

Behind Silence and Lies: An Analysis of Lucy's Unreliable Narration and Its Effects

Qiumei Yang

Department of Chinese Language and Literature, College of Arts and Sciences, Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China

Abstract

As the narrator in a fixed internal focalization narrative form, Lucy creates narrative ambiguity and contradiction by concealing the identities of Dr. John and Mr. Paul and denying her feelings for Graham, she has unreliable characteristics on both the "fact" axis and the "value" axis. This unreliability both keeps readers at a distance through silence and lies while resonating with readers through her mental motivation. Bronte restructures the relationship between the narrator and the readers based on this, thus highlighting the living dilemma of women's self-repression in the Victorian era.

Keywords

Unreliable narration; Lucy Snowe; *Villette*, self-repression.

1. Introduction

With the in-depth study of narratology, unreliable narration has become one of the most-discussed topics at the moment [1]. Wayne Booth first defined "unreliable narration" in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*: a narrator is reliable "when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work", unreliable when he does not". Unreliable narration occurs when the narrator's behaviors, deeds, and judgments are contrary to the deep intentions of the implied author. *Villette* is a semi-autobiographical novel published by Charlotte Bronte in 1853, which portrays the living picture of the orphan Lucy Snowe in a boarding school for girls in Belgium. In the novel, Lucy narrates in the first person, her words frequently contain contradictions with objective facts, and she has the characteristics of what Booth said an unreliable narrator. Ivan Kreilkamp said bluntly: "The central issue of *Villette* is the reliability of Lucy as the narrator." [2] Although there are studies on Lucy's unreliable narration in *Villette* in the academic circles at present, most of them pursue research from perspectives such as narrator, author [3] or reader, only one paper fully adopts the analytical perspectives of narrator, text and reader, but it overlooks the connection between the narrative strategy and the gist of the novel. Therefore, this paper will use various theoretical methods to analyze Lucy's performance as an unreliable narrator as well as the effects of this narrative mode on the three levels: narrator, reader and author, trying to contribute to the research on *Villette*.

2. Narrative Perspective of Unreliable Narrator

Percy Lubbock said: "The whole intricate question of method, in the craft of fiction, I take to be governed by the point of view—the question of the relation in which the narrator stands to the story." [4] This assertion emphasizes the core position of narrative perspective in understanding the art of the novel. The perspective he said essentially corresponds to the focalization presented by Gérard Genette in *Figures II*, namely the issue of "who speaks" and "who sees". Therefore, the type and characteristics of her narrative perspective, and its influence on the unreliable narration should be made clear before analyzing Lucy Snowe's unreliable narration. The fixed internal focalization narrative mode is used in *Villette*, the

protagonist Lucy Snowe, as the first-person narrator 'I', tells the entire story. It means that the narrator has almost absolute control over the information presented, inherently containing the potential tension for creating unreliable narration. Lucy's account is a review of the past: "I speak of a time gone by." As Shen Dan argued, when a first-person narrator looks back on his or her own past, "it is difficult to be as calm and objective as a third-person narrator ('external perspective'), because it is his or her own past after all." [5] As is the case with Lucy, she deliberately conceals the identities of Dr. John and Mr. Paul due to her own position, and denies her feelings for Graham, resulting in an intentional unreliable narration. This also confirms Stanzel's judgment on the nature of first-person narration: "In Booth's terms, by definition, the first-person narrator is an unreliable narrator." [6] Arguably, Lucy's unreliability benefits from the narrative authority granted to her by this specific narrative perspective.

Many critics take Robert Coleby's point of view; they believe that the narrator Lucy is an "elderly unmarried woman now at peace with the world" [7]. However, Lucy's strong self-awareness challenges this assertion. In narrative, narrator frequently reflects, such as "I scarcely know what thoughts I had", "though without at the time particularly noticing the gossip", "But I did not want to look then"; she further judges her past actions, such as "Those thoughts of mine were dangerous"; and she also analyzes her understanding differences between the past and the present, such as "I had not at the moment comprehended that blue, yet lurid, flash out of his angry eye; but I read its meaning now." These characteristics collectively suggest that the narrative essence of *Villette* is not merely a simple record of the past, but rather a mental process of Lucy's self-analysis. The conclusion of the work reinforces this symbolic aim: "My vague aim, as I went, was to find the stone-basin, with its clear depth and green lining... I still secretly and chiefly longed to come on that circular mirror of crystal, and surprise the moon glassing therein her pearly front." Gregory O'Dea points out that the "basin" and the "circular mirror" symbolize the medium through which Lucy acquires self-knowledge, as a narrator, her aim is just to pursue these media and complete her self-examination. This interpretation echoes Sally Shuttleworth's view, she points out that *Villette* "as a form of creative escape, ultimately leading to a new knowledge of the embodied selves". Lucy's unreliable narration is largely rooted in a highly conscious process of self-examination. In order to achieve some kind of internal integration, she uses silence and even lies to construct the narrative, causing a confusing effect.

