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Tombs or Sanctuaries: Convent-Coded Spaces in *Middlemarch* and *Villette*

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores the concept of female spaces in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, particularly focusing on the convent space as a contrast to the domestic sphere and the effects of these spaces on the female protagonists of the novels. In the works, these Protestant women find themselves in enclosed convent-coded spaces after trying to expand their lives beyond the limited society they exist in.

In these convent spaces, they must build and assert a sense of self while struggling against unfit moral guides and oppressive forces. After leaving the convent space, the women are able to create spaces of their own, modified spaces that include the better qualities of both the domestic sphere and the convent space. The novels were written roughly twenty years apart, but the focus of the works remain the same, both emphasizing the fundamental importance of space, and exploring the female protagonists' search for a suitable space in a society that does not offer many options. The main elements analyzed in this thesis are repression, surveillance, enclosure, education, burial, and romantic love.

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Introduction

In Charles Allston Collins' *Convent Thoughts*, created between 1850-1, a nun stands in a garden, inches away from a pond filled with lilies. One of her hands is holding the illuminated missal, the other holding a white passionflower up to her face, the subject of her gaze. She looks intensely concentrated, as if nothing else exists. In scholar Anne Neale's analysis of the work, "Considering the Lilies: Symbolism and Revelation in 'Convent Thoughts' (1851) by Charles Allsten Collins (1828-73)," she asserts that the work reinforces the unity between nature and religion. Nature is shown to aid religious contemplation: "The way the nun holds the flower in one hand, and the illuminated Missal in the other, serves as a reminder that meditation on Nature together with God's Word is most fruitful" (Neale 97). The nun is at peace, tucked away among the flowers, surrounded by ferns, red day lilies and honeysuckles, among other plants. The woman in the convent seems to be given access to both nature and learning; she grasps both within her hands. In the background is a high wall, enclosing the whole scene. This portrait is serene, beautiful in execution and meaning, but past all the flowers and shrubs, the wall serves as a quiet reminder that the nun is enclosed, occupying only the space of her little walled garden. Victorian views of convent life often showed an uneasy fascination, a mix of repulsion and curiosity about these spaces. Convents could be spaces of horror, where entrapment, abuse and horrible mysteries lay concealed. Alternatively, these spaces could be places of growth and education for women, a place where they could focus on themselves without societal constraint or censorship.

Her thoughts, her religious contemplations, her flowers, all this life is given only so much space, making "Convent Thoughts" perhaps the evocative image of Victorian ideas about convent life. This painting is also the perfect frame by which to read Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*

and George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. In *Villette* and *Middlemarch* Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot exploit this mixed image of the convent: simultaneously as a place full of beauty and peace, where there is access to nature and learning, but also as a place of imprisonment, an enclosed area where there is no clear avenue for escape. In *Villette*, the protagonist Lucy Snowe is hired as a teacher at a French Catholic boarding school, one she cannot leave due to financial constraint. Just like the woman in the painting, she is imprisoned in a pleasant-looking place that offers her knowledge, but simultaneously offers no escape. In *Middlemarch*, the protagonist Dorothea is positioned similarly; her marriage to an elderly scholar expands her scope for knowledge, but leaves her trapped inside his residence, Lowick, with very little interaction with the outside world. In both novels, the women are portrayed as existing in a liminal space: the world of the convent life. The crucial difference between the convent spaces in the two novels is gender; Lucy's convent is dominated by women; it is a vibrant space for her to grow and learn among other women, despite the poor moral ethics of the school. Dorothea's convent space is controlled by a man; her husband serves a priest figure who smothers her and stunts her growth.

Convents as Places of Death in 19th Century England

According to Susan O'Brien, there were only 20 English convents in 1840. But by 1880, there were more than 300 convents within England, with a variety of services offered, including welfare and education. As sisterhood organizations rapidly grew, anti-nun sentiment was growing as well. Rene Kollar estimated upward of 8,000 Catholic tracts and other publications were being circulated in 1938 by the Catholic Tract Society in order to combat the general public's negative perception; "Anti-Catholic literature portrayed convents as dens of debauchery where young women surrendered their English liberties to fanatical religious superiors. With the publication in 1836 of *The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk* and its fictitious stories of murder,

infanticide, and sexual immorality in a Montreal convent, critics of the conventual life for women in England became more vocal” (Kollar 315). The fight for and against Catholic convent life took place in the battlegrounds of literature, with Protestant opponents thinking convent life took away from natural womanly behavior, with women isolated in women-only societies, depersonalized under the control of a female, often thought to be despotic, lacking free will, family ties and marital status.

In the Victorian era, the pervasive idea of convents continued to be the nightmarish den of sins popularized by Gothic novels. As Katharine Rogers says, convents were always seen as prisons, not as a decent alternative to married life, “None of them considered the possibility that women might find more fulfillment in the convent than in marriage - might prefer a community of congenial women to a husband whom they were bound to obey...” (Rogers 302). Rogers gives an account of French convent life as lackluster in education and spirituality but argues that English convent life around the 1790s was a viable option to conventional domestic life, even gaining the approval of diarist Hester Thrale Piozzi, who looked favorably on convent life for English women as preferable to married life, saying that many English nuns were content. When she visited an English Augustinian convent in Paris, she found it a pleasant space, full of comforts and accommodations:

The Women are perfectly conversible, chearful & pleasing—I like them extremely...I had an Opportunity of seeing all their Cells & hearing the manner of the Monastick Life described to me exactly. There is an excellent Garden, Kitchen Garden & Vineyard....The Votaries of St. Austin suffer no violent Hardships —Their Beds are soft, their Linnen fine, and their Table plentiful & their House convenient...as to Poverty — they never feel the pressure of it at all, nor know those Anxieties with which the Fear of it fills half Mankind: a Well endowed Convent is of all others the most perfect Refuge from Poverty (Piozzi 121-122).

However, the increasingly prevalent idea of marriage as the ultimate state of happiness for women led most prominent society members to view convents with suspicion. This suspicion, along with the ever-present fear of popery, still lingered on more than half a century later.

