Wilted Petals that Loved: Flowers and Humanity in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*

Colleen Bidner

Abstract: This essay discusses scenes in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853) that involve flowers and the relationship between Lucy Snowe and Monsieur Paul Emmanuel. Their romance demonstrates how Brontë shines a light on the humanity of women when mid-Victorian society values their physical appearance and housewife skills. The relationship demonstrates human connection and mortality through the following: offering gifts more meaningful than a bouquet; security through the house that Monsieur Paul gives Lucy for her career; and Biblical origins of man and woman. Lucy achieves autonomous security due to their connection, making her a model for women in Brontë's desired society.

From a twenty-first century perspective, flowers are symbolic of blossoming love. A bouquet is bought for the receiving lover, representing the giver's thoughtfulness and dedication in the relationship. During the nineteenth century, flowers symbolised romance, relationships, and female delicacy. Barbara T. Gates emphasises the Victorians' long-lasting fascination with natural history as a "love affair" due to Victorian literature's association with romance and nature (539). Louisa Anne Meredith's book titled *The Romance of Nature; or the Flower Seasons Illustrated* (1836) is one example (Gates 539). Flowers in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853) become a significant topic around the romantic relationship of Lucy Snowe and Monsieur Paul Emmanuel, considering the heightening interest in tending flowers during the 1840s and the creation of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in 1848 (Gates 545). Flowers play a central role in the scene of Monsieur Paul's fête, or birthday. As the story clos-

es, flowers are still present but blend with the background. Analysis of four scenes concludes that flowers in the novel show more than a human's outer beauty and emphasises Victorian women's romantic lives. The mortality of flowers symbolises Monsieur Paul's implied death and the terminal end of his relationship with Lucy. References to Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden within *Villette* and Victorian media enhance the link between humanity and flowers. I will demonstrate the humanity, and therefore mortality, that flowers of *Villette* and the Victorian age represent.

Flowers in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* are important objects in Chapter XXIX: "Monsieur's Fête," in which Brontë's figurative language personifies flowers and compares them to romantic feelings. In this chapter, the school's teachers and all-female pupils present Monsieur Paul with bouquets on his fête. Flowers are not depicted as an "article of value" such as expensive plates or accessories. Instead, Monsieur Paul prefers a flower "offered simply and with sincere feelings" (381). His fête is on March 1, a detail that adds to the spring atmosphere encapsulated in flowers. So, flowers represent the growth or budding of "sincere feelings" between Lucy and her fellow professor. Shawna Ross quotes Molly Engelhardt: Brontë "inserted flowers strategically into particularly potent scenes to represent sexual tension" (221), which connotes a burgeoning romantic relationship and spring atmosphere. Lucy would not be satisfied with offering simple plants for Monsieur Paul on his fête:

> I like to see flowers growing, but when they are gathered, they cease to please. I look on them then as things rootless and perishable; their likeness to life makes me sad. I never offer flowers to those I love; I never wish to receive them from hands dear to me. (382)

The chapter setting has an academic context since Monsieur Paul's students offer flowers. Although Lucy still brings flowers into the topic of love, acknowledging their strong, almost default attachment to romance, her opinion on flowers equates to life itself. Lucy's words "rootless and perishable" to describe bouquets indicate that love, when

shown through ordinary bouquets, is rootless and perishable like life. She believes that love must be strengthened through deeper means than an offering of temporal objects valued merely for appearance. The words "some solitary symbolic flower" connect Lucy to herself since she values solitude when alone in gardens—where flowers also grow—making flowers an essential part of Lucy's first-person voice (Brontë 383). Her view on flowers goes beyond their aesthetic appearance. Even though Monsieur Paul appreciates flowers offered as gifts while Lucy does not, they both denote flowers with genuine care, beginning a closer human connection with each other.

When flowers return in Lucy and Monsieur Paul's relationship, men and women's gender roles come into balance; therefore, romance unifies humanity. As Monsieur Paul shows Lucy the new house he provides for her future teaching classes, the flowers are more subtle compared to when they are the central gift during Monsieur Paul's fête:

> Three green flowerpots, each filled with a fine plant glowing in bloom; in one corner appeared a guéridon with a marble top, and upon it a workbox, and a glass filled with violets in water. The lattice of this room was open; the outer air breathing through gave freshness, the sweet violets lent fragrance. (548)

