harm. . . . Picture me then idle, basking, plump, and happy, . . . warmed with constant sunshine.” However, this idyllic picture is abruptly interrupted with a vague recollection: “I must somehow have fallen over-board, or . . . there must have been wreck at last. I too well remember a time—a long time, of cold, of danger, of contention.” Lucy alludes to a tragedy, and the death of her parents, but she does so in words opaque and uncertain: “I even know there was a storm, and that not of one hour nor one day. For many days and nights neither sun nor stars appeared; . . . a heavy tempest lay on us; all hope that we should be saved was taken away. In fine, the ship was lost, the crew perished” (39). Instead of concrete details, readers receive abstractions. Like the

ending of the novel, which “leave[s] sunny imaginations hope” (546), this passage directs readers to picture an “amiable conjecture” (39) instead of believing in any misfortune. The narrator’s obfuscation continues throughout the novel: she hides facts, skips time, and glosses over tragedies. Blom comments that “even if Lucy’s recollections of her past were presented in the most objective terms, they would form a record of defeat and loss” (134). The narrative dissimulation⁸⁷ might be indicative of Lucy’s (and possibly by correlation, Charlotte’s) spiritual state: she cannot admit to her readers the hopeless, harsh reality of existence, namely that real life has tragedies whose grief is not outweighed by hope in the afterlife. Thus, she circumvents the details.

Critics have noticed Lucy’s reticence, and certainly we see other examples of this throughout the novel. Polhemus finds that “nothing can be taken at face value because all appears through Lucy’s words and eye . . .” (116). Cooper finds that “her cryptic comment” about the shipwreck displays a hesitancy and mystery that “presages the end of the novel” (xxvi) wherein M. Paul may or may not be dead, depending on a reader’s interpretation. In this sense, Lucy chooses to relate only what she deems necessary, but the parts she leaves out, and the manner in which she directs the reader away from tragedy, are important because they reflect Lucy’s attempt to deflect distress in a casual and often glib manner. Lucy’s unreliability increases the problematic tone of the novel. For example, Blom observes that “[t]he opening chapters of *Villette* . . . epitomize Charlotte’s treatment of her heroine. . . . [T]here is no solution to Lucy’s dilemma, for she is caught in a vicious circle: robbed of hope and made fearful by circumstances over which she has no control, she exacerbates her situation by retreating into a negative passivity which increases . . . her own latent self-destructive impulses” (137). Thus,

⁸⁷We also see an attempt by the narrator in *Shirley* to move the reader abruptly, and sometimes nonsensically, away from despair.

throughout the novel Lucy presents half-truths, describes martyr-like agony, provides depressive narration, demonstrates hopeless (and perhaps godless) living, all resulting in a spiritual crisis that must be adjudicated by Brontë's audience.

Lucy's story recalls another such tale of suffering and questioning of fate: Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In the famous soliloquy of Act 3, Scene 1, Hamlet defines the problem:

To be, or not to be, that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take Arms against a Sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them: to die, to sleep. (lines 56-60)

While Hamlet is far more active in his pursuit against life's "slings and arrows," Lucy's response to the "shocks and repulses" demonstrates a psychological attempt to suppress pain. For instance, instead of taking action to find work after the loss of her family, Lucy seems to ignore her fate and passively waits for succor. Only when "self-reliance and exertion were forced upon her" (40) by Miss Marchmont's offer of employment does Lucy act. Blom asserts that "[u]nlike Charlotte's other protagonists, . . . Lucy is forever thwarted" (134), in part because of her diffidence. Lucy's inertia reflects a resigned and cheerless spirit.

Fortuitously, Lucy is offered a job as a lady's maid to Miss Marchmont. Even though the work is confining and tedious, Lucy admires her employer. Lucy attempts to "compromise with Fate: to escape occasional great agonies by submitting to a whole life of privation and small pains." Unfortunately for Lucy, "Fate would not be so be pacified" (42). One night, she experiences terrible premonitions upon hearing the wind howl: "Three times in the course of my life, events had taught me that these strange accents in the storm—this restless, hopeless cry—denote a coming state of the atmosphere unpropitious to life: . . . of disturbed volcanic action, . . . of rivers suddenly rushing above their banks." Lucy describes human suffering in terms of the

cosmos: “Our globe . . . seems at such periods torn and disordered; the feeble amongst us wither in her distempered breath, rushing hot from steaming volcanoes” (43). Lucy anticipates something terrible, and she is only able to describe tragedy in terms of a naturalistic disorder; the world is out of sorts, and God is not in control.

Prior to *Villette*, nature generally represents a sustaining spiritual force in Brontë’s novels. For instance, after Jane has left Thornfield and is alone on the wild moors, half frozen and hungry, Jane sees the Milky Way and feels the omnipresence and “the might and strength of God” (373). In *Shirley*, the natural world comforts Shirley, and rather than enter a church for sustenance, Shirley would rather “stay out here with my mother Eve, in these days called Nature” (304). Nature is a comfort to these protagonists. In *Villette*, however, Lucy is separated from that nourishing, transcendent aspect of nature. Instead, nature is often violent—a foreteller of tragedy—and Lucy only experiences storms, shipwrecks, incessant rain, cold, and poverty.

While Lucy might wish to “compromise with Fate,” she cannot escape the misery that seems to be her destiny. One night, when Miss Marchmont is ill, Lucy is told about Miss Marchmont’s history with her fiancé Frank. The elderly lady had experienced a “glorious” year with her lover, full of “soft moonlight, silvering the autumn evenings” (44). She was happy, content, but she is bitter about the loss of her lover: “let me reflect why [happiness] was taken from me? For what crime was I condemned, after twelve months of bliss, to undergo thirty years of sorrow?” (44). As she recalls the scene of Frank’s death to young Lucy, she finally succumbs to resignation and cries, “Inscrutable God, Thy will be done! And at this moment I can believe that death will restore me to Frank. I never believed it till now” (44). This is as close to a death-bed conversion scene as we get in any novel of Brontë’s. She concludes by telling Lucy what the proper response to suffering should be: “I doubt if I have made the best use of all my calamities

. . . [for] I have only been a woe-struck and selfish woman” (46), but “[w]e should acknowledge God merciful, but not always for us comprehensible. We should accept our own lot whatever it be, and try to render happy that of others” (46). Thus, for Miss Marchmont, the answer to decades of pain is, at last, resignation. The day after this conversation, Miss Marchmont is found dead, and Lucy is left alone once again. Surely, Miss Marchmont’s long suffering—and sudden—resignation, make an impression upon Lucy. Martin seems to find the notion of an “Inscrutable God” positive. He says that “Miss Brontë has stopped protesting against the injustice of a Christian fate that she can neither control nor understand, and the result is a distinct lessening of the dissatisfaction and agony that suffuses *Shirley*. . . . It is a tragic view of life, but as in all true tragedy, knowledge and awareness are themselves an amelioration of pain . . .” (145). However, as we learned earlier from Brontë’s penultimate novel, the suffering of the protagonists is quite different from the kind Lucy experiences, and while Caroline Helstone suffers periods of intense depression, her life is not the unending stream of despair that Lucy experiences. Lucy’s life just does not seem fair nor does she seem to find the awareness of an incomprehensible God an “amelioration of pain.”

After the death of her employer, Lucy once again must rouse herself to find employment, and Miss Marchmont’s story of suffering, or being “struck by God’s hand,” foretells Lucy’s own life and much of *Villette*. Some critics have gone as far as to call Lucy’s life a conflagration: “Life to [Lucy] is . . . a ‘war,’ a ‘desert’; she considers herself a castaway, a pilgrim, a doomed victim of hidden, threatening forces” (Blom 132). Indeed, as the story continues in Belgium, we see that Lucy is engaged in a battle for survival. Lucy finds work abroad as a children’s nurse and then is hired shortly thereafter to teach English at a girls’ boarding school, the Pensionnat de Demoiselles run by Madame Beck. There, Lucy experiences the drudgery of day-to-day

existence, confined in a foreign and Catholic environment. The students are uncordial, and her employer distant. Lucy seems to even consider suicide shortly after her employment begins and harbors a wish for death as a means to end her anguish: “I did long, achingly, then and for four-and-twenty hours afterwards, for something to fetch me out of my present existence and lead me upwards and onwards,” but she notes that “it was necessary to knock on the head” all similar thoughts (121).