The resurgence of the Catholic presence in England, and especially the increasing number of convents in the early 1800s, made this fear more present than ever. Just like the earlier Protestant prejudices against convents, the emphasis was on the idea of personhood, that being in this environment effectively takes away the identity and personhood of the women who live within these enclosed spaces. The common opinion was that these unfortunate women would suffer spiritual and physical diminishment under such confines. Before witnessing convent spaces for herself, Piozzi thought of the convent as a place women were forced into; “Parents who want to be rid of their poor Girls send them at the age of ten or eleven to these Convents where they—seeing these Nuns perpetually & seeing nothing else—fall into the Snare & profess Poverty, Misery & all which the rest of the World unite to avoid—much less from Religion than Stupidity” (Piozzi 83). These ideas definitely seem rooted in the pervasive notion that women belonged in the home and that unmarried women led fruitless lives without children or husbands, lives devoid of meaning or distinction. As Rene Kollar writes, even Anglican convents seemed a little suspect. After the first Anglican convent was established in 1845, the Sisterhood of the Holy Cross, people were torn between admiration of the sisters’ good deeds, which involved helping homeless or otherwise destitute women, and distrust of the Roman convents where these principles originated.

The idea of female escape from brutal convent life also became pervasive in American Protestant culture between the 1830s-1860s, as described in Susan Griffin’s “Awful Disclosures: Women's Evidence in the Escaped Nun's Tale.” Stories of women’s escapes from Catholic

convents gripped the young nation; tales of harrowing lives within convent walls served as warnings against female agency and female spirituality in this “escaped nun” narrative.

According to Griffin, the female protagonist, the escaped nun in these narratives was a nuanced symbol:

The female renegade testifies to the awfulness of Romanism because who she is and what has happened to her tell her audience what Catholicism is. She is a victim of and a witness to popery's crimes. Yet perhaps, having chosen to enter the convent and take vows, she is also a perpetrator...The story typically begins by describing how unsuspecting wealthy Protestant girls are enticed by beautiful music, lofty sentiments, charming rituals, and gorgeous decorations in Catholic convent schools. The girls are told that they can gain full access to the wonderful mysteries of convent life only by becoming nuns. This promise is borne out, since a young woman literally enters new areas of the convent once she takes vows. However, in the secret inner space of Catholicism, she finds not greater beauty and holiness but an ugly life of austerity and deprivation. The refined pursuits of the upper-class young lady class are replaced with mindless, repetitive devotions and demeaning physical labor...Her privacy is systematically violated: her captors invade her room, eavesdrop on her conversations, spy on her actions, and assault her person (Griffin 94-95).

The narratives of *Villette* and *Middlemarch* reflect Griffins’ analysis of the escaped nun narrative perfectly. Both Protestant well-born women are enticed into seemingly better and more secretive worlds than the Protestant society they exist in at the beginning of the novel only to find themselves suffering in unforeseen ways, Dorothea under the faulty guidance of her tyrannical husband Casaubon, and Lucy under the head of the Pensionnat, Madame Beck. However, Dorothea is forced out of her convent by the death of her husband, while Lucy has more agency in the matter; she chooses to leave and plans her way out. Both protagonists of these two novels undergo surveillance by their tyrannical masters and must struggle along without privacy inside of the convent-like space.

By 1862, there were numerous objections to convents both in England and America, but one of the most convincing to the English Protestant public was perhaps leading women’s suffrage campaigner and writer Frances Power Cobbe’s argument. “Power Cobbe believed that

asceticism and Roman Catholic conventual life, especially for women, have produced an unhealthy environment which effectively de-personalized the nuns, and this destructive spirit had permeated Anglican sisterhood” (Kollar 318). Cobbe believed that there was something rotten about all convents, something inherently demeaning and unhealthy about these lives and that this air of corruption would be detrimental even to women in Anglican sisterhoods. Her worries about the corrupting effects of convents were still relevant a few decades later. S.J. Abbott, the secretary for the Convent Inquiry Society, was sufficiently suspicious of convents to start a petition in 1898, demanding that the government take action; “it enumerated a number of the traditional complaints against convent life: naive and romantic young women entered a harsh life from which there was no escape; underground cells existed to restrain rebellious nuns; women enjoyed no freedom when they entered a sisterhood; instruments of torture such as the "discipline" were used to deepen one's spiritual life; private and secret burials took place; and nuns had even been transported to convents on the Continent” (Kollar 324). Abbott collected 336,250 female signatures on this petition and argued that the issue should be one of the highest importance to the British government because of how vulnerable these women were.

In 1884, a little more than thirty years after Charlotte Brontë published *Villette*, the Catholic Truth Society was created for the purpose of clearing the religion’s reputation. This did not work as well as the society hoped; in fact, it did nothing to dispel rumors of “immuring,” the idea that women trapped in these convents were being walled up alive. By the 1890s, English government officials were busily inspecting Catholic convents, on the chance that there were a few young women walled up alive inside, or being abused or mistreated, aided in this mission by the Convent Enquiry Society, which was founded in 1889 by the Protestant Church. With sensationalist literature like *The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk* promoting depraved images

of convent life, and anti-Catholic sentiment still on the rise, there was a common worry about what exactly these convents were promoting, and the effect these enclosed spaces would have on the vulnerable young women sent to them.

Brontë uses this sort of Gothic imagery in *Villette*, depicting a nun haunting the Pensionnat, and Eliot later echoes Brontë's use of gothic in her depiction of Dorothea sealed up alive in the tomb-like Lowick. *Villette* and *Middlemarch* heavily dwell on this idea of closed-over tomb-like spaces; the novels depict the convent-like places the Protestant protagonists dwell in as places of death. Claire Kahane's analysis of Gothic spaces identifies enclosed space as "obscure recesses of a vast labyrinthian space...a secret room sealed off by its association with death. In this dark, secret center of the Gothic structure — typically a bedroom — the boundaries of life and death themselves seem confused. Who died? Was there a murder? Or merely a disappearance?" (Kahane 45-46). This blurring of life and death is seen in both novels; Dorothea and Lucy are living women trapped in spaces of death. The women are forced to navigate these spaces full of concealed secrets and grave-like imagery, only able to rely on their own wits under the surveillance of malevolent higher forces.