Therefore, Lucy's unreliable narration stems from the inherent limitations of the first-person internal focalization perspective, and is further driven by her strong self-awareness. This self-conscious narrative behavior, which aims at self-examination, fundamentally shapes Lucy's unreliability as a narrator.

3. Unreliable Narrator's Deviation from Implied Author

In Booth's view, the distance between the unreliable narrator and the implied author grows out of the inconsistency between the narrator and the paradigm of the work, and this inconsistency often occurs on the "fact" axis and the "value" axis. The former is the narrator's mistakes or hiding when reporting the truth of events, and the latter is the deviation of the narrator's value judgments from the norms of the implied author. Lucy Snowe's narration combines the above characteristics, which consist of long-term concealment of the identities of Dr. John and Mr. Paul, as well as her deliberate denial of own emotions.

The unreliable narration on the "fact" axis is illustrated by the narrator Lucy's deliberate concealment of the identities of Dr. John and Mr. Paul. Dr. John is actually Lucy's childhood acquaintance - the son of her godmother, and she discovers this point in Chapter 10. When Lucy looks at Dr. John, "an idea new, sudden, and startling, riveted my attention with an overmastering strength and power of attraction." But what exactly this new and startling idea

is, the narrator does not explain. It is not until Chapter 16, after Lucy is rescued from the coma and returns to her godmother and Graham's home, the narrator tells the truth to the readers: "This tall young man - this darling son - this host of mine - this Graham Bretton, was Dr. John: he, and no other." She herself admitted this concealment: "The discovery was not of today... noted several chapters back; I first recognized him on that occasion." This proves that her narration on the "fact" axis constitutes an unreliable narration. The concealment of Mr. Paul's identity follows a similar pattern. In Chapter 13, the narrator casually mentions, "a certain little bunch of white violets that had once been silently presented to me by a stranger." It is not until Chapter 31 that readers realized that the so-called "stranger" is Mr. Paul, because he volunteered to Lucy that he "once coming silently and offering you a little knot of white violets." Paul Emanuel appeared as early as Chapter 7, he is the cousin of Madame Beck, he met and interacted with Lucy in the boarding house when she first arrived in Villette. He is by no means a stranger to both Lucy and the readers. Therefore, when Lucy tells key events and character relationships, she conceals the truth, causing unreliable narration on the "fact" axis.

The narrator Lucy is also unreliable on the "value" axis. Booth points out: "Sometimes it is almost impossible to infer whether or to what degree a narrator is fallible.; sometimes, however, clear evidence or self-contradictory evidence makes the inference easier." Lucy's self-contradiction is apparently reflected in her feelings towards Graham. The narrator vehemently denies having fallen in love with Graham: "I disclaim, with the utmost scorn, every sneaking suspicion of what are called "warmer feelings". However, various signs in the text suggest that what she says is not the truth. When Lucy receives a letter from Graham, she "experiences a belief in happiness" and even "approached the seal with a mixture of awe and shame and delight." When Lucy realized that Graham had fallen in love with Paulina, she "wept bitterly", she laments "The hope I am bemoaning suffered and made me suffer much: it did not die till it was full time." The narrator verbally denies "warmer feelings", but his behavioral responses reveal the true emotions, this contradiction between judgment and behavioral evidence is just the mark of unreliable narration. As Mary Jacobus said, " Lucy lies to us. Her deliberate ruses, omissions and falsifications break the unwritten contract of first-person narrative and unsettle our faith in the reliability of the text." [8] Lucy deeply loves Graham; however, the narrator denies this point to the readers, her lies have caused unreliable judgments on the "value" axis. In a word, the narrator Lucy of *Villette* deliberately remains silent on the "fact" axis and denies her true feelings on the "value" axis, which makes her narration full of ambiguity and contradiction, and has the typical characteristics of unreliable narration. However, this unreliability is not a fault in Bronte's creation; on the contrary, it profoundly influences the artistic value of the work.