The “knock on the head” is a reference to the Biblical account of Jael and Sisera,⁸⁸ and Brontë uses the story as an analogue to Lucy’s suffering. Jael was the wife of Heber, a Kenite whose family had an alliance with the king of Canaan. Sisera was the commander of the Canaanite forces. After a battle between the Israelites and Canaanites, Sisera fled into Jael’s tent. Jael fed Sisera, she encouraged him to fall asleep, and then she drove a tent peg through his skull with a hammer. Lucy cannot control her thoughts, and she struggles “after the manner of Jael to Sisera” to “driv[e] a nail through their temples. Unlike Sisera, they did not die, . . . and at intervals would turn on the nail with a rebellious wrench; then did the temples bleed, and the brain thrill to its core.” Brontë embellishes the Biblical story, describing Sisera lying peacefully and dreaming sweetly in Jael’s tent before his demise while Jael “sat apart, relenting somewhat over her captive; but more prone to dwell on the faithful expectation of Heber coming home.” Lucy moves from thoughts of death to an almost purposeful denial of their existence as she uses her imagination to escape pain, and while she cannot completely control her deliberations, later that night she finds that her thoughts are “not so mutinous, nor so miserable.” Earlier in the novel, Lucy explains that she seems to possess “two lives—the life of thought, and that of

⁸⁸See Judges chapters 4 and 5.

reality,” (85) and we comprehend that for Lucy imagination must be nourished; the drudgery (and affliction) of her reality can then be tolerated. Invention, not God, is a sustaining force. As Lucy works through her duties at the *pensionnat*, she continues to experience despondency. Friendless, Lucy is left alone during the chapter “The Long Vacation,” and her only company is a pupil who is disabled. Once again, she expresses a wish for death. She defines her feelings as a “sorrowful indifference to existence . . . a despairing resignation to reach betimes the end of all things earthly” and defines her life as “a hopeless desert . . . with no green field, no palm-tree, no well in view” (171). In the next few sentences, she provides an explanation in anticipation of a reader’s criticism of her despair:⁸⁹

Religious reader, you will preach to me a long sermon about what I have just written, and so will you, moralist, and you, stern sage: you, stoic, will frown; you, cynic, sneer; you, epicure, laugh. Well, each and all, take it your own way. I accept the sermon, frown, sneer and laugh; perhaps you are all right: and perhaps, circumstanced like me, you would have been, like me, wrong. (173)

Again, Lucy offers readers the choice to interpret events but refuses to provide a definitive answer.

During Lucy’s long vacation trapped in the school, the “*crétin* being gone” (174), her depression results in physical illness. She “lay in a strange fever of the nerves and blood” listening to nine days’ of stormy weather alone in the house. She has nightmares. She again has no reason “to recover or wish to live,” and when she tries to pray, she can only utter, “From my youth up Thy terrors have I suffered with a troubled mind.” What spiritual comfort is this? Another evening she hallucinates, seeing “ghostly white beds [turn] into spectres,” and she determines that “Fate was of stone, and Hope a false idol—blind, bloodless, and of granite core.” As twilight approaches, she leaves the school, thinking that hope might appear if she “got out

⁸⁹Rather than write a preface to any criticism in subsequent editions of *Villette* or any new novel, as she had for *Jane Eyre*, Brontë seems to be anticipating and answering any pugnacious punditry here.

from under this house-roof, which was crushing as the slab of a tomb” (176-77). Outside, she hears bells from the Catholic church as if calling her. She enters the church, kneels with others, and prays. Then, she enters a confessional. We shall revisit this episode in more detail later, but we should note that Lucy does not find solace in the Bible or in a Protestant place of worship. Shortly after her visit, she experiences a mental and physical break down. She collapses upon the street. In her unconscious state, she happily believes her soul may have finally reached “her eternal home, hoping for leave to rest now, and deeming that her painful union with matter was a last dissolved.” Instead, an angel or other heavenly host guides her back to the real world while her soul is bound, “all shuddering and unwilling” and “re-enter[s] her prison with pain, with reluctance, with a moan and a long shiver” (185). Lucy’s relief at thinking she has died is replaced with an awareness of her earthly bondage. She is taken to John Graham Bretton, finally revealed as the character Dr. John. She explains to him that her “days and nights were grown intolerable” and that she “wanted companionship . . . friendship . . . counsel” and “could find none of these in closet, or chamber” so she “sought them in church and confessional. . . . I have done nothing wrong: . . . all I poured out was a dreary, desperate complaint” (207). The depth of her suffering is apparent.

Lucy remains at Dr. Bretton’s home and is fortuitously reacquainted with her godmother Mrs. Bretton. Lucy experiences some happy discourse, but even rest fails to mitigate the pain of such a lonely soul. Lucy desires connection with others yet cautions her soul to “be content with a temperate draught of this living stream. . . . Oh! Would to God! I may be enabled to feel enough sustained by an occasional, amicable, intercourse, rare, brief, unengrossing and tranquil,” and with that admonition, she finally releases her pent-up emotions and, for the first time, cries into her pillow (199). Blom argues that Lucy’s troubles are half her own creation from a

“troubled mind” that “drives her to the verge of a spiritual despair which condemns its sufferer to a life of negative withdrawal that ‘blaspheme[s] the Creator.’” She adds that Lucy’s heroic efforts at trying to believe and reach God, in trying to find solace, fail (136). By all accounts, that seems to be the case.

Throughout the novel, the narrator offers hope and then immediately withdraws it. For instance, as Lucy lies recovering at the Brettons, she rationalizes to herself that she must wait for God to provide sustenance and healing, as he did in the pool of Bethesda where the diseased and broken would wait for an angel of the Lord to stir the waters.⁹⁰ Lucy provides a long list of the reasons we should have hope because of the miraculous powers of God but then just as quickly upends the hopeful aspect: “Herald, come quickly! Thousands lie round the pool, weeping and despairing, to see [God’s angel move], through slow years, stagnant. Long are the ‘times’ of Heaven. . . .” (200). She explains that while the sufferers are waiting, ages pass “and dust, kindling to brief suffering life, and, through pain, pass[es] back to dust” (200). Lucy’s brief recollection of hope is trumped by sorrow.

Possibly, the anguish of reconciling belief and suffering was more than Charlotte Brontë could bear, as well. In a letter to Ellen Nussey (25 August 1852), Brontë’s usual constraint in writing to her friend wanes:

Perhaps you think that as I generally write with some reserve. . . . I am silent because I have literally nothing to say. I might indeed repeat over and over again that my life is a pale blank and often a very weary burden—and that the Future sometimes appalls me—but what end could be answered by such repetition except to weary you and enervate myself? The evils that now and then wring a groan from my heart—lie in position. . . . But it cannot be helped and therefore imperatively must be borne—and borne too with as few words about it as may be. (206-207)

In this discourse, we can almost hear echoes of Lucy Snowe.

⁹⁰See John 5.4.

Lucy revives and returns to Villette from the Brettons, seemingly resigned to a mirthless life, and when she arrives, Lucy continues to experience such agony of spirit that it threatens once again to overwhelm her. Vargish calls Lucy's response to unhappiness (or to life in general) "agonized passivity" (87). Indeed, Lucy does not even accept the possibility of happiness in this life until she receives a letter from Dr. John. She settles down in her room to read it, but even as Lucy dares to hope in love, she once again shuts down the idea of this delightful thought, as she does all semblances of happiness in the novel. She begins to doubt: "Are there wicked things, not human, which envy human bliss? Are there evil influences haunting the air, and poisoning it for man? What was near me?" (275). Lucy's fear of unhappiness, of "wicked things" that poison the air illuminates the depth of distrust in God's benevolence. Instead of Lucy experiencing what Apostles Paul and Timothy exhort all believers to possess, "the peace of God, which passeth all understanding,"⁹¹ the scene is another one of hopelessness, fear, and distress. In fact, Lucy's fears in this instance become corporeal. Prior to reading the letter, she senses an unfriendly presence and sees a phantasmal image—that of a nun. She quickly runs to find others to validate its presence, but when they arrive, the supposed ghost is gone. Lucy wrings her hands in a crazy panic because her letter from Dr. John is also missing, and she thinks about the irony of having her "bit of comfort preternaturally snatched" before she had been able to read it (274). In short, she has another mental breakdown of sorts.

Dr. John finds Lucy in distress and sits down with her, trying to soothe her nerves. He locates the missing letter, calms her, and provides advice: "Happiness is the cure—a cheerful mind the preventive: cultivate both" (278). Unfortunately, the words ring hollow to Lucy:

No mockery in this world ever sounds to me so hollow as that of being told to *cultivate* happiness. . . . Happiness is not a potato, to be planted in mould, and tilled with manure. Happiness is a glory shining far down upon us out of Heaven. She is

⁹¹Phil. 4.7 (KJV).

a divine dew which the soul, on certain of its summer mornings, feels dropping upon it from the amaranth bloom and golden fruitage of Paradise. (278)

Certainly, the type of contentment that Lucy describes as a gift from heaven is something she has only imagined in quite poetic terms, but when she must rely on reality, or reason, to understand life, she unsentimentally finds that she “was born only to work for a piece of bread, to await the pains of death, and steadily through all life to despond” (255-56). In the next section of *Villette*, we will see Lucy once again try to adhere to Dr. John’s advice to attempt “[a] new creed, . . . a belief in happiness” (281), and this time, Lucy’s gossamer belief in felicity stems from the chance to be loved.

