

## Abstract

This is a thesis about women authors and the subjectivity of their protagonists and narration. In looking at Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* and George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, I seek to answer a few questions. How does subjective narration change the relationship between the narrator and reader? Why do the protagonists express themselves nearly exclusively in subjective language? Why do the plots of these two bildungsroman lack the linear nature of other novels? In the modern age, how does an authentic self express itself? What is the relationship between subjectivity, desire, and narration?

In this paper, I demonstrate the role of subjective communication and the presence of listeners as the fundamental building blocks of nineteenth-century women's selfhood. First, I discuss what a novel about selfhood (*bildungsroman*) looks like, keeping in mind Nancy Armstrong's argument in *Domestic Desire: A Political History of the Novel*. She writes about the subversive ways women write novels about desire. Next, I look closely at the novels in turn, following a basic pattern found in most *bildungsroman*—first paying attention to the undeveloped self; next, to the developing selfhood; and thirdly, to the full self. Finally, I consider what implications of each novel's narrative voice and role of desire have for the reader. In doing so, I hope to encourage a reading of *Villette* and *Middlemarch* that harmonizes with the subjectiveness of each text, one that pays tribute to the forms of desire.

*Villette*, especially, has been decried by many as too full of desire. Matthew Arnold called it a novel full only of "hunger, rebellion, and rage" (qtd. in Cooper xxiii); William Thackeray, Charlotte Brontë's hero and friend, commented on her singleness, and even the feminist Harriet Martineau, a dear friend of Brontë's, called the book "almost intolerably painful" (qtd. in Cooper xxii). In the same vein, critics Gilbert and Gubar call *Middlemarch* a "Satanically ambitious book, a

“home epic” (Finale) that tells the story not of great men but of a “foundress of nothing” (Prelude) (531). These criticisms are addressed fully in this thesis, and the futility and hunger found in both are given context.

The joy of *Villette* and *Middlemarch* lies in their subjectivity. Their protagonists’ goals are undefined, and their success is felt rather than known. Both narrators of the novels, Lucy Snowe and the omniscient narrator of *Middlemarch*, seek to transcend the words on the page and reach directly for the passions and desires of the readers through the tools that subjectivity offers. Lucy Snowe does this through symbolism and trance-like writing that seeks to circumvent analytical, detached readings of her story. *Middlemarch*’s narrator does so by sympathetically bridging the gap between characters, calling upon the readers to feel universal human emotions and conflicts. The narrators of *Villette* and *Middlemarch* are best read by readers who suspend judgments and enter into the desires, the interiority of their heroines. *Villette* does not seek to change the social order of its namesake town, but rather to tell Lucy’s story to the world. In the same way, *Middlemarch*’s narrator does not seek to change its namesake town, but to justify its characters to the sympathetic reader.

In these pages, I present a case for a different reading of women’s novels in the nineteenth century, one that allows for more personal, visceral responses to the texts. This is not to say that scholarly readings are of little or no value, but rather to carve out a place for reading with desire. Brontë sees the need for community, one that requires both listeners and speakers, in the growth of Lucy Snowe. In the same way, Eliot’s narrator creates a community of listeners and speakers, listeners who learn, through the narrator’s gentle guidance, to read between the lines of dialogue, to sympathize and realize the desires of each character.