Convents as Places of Intellectual Growth

While the convent was depicted as a mysterious place of death, it could also be a place of empowered life and intellectual growth. American classical scholar Emily James Putnam wrote in 1910, "No institution in Europe has ever won for the lady the freedom of development that she enjoyed in the convent in the early days" (Putnam 71). Despite the many negative descriptions of the convents, these were fundamentally spaces for self-analysis, areas where women could focus entirely on themselves, free from outside pressures and distractions. Dorothea and Lucy both broaden their intellectual scope as a result of their time in the convent spaces. The convent's

educational advantages were noticed by earlier female writers who were trying to adapt Catholic institutes for Protestant education, perhaps most intriguingly in the idea of Protestant nunneries as a way to educate women in a space free from men. This concept was championed mainly by early feminist Mary Astell, who first argued for this idea in her 1694 work, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies for the Advancement of their True and Greatest Interest By a Lover of Her Sex*. Astell dreamed of an ideal “Protestant convent” where women would follow lives similar to nuns—fasting, praying, doing acts of charity, but with one important caveat—no self-suppression. This type of asceticism was Roman Catholic and death to the soul; in her new institution, women would be individuals, living together without unnecessary and derogatory self-denial:

We will call it a *Religious Retirement*, and such as shall have a double aspect, being not only a Retreat from the World for those who desire that advantage; but likewise, an institution and previous discipline, to fit us to do the greatest good in it; such an institution as this (if I do not mightily deceive my self,) would be the most probable method to amend the present, and improve the future Age. For here, those who are convinc'd of the emptiness of earthly Enjoyments, who are sick of the vanity of the world, and its impertinencies, may find more substantial and satisfying entertainments, and need not be confin'd to what they justly loath. Those who are desirous to know and fortify their weak side, first do good to themselves, that hereafter they may be capable of doing more good to others...and gain an opportunity to look into themselves, to be acquainted at home, and no longer the greatest strangers to their own hearts (Astell 60-63).

In Astell’s institution, ladies would strive for mental improvement, studying and gaining a superior education than would be available to other women at the time. While this idea never came to fruition, her dream was picked up by her contemporary, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, who “daydreamed about the convent as a girl...and confided that if she had been mistress of an independent fortune at fifteen, she would have used it to found a convent...Montagu, even more clearly than Astell, thought of the convent as an intellectual opportunity for women rather than as an institution to serve the Church.” (Rogers 298). Tennyson’s 1847 poem “The Princess,” also

pictures a female-only learning space. In the poem, a beautiful princess turns a summer-palace into a university for women, and bars men from entering on pain of death. While the poem is told from a male-orientated perspective, it is still a remarkable piece on female education and equality for that time, describing a space of peace and tranquility, with lights that “glitter firefly-like in copse,” and noises of clocks and chimes that sound like “silver hammers falling on silver anvils,” splashing fountains surrounded by jasmine and rose, and a nightingale that sings, “rapt in her song.” (Tennyson 16).

These writers saw an appealing side to convent spaces, as potentially beautiful places for growth. Historical convents also provided some educational benefits for women, though they were often places where women worked hard at domestic tasks, as Susan O’Brien said in *Terra Incognita: The Nun in Nineteenth-Century England*:

The congregations by 1900 were involved at every level of educational provision from kindergarten to college, a full range of nursing including mental and terminal illness, and social welfare work of many kinds...Taking the veil, contrary to contemporary popular belief, meant the beginning not the end of a useful life. On the other hand, women religious, unlike most of their male counterparts, undertook a good deal of domestic drudgery. They not only did their own cleaning and all the domestic work generated by their hospitals, hostels and schools, but some of them also cleaned and sewed for the men of the church. In their search for paid work to support their communities, most had to rely on the traditional and poorly paid areas of women's employment - embroidery, sewing and laundry work. An equally important consequence of their sex was the dependence of the congregations on the goodwill of the bishop and priests for permission to work in any diocese and for the spiritual and sacramental offices which were crucial to the community. (121).

Despite this early vision of what convents could be—alternately an intellectual haven for women or a home of horrors, the convent was also the mirror to Victorian domestic life in terms of religion—both were women-centered spaces that existed outside of the larger social world, places of surveillance, repression and structured rules.

Domestic Life as Modified Convent

Victorian domestic life was almost a lonely business, with carved out domains designated according to gender and class. In the Victorian period, the idea of “separate spheres” became a prevalent domestic ideology for the middle and upper classes. Men went out into the world while women stayed in the home, perfecting this space and controlling all aspects of domestic duties from managing the household finances to preparing the dinner menus. John Ruskin defines this ideology in “Of Queen’s Gardens,” when he writes about the role of women:

By her office, and place, she is protected from all danger and temptation. The man, in his rough work in open world, must Rencounter all peril and trial; — to him, therefore, must be the failure, the offence, the inevitable error: often he must be wounded, or subdued; often misled; and ALWAYS hardened. But he guards the woman from all this; within his house, as ruled by her, unless she herself has sought it, need enter no danger, no temptation, no cause of error or offence. This is the true nature of home — it is the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division..it is a sacred place, a vestal temple, a temple of the hearth watched over by Household Gods (Ruskin 21-22).

The role of the wife became a religious one—the domestic sphere consecrated as a holy place, one which must be preserved from the influences of the outside world by a vigilant guardian. Just as convent spaces were alternately evil and enlightening, the Victorian domestic sphere was seen both as empowering, a place where the woman controlled everything in the house, and entombing, where the woman was trapped into a designated role with very little ability to do anything outside of the house. The domestic sphere, closed off from society, maintained by a female authority figure, governed by very strictly enforced rules and composed mainly of female servants who must obey these structures or face punishment — actually ends up sounding very similar to convents. The position of the mother-wife existing inside of and sustaining the domestic sphere was revered as the highest ideal female occupation. While the convent was despised as the worst possible thing for women in Victorian society, the similarities between the two spaces cannot be ignored. Both first and foremost function as designated, enclosed places for

women, sealed off from the dangerous influences of the outside world to uphold a designated morality.