Is Love the Answer?

Lucy has two potential suitors: Dr. John and Monsieur Paul. While Lucy does attempt an amorous relationship as a source of potential happiness, the way she depreciates herself makes the outcome doubtful: “I find no reason why I should be of the few favoured. I believe in some blending of hope and sunshine sweetening the worst lots. I believe that this life is not all; neither the beginning nor the end. I believe while I tremble; I trust while I weep” (401). What hope is this? Lucy’s statement demonstrates the ambiguity she feels by concluding with a paradoxical axiom that fails to provide reassurance. Still, Lucy does try to “cultivate happiness” even though it seems that she does not anticipate a positive result. Before we examine Lucy’s relationship with Dr. John and M. Paul, Charlotte’s own connection with the headmaster at the Belgian Pensionnat Héger should be briefly explored, for it is a biographical source of both relationships; the significance of the connection is considerable.

In 1841, Charlotte had the opportunity to open a school. Charlotte borrowed £100 from Aunt Branwell and planned on using it to procure an empty building near Roe Head, suggested by her former schoolteacher Miss Wooler. However, hearing that her friend Mary Taylor was

going on a continental tour, Charlotte decided to use half that amount to procure Emily and herself an overseas education, thinking that would enhance the value of their own anticipated school. At age twenty-five, Charlotte departed in February 1842 with Emily, intending to spend at least a year away from home studying French, German, and other subjects necessary for their own success as schoolmasters. They spent nine months at the Pensionnat Héger, a girls' boarding school, in Brussels on the Rue d'Isabelle run by Monsieur Constantin Héger, eight years older than Charlotte, and his wife Madame Claire Zoe Héger. The siblings appear to have been excellent students. Upon the death of their aunt, the sisters returned to England in November 1842, but Charlotte intended to revisit at some point. In January 1843, she returned alone to the school as a teacher earning sixteen pounds a year.

It was during this return visit that Héger's influence became prodigious. He affected Charlotte in many ways and inspired a passionate attachment. Barker calls M. Héger "[p]ossibly the greatest single influence on Charlotte, both as a person and as a writer" (412). As M. Paul does to Lucy, M. Héger criticized Charlotte's writing, apparently spurring her to greater intellectual thought. He had her read great works in French and German and respond in her *devoirs*, and Charlotte enjoyed their repartee as Lucy Snowe does with M. Paul. M. Héger clearly singled out Charlotte as a favorite, and he also gave her trinkets, including a copy of a speech he had given. She was given tremendous approbation by her employer, who even took her along with another pupil to see celebrations in the town for Lent. However, a change occurred in their relationship as her time at the *pensionnat* continued. Charlotte was lonely and isolated from her home. As her formal lessons ceased and Charlotte continued to teach other pupils herself, her contact with the stimulating M. Héger diminished. Once, after not speaking together for days, he presented her with a German New Testament, surprising her pleasantly, but

his attention to her lessened. During this period, Charlotte's relationship with Madame Héger also deteriorated. In a letter (29 May 1843) to Emily, Charlotte explains the situation:

Things wag on much as usual here. Only Mdlle Blanche and Mdlle Haussé are at present on a system of war without quarter. . . . I find also that Mdlle. Sophie dislikes Mdlle Blanche extremely. She says she is heartless, insincere, and vindictive, which epithets, I assure you, are richly deserved. Also I find she is the regular spy of Mme Héger, to whom she reports everything. (Smith 1: 319)

Perhaps it was the spying of Madame Héger that brought about a direct conflict with Charlotte. Charlotte refused to communicate with one of the instructors and seemed to display generally reclusive behavior—not an attitude to hold with her peers in a small, convent-like work environment. Charlotte seemed to be unaware of the problems she was causing. As the dislike became more apparent, Charlotte wrote to Emily (29 May 1843) of her loneliness at M. Héger's continued withdrawal and blamed the *directrice* of the school:

M. Héger is wonderously influenced by Madame, and I should not wonder if he disapproves very much of my unamiable want of sociability. He has already given me a brief lecture on universal *bienveillance*, and, perceiving that I don't improve in consequence, I fancy he has taken to considering me as a person to be let alone—left to the error of her ways; and consequently he has in a great measure withdrawn the light of his countenance, and I get on from day to day in a Robinson-Crusoe-like condition—very lonely. (Smith 1: 320)

By June, Charlotte began to understand the abating of Madame Héger's regard (and her husband's distance), and she intimated the cause to Ellen: "You remember the letter [Madame Héger] wrote me when I was in England how kind and affectionate it was—is it not odd—? I fancy I begin to perceive the reason of this mighty distance & reserve—it sometimes makes me laugh & at other times nearly cry—When I am sure of 'it', I will tell you" (Smith 1: 325). There is much conjecture that the change in Madame Héger's attitude toward Charlotte is that Madame Héger had discovered what Barker calls Charlotte's "guilty secret" (422), Charlotte's increasing infatuation with M. Héger. In *The Brontë Story*, Margaret Lane explores the nature of Héger and

Brontë's relationship by explaining how toxic the atmosphere had become in Brussels after Charlotte's second visit. Madame Héger had become cold toward the pupil: "If [Madame Héger] did not know that Charlotte was absorbed in writing long love poems on the master and pupil theme, she may well have guessed it" (154). It seems as if Madame Héger was jealous.

Amid this chaotic situation, the strongest indication of Brontë's spiritual angst occurred: her visit to a Catholic church. Feeling that "the trial God had appointed me was gaining its climax" (M. Lane 154), an agitated Brontë went into St. Gudule's cathedral and confessed. This item is left out of Gaskell's biography for good reason.⁹² The event shows the depth of Brontë's infatuation with Héger and the potential disruption of her faith. Brontë told no one in her family about her visit to the Church except Emily (2 September 1843): "You had better not tell papa of this. He will not understand that it was only a freak, and will perhaps think I am going to turn Catholic" (Smith 1: 330). This shows Charlotte's reticence to acknowledge a spiritual crisis, even to her trusted sister.

The situation deteriorated and became unbearable for Charlotte. She writes to her brother on 1 May 1843: "I perceive, however, that I grow exceedingly misanthropic and sour . . ." (Smith 1: 316). During a long vacation, Charlotte, like Lucy, was left alone and had something of a mental breakdown; she wanted to return home. Brontë attempted to give her notice, but was unsuccessful:

I went to Mde⁹³ Héger and gave her notice—If it had depended on her I should certainly have soon been at liberty but Monsieur Héger—having heard of what was in agitation—sent for me the day after—and pronounced with vehemence his decision that I should not leave—I could not at that time have persevered in my

⁹²Gaskell's biography is often viewed as a sanitized version of events. While some events, such as this, are left out, Gaskell knew Charlotte and wrote when events were fresh in the mind of those she interviewed.

⁹³Either the abbreviation for Madame is transcribed incorrectly by Smith from Charlotte's handwriting, or Charlotte uses Mde of Mme interchangeably in her letters.

intention without exciting him to passion—so I promised to stay a while longer.
(Smith 1: 334)

Charlotte's attempts to leave Belgium prompted M. Héger to re-engage with his former pupil, perhaps thinking that his neglect had motivated her decision. The excuse to return to England because of her father's failing eyesight, and the continued enmity of Madame Héger and attention of M. Héger, finally set Charlotte on an unalterable course of departure. Barker sums up the situation: "[Charlotte] had fallen in love for the first time—with a man who was the antithesis of everything that she had previously valued. Monsieur Héger was . . . small, ugly, short-tempered, and above all, Catholic . . ." (427). For Charlotte, leaving should have been the solution.

However, upon her return to England, Charlotte's desperate and passionate connection to M. Héger continued to cause tremendous anguish. She writes to Ellen (23 January 1844) of her leave-taking from Mr. Héger: "I think however long I live I shall not forget what the parting with Monsieur Héger cost me" (Smith 1: 341). Charlotte was heartbroken. After returning home, she wrote to him several times, only occasionally receiving replies. Lucy describes Dr. John's letters as "real food that nourished, living water that refreshed" (544), and those feelings mirror Charlotte's need for correspondence with M. Héger. However, the tone of M. Héger's letters reveal an intimacy that is disquieting.⁹⁴

Then, he abruptly severed all correspondence. Her letters that follow display an agonized attempt to reconnect.⁹⁵ After her friend Martha Taylor returned from Belgium with neither word

⁹⁴Baker believes Brontë was seduced "mentally and morally, if not physically" (419) by her employer. When their correspondence was made public at the beginning of the twentieth century, it was quite scandalous. Here was the prim Protestant rector's daughter writing to, and intimate with, a married Catholic! Some have gone as far as to suggest theirs was an adulterous relationship; that much cannot be proven.

