CLASSICS LIBRARY · STORY MAP

Villette

Charlotte Brontë · *1853 · original English text*

Lucy Snowe, poor, plain, and nearly friendless, leaves England for a girls' school in the French-speaking city of Villette. There she teaches, watches, and loves under a discipline of silence. Charlotte Brontë's last novel is not a second Jane Eyre: the ending is withheld in part, and the faith Lucy claims is a faith that trembles.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

How does a woman without fortune or beauty keep a self, and a hope, in a foreign house that watches her—and what kind of faith is it that believes while it trembles?

"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."

Lucy Snowe · Late in the novel, Lucy's profession of faith

Lucy is not rewarded with an easy plot. Miss Marchmont's death, the long vacation's solitude, Dr. John's kindness that will not become her romance, and Madame Beck's system of surveillance all press her toward self-erasure. M. Paul Emanuel, irascible and generous, sees her and educates her. The book honors work, conscience, and a Protestant steadfastness in a Catholic city without turning the city into a cartoon. Whether the West Indies storm returns Paul to her is left, famously, for the reader to decide. Her creed remains: this life is not all.

KEY CHARACTERS

Lucy Snowe
The narrator: reserved, poor, observant, and stubborn in conscience.

Madame Beck
Directress of the pensionnat: able, worldly, and a mistress of surveillance.

M. Paul Emanuel
A hot-tempered, generous professor who sees Lucy and tries to form her for a shared work.

Dr. John (Graham Bretton)
The kind physician of Lucy's English past, who cannot be her romance.

Ginevra Fanshawe
A pretty, careless pupil, Lucy's opposite in almost every virtue.

Mrs. Bretton and Polly (Paulina)
Figures from Lucy's earlier life who return in Villette and find easier happiness than she.

BELIEVE WHILE YOU TREMBLE

> *"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."*
>
> **Lucy Snowe** · Late in the novel

Grades 11–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01
Bretton, and a Departure
THE EARLY CHAPTERS, ENGLAND

As a girl Lucy stays at Mrs. Bretton's; she watches little Polly and Graham. Years later, after losses only partly told, she attends the dying Miss Marchmont and then sets out, almost at random, for the Continent.

- Lucy's narration hides as much as it tells; her reserves are a character trait.
- Miss Marchmont's story of love and delay is a first emblem.
- The crossing is loneliness as a vocation beginning.

02
Madame Beck's House
THE PENSIONNAT CHAPTERS

Lucy becomes a teacher in Madame Beck's school. The house is orderly, kind in spots, and thoroughly watched. She must teach before a class in a language she is still learning.

- Madame Beck's espionage is quiet and constant: keys, letters, and a soft step.
- Lucy's first lesson is an act of courage, not of fluency.
- Ginevra Fanshawe is a bright, shallow foil to Lucy's hidden intensity.

03
Dr. John
THE MIDDLE CHAPTERS

A physician who is also Graham Bretton grown becomes Lucy's friend and the object of a hope she will not fully confess. The hope is not returned in the way she might have wished.

- Kindness is not the same as election.
- The Bretton circle can comfort and still not see her whole.
- Lucy buries letters and, with them, a temptation to live only in waiting.

04
M. Paul
THE LATER SCHOOL YEARS

The irascible professor of literature becomes Lucy's true counterpart: severe, generous, determined to make her read, speak, and stand. Their understanding grows under Madame Beck's eye and under religious difference.

- His faults are on the surface; his loyalty is not.
- The interview in the confessional, and the night festival in the park, are scenes of a soul under pressure.
- A career and a small school are offered as a future together.

05
A Storm, and a Creed
THE CLOSING CHAPTERS

M. Paul sails. Lucy, given work and a hope of return, waits through a storm she will not fully describe. She states her belief that this life is not all, and leaves the last fact in shadow.

- The ending's ambiguity is deliberate; do not force a wedding the narrator will not give.
- 'I believe while I tremble' is not unbelief; it is faith under weather.
- The book's courage is Lucy's long constancy, not a single melodramatic act.

Faith under Trial · Surveillance · Work · Reserve and Truth · Hope

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 11–12

1. The hosted text is the original English of Project Gutenberg #9182. Lucy is an unreliable narrator in her silences more than in her lies; attend to what she will not tell.
2. The profession of faith is exact: "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."
3. Do not treat Villette as a repeat of Jane Eyre. The ending leaves M. Paul's fate partly in the reader's hands.
4. The book includes isolation, a breakdown in the long vacation, and a serious treatment of Catholic and Protestant difference. Teach the religious conflict with care, as Brontë wrote it, not as a sneer.

Quotations are verbatim from the original English text, Project Gutenberg #9182, Villette, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/villette/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.