4. Effect Analysis of Unreliable Narration

In order to comprehensively analyze the effect of unreliable narration in *Villette*, the author will cut from the perspectives of narrator, reader, and author, and they are also the three dimensions that James Phelan pays attention to. In his view the unreliable narration of the narrator affects the readers, causing specific cognitive, emotional and ethical responses; while the readers' response is essentially the result of the author's careful guidance through textual clues. Therefore, the following text will successively explore how Lucy's unreliable narration reveals her image and how it guides the reader's reading experience, and thereby achieves the author's creative intention.

(1) Narrator: Self-concealment and Revelation

Lucy's silence on the "fact" axis and denial on the "value" axis shape the image of a self-repressed narrator. After admitting his concealment of Graham's identity, the narrator explained, "To say anything on the subject, to hint at my discovery, had not suited my habits of

thought, or assimilated with my system of feeling. On the contrary, I had preferred to keep the matter to myself." This just shows that concealment is a conscious mental repression. She described Mr. Paul, whom she had known for a long time, as a stranger, also attempting to weaken the emotions caused by the act of giving flowers. The narrator emphasizes to the reader: "a stranger to me, for we had never exchanged words." Attributing this to the stranger who requires no response helps her evade deeper emotional involvement. In the final analysis, the narrator attempts to portray herself as aloof, and only when she represses her passion does she feel "I was again Lucy Snowe." She has always controlled her unspeakable inner impulses under a mask called "Lucy Snowe". And Lucy's unreliable narration on the "value" axis is an embodiment of her self-repression. Although all the signs seemed to suggest the opposite, she still insisted that she had never had "warmer feelings" for Graham. That was because her reason, "frostily touching my ear with the chill blue lips of eld", pressed against her ear and sharply warned her that she should never express her feelings. Such self-repression repeated itself, leading Lucy to gradually accept a peaceful life. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar concluded that "Lucy Snowe is tormented by the realization that she has bought survival at the price of never fully existing, escaped pain by retreating behind a dull, grave camouflage." Therefore, the denial of Graham's feelings was her effort to resist her inner passion and try to confine it within a safe range. Arguably, the reason why Lucy chose unreliable narration and unreliable judgment in her narration was all to conceal the fact of her inner passion or emotional fluctuations, which reveals Lucy's mental characteristic of self-repression.

(2) Readers: Breaking and Reconstruction of Contract

Lucy's unreliable narration which is rooted in self-repression directly acts upon recipients of her narration-the reader, creating a unique reading experience. James Phelan classifies unreliable narration into "estranging unreliability" and "contractual unreliability" based on narrative distance. The former is that unreliable narration will widen the distance between narrator and 'authorial reader', 'authorial reader' realizes that adopting the narrator's perspective means deviating from the perspective of the implied author; the latter is that this distance is shortened, because the "unreliability" contains information mutually recognized by the implied author and the 'authorial reader'. Lucy's unreliable narration combines the above effects and has a dynamic impact on the reader's reading experience. On the one hand, the silences and lies Lucy inserts in her narration push her further away from the reader. Once these omissions are detected, the readers soon realize Lucy's unreliability and thus becomes more cautious about the events and judgments she describes. On the other hand, the author does not let unreliable narration merely lead to estrangement. She creates a space for understanding Lucy's concealments by textual clues in time, thereby tapping into the empathy of the "authorial reader" for her situation and generating contractual unreliability. Readers will find in subsequent reading that Lucy always tries to maintain a calm appearance in front of them. For instance, when she was caught peeping at Graham, she emphasized that "it was not due to any rash and envious passion"; when she went to the theater with Graham, she anticipated that readers would think "that to go anywhere with Graham and without Mrs. Bretton could be objectionable" and argued "I could not have conceived"; her only almost direct expression of emotion was her love for Paulina, but she quickly expressed "I do not often make such statements about people I know" and humbly request readers to "tolerate this time". Readers gradually realize that Lucy lies to hide her true self and avoid the anxiety of being judged. As Helen Moglen said, she makes "superior gesture of justice to defend against her threatened sense of inferiority"[9]. With the deepening of reading, readers constantly experience Lucy's situation and motives, gradually understand the "threatened sense of inferiority", this brings them closer to Lucy and forms a contractual connection. Lucy's lies break the contract between the first-person narrator and the reader, but her motive to maintain

self-esteem evokes sympathy and reconstruct the contract, this contradiction is precisely the source of the narrative tension.