The concept of the domestic sphere as an oppressive space for women can be seen in *Miss Beeton's Book of Household Management*, where Beeton sets down specific ideas of the wifely duties, which include the maintenance of virtues such as early rising, cleanliness and frugality. She set out a very firm schedule for the wife of the household, dictating when to serve food, what duties need to be performed and what actions are appropriate for the time of day in minute detail. For instance, Beeton mentions social calls and dinner etiquette as two areas of society that the proper wife must carefully monitor and tailored to suit each occasion:

The courtesies of society should ever be maintained, even in the domestic circle, and amongst the nearest friends. During these visits, the manners should be easy and cheerful, and the subjects of conversation such as may be readily terminated. Serious discussions or arguments are to be altogether avoided, and there is much danger and impropriety in expressing opinions of those persons and characters with whom, perhaps, there is but a slight acquaintance...(222).

The reader gets the sense of surveillance and repression; these rituals of everyday life must be perfectly done, under the watchful eye of society. When calling upon other households, serious topics and arguments are not allowed, nor are dissenting opinions or arguments. The real thoughts and feelings of the woman should never be known. In serving dinner, the wife has to quickly move on to the next stage, ensuring there are no delays and irregularities. After the dessert has been consumed and the fruit taken, the hostess then withdraws out of the presence of men with the rest of the ladies, moving to the drawing room. The way Beeton describes it, this tightly regulated life, lived mostly indoors, and with very strict protocol, becomes convent-like.

In *The Life of Cornelia Connelly*, an account of Cornelia Connelly, foundress of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, repression and surveillance of those within the space are also emphasized. Connelly remarked on the exemplary behavior of a novice who displayed the

correct social behavior when her mother and sister came to visit her in the convent; “she knitted all the time while in conversation and gave great edification by the promptness with which she left them and the silence she observed when the bell rang” (428). The novice was praised for her restraint of familial feelings; she buries her emotions to adhere to the social climate of the space, just as Mrs. Beeton recommends. Connelly was also described as busily managing every aspect of the convent:

She was never idle. When speaking to the sisters she would have her little brown basket beside her and occupy her fingers with some plain sewing. For about twenty-five years, until increasing work and ill-health made it impossible, she took her part in the manual labour of the house, usually dusting the front staircase. On Mondays she served the community at dinner with great diligence. This practice she continued even when enfeebled by age, and a sister relates how "quietly and gently " she served...Once a week in the first years she rose at 4 a.m. with others of the community to help in the weekly washing, and she spent the midday recreation with the sisters in the laundry busily ironing (238).

The same values were found in the domestic sphere and the convent. Just as the wife should always be attending to household affairs, the nun must be always occupied with work. The women lived under the same ideas of repression, a burial of feeling, the sacrifice of the woman to the space around her. Both the nun and the wife were living in spaces that buried the self in favor of the other people existing in the space around them. The wife, enjoined to be modest and reclusive, lives in an almost entirely female society under the guidance of a masculine authoritative figure, who provides religious and spiritual guidance. It is a space where the woman cannot exist freely, constrained by all sorts of domestic regulations, entombed in the home.

However, as Elizabeth Langland argues in *Nobody's Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in the Victorian Novel*, the role of the wife was not a powerless one; “As the century unfolded, the role of the wife as middle-class manager was confirmed. Indeed, the bourgeois seemed eager to distinguish her from the idle aristocracy, for whom at least a part of

these functions was usually performed by a capable housekeeper...The bourgeois wife decided upon the household help required, drew up job descriptions, advertised, interviewed, hired, supervised, paid, and fired” (Langland 46). Women in the home had managerial power within that enclosed space, able to manage all household staff and the house finances. Within this sphere, married women of a certain class lived life in these designated areas, according to very strict social rules, and carried out their ironclad duties, which included household management, disciplining the servants and trying to maintain class distinctions. Kay Boardman further analyzes this portrayal of domestic ideals through Victorian women’s magazines; “The final emphasis on the privileges of mistresshood is significant as it endows the responsibility with an almost religious status, taking its cue from the cult of the home and the cult of the mother who exudes her benevolent influence to family and domestic staff alike” (154-161). The wife holds moral responsibility in Boardman’s interpretation; in her and Langland’s analyses of the separate spheres, they attribute certain amounts of power to the wife's position in the domestic space.

Convent space and domestic space share similarities, alternatively viewed as empowering or enfeebling, places for self-introspection or places of self-burial. The two protagonists of *Middlemarch* and *Villette* search for fulfilling spaces for themselves, some other choice outside of these liminal spaces, a new space that melds the better elements of the domestic sphere and the convent. Lucy is able to do this more successfully than Dorothea, who never fulfills her potential for greatness, but both women are able to find contentment. In the novels, the women choose to enter their pseudo-convent spaces, quickly become disillusioned with the space they are entrapped in and gain intellectual and self-knowledge before exiting the convent space. The novels focus on female-centered spaces, where they can be found, what they can offer. Throughout *Villette* and *Middlemarch*, the two protagonists seek spaces of their own.

Chapter 1: Creating and Adapting to Spaces in *Villette*

Charlotte Brontë's 1853 *Villette* provides an especially vivid portrayal of the double-sided nature of convents—as a space of growth and also a space of entombment. Throughout the novel, Lucy Snowe searches for a suitable space and hones her identity through the spaces she finds herself in. When Lucy accepts a teaching position in the small French town Villette, at Madame Beck's Pensionnat, she finds herself in a space of ambiguity, where there are religious symbols everywhere, but no true piety, where there is repression and daily challenges of dominance and submission. The Pensionnat is a boarding school for Catholic girls; the building was formerly a convent before it was turned into a school, and the rooms and structure of the school still retain the convent atmosphere. Lucy is surrounded by Catholics, haunted by the specter of a nun, and tempted by the local priest, who tries to convert her when she is weakened by intense emotions. She must constantly fight to uphold her own values in this Catholic setting, which she is forced to stay in due to financial constraint. In this pseudo-convent, she experiences firsthand the effect of an enclosed way of living and emerges stronger, with more self-knowledge and a greater understanding of her own strength. The constant tension between her enclosed convent life and her forays to the outside world showcase the values of these spaces and allows her to eventually create a space of her own.