⁹⁵Charlotte wrote a poem about a self-centered man written around the time she was desperate for M. Héger's correspondence. The poem reflects her obsession with M. Héger (whom she called "the black swan" [Gérin 232]):

nor message from M. Héger, Charlotte writes an impassioned demand for correspondence to her former mentor:

I know that you will lose patience with me when you read this letter—You will say that I am over-excited—that I have black thoughts etc. So be it Monsieur. . . . I would rather undergo the greatest bodily pains than have my heart constantly lacerated by searing regrets. If my master withdraws his friendship from me entirely I shall be absolutely without hope—if he gives me a little friendship—a very little—I shall be content—happy, I would have a motive for living—for working. (8 January 1845, translated from French in Smith 1: 380)

Her desperation increases after six months without any return correspondence:

I will tell you candidly that during this time of waiting I have tried to forget you, . . . and when one has suffered this kind of anxiety for one or two years, one is ready to do anything to regain peace of mind. . . . [It] is truly humiliating—not to know how to get the mastery over one's own thoughts, to be the slave of a regret, a memory, the slave of a dominant and fixed idea which has become a tyrant over one's mind. . . . [S]o long as I still have the hope of hearing from you, I can be tranquil and not too sad, but when a dreary and prolonged silence seems to warn me that my master is becoming estranged from me, . . . then I am in a fever—I lose my appetite and my sleep—I pine away. (18 November 1845, translated from French, Smith 1: 436-38)

The extent of her unhealthy infatuation is distinct. The representation of young Polly's devotion to her father is perhaps a good analogue of the overwhelming attachment Brontë had felt for M. Héger: "One would have thought the child had no mind or life of her own, but must necessarily live, move, and have her being in another" (29).

His praise unfrequent—favour rare
Unduly precious grew
And too much power—a haunting fear
Around his anger threw—

His coming was my hope each day
His parting was my pain!
The chance that did his steps delay
Was ice in every vein (qtd. in Barker 445)

Since Charlotte was “painfully slow to believe in protestations of friendship . . . deeply insecure, [shrinking] from giving her affection,” (Peters 28), it must have taken great effort to attach and then detach herself to M. Héger, and this seems to have presented a spiritual crisis for Charlotte. Brontë’s letters display an active struggle to achieve earthly happiness by continuing correspondence with a man who meant much to her, but Charlotte became more morose and even risked losing her physical health as she continued to pursue M. Héger. Charlotte feared she was even going blind but instead she determined that she “was simply wallowing in misery and self-pity, unable to shake off her prostration of spirits . . .” (Barker 441). Like Lucy, Charlotte’s distress manifested itself in physical illness. Brontë describes her suffering two years later in an untitled poem beginning with “He saw my heart’s woe”:

I sought love where love was utterly unknown.
Idolator I kneeled to an idol cut in rock!
I might have slashed my flesh and drawn my heart’s best blood.
The Granite God had felt no tenderness, no shock;
My Baal had not seen nor heard nor understood. . . . (qtd. in Peters 171)

The anguish that Charlotte felt upon leaving Brussels produced two other poems including one titled “Master and Pupil” (inserted into *The Professor*, wherein the master marries his protégé). The poems reflect poignant images of hopeless love. In the end, as Rebecca Fraser argues, Héger was a “catalyst . . . like a chemical flung into the fermenting mixture of Charlotte’s Brontë’s mind” (190). If he was a catalyst, Héger was also the element that snuffed out any religious fire.

Fortunately, in the autumn of 1845, another event changes the trajectory of what might have been certain death from a deep depression that encompassed her mind and body: Charlotte discovers Emily’s poetry. That was the beginning of a new plan to publish her siblings’ writings alongside her own. After that, Brontë found her voice (and opportunity) as a writer. The rest is

history. Charlotte succeeded in putting aside her obsession with M. Héger and poured herself into her books.

The biographical parallels connecting Brontë's novel and life are important, for they underscore thematic elements of the novel. As we have seen, Lucy has a couple of chances at love: Dr. John Graham Bretton and M. Paul Emanuel, a teacher at the school. Initially, she attaches herself to Dr. John, but he does not reciprocate Lucy's feelings. Lucy eagerly awaits Graham's letters but understands that while "[h]e may write once" out of kindness, she anticipates that to trust such a casually made promise is madness, yet she spends several pages agonizing over whether he will write or not, whether it is folly to believe so or not (255). Like Charlotte's fixation with M. Héger's correspondence, Lucy's obsession "is balanced with admirable delicacy somewhere between romantic love and the neurotic attachment of an isolated soul who has nowhere else to turn" (Vargish 78). Lucy understands that "if life be war, it seemed [her] destiny to conduct it single-handed" (329), and the missives cause her to become an active participant.

Even so, Lucy questions the plausibility of human love: "how many people ever *do* love, or at least marry for love in this world?" (112). It seems as if love is in short supply. Polhemus concurs: "If love makes life worth living and a person cannot bloom without it, what then is an unattractive, unloved, and apparently unlovable woman to do? *Villette* offers no solution except to pursue and imagine love in a way that makes it possible to go on living, and there is no guarantee that the pursuit will bring anything except a renewal of suffering" (111). Lucy is such a woman. Therein lies the problem, for a doubt about the capacity to receive love (a serious doubt indeed, which affects the heart), combined with doubt in the benevolence of God, only amplifies Lucy's suffering.

After learning of the affections of Dr. John for Polly, Lucy is despondent: she weeps and acknowledges that her expectations have once again been disappointed. She states, “[T]he Hope I am bemoaning suffered and made me suffer much: it did not die till it was full time: following an agony so lingering, death ought to be welcome” (326). A few chapters later, however, she attempts to shore up her faltering faith, learn acceptance (albeit a fatalistic one), and resignedly trust in a God who blesses some and withholds good from others:

Some lives *are* thus blessed: it is God's will: it is the attesting trace and lingering evidence of Eden. . . . Other travellers encounter weather fitful and gusty, wild and variable . . . and [are] overtaken by the early closing winter night. Neither can this happen without the sanction of God; and I know that, amidst His boundless works, is somewhere stored the secret of this last fate's justice. . . . (418)

Lucy comprehends that some are born to suffer, others to enjoy life, and this is a problem to which she has no spiritual solution—no understanding of “the secret of this last fate’s justice.” Even the usually unobservant Polly acknowledges the fickleness of life. Polly adverts to biographies she has read “where the wayfarer seemed to journey on from suffering to suffering,” never to gain hope (415). Worse, Polly notes, these tribulations were not their fault: “Some of them were good, endeavouring people. I am not endeavouring, not actively good, yet 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” (416). Polly is one of the favored few who live their lives under the clear skies of good fortune. Neither Lucy’s nor Polly’s expositions provide an answer to the problem of Divine goodness existing concurrently with suffering.

Since Lucy must give up the notion of marrying Dr. John, she now transfers her affections to one she deeply esteems: M. Paul, the fictional twin of M. Héger. He is described as a “dark little man, . . . pungent and austere . . . with his close-shorn, black head, his broad, sallow

brow, his thin cheek, his wide and quivering nostril, his thorough glance and hurried bearing” (142). Lucy’s volatile relationship with M. Paul is similar in its tendency toward the masochistic bondage Charlotte seems to have had for M. Héger.⁹⁶ Lucy calls him “[t]hat other self-elected judge of mine” who “never lost an opportunity of intimating his opinion that mine was rather a fiery and rash nature—adventurous, indocile, and audacious” (334). He accuses her repeatedly of being “reckless, worldly, and epicurean; ambitious of greatness and feverishly athirst for the pomps and vanities of life.” He adds that she has no “spirit of grace, faith, sacrifice, or self-abasement, . . .” and he could see in her “nothing Christian” (335). He criticizes her dress when she begins to wear lighter colors and ribbons and “sighs over [her] degeneracy” in wearing anything but somber apparel. In short, he continually chastises Lucy. There is a littleness to M. Paul’s criticism of Lucy, a demeaning and demoralizing communication, yet Lucy discovers that M. Paul’s bellicose behavior stirs her from inertia toward activity as “his injustice . . . imparted a strong stimulus—it gave wings to aspiration” (390). Lucy begins to hope in love once again.

