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The Appeal for Readerly Sympathy in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*


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Because reading any piece of literature is a personal experience for me, I was drawn to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*: the novel's first-person narrative voice strongly solicits feelings of sympathy from the reader, thus emphasizing the importance and necessity of the reader's role and response to the novel. My interest in *Jane Eyre* led me to read Brontë's *Villette*, a novel which still conjures sympathetic feelings from the reader, but makes problematic this sympathy with a narrative voice that minimizes the role of the reader and addresses the reader almost as an afterthought. While *Jane Eyre* gives the reader a role to fulfill with a promised sense of readerly privilege and satisfaction, *Villette* leaves the reader aware of her inadequacies as a reader and the banality of her role. My research seeks to understand how and why *Villette* is a critique of the reader's role as it pertains to readerly sympathy and how this critique comments on Victorian life and society.

When the relationship between narrative voice and readerly sympathy in *Jane Eyre* is compared to that in *Villette*, a complex set of questions arises. Jane is very conscious of the reader and her voice appeals strongly to the reader. Her relationship with the reader is personal and she brings the reader into her confidence. Thus, the appeals for readerly sympathy in *Jane Eyre* align with our own readerly expectations. In *Villette*, Lucy's acknowledgement of the reader is rather impersonal, almost professional. Lucy treats the reader in a self-controlled manner and her most intense moments seem to be reserved for herself. Lucy's narrative voice is more self-involved than Jane's narrative voice, and mystifies and thwarts our readerly expectations. Unlike Jane's narrative voice, which directly addresses the reader in a confidential manner and acknowledges the necessity of the reader's role and involvement in her situation, Lucy's narrative voice addresses the reader with tact and discretion. Thus, in its most impassioned moments, Lucy's voice emphasizes how Lucy is in fact having a personal moment and reveals to the reader her limitations in understanding and sympathizing with Lucy. Although the reader sympathizes with both characters, the way she feels about her role as the reader changes according to whether she is in Jane's or Lucy's presence.

<p>The Appeal for Readerly Sympathy in Charlotte Brontë's <i>Jane Eyre</i> and <i>Villette</i></p> <p>Stephanie Lo</p>		<p>Lucy:</p> <p><i>"Under every cloud, no matter what its nature, Ginevra, as of old, called out heartily for sympathy and aid. She had no notion of meeting any distress single-handed. In some shape, from some quarter or other, she was pretty sure to obtain her will, and so she got on -- fighting the battle of life by proxy, and on the whole, suffering as little as any human being I have ever known."</i></p> <p>A critique of the voice, often feminine, which appeals for sympathy and the readerly sympathy that is solicited</p> <p>Narrative voice mystifies and thwarts our readerly expectations</p> <p>Reveals to the reader her limitations in understanding and sympathizing with the protagonist</p>
	<p>Questions for Thought:</p> <p>Explore how the novels differ in their appeal for readerly sympathy through narrative voice</p> <p>What accounts for the changes from <i>Jane Eyre</i> to <i>Villette</i>? Why does <i>Jane Eyre</i> leave readers with a sense of closeness to its protagonist Jane, while <i>Villette</i> leaves the reader disquieted because she couldn't have understood its protagonist Lucy more?</p> <p>How do the narrative voices' different approaches for soliciting readerly sympathy shape the reader's role?</p>	
<p>Jane:</p> <p><i>"Reader, I married him."</i></p> <p>Conscious of the reader's presence</p> <p>Narrative voice appeals strongly to the reader</p> <p>Treats her relationship with the reader as personal; brings the reader into her confidence</p> <p>Appeals for readerly sympathy align with our own readerly expectations</p> <p>Acknowledges the necessity of the reader's role and involvement in her situation</p>		<p>Aims:</p> <p>Understand how <i>Jane Eyre</i> and <i>Villette</i> are situated in their literary and historical context</p> <p>Understand the ways in which <i>Villette</i> complicates the concepts of sympathy and the reader's role as presented in <i>Jane Eyre</i></p> <p>Understand how <i>Jane Eyre</i> gives the reader a role to fulfill with a promised sense of readerly privilege and satisfaction, and how <i>Villette</i> leaves the reader aware of her inadequacies as a reader and the banality of her role</p>

References

- [1] Bronte, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. 3rd ed. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001. A Norton Critical Edition.
- [2] Bronte, Charlotte. *Villette*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008. Oxford World's Classics.