After Lucy is evaluated and deemed worthy of hiring by M. Paul on the dark and cold night she arrives in Villette, she goes through the school, seeing the “queerest little dormitories,” “the oratory...where a crucifix hung, pale, against the wall, and two tapers kept dim vigils” (75). From the start, the school is set up as a convent, not only because it had been, in the past, the domicile of nuns, but also by every description of the place. Lucy enters with absolutely no possessions except the contents of her purse, after an extreme emotional upheaval, and finds

this place alone after her long, exhausting journey. Lucy finds this building with difficulty, after wandering and being chased by men, she finds a flight of stairs, “The street in which they led was indeed narrow, but it contained no inn. On I wandered. In a very quiet and comparatively clean and well-paved street, I saw a light burning over the door of a rather large house, loftier by a storey than those around” (71). This place is a refuge, a haven from the spiritual exhaustion, the cold dark night, and the men who pursued her. It is secluded, clean and quiet, with a welcoming light burning in the window, signifying rest and comfort. But when she enters, this peaceful vision is a little distorted; it is not as welcoming as the outside had made it seem. When she gains entrance, the room she must wait in is cold, the stove unlit, and the white doors, “closed and motionless.” Madame Beck is dumpy and unsympathetic, led by logic instead of any sort of emotion; she showed “Never a gleam of sympathy, or a shade of compassion...” Instead of a warm, light-filled place filled with life, the school is a much sparser and more unsympathetic domicile. It is not exactly the refuge Lucy Snowe had hoped for, but exhausted and optionless, Lucy must accept this new life as a way to survive.

The Pensionnat Atmosphere of Oppression and Surveillance

As she is taken further into the school, past all the religious iconography like the tapers and the crucifix, she finds the bedroom she is to sleep in “oppressive,” with three children already asleep there, and “scented with an odour...like the combination of smoke with some spirituous essence—a smell, in short, of whiskey.” This alcohol-infused air is just the first sign of lax moral principles. The contrast between the cold pale religious symbols Lucy sees earlier in the house and the oppressively heated gaudy drunkenness Lucy finds in the bedroom establishes the hypocrisy of this Catholic institution from the start. It pretends to be a place of morality to

visitors and outsiders, white and pure, while the inside is stuffy, cluttered and home to many vices. Additionally, the smoky odor brings to mind incense, which is often used in Catholic religious rituals, showing the perversion of religious observation into this smoky liquor-drenched air. The air itself is impure; Lucy is breathing in corruption, along with the small children also asleep in this stifling atmosphere. The inclusion of children in this scene shows that the Pensionnat is a place where innocence is threatened, and also empathizes that there is life inside this convent space, but life twisted, growing poorly.

This oppressiveness is further reinforced when Lucy wakes up in the middle of the night:

All was hushed, but a white figure stood in the room—Madame in her nightdress. Moving without perceptible sound, she visited the three children in the three beds; she approved me: I feigned sleep...I dare say she sat a quarter of an hour...gazing at my face. She then drew nearer, bent close to me; slightly raised my cap...This done, she turned to the chair where my clothes lay...every article did she inspect...she counted the money in my purse; she opened a little memorandum-book coolly perused its contents...To a bunch of three keys, being those of my trunk, desk and work-box, she accorded special attention...these keys, reader, were not brought back till they had left on the toilet of the adjoining room the impress of their ward in wax (78).

Madame Beck—giving the impression of a nun in her white nightdress—thoroughly violates Lucy's privacy, intruding on both Lucy's body and her belongings. She rummages through everything with impunity, even rifles through Lucy's book of treasured memories and examines her hair and face. Everything about this passage imbues the school with a sense of impurity, an air of fairy-tale evil. At midnight in this oppressive room reeking of spirits, this white-clothed figure comes and terrorizes a passive Lucy, who must pretend to be sleeping while this violation occurs, or risk losing housing.

While no one in the house is actually a nun, every detail about the place turns this Catholic boarding school into a symbolic convent. This convent-like atmosphere is a prison-state, and Madame Beck is the warden — a false spiritual guide for these poor children and an

unfit authority figure for Lucy. By showing how morally unfit Madame Beck is through her violation of Lucy's privacy and her allowance of alcoholic servants around children, Brontë reinforces Victorian anti-convent prejudices. As Susan Griffin states in “Awful Disclosures: Women’s Evidence in the Escaped Nun’s Tale,” convents were seen as places of confinement that women were forced into, “All communication with the outside world is cut off: letters are destroyed, visitors denied, false communications issued in the protagonist's name. Her privacy is systematically violated: her captors invade her room, eavesdrop on her conversations, spy on her actions, and assault her” (95). These spaces were places of sexual deviancy, death, and surveillance, where the hapless women, lured in by false promises, were subjected to all sorts of depravity.

This was a characteristic British Protestant view of both convents and Catholicism in general. Protestants viewed the Church as an oppressive religion, full of surveillance and policing, which gave practitioners much less freedom than their Protestant counterparts. Abbesses were especially negatively portrayed in Victorian novels, seen as evil figures that negatively influenced the young girls under their care, forcing helpless victims into bending to their will. In Ann Radcliffe’s 1797 novel *The Italian*, the beautiful young heroine is kidnapped and placed in a convent to keep her away from the love of her life. Trapped in the convent, she suffers under the sadistic eye of the abbess, who locks her up and starves her in an attempt to make her choose between a forced marriage or taking the veil. The heroine, Ellena, must do everything she can to escape from the evil abbess, who oppresses everyone within the convent walls:

The Abbess appeared; a stately lady, apparently occupied with opinions of her own importance, and prepared to receive her guest with rigour and supercilious haughtiness...a woman, who had dared to demand respect from the very victim of her cruelty and oppression...Her conviction of the abbess’s unworthy character was too clear to allow

Ellena to feel abashed in her presence; for she regarded only the censure of the good, to which she had ever been as tremblingly alive, as she was obdurately insensible to that of the vicious. (Radcliffe 69-87).

The Abbess in *The Italian* is a cold-hearted woman with no sentimental feelings or qualms about abusing the girls under her care, caring more about her personal wealth and status than religion or morals. Like other portrayals of the evil abbess figure in Victorian literature, the Abbess lacks femininity and is also extremely invasive, constantly monitoring Ellena, who can never escape from her watchful eye.