A few obstacles exist that prevent a union between Lucy and M. Paul. First, Lucy discovers that M. Paul has vowed never to marry after his lover Justine Marie died. If he does change his mind, however, she learns that the Becks and Walravens intend him to marry their relation, the other Justine Marie. He is bound for Guadaloupe to handle Mme. Walravens’ affairs out of his own sense of obligation and will be absent several years. Lucy is certain that her hope has been snatched away once again: “I think I never felt jealousy till now. This was not like enduring the endearments of Dr. John and Paulina, against which while I sealed my eyes and my ears, while I withdrew thence my thoughts, my sense of harmony still acknowledged in it a charm. This was an outrage” (517). Her blood is up. Like Charlotte, Lucy has not been endowed

⁹⁶In a sense, both M. Héger and M. Paul act as muses—critical, pugnacious ones. Nonetheless, they provide the hard nudge that is needed for some sort of success in life from two forbearing women: Charlotte and Lucy.

by Fate with physical beauty: “The love born of beauty was not mine; I had nothing in common with it: I could not dare to meddle with it,” but Lucy assures her audience that even without handsome looks, she has the ability and the right to desire M. Paul. Her love is not superficial, she claims; it is

furnace-ried by pain, stamped by constancy, consolidated by affection's pure and durable alloy, submitted by intellect to intellect's own tests, and finally wrought up, by his own process, to his own unflawed completeness, this Love that laughed at Passion, his fast frenzies and his hot and hurried extinction, in *this* Love I had a vested interest. . . . (517)

However tenacious, constant, rational, and spotless her love might be, at this juncture it seems as if destiny might once again snatch away Lucy’s chance of happiness as M. Paul prepares to leave for Guadeloupe without declaring his intentions to Lucy. Perhaps, however, their separation for three years is not the greatest obstacle to the union: it might just be their different confessions of faith.

Catholicism vs. Protestantism

In the world of *Villette*, Catholics are the real missionaries, not the Evangelical Protestants—a rare find in Victorian fiction. The allusions to events in *Villette* place the temporal setting of the novel no later than the 1820s—a time of great change for English Catholics. In 1829, Parliament passed the important, and yet divisive, Catholic Emancipation Act. Abroad on the Continent, many revolutions had recently occurred, and part of the argument in favor of Catholic emancipation in England stemmed from fear of insurrection. Nationalism increased the perceived threat of Catholicism as Roman Catholic dioceses were once more carved out of England by the Pope (something that had not been done for over three hundred years) and a new Cardinal appointed at Westminster (Cooper xvii). In addition to hatred of allegiance to a foreign power, Protestants disagreed with Roman Catholicism on many other points:

[T]he worship of saints, especially the Virgin Mary; the adoration of images and relics ('idolatry and superstition'); the lavish decorations of churches and outward splendours of services (universally referred to as 'mummeries', a word repeatedly used by Charlotte Brontë); Papal supremacy and infallibility; an emphasis on tradition and the Fathers rather than on the Bible; restrictions on the reading and dissemination of Holy Writ among the laity, as well as the inclusion of the Apocrypha in the 'Romanist' Bible; repressive disciplinary measures as a result of which searching minds were inexorably subjugated under the 'Dictatorship' of a priest; . . . the idea of buying out of sin by way of indulgences; and a set of doctrinal issues comprising baptismal regeneration and apostolic succession, . . . auricular confession, transubstantiation, and belief in purgatory. (Thormählen 27-28)

The list demonstrates significant areas of disagreement.

Patrick Brontë was in favor of civil rights for Catholics, but he was adamantly opposed to Catholic doctrine and expressed fear of harm the beliefs may bring to England. In a letter to the *Leeds Intelligencer* (27 May 1843), Mr. Brontë wrote expressing these concerns: "I am a friend to liberty of conscience and political liberty; but I am an open and avowed enemy to hypocrisy, false zeal, revolutionary principles, and all those motives and movements which can have for their end only what is doubtful, or extremely exceptionable and bad" (qtd. in Baker 428). He encourages Protestants in Ireland to arm themselves (he also kept a pistol under his pillow) and provides warning: "Should the Romanists gain their ends, they will destroy, and utterly exterminate, both Churchmen, and Dissenters . . ." and reminds his audience that even though he does not like war, "Christ has said, in reference to a case of necessity, like this, 'let him who has no sword, sell his Garments and buy one'" (429). Even so, Barker mentions an incident that shows Patrick could be broad-minded and friendly with individual Catholics in his parish. Once as repairs were being made to the old parsonage, he discovered one of the workers was a Catholic. He "simply told [the worker] to keep up to his faith and he would be all right at the last" (647). As during King Henry VIII's reign—and in the seventeenth century and eighteenth when people feared that Stuart monarchs might sell out England to Catholic France or

that exiled Stuarts might conquer England and return England to Catholicism—the difference in beliefs between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism during Charlotte’s lifetime became an issue of national alarm.

Charlotte seems to possess a similar quantity of her father’s conciliatory and antagonistic attitudes with respect to Roman Catholicism. In a letter to Ellen Nussey, (c. July 1842), she virulently attacks the Catholic Church yet ends on a generous note:

People talk of the danger which protestants expose themselves to in going to reside in Catholic countries—and thereby running the chance of changing to their faith—my advice to all protestants who are tempted to do anything so besotted as turn Catholic—is to walk over the sea on to the continent—to attend mass sedulously for a time—to note well the mum[m]eries thereof—also the idiotic, mercenary, aspect of all the priests—& then if they are still disposed to consider Papistry . . . let them turn papists at once. . . . At the same time allow me to tell you that there are some Catholics—who are as good as any christians can be to whom the bible is a sealed book, and much better than scores of Protestants. (Smith 1: 289-90)

However, a year later, we find Charlotte visiting a Roman Catholic Church after a period of great personal turmoil. Thormählen also notes that Charlotte’s attitude toward Catholicism seemed to change—more or less dogmatic—depending on the recipient of her letters. To Ellen, she is generally condemning of Roman Catholicism. To her father, she expresses distaste of the physiognomy of those Catholics whom she met in Belgium, perhaps to reassure him she was in no danger of conversion. To her publisher George Smith, she points out some of the problems of Protestantism with open candor (29). This is important to remember as we evaluate the discussion of the two confessions of faith in *Villette* since it seems to indicate ambivalence on Charlotte’s part.

Using Belgium as the setting of *Villette* allows Brontë some artistic license; after all, attempting to marry a Protestant heroine to a Roman Catholic hero during the *milieu* of the Victorian period requires some delicacy. However conciliatory Charlotte seems toward

Catholicism in her letters, she excoriates them in her novel. Critics were quick to pick up on Brontë's disapprobation, as Harriett Martineau pens in a review of *Villette* in 1853:

[Curren Bell] goes out of her way to express a passionate hatred of Romanism. . . . We do not exactly see the moral necessity for this (there is no artistical necessity). . . . A better advocacy of protestantism would have been to show that it can give rest to the weary and heavy laden; whereas it seems to yield no comfort in return for every variety of sorrowful invocation. (qtd. in Allott 174)

The first reference of Catholicism in *Villette* occurs when Lucy spies young Polly “kneeling upright in bed, and praying like some Catholic or Methodist enthusiast—some precocious fanatic or untimely saint” (15). Lucy is disturbed by this vision, believing the young child’s mind to be irrational and unhealthy, foretelling Lucy’s own distaste of Catholic practices. When Lucy arrives at the *pensionnat* and observes her students, she accuses the Roman Catholic Church of intellectual and spiritual deficits. She claims the Catholic students’ minds were “being reared in slavery” and that the Church brought them up “feeble in soul, . . . ignorant, unthinking, unquestioning” wherein the Church “guarantee[s] their final fate” if they adhere to those same practices (141). Whether or not this belief is doctrinally correct for Roman Catholics, Lucy (and Charlotte) sticks to this position. Lucy describes the students as “passive victims of an educational and theological system” who think nothing of telling lies (easily forgiven by their monthly confession) yet who are given a harsher punishment if they simply miss “going to mass. . . . [T]hese were crimes whereof rebuke and penance were the unfailing meed” (91). The girls’ evening religious study, or *lecture pieuse*, consists of cautionary tales of martyrs, like those Charlotte had endured at the Pensionnat Héger which caused her restless sleep. Lucy claims

these stories "were nightmares of oppression, privation, and agony" (129) to encourage penitence.⁹⁷ Lucy's depiction of Catholicism throughout the story is disparaging.

Ironically, as much as Lucy claims to detest the Catholic church, when she is in utmost need, she visits a Catholic cathedral—not a Protestant church—in hopes of finding solace. In a letter to Williams (6 November 1852), Charlotte provides her view of Lucy's distress: "It was no impetus of healthy feeling which urged [Lucy] to the confessional for instance—it was the semi-delirium of solitary grief and sickness" (Smith 3: 80). But was it simply mental anguish and physical illness that compels Lucy's visit to the Catholic cathedral? It seems unlikely, particularly if we recall Charlotte's own crisis of faith in visiting the Catholic church in Belgium. It seems that Lucy is ready to take what Thomas Arnold calls "a desperate leap into a blind fanaticism" (Stanley 2: 110). Lucy's inability to find comfort in her own Protestant faith demonstrates her doubt, her distress, and her dilemma. As Polhemus points out, "Faith means a way of preserving life" (122), and Lucy cannot sustain hers. Lucy's suffering causes her to gravitate toward any possible relief: death wishes, exile, resignation, love, and conversion are all options, and while Lucy's problems do not quite amount to the notion of *Imitatio Christi*, she nonetheless feels tremendous burden.