Here, the roles are switched regarding who receives the flowers. In this section of Chapter XLI: "Fauberg Clotilde," flowers are part of the house décor, appearing briefly in the paragraph. The house represents the security that Monsieur Paul grants Lucy; therefore, security has been found in their relationship. Lucy then comments on the house's aesthetic appeal; flowers and beauty are part of the house where a woman will carry out her career, not the house where a woman will raise children. This speaks to Helen Benedict's words: Monsieur Paul is "symbolic of an essential Brontë vision: a future when women are loved not for their beauty or pretenses of virtue and submissiveness, but for their intelligence, character, and accomplishments" (584). This idea of women's beauty and submissiveness can be com-

pared to the idea of delicate flowers. As previously quoted, Lucy describes flowers as having a "likeness to life" (Brontë 382). Her description of flowers being unfortunately picked from their life force, the earth, resembles the objectification of women: when objectified, both women and flowers are deprived of their existence as living beings. Instead, they are valued simply for aesthetics. Brontë goes against this concept by making the flowers part of the background as décor of Lucy's classroom. The passage on Lucy's new home shows how flowers, like women, serve more importance than their delicate appearances.

The 1852 John Bull article titled "Female Education" represents how women were viewed during Brontë's time, and she fights against this viewpoint. This article says that women who present artificial flowers in their home instead of cleaning, cooking well, or managing their husband's money serve little use as a wife (73). Artificial flowers are not picked from the earth and do not produce natural scents. Consequently, married women who display manmade flowers and receive this message may feel insubstantial. Their artificial flowers would be useful only for decoration, just as a wife of this nature would be valued significantly for appearance. In this scene (548), Brontë draws on the air and the scent of violets. Hence, she draws on human emotionality, as supported by Engelhardt: "Flowers exude perfumes that invoke feelings and trigger memories that are not necessarily ephemeral; by drying flowers and storing them inside books, those memories can be accessed on demand" (359). Engelhardt's quotation applies to an earlier scene in *Villette*, when Monsieur Paul (then a stranger to Lucy) gives Lucy violets. Back then, Lucy dried the flowers to keep their fragrance (Brontë 132). Now, as Monsieur Paul and Lucy know each other more deeply, the scent of violets returns. By placing delicate flowers in the background of a schoolroom where Lucy has independence gifted from a man, Brontë's vision of gender equality is depicted at the end of the novel. The plants and violets symbolise not only decoration but also the new breath of life and love given to her, where she can use a workbox and thrive alongside her plants.

Another magazine article titled "The Language of Flowers" (*The Ladies' Cabinet of Fashion, Music and Romance*, 1850) analyses the romantic symbology of flowers and gardens, which goes back to the Bible. "The Language of Flowers" says that, in ancient times, there must have been a "language of the eyes" for humans to "communicate reciprocally their thoughts, and make known to each other their feelings, their wants, and their desires" (17). The unknown author argues that flowers were used as symbols of communication. In other words, flowers offer a path for humans to see each other's souls and humanity. This path becomes clearer through romantic relationships. The author describes how Adam and Eve must have handed each other flowers to express love and how that language was passed on through generations (18-19). They quote another author who says, "[Flowers] are the teachers of gentle thoughts, and of kindly emotions" (19). Thus, flowers not only encapsulate the inner hearts of humans but also bring out the traits that make us better humans and help us strive for them. This teaching is demonstrated in Monsieur Paul and Lucy's relationship. Prior to the fête, they had been angry with each other. For example, Monsieur Paul and Lucy clash when he locks her in the attic to ensure she learns her lines in the play and when he tells her not to look at the openly sexual painting of nude Cleopatra (Brontë 148, 226). When flowers appear in the novel, their connection starts to improve. Even though Lucy does not give him flowers at his fête, they connect intimately when she makes him a pocket watch for his fête instead of flowers.

Villette imitates the ideal Victorian image and symbology of flowers. Angelus's poem "Genoveva: A Legend of Ardennes" (T*he Lady's Newspaper and Pictorial Times*, 1850) shows an ideal image of love and flowers that recreates a vision of Eden. The poem has its own "language of the eyes," making flowers a significant art. In the third section, the narrator wishes to "paint" Genoveva with a "flower serene" (1, 7). She has an "Eve-like grace of primal paradise" (14). This line compares to previous descriptions of and connections to Genesis, women, and flowers in "The Language of

Flowers." Since both articles are from 1850, the third section of "Genoveva" evokes the Pre-Raphaelite paintings that arose during this time. The poem continues by describing Genoveva and her lover walking at night with flowers that add to the romantic scene and atmosphere of "primal paradise." Brontë's scene near the end of "Fauberg Clotilde" parallels Angelus's poem. Monsieur Paul's words, "Be my dearest, first on earth" (Brontë 554), suggest an image of Adam and Eve. The following passage builds on this image, painting the couple in a likeness to the Biblical origin of humanity:

> We walked back to the Rue Fossette by moonlight—such moonlight as fell on Eden—shining through the shades of the Great Garden, and haply gilding a path glorious, for a step divine—a Presence nameless. Once in their lives some men and women go back to these first fresh days of our great Sire and Mother—taste that grand morning's dew—bathe in its sunrise. (Brontë 554–555)

Beverly Seaton notes that "in nature, many Victorian thinkers read messages about Christ and the Christian experience in the same way that they read their Bibles" (260). Natural symbols had religious meaning that form a material connection to the historical truth of Scripture. Therefore, nature and flowers were interpreted like the symbols of Biblical typology that appear in the Old Testament to foreshadow their significance in the New Testament. In *Villette*'s case, nature amplifies the truth of human mortality as depicted in Christianity, and the overarching story sets Brontë's work apart from Victorian material.

While "Genoveva," Pre-Raphaelite paintings, and *Villette* reference eternal beauty found in myth and the Bible, *Villette*'s allusions to Adam and Eve emphasise the temporality of flowers, youthful feminine beauty, and human life. Throughout the novel, Lucy seeks solitude in gardens. Near the novel's end, she is in the garden to bond with Monsieur Paul, a fellow human being. As Brontë compares the characters to Adam and Eve and the scenery to the Garden of Eden, readers see the idealised version of humanity. This

idealised perspective compares to how beautiful flowers may be idealised in the Victorian age. On a deeper level, Brontë's scene communicates the euphoric state that love and human connection can radiate. Brontë's novel *Shirley* (1849) has a similar scene in which "flowers … are thus not only a metaphor for romance but also a physical medium through which it advances" (Ross 222). *Villette*'s scene uses the concept of "The Language of Flowers" and "Genoveva": there are no words needed when Lucy and Monsieur Paul walk through the "Great Garden." Instead, they use their eyes to sense the divine eternity of being human. However, the scene becomes different from both Victorian texts once the rest of the novel's context becomes clear: this moment is only temporary. While waiting for Monsieur Paul, Lucy tends plants on her own (558), once again in solitude. Since they can only "go back" to the "Sire and Mother" known as Adam and Eve, Brontë discretely acknowledges that the days of paradise on Earth are gone. With the couple's separation and Monsieur Paul's hinted death by the novel's end, readers know that the couple's walk, which evokes an "idealised," Pre-Raphaelite atmosphere, is mortal. Flowers, romance, and the human body eventually end in their paradise, just as the Garden of Eden becomes tainted with the Serpent's corruption.

Brontë also shows the personal human side of herself, an extension of showing women's (human) rights. John Hughes says that "the text can itself be seen as an artistic expression or reiteration of childhood emotions of loss, which still persist, unappeased, within the adult" (724–725). He notes that, just before *Villette*'s publication, Brontë recently experienced the deaths of sisters Emily (1848) and Anne (1849). He references when Madame Beck blocks Lucy from seeing Monsieur Paul for a last goodbye (Brontë 503). The emotion in this scene mirrors her sorrow regarding unrequited love from her professor Constantin Héger (Hughes 725). It is easier for Lucy to accept his absence after his final departure. Therefore, she realises that time spent with loved ones is temporary, like death. To cope with this, Lucy, who is "naturally no florist," grows Monsieur Paul's "pre-

ferred" plants (Brontë 558). These plants flourish under love, as she chooses to tend them out of caring for him. The scene links to Chapter XXIX: "Monsieur's Fête," as Monsieur Paul cares more about the feelings in a flower rather than its beauty. Both characters are unified in their vision of flowers. As Lucy prefers, she does not pluck the plants from the ground and offer them to her lover. Instead, she becomes an amateur florist, carrying out the purpose that pleases her: to watch them grow. Feelings are a quality that all humans have, whether or not society deems those humans attractive like a flower. Thus, the flowers in Lucy's classroom can be interpreted as quotidian rather than an Eden-like perfection, adding to Brontë's vision of women being valued for their personal, human characteristics. Just as Lucy helps the flowers grow, she begins to pave her own way as an individual, making a prime success in human life.

Since the time of Adam and Eve, flowers have been admired for their beauty. As humans, we understand why they wilt and die, for they are mortal like us. In *Villette*, flowers bring two humans together on an emotional level that runs deeper than outer beauty. The growth of Lucy and Monsieur Paul's romance leads to an imitation of how Victorian media presents picturesque flowers and women. Charlotte Brontë veers from this vision by implying the end of their relationship, an unfortunate but inevitable occurrence for imperfect mortal lives. When flowers are associated with human traits, they represent the life and fragility of human love, which strengthens the emotional potency in someone giving their lover a bouquet.

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