Like Radcliffe's villain, Madame Beck becomes a stand-in abbess, deferring to M. Paul for judgement, but secretly promoting immortality and patrolling her captive charges for any evidence of wrongdoing. Upon further reflection into the character of Madame Beck, Lucy finds her first opinion justified: that Madame Beck is actively harming the moral development of the young impressionable girls in her care:

Very good sense she often showed; very sound opinions she often broached: she seemed to know that keeping girls in distrustful restraint, in blind ignorance, and under a surveillance that left them no moment and no corner for retirement, was not the best way to make them grow up honest and modest women; but she averred that ruinous consequences would ensue if any other method were tried with continental children—they were so accustomed to constraint, that relaxation, however guarded, would be misunderstood...she was sick, she would declare, of the means she had to use, but use them she must...she would move away...and glide ghost-like through the house watching and spying everywhere, peering through every keyhole, listening behind every door (81).

Madame Beck is shown to be relentless, with a fanatical need to always be in control, allowing no secrets in the convent-space. She knows that her method of education, with “restraint,” “ignorance,” and “under surveillance,” will not produce morally sound women, but cares more about her reputation than the children's development. The girls growing up in this dim religious environment are living in a surveillance state, in an unwholesome environment where learning and morality are stunted and guided by a questionable authority figure. Madame Beck, much like

the stereotypical portrayal of the evil abbess, hinders the moral development of the tender minds under care, and is again described in very creepy, nightmarish terms, she is “ghost-like,” always everywhere and silent, always watching.

Additionally, Madame Beck blurs traditional gender roles, with Lucy constantly describing her as masculine, which fits in with some prevalent Victorian convent stereotypes, that in these female-only spaces, sexual perversion ran rampant. Madame Beck, when she is commanding Lucy to do something, does not look feminine: “At that instant, she did not wear a woman’s aspect, but rather a man’s. Power of a particular kind strongly limned itself in all her traits, and that power was not my kind of power...It seemed as if a challenge of strength between opposing gifts was given, and I suddenly felt all the dishonour of my diffidence...”(86). Before she knows Madame Beck, Lucy describes her as a dumpy little woman who follows the advice of M. Paul. However, as Lucy slowly becomes embedded in this world, she increasingly attributes power to Madame Beck, specifically couched in masculine terms, describing her as having a man’s face, “strongly limned.” Madame Beck is both an evil abbess figure and a masculine dominator. Lucy responds to this blurring of gender roles, facing the masculine challenge of Madame Beck and starts to assume more masculine authority herself.

In contrast to Catholic convents, which were seen as evil places actively harming the women imprisoned there, Protestant convents were seen as comparatively more freeing; female-only spaces of intellectual growth and service that allow the women spiritual freedom and improvement. Lucy’s original view of the school, as an ideal place of learning, brings to mind this idea of Protestant convents. Lucy describes her knowledge of Madame Beck’s true ways as hard-won; at first she is deceived by the outward appearance of the school, thinking this manner of education was ideal, “What I saw at first was the thriving outside of a large and flourishing

educational establishment. Here was a great house, full of lively, healthy girls...gaining knowledge by a marvellously easy method...always employed, and never oppressed” (83). Lucy said it was some time before she could clearly see the corrupting effects of Madame Beck’s regime, more than half a year before she could shake off the illusion Madame Beck created. Only later does she realize the true, harmful state of things at the boarding school; “large sensual indulgence (so to speak) was permitted by way of counterpoise to jealous spiritual restraint. Each mind was being reared in slavery...” (143). Living in this twilight state of morals, corruption and deception, Lucy’s independent Protestant nature is eventually able to reassert itself, but not before a period of obedience to this Catholic dominance; she obeys Madame Beck like the rest of the Catholic girls. Here, there is mystery and corruption, and Lucy must fight every day against these Catholic forces. In this fight, she begins to define herself.

Masculine Presentation as Power in the Pensionnat

Despite the unwholesome atmosphere of the boarding school, it is a place of growth for Lucy. In this Catholic environment, Lucy is able to thrive, as long as she maintains her innate values. Madame Beck, despite these horrible ways, still brings out strength in Lucy that she never knew she had, “If let to myself, I should infallibly have let this chance slip. Inadverturous, unstirred by impulses of practical ambition, I was capable of sitting 20 years teaching infants the hornbook, turning silk dresses and making children’s frocks.” (85). Lucy was content doing typically feminine household chores, playing and teaching babies, making clothes for the children, and sewing up more outfits for the children. Before she started teaching, she was serving Madame Beck in this maternal role, under her thumb and quiet, with only her inner thoughts as company. When Lucy accepts Madame Beck’s challenge to teach the rebellious French girls and get them to listen to her, she finally begins to be aware of her own potential. In

this feminine space, she steps out of the female role of caretaker into the more masculine-coded role of teacher, blending into the convent culture. Lucy begins to take on masculine qualities to exert influence at the school, since dominance is the only way she can gain authority over her pupils, herself, and Madame Beck in this twisted atmosphere. As Joseph Litvak writes in his analysis of the work, this power struggle; “derives its logic from the material exigencies of a more or less abject power-struggle archetypally enacted between women, who can overcome their disenfranchisement and claim some of the prerogatives of male authority only by battling each other in a game of silence and indirection” (Litvak 474). To have authority at the school, it is necessary for Lucy to present herself with masculine authority that rivals Madame Beck’s.

In Lucy’s first display of masculine dominance, she makes the class submit to her by tearing up one student’s poorly done homework and shuts another girl into a closet, physically entrapping the student in the dark, enclosed space. When Lucy finishes the class, Madame Beck congratulates her for the way she handled the situation, which she knew from her spying, “She had been listening and peeping through a spy-hole the whole time.” Lucy thus wins approval and her symbolic place within the convent by dominating the girls she is in charge of; she must prove her power in the convent space by becoming somewhat of an evil abbess figure and masculine dominator herself. Lucy notes that while the students hated to do extra work, they respected her attempts to shame them, “They would riot for three additional lines to a lesson; but I never knew them rebel against a wound given to their self-respect: the little they had of that quality was trained to be crushed, and it rather liked the pressure of a firm heel, than otherwise” (93). Lucy goes from absolute submission in her previous life to becoming a force in her own right. The rapidity of this change is astonishing; she begins to take control in the first place when she decides to strike out to Villette on her own, but only when she is within the walls of this pseudo-

convent does she fully awaken all of her masculine attributes, throwing over the domestic duties she was occupied with before Madame Beck challenges her.