At the cathedral, she meets with Père Silas. She admits she is not of the Catholic faith; he questions her desire to confess. Lucy says, "I was perishing for a word of advice or an accent of comfort. . . . I had a pressure of affliction on my mind of which it would hardly any longer endure the weight" (178). He attempts to help her, unsure of how to proceed, but Lucy finds "an ear which was human and sentient, yet consecrated," and that does her good. Père Silas

⁹⁷Lucy seems to forget that Evangelical periodicals as well, such as *The Children's Friends*, were popular tools of instruction full of cautionary tales that befell disobedient children. We may recall that young Jane Eyre is given *The Child's Guide* by Mr. Brocklehurst so that she can be "properly" instructed.

determines that the Catholic “faith alone could help and heal” (179). He encourages her to return later to receive his advice after he ruminates about what actions should be taken. However, after leaving, Lucy is determined never to encounter the priest again, for she fears she may convert:

Did I, do you suppose, reader, contemplate venturing again within that worthy priest’s reach? . . . That priest had arms which could influence me; . . . Had I gone to him, he would have shown me all that was tender, and comforting, and gentle. . . . Then he would have tried to kindle, blow and stir up in me the zeal of good works. I know not how it would all have ended. We all think ourselves strong in some points; we all know ourselves weak in many; the probabilities are that had I visited [the Priest] . . . I might just now, instead of writing this heretic narrative, be counting my beads in the cell of a certain Carmelite convent. . . . (180)

Lucy admits that as a response to despair, conversion to the Catholic faith is a possible solution—one that is unique to any of the novels written by the Brontë sisters. For instance, if we compare Lucy’s response with that of the heroine of Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, we can observe a much more typical Protestant response. Helen Huntingdon says, “But it is wrong to despair; I will remember the counsel of the inspired writer to him ‘that feareth the Lord and obeyeth the voice of his servant, that sitteth in darkness and hath no light; let him trust in the name of the Lord, and stay upon his God!’” (ch. 36). Anne’s protagonist reconciles faith and despair; it seems Charlotte cannot. Her heroine must attempt a different course.

Beyond indicating a possible religious crisis, Lucy’s visit to the Catholic church⁹⁸ seems to portend a more positive outcome for her relationship with M. Paul. From this point on in the novel, Lucy becomes more tolerant of “Romanism.” For instance, Lucy says this about the

⁹⁸To this point, there is no outward evidence of Lucy’s Protestant practices. Toward the end of the novel, we get a glimpse of her habits when Père Silas finds Lucy’s frequent visitation of three different Protestant chapels (the Presbyterian, Lutheran, and Episcopalian) baffling, even noting that “[s]uch liberality argued . . . profound indifference—who tolerates all, he reasoned, can be attached to none” (463). Thormählen notes “[t]he absence of spiritual satisfaction in connexion (sic) with church attendance” in the fiction of the Brontës, and she posits that for such an intellectual group of sisters, attending church services in Haworth and listening to less-than-engaging visiting preachers “must often have seemed like a mode of penance. It is not surprising that they were unable and/or unwilling to invest church-going in their fiction with any spiritually nourishing properties to speak of” (163).

fervent Catholic M. Paul: “Whatever Romanism may be, there are good Romanists: this man, Emanuel, seemed of the best . . . wondrous for fond faith, for pious devotion, for sacrifice of self, for charity unbounded” (439). As Lucy becomes better acquainted with M. Paul, their theological arguments increase in intensity, as do the number of pages that Brontë gives to the doctrinal debate. M. Paul gives her a tract she finds distasteful whose only “inducement to apostasy” is “the fact that a Catholic who had lost dear friends by death could enjoy the unspeakable solace of praying them out of purgatory” (457-58). That is a strong point in favor of Catholicism for Lucy, especially if we recall the early death of her parents. M. Paul is upset that the tract does not convert her. Instead, she calms him, stating “I am not dangerous, as they tell you; I would not trouble your faith; you believe in God and Christ and the Bible, and so do I” (462). Later, Lucy acquiesces that “doubtless there were errors in every Church” (466) but argues that when a soul is sorrowful, that person “could not care for chanting priests or mumming officials; that when the pains of existence . . . and measureless doubt of the future arose in view,” she only wants to cry “God be merciful to me, a sinner!” rather than be hindered by praying in a “language learned and dead.” M. Paul is sympathetic to Lucy’s concerns and states, “How seem in the eyes of that God who made all firmaments, from whose nostrils issued whatever of life is here, or in the stars shining yonder—how seem the differences of man?” They agree that no matter their discordances, “God is good, and loves all the sincere.” There are few places, if any, in Victorian literature that demonstrate such willingness by a Protestant heroine to show a conciliatory stance toward Catholic beliefs. With Lucy’s more tolerant viewpoint comes a kind of relativism.⁹⁹ But

⁹⁹We might even observe a possible influence on Charlotte by Anne Brontë’s notion of universal salvation. After publishing *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Anne Brontë came under attack for advocating the doctrine of universal salvation in the novel. Barker says, “The very idea that there was no such thing as eternal damnation and that, after a period of purifying purgatory, all men, however wicked, could attain heaven” (580) was a radical thought for the daughter of an Anglican preacher. *Sharpe’s London Magazine* harshly criticized Anne’s beliefs, calling them “repugnant to Scripture, and in direct opposition to the teaching of the Anglican Church” (qtd. in Barker 580).

do Lucy's apologetics soothe her spirit? Even though she has weighed the advantages of Catholicism and outwardly found it wanting, we are still not sure that Protestantism offers any comfort to Lucy's distressed spirit as evidenced by her despair. Lucy's love for M. Paul may offer succor, but there are ample warnings that their union will not go unchallenged. The ending will force readers to decide whether Lucy's sorrows are purposive—and whether they receive any recompense.¹⁰⁰

The Elliptical Conclusion

Is Lucy's problematic trust in Providence finally rewarded? Does the novel point toward a benevolent God? Does the conclusion reconcile the pain, suffering, and evil present on planet Earth with a loving Creator? If we follow the novel's general trend of suffering, Lucy's hopeless resignation to it, and her belief that she is not meant to possess happiness in this life (thus, an indication of her spiritual malaise), we must answer no. Apparently, this is the determination Charlotte Brontë came to, as well, when she penned her ambiguous ending. The resolution sums up the entire theological discourse contained in the novel and is critical in understanding Brontë's treatment of theodicy. To that point, Vargish reminds us of the importance of examining fictional events and their relation to the cosmos:

[N]o event can be fully apprehended without some acknowledgement of its potential spiritual or moral content. No circumstance can be assumed to exist and no event to occur simply for its own sake. All being and action are susceptible to meaning beyond themselves. . . . The universe is a moral theater, a spiritual classroom. (3)

Charlotte, however, seems to have favored Anne's notion that Christ's salvation was open to everyone. In a letter to Margaret Wooler (14 February 1850), she says, "I am sorry the Clergy do not like the doctrine of Universal Salvation; I think it a great pity for their sakes, but surely they are not so unreasonable as to expect me to deny or suppress what I believe the truth!" (Smith 2: 343).

¹⁰⁰Two verses in the Bible epitomize the actions Christians should take during times of suffering: James 1.2-3: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance" (NIV) and Romans 8.28 "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (NIV).

Moreover, he reminds us that the Victorian novel prior to George Eliot “imitates life in revealing a moral intention in the universe” (3). Because *Villette*’s narrator is recalling past events, as in *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley*, readers learn alongside Lucy as she makes her way through life. Vargish agrees with this point: “Characters ‘read’ the ‘text’ of their own lives in an attempt to discover meaning and order there. Readers not only interpret the events of those lives but also must evaluate the characters’ interpretations of them. . . , a process that constitutes much of the excitement of the providential aesthetic and perhaps of most dramatic narrative . . .” (11). So what have we learned?

As we head toward the final pages of the novel, Lucy Snowe’s somber narrative culminates in the most potentially depressing conclusion possible,¹⁰¹ but just before that, Brontë provides us with several happy scenes—the happiest that have occurred in over 400 lugubrious pages. Immediately following these scenes of felicity are scenes of caution, of prediction, and of anticipated suffering. Graham and Paulina are married, and we are told that their lives are blessed, “like that of Jacob’s favoured son, with ‘blessings of Heaven above’” (483). Dr. John “was born victor, as some are born vanquished” (479). However, immediately on the next page a warning is written: “But it is not so for all. What then? His will be done . . . whether we humble ourselves to resignation or not. . . . Proof of a life to come must be given. In fire and in blood, if needful, must that proof be written. . . .” *Villette* is a novel of fire and blood, one of extreme mental and spiritual suffering, and while Lucy continues to remind herself of various Christian assurances to sustain her as she experiences sorrow, encouraging her readers that “for present hope [we have] His providence,” for much of the novel Lucy has not followed her own advice and has despaired—possibly even to the point of suicide. Nevertheless, in the end Lucy exhorts

¹⁰¹As Thormählen reminds us, “No book of [Charlotte Brontë’s] ends on an unambiguously triumphant happy-ever-after note” (153).

her readers with a message that reads like a Pauline exposition: “endure hardness as good soldiers; let us finish our course, and keep the faith, reliant in the issue to come off more than conquerors” (484-85). But does Lucy really believe what she is preaching? We must recall that she has been an unreliable narrator in places and has consistently demonstrated an attempt to believe in God’s mercy while simultaneously doubting the entire spiritual apparatus.