(3) Author: Narrative Strategy and Theme Expression

Lucy is a narrator who is both distant from and understandable to the readers, Bronte restructures the relationship between the narrator and the readers by creating this image. have long recognized that Lucy might upset the readers, admitted "I did not intend to place her in a pleasant position from the start." But more importantly, Bronte firmly believed that Lucy would resonate with the readers: "Anyone who leads such a life is bound to become unhealthy... if all are not expressed in the book, there must be a major fault somewhere." [10] Bronte did not create Lucy's unreliability unconsciously but intentionally used this unreliability to make a character with the characteristic of 'unapproachable' understandable to readers. When Wolfgang Iser analyzed Fielding's works, he pointed out that "the author almost plea for and even urges the reader to penetrate this surface, and ultimately abandon it completely, and switch to conceiving that emotion within their heart... The reader must construct their own understanding of reality and the textual meaning from the given textual materials." [11] Bronte practiced this point in *Villette*. She created uncertain point under textual meaning through Lucy's unreliable narration, prompting the reader to break through the carefully constructed narrative surface by Lucy, thereby getting closer to the narrator's secret and repressed inner world. This strategy implies Bronte's challenge to the traditional narrative authority; she partially transfers the task of interpreting the inner truth of women to the shoulders of the engaged readers.

The unreliable narration in *Villette* ultimately serves the effective conveyance of the novel's gist. Lucy's self-repression is not an isolated individual mental phenomenon but a necessary consequence of the internalization of gender norms in her era. She admits that the reason for adopting "these struggles with the natural character, the strong native bent of the heart " is because it can make her "quieter on the surface", and 'it is on the surface only the common gaze will fall'; Mr. Paul's words to Lucy also reflect the moral shackles on women: "Women who are worthy the name ought infinitely to surpass our course, fallible, self-indulgent sex, in the power to perform such duties." The prevailing cultural discourse of this period was no exception, such as Coventry Patmore's narrative poem "The Angel in the House" published in 1854, which rhapsodized about the image of submissive, pious, and self-sacrificing wife. In *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850-1920*, Vicinus pointed out that women's self-repression was worshiped by Victorian society, namely "unconsciously sacrifice their personal desires and wishes for the ambitions and goals of their husbands and families" [12]. The behavior of Lucy's unreliable narration is a vivid illustration of these times mental oppression at the individual narrative level. When readers see through the narrator's silence and lies, they can feel the struggle of women between moral constraints and emotional needs, thereby causing reflection on the gender power structure. To this *Villette* denounced the oppression of patriarchal society on the women's mental world in the Victorian era, Lucy's unreliable narration became a powerful weapon for Bronte to expose oppression.

5. Conclusion

The narrator of *Villette*, Lucy, shows unreliable characteristics on both the "fact" axis and "value" axis, this unreliability stems from her self-repressive mental mechanism and is a metaphor for women's mental predicament in the Victorian era. Bronte uses unreliable narration to deconstruct the traditional narrative authority, forces readers to scratch the surface to feel the true psychology of women, thereby sublimating individual narration to a critique of the gender power structure of the era. This analysis provides a new dimension for understanding 19th-century women's literature, unreliable narration is not a narrative fault

but a creative strategy for women's writers to break through discourse shackle. Extending from *Villette*, this narrative mechanism also reminds us that in a cultural context where gender power is imbalanced, the "unreliability" of women's narrators often implies a hidden resistance to mainstream discourse. This resistance does indeed exist in the textual narrative as well as in the active construction of the narration truth by readers, ultimately forming a literary breakthrough against historical repression. In the future, research can further combine trauma theory and cultural history perspectives, explore the connection between unreliable narration and women's collective memory, providing a richer interpretive space for re-examining gender narrative in the Victorian era.

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