However, Lucy refuses to let go of her own identity for this masculine authority entirely, as seen when she is urged to play a male role in a school play. In this scene, M. Paul pressures Lucy into playing the role of doting suitor and the teaching staff tries to force her into male garb. Lucy would not fully dress in a masculine style but “assumed in addition, a little vest, a collar, and cravat...the whole being the costume of a brother of one of the pupils” (157). Thus adorned, she is able to act with a passion that astonishes everyone, including herself, and even tries to romance one of the pupils in the scene, seeing Dr. John as a rival and not her love, “I put my idea into the part I performed; I threw it into my wooing of Ginevra...I hardened my heart, rivalled and out-rivalled him...Now I know I acted as if wishful and resolute to win and conquer” (159). The convent gives Lucy a venue to express feelings and powers that she never knew she possessed; while the convent is repressive in other areas, Lucy is able to freely express societally forbidden ideas and act in ways she would never be allowed to do in any other setting as a honorable Protestant lady. Though she still retains her identity, Lucy learns to exert power.

Outside the Convent: Burial and Resurrection

Outside of the convent walls, Lucy gains more clarity about her situation within the convent. The outside world, whether she goes for art exhibits, plays or other social events, gives her renewed strength in the moral struggle she faces inside the convent, but at the same time, it also offers limited ideas about womanhood. In one outing, Lucy views a painting of Cleopatra at an art gallery, criticizing this depiction of womanhood. Cleopatra is large, untidy and exposed, with “wretched untidiness,” and “inefficient raiment.” Lucy finishes her study of the painting by concluding it was “an enormous piece of claptrap” (Brontë 227). Turning away from it, she goes

to look at some “exquisite little pictures of still life: wild-flowers, wild-fruit, mossy wood nests...hung modestly,” when M. Paul comes to scold her for looking at the scandalous painting of Cleopatra and directs her to paintings he thinks are more appropriate, a set called “A Woman’s Life,” which depict women doing domestic acts, such as getting married and having children. These paintings also show religious imagery, with the woman in the first painting coming out of a church with a missal in hand, and the second wearing a veil and kneeling at a prie-dieu. Lucy does not like these paintings, ugly and passionless.

Lucy characterizes these images as “flat, dead, pale and formal...grim and gray as burglars, and cold and vapid as ghosts. What women to live with! Insincere, ill-humored, bloodless, brainless nonentities! As bad in their way as the indolent gipsy-giantess, the Cleopatra, in hers.” (Brontë 230). These paintings of women all fall short; Lucy cannot find an accurate reflection of herself in any of these depictions of womanhood. Emily Petermann explores the concept of gender in Lucy’s style of art criticism, writing that Lucy judges the paintings off of content rather than style:

She regards, evaluates and dismisses Cleopatra as a woman, much more so than as a painted figure, or as an artwork in general. There is no reference in the gallery scene to the painters of the ‘Cleopatra’ or of ‘La Vie d’une Femme’, only to the figures portrayed within those paintings and to a lesser extent, to the paintings themselves...The description of ‘La Vie d’une Femme’ may seem to concentrate more on the ‘remarkable style — flat, dead, pale, and formal’, but Lucy’s rejection of these panels, too, is based to a great extent on the content rather than the form. The suppressed passion in Lucy as well as the Protestant in her rebel against the roles considered appropriate for a woman and a Catholic, as this series of four paintings depicts them (Petermann 281).

As Petermann states, Lucy does not like this representation of female life, rebelling against these conceptualized domestic roles for women. These paintings are meant to act as societal instruction for Lucy; this is the sort of behavior she should also be exhibiting, domestic and religious, unquestioning and trapped. She can be admired as one of these domestic ladies or ostracized as a

Cleopatra; the paintings only show these two choices for life as a woman in Victorian society. However, Lucy refuses to accept these; she rejects both of these depictions to find her own way of existing, though the world inside of the Pensionnat does not allow her many options.

With few social outings like the art gallery, Lucy craves the world outside the convent. When Lucy becomes sick during the holidays, after a deep depression when she finds herself physically and spiritually alone, she feels the need to leave the house, “the ghastly white beds were turning into spectres—the coronal of each became a death’s head...this house roof, which was crushing as the slab of a tomb” (181). The empty boarding school becomes a prison for Lucy; a place that was bearable when filled with people and life becomes a monstrous nightmare when she has nothing to distract her. The boarding school is dead and threatens to bury her; in reaction to this sense of physical oppression she must go outside, escape from the tomb. The school’s oppression of her is also mental; her sense of identity has been threatened by constant surveillance and her adoption of masculine authority. Mentally and physically exhausted from this struggle, Lucy must remove herself from the Pensionnat.

When Lucy flees from the Pensionnat, she goes to Catholic church and confesses to a priest. This scene is also couched in terms of burial; dazed and confused from her narrow escape from the Pensionnat, she instinctively turns to another grave; “Every door of the church was shut; a holy quiet sank upon, and a solemn shade gathered about us” (182). However, this foray into the Catholic Church leaves her calm and relieved, “the mere pouring out of some portion of long accumulating, long pent-up pain into a vessel whence it could not be again diffused—had done me good. I was already solaced” (183). Her confession allows her emotional release; this scene is not a burial of self, but a ceremonial burial of painful feelings. Inside the tightly sealed

up church, Lucy releases all of her emotions into the priest, who is a safe “vessel,” since he is bound by rules not to share her confession.

Having buried her negative feelings in the priest, Lucy feels solaced. At the end of their encounter, the priest invites Lucy to visit him, which she decides not to accept, since she recognizes that the priest wants to entomb her in a convent; as she says, “I might just now, instead of writing this heretic narrative, be counting my beads in the cell of a certain Carmelite convent on the Boulevard of Crecy in Villette” (184). Lucy recognizes the Church’s grave-like qualities and uses the entombing element for her own good, burying painful emotions and avoiding the Church’s attempts to bury her. In Michael Schiefelbein’s analysis of *Villette*, he argues that Lucy projects all of her feelings of helplessness onto Catholicism as an institution; by attributing negative forces to Catholic figures and institutions, she is able to fight more effectively against them. Schiefelbein argues that Lucy was never in real danger of conversion in this confession scene; the scene just serves to show that Lucy is intrigued by the religion:

Only an attraction to Catholic ritual, to its ability to help her mystically transcend painful circumstances, explains why a Protestant repelled by the Romish religion finds herself in perhaps the most Catholic of positions: kneeling before a priest in the confessional. (It is interesting to note that Lucy never considers going to a Protestant church during her despondency. In fact, she mentions attending a Protestant church only once in the novel and reports that afterwards she felt “weary” (Schiefelbein 324).