After Graham and Polly are happily married, another such scene of felicity and then doom appears. M. Paul takes Lucy to the Faubourg Clotilde to a small house. He shows her the furnishings, the cookware, the bedrooms, and a schoolroom, and he surprises her by admitting that he intends for her to live there and run a small school. He has secured three pupils for her and notes that Lucy already has the first year’s rent in her savings. Lucy experiences a moment of true happiness, yet she understands its fleeting nature. Lucy tentatively expresses hope for “one moment” in her “Happy hour,” asking Heaven to “let thy light linger; leave its reflection on succeeding clouds; bequeath its cheer to that time which needs a ray in retrospect!” (538). What foreboding thoughts after such a turn of events! Eventually, M. Paul declares his intentions: “Lucy, take my love. One day share my life,” and they walk back to the Rue Fossette under “such moonlight as fell on Eden” (541). The next day, M. Paul sets sail for the West Indies. For three years, they correspond as Lucy works at her school and he labors at the plantation of Madame Walravens. A few weeks before his scheduled return, Lucy sees frost appear early in autumn. The weather changes and the “skies hang full and dark.” A squall appears as the time for his arrival draws near. Lucy prays, “God, watch that sail! Oh! Guard it!” (545). The storm rages for a week and “did not cease till the Atlantic was strewn with wrecks: it did not lull till the deeps had gorged their full of sustenance; Not till the destroying angel of tempest had achieved his perfect work.” Lucy recalls the “thousand weepers, praying in agony on waiting shores,

listen[ing] for that voice, but it was not uttered. . . .” Abruptly, Lucy ends her dirge, telling the reader to “pause at once. There is enough said. Trouble no quiet, kind heart; leave sunny imaginations hope. . . . Let them picture union and a happy succeeding life.” Immediately following are the final words of the novel: “Madame Beck prospered all the days of her life; so did Père Silas; Madame Walravens fulfilled her ninetieth year before she died. Farewell” (546). We are not told anything about Lucy’s life after the supposed drowning of M. Paul, and Lucy seems unsuited to run a school successfully without his support. On the other hand, her adversaries, all Catholic, appear to have succeeded in life. The reader is left with a disconsolate feeling that Lucy has lost, and her foes have won.

The elision of a definitive conclusion leaves much room for interpretation, but most critics understand that Brontë meant to kill M. Paul. In a letter to her editor George Smith (26 March 1853), Brontë writes about the fate of M. Paul:

With regard to the momentous point . . . it was designed that every reader should settle the catastrophe for himself. . . . ‘[D]rowning and Matrimony are the fearful alternatives.’ The Merciful . . . will of course choose the former and milder doom—drown him to put him out of pain. The cruel-hearted will on the contrary pitilessly impale him on the second horn of the dilemma—marrying him without ruth or compunction to that—person—that—that— individual—‘Lucy Snowe.’ (Smith 3: 142)

Between the two possible endings, Charlotte offers a flippant response. Barker notes, “like Charlotte herself, Lucy would not get her man.” Brontë potentially would have been more explicit about M. Paul’s demise if her father had not intervened. While with the conclusion of *Jane Eyre* we can only conjecture Patrick Brontë’s influence, for *Villette* we have proof; her father wanted her to write a “‘happy ending’ because he disliked books that left a melancholy impression on the mind” (723). She acquiesced in part to please him, but the result was a perplexing conclusion.

For the most part, Victorian values were reaffirmed by Victorian novels, particularly in the first half of the nineteenth century. Generally, if characters behaved poorly, they would reap what they had sowed; conversely, if they acted correctly and persevered through all the trials and tribulations that came their way, they were amply rewarded, usually with a happy marriage.¹⁰² These types of endings reaffirmed a traditional Christian worldview, and we can observe the pressure on authors (Christian or not) to conform to this ideology by their choice of ending. *Great Expectations*, for example, is famous among critics for its original and then subsequently revised last scene.¹⁰³ The first conclusion Dickens wrote left the young couple apart. Upon finishing his novel, Dickens's friend Bulwer Lytton "objected to an ending that left Pip a solitary man" (J. Forster 368). Taking the advice, Dickens rewrote the ending, giving a happily-ever-after to Pip and Estella. Pip says the last line: "I saw no shadow of another parting from her." Vargish notes that the revised conclusion and the coincidental meeting of Pip and Estella requires an understanding of "causality that was not naturalistic" and "if a reader possesses a providential view of the world, then the meeting on the grounds of Satis House is true, true in the sense that moral development and spiritual refinement do merit and receive acknowledgement. . . . Rewards do come. Pip and Estella deserve to be rewarded and acknowledged" (8-9). Since we have observed that Brontë seems to possess a providential view of the world as reflected in her writing, why does she not vindicate God's goodness in the light of human suffering by rewarding Lucy with a career, a home, and M. Paul? Instead, she allows for an alternate conclusion with the

¹⁰²Even though *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley* end in marriage, the resolutions feel impermanent—fragile and gossamer-like. In *Jane Eyre*, the love story is quickly wrapped up, yet we must decipher the reinsertion of St. John Rivers. *Shirley* provides a similarly condensed, baffling ending with its cryptic message from the narrator, and even the happy marriages are suspect. Gubar finds that "Brontë cannot avoid the conventional 'happy ending,' as bankrupt as she knows it to be" (248).

¹⁰³See John Forster p. 368.

presumed death of M. Paul: suffering is not rewarded, and God appears to be absent. If this is the case, Lucy will experience what Lionel Trilling calls “the greatest distress associated with the evanescence of faith: . . . the loss of the assumption that the universe is purposive” (qtd. in Vargish 5), and this assumption was “not merely a comfortable idea but nothing less than a category of thought; its extirpation was a psychic catastrophe” (Vargish 5). If Brontë genuinely believed that God rewards the faithful, the ending of *Villette* should have demanded Lucy’s assured happiness. And if we agree, as Vargish finds, that “[a] good novel is not the successful justification of a theory about life” but instead “is the successful representation of life as the author perceives it,” (14) then we must conclude that for Brontë, God’s divine goodness is not explainable in the light of human suffering. Every time Lucy questions her fate, Brontë invites readers to join a philosophical discussion, and as Nieman says, “Every time we make the judgment *this ought not to have happened*, we are stepping onto a path that leads straight to the problem of evil” (5).

The conclusion of *Villette* is the last nail in the coffin for Christian Protestant assurance, its meaning full of “metaphysical silence and mystery” (Vargish 58). Unlike *Jane Eyre*, which “cheered [Victorian readers] by showing the providential intention vigorously at work in their world” (58), *Villette*’s conclusion upends Victorian readers’ expectations. Lucy learns “to endure suffering and deprivation, to keep to her path of perhaps hopeless hope” (Maynard, “The Brontës” 210). The words of Ecclesiastes 1.18 seem particularly apt to Lucy: “For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief” (*NIV*), and throughout the story, Lucy does gain more knowledge: a random lottery of pain or happiness exists in the world, and somehow God is author of both. Lucy’s defeatism throughout the novel provides a cover for her disbelief that God will provide comfort, peace, joy, and happiness to all. Only acceptance to

the bane of her existence prolongs Lucy's life. Likewise, the amount of resignation necessary for Charlotte to endure the tragedies of her life must have approached that of Lucy's. Their mutual griefs challenge the notion of an omnibenevolent God who concurrently allows suffering in the world, and both did their best to retain their faith while slipping into despair. Mary Taylor had this to say of her friend after Charlotte's death: "All her life was but labour and pain . . ." (qtd. in Gaskell 2: 268). That is something both author and protagonist have in common.

Conclusion: “[M]arked by a ‘Lost, Fated, God-Abandoned Smile’”

“Where there is no vision, the people perish”—Proverbs 29.18

In June 1855, three months after Charlotte Brontë’s untimely death,¹⁰⁴ *Sharpe’s London Magazine* wrote a tribute, acknowledging the importance of Brontë’s work:

That she has been taken from among us in the full vigor of her intellect, ere the sunshine of a happy home had fostered and developed the brighter and more genial portion of her nature, must ever be a source of regret to those who, admiring as we admire the works she has left as her lasting memorial, hoped for yet nobler proofs of her remarkable powers of invention, when time and an increased knowledge of life should have corrected the eccentricity, without lessening the originality, of her genius. (“A Review” 342)

In 1877, twenty-two years after Charlotte’s death, Algernon Charles Swinburne also acknowledged her gift as a writer:

There is no clearer and more positive instance in the whole world of letters than that supplied by the genius of Charlotte Brontë.

I must take leave to reiterate my conviction that no living English or female writer can rationally be held her equal in what I cannot but regard as the highest and the rarest quality which supplies the hardest and the surest proof of a great and absolute genius for the painting and the handling of human characters in mutual relation and reaction. (qtd. in Allott 406)

Anthony Trollope makes a fortuitous remark regarding *Jane Eyre*: “I venture to predict that *Jane Eyre* will be read among English novels when many whose names are now better known shall have been forgotten . . .” (qtd. in Allott 444). Indeed, Brontë’s works have proved the test of time.

As we conclude our study, we might glance at Brontë’s unfinished work to examine if it might support the kind of patterns we have been exploring. In November 1853, Brontë began a

¹⁰⁴We can conjecture from most accounts that Charlotte died while early in a pregnancy from complications of tuberculosis, the same disease that had claimed the lives of her siblings.

new novel subsequently titled “Emma,”¹⁰⁵ but before she had written more than two chapters, she died. In the remaining fragment, once again we have an older narrator (this time a woman) who reminisces about a recent past. The story begins with an aphorism:

We all seek an ideal in life.¹⁰⁶ A pleasant fancy began to visit me . . . that perhaps the number of human beings is few who do not find their quest at some era of life for some space more or less brief. I had certainly not found mine in youth, though the strong belief I held of its existence sufficed through all my brightest and freshest time to keep me hopeful. I had not found it in maturity. I was become resigned never to find it. (qtd. in Thackeray 825)

After this somber note, we are told the story of a young schoolgirl, Matilda Fitzgibbon, who it seems might become the narrator’s companion. Matilda is abruptly left in the care of Misses Wilcox who had recently opened a school, and we soon learn that Matilda’s apparent wealth is but a sham. The second chapter ends with her swooning after being confronted by Miss Wilcox of her penury. That is all we have of what promises to be an engaging novel. We can observe many similarities, however, to Brontë’s other works. First, we have autobiographical elements so critical to her work (e.g., the two Wilcox sisters, like Charlotte and Emily, had recently returned from abroad to begin their own school). We have Matilda Fitzgibbon, another sullen protagonist who might resemble Mina Laury’s physiognomy as a person who “now seems marked by a ‘lost, fated, God-abandoned smile’” (qtd in Maynard, *Charlotte* 53).¹⁰⁷ There is Mr. Ellin, a newly-arrived rector, who is initially described as a “gossiping, leisurely person,” “eccentric,” and “a

¹⁰⁵William Thackeray wrote “Charlotte Brontë’s Last Sketch” and included the fragment of “Emma” just after his brief introduction. This is one of the few printed copies available. Charlotte’s handwriting is miniscule and often illegible. For the actual manuscript, Princeton University Library has a copy in the Special Collections Department. Refer to “Emma” by Charlotte Brontë, “Wilfred Merton, Richmond, Surrey, MS. 71,” written in pen on preliminary leaf, RTC01 (no. 196).

¹⁰⁶We might notice how much more introspective the first line is when compared to the beginnings of Brontë’s other novels. *Jane Eyre* begins, “There was no possibility of taking a walk that day.” *Shirley* begins, “Of late years, an abundant shower of curates has fallen upon the north of England.” *Villette* begins, “My godmother lived in a handsome house in the clean and ancient town of Bretton.”

¹⁰⁷Mina Laury is Zamorna’s mistress in Brontë’s Angrian short story “The Spell.”

character” and then a bit later we are told that his “conduct had *yet* seemed to prove him unworthy” (827; emphasis added). His disputable characterization by Brontë is affirmed by his conversation with one of the school’s owners a few paragraphs later. Upon learning of Matilda’s impoverishment, he tells Miss Wilcox, “And if we were only in the good old times . . . where we ought to be, you might just send Miss Matilda out to the plantations in Virginia, sell her for what she is worth, and pay yourself” (830). Clearly, he is not meant to be a sympathetic character even though the original title for the story was *Willie Ellin*. While we cannot determine any true semblance of a plot from two chapters, and particularly cannot evaluate the fragment in terms of its religious concerns, we might conjecture that the somber beginning promises a book that will continue along the lines of her other works in its opprobrium of clergy, its dark, morose tone, and its questioning of how happiness is achieved (“We all seek an ideal in life”). Clearly, evaluating the metaphysical elements in Brontë’s novels holds promise.

Tillotson says, “With the Brontës the interconnexion (sic) of work and life is, at one level, only too obvious; the critic’s problem is to distinguish between fact and speculation, and what is still more difficult, between the less and the more critically relevant” (11). In our study, we have focused on the “more critically relevant” motif of religion as a heuristic in evaluating Charlotte Brontë’s works. As we have observed, Brontë’s providential worldview progresses toward a more secular stance as she writes her novels. Even after Brontë lost her anonymity, which allowed her to write with impunity, her novels became more somber and doubtful of God’s benevolence.¹⁰⁸ Sadly, Brontë’s final words demonstrate the despair that displaces belief when faith is ravaged. As she lay on her death bed, she awoke for an instant and saw her

¹⁰⁸In a letter to W.S. Williams (20 April 1848), Charlotte explains her desire to remain anonymous: “Currer Bell’ only—I am and will be to the Public; if accident or design should deprive me of that name, I should deem it a misfortune—a very great one; . . . If I were known—I should ever be conscious in writing that my book must be read by ordinary acquaintances—and that idea would fetter me intolerably” (Smith 2: 51).

husband, who was apparently praying that God would spare her. Charlotte whispered, “I am not going to die, am I? [God] will not separate us, we have been so happy” (qtd. in Gaskell 266). Sadly, Charlotte lived and died struggling with the question of God’s goodness, just as her protagonists experience during tumultuous moments in their lives. As we move through *Jane Eyre* to *Villette*, we observe Brontë’s important attempt “to raise questions and confront problems . . .” (Vargish 67)—questions and problems that are at the heart of Christian belief.

In the end, to say that there are any shortcomings in Brontë’s novels may be tantamount to scholarly treason. Nonetheless, I have demonstrated that the aesthetic failures are a result of the religious conflicts present in Brontë’s life and times as she works through those challenges. Charlotte Brontë is no Keats—her fiction is not a denial of self. Instead, she writes assertively in an anguished attempt to understand God’s benevolence. Thus, this study has demonstrated that evaluating Brontë’s works via a religious heuristic provides a more complete understanding of her novels and offers an additional approach to Brontë studies.

In his conclusion to *Aspects of the Novel*, E.M. Forster discusses the novel and its potential longevity as a form. He says,

If human nature does alter [the novel] it will be because individuals manage to look at themselves in a new way. Here and there people—very few people, but a few novelists are among them—are trying to do this. Every institution and vested interest is against such a search: organized religion, the State, the family in its economic aspect, have nothing to gain, and it is only when outward prohibitions weaken that it can proceed: history conditions it to that extent. . . . [T]hat way lies movement and even combustion for the novel, for if the novelist sees himself differently he will see his characters differently and a new system of lighting will result.

Charlotte Brontë is one of the few Victorian authors who wrestled with the notion of theodicy in difficult times as society moved toward secularization.¹⁰⁹ She is one of those authors whom E.M. Forster described as moving the novel forward by creating “a new system of lighting” that elucidates the Victorians’ religious doubt. Brontë offers up several characters who possess neither certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain, who are “swept with confused alarms of struggle and fight” like the speaker in Arnold’s “Dover Beach.” Whether Charlotte was Ernest Dimmet’s “Puritan, narrow and insular” (79), Gilbert and Gubar’s proto-feminist icon, Harold Bloom’s “will-to-power” dominatrix,¹¹⁰ or the saintly Gaskell icon of piety, Charlotte Brontë has the power to move her readers. Her faith, doubt, and gender have left us with a better understanding of the Victorian world, for the homely, diminutive writer succeeded against major obstacles: against those of a patriarchal society and those, perhaps even more dangerous, that threaten a fragile sense of spiritual assurance.

¹⁰⁹For instance, Chadwick notes that in 1886, an avowed atheist was allowed to take a seat in the House of Commons (2). This is yet another indicator of the tremendous change in Victorian society with regards to religious mores.

¹¹⁰Bloom proposes that Jane’s taming of Rochester in the end and “much of the literary power of *Jane Eyre* results from its authentic sadism in representing the very masculine Rochester as a victim of Charlotte Brontë’s will-to-power” (4).

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