As Schiefelbein states, Lucy recognizes the benefits Catholic rituals could give her, though her Protestant religion is not necessarily threatened by her attraction to the religion. Lucy’s choice of confession instead of attending a Protestant church shows awareness of the beneficial qualities of Catholic entombment in this case. After being inside the grave of the Church, Lucy feels able to return to the grave of the Pensionnat, since she is now reassured of her ability to avoid self-burial and calmer from the burying of pain, “To turn back was now become possible to me; the wild longing to breathe this October wind on the little hill far without the city-walls had ceased to be

an imperative impulse...and I turned, as I thought, to the Rue Fossette” (185). While she still experiences the desire to be free of the grave, to breath fresh air free of constraining walls, she is no longer afraid of burial.

Leaving the church, Lucy faints due to this extremely emotional venture, and awakens in the home of Mrs. Bretton, her kindly English Protestant godmother. This pleasant Protestant environment is a place of resurrection for her, completely opposite of the two graves of the Church and Pensionnat. Here, she is surrounded by comforts from her childhood; “The green chintz of that little chair; the little snug chair itself, the carved, shining-black, foliated frame of that glass; the smooth milky-green of the china vessels” (193). There are comfortable, colorful things and life. Though this space is a secluded one, away from the outside world, it is not a restrictive one. Mrs. Bretton is the opposite of Madame Beck; she is the primary authority figure in her home, but unlike Beck, she does not lose her femininity or resort to unsavory ways to maintain control. Mrs. Bretton is intellectual, kind and principled:

It is not every friend whose eye is a light in a sick room, whose presence there is a solace: but all this was Mrs. Bretton to me...my godmother’s lively black eye and clear brunette cheek, her warm, prompt hand, her self-reliant mood, her decided bearing, were all beneficial to me as the atmosphere of some salubrious climate (205).

Bretton’s home functions as the idealized Protestant convent, a female space where Lucy can heal from the trauma of her time in the Catholic-coded convent.

While Dr. John, Mrs. Bretton’s son and Lucy’s unrequited love, also lives in the house, Mrs. Bretton is the chief household force, in command of the space around her. Though she is the key household authority figure, she is also comforting, a soft presence in a sick room, with good looks, refined manners, and abundant intellect. Lucy is much thinner and weaker from her intense convent experience in the Pensionnat; “My eyes larger and more hollow, my hair darker than was natural, by contrast with my thin and ashen face” (190). Having escaped from the

solitary confinement of her tomb-like convent atmosphere, Lucy is able to begin to revive under the care of her Protestant friends. Though she only stays in this comforting space for a month, the possibility of this space stays with her; Mrs. Bretton shows her a different method of authority than Beck's, one without masculine domination or oppression. At the end of the novel, Lucy's created space mimics the comforts of Mrs. Bretton's. This time in the Protestant space is a time of instruction and regeneration for Lucy, where she is shown a new way of authority, one that is gentle and female-coded. In this swift sequence of events, Lucy's escape from the convent, her confession, and her recuperation in Mrs. Bretton's home, Lucy reaffirms her own identity and learns different ways to display authority. When she returns to the Pensionnat, Lucy is stronger, once again able to resume her fight against convent forces.

Return to the Convent: Facing Repressed Emotions

However, Lucy's time in the school is not completely fixed by her burial and rejuvenation. Still haunted by repression, Lucy must face the ghostly specter of a nun:

I turned: my light was dim; the room was long—but, as I live! I saw in the middle of that ghostly chamber a figure all black or white; the skirts straight, narrow, black; the head bandaged, veiled, white....this I vow—I saw there—in that room—on that night—an image like—a NUN. I cried out; I sickened. Had the shape approached me I might have swooned (277).

This vision comes to her at the time of her most intense feelings for Doctor John; this first nun sighting is when she is in a moment of pure happiness, having received a lengthy letter from the doctor. But in that moment of blossoming romance (however one-sided) this Catholic signifier comes to dampen her mood. Terrifying and sickening her, this figure of horror fits in with the convent stereotype, the unnatural goings-on that stop a young girl from successful romantic happiness. Through the nun figure, Lucy is prevented from the normal process of enjoying

romantic feelings; the nun figure presents repression, one more facet of the convent narrative that shows the boarding school as an unnatural, unhealthy place.

While repression is a key element of life inside the Pensionnat, the garden attached to the school allows Lucy to process and acknowledge this repression. Most of Lucy's inner emotional life correlates with the living garden, which is described as a place of solace:

Independently of romantic rubbish, however, that old garden had its charms. On summer mornings I used to rise early, to enjoy them alone; on summer evenings, to linger solitary, to keep tryste with the rising moon, or taste one kiss of the evening breeze...the turf was verdant, the gravelled walks were white; sun-bright nasturtiums clustered beautiful...there was a smaller, more sequestered bower, nestled in the vines which ran all along a high and gray wall, and gathered their tendrils in a knot of beauty (119).

The garden serves as a contrast to the repressed, mainly intellectual form of life happening inside the convent. Out there, there's a profusion of unrepressed life, though the cloisters still keep Lucy linked to the convent, and there's still an association with death and trapped femininity. However, there's also a sort of romance happening with Lucy and nature; she "keeps tryste," with the moon, she can "taste the kiss," of the wind; everything is blooming and beautiful. The outside, with the garden filled with life is a place of clarity for Lucy, a place where the secrets buried inside the convent can be viewed. While things are still being repressed here, it is an active process of burial; Lucy recognizes and takes part in this repression happening in the garden when she buries all of her letters from Doctor John, under the same tree where, as rumors had it, there was a vault which held "the bones of a girl whom a monkish conclave of the drear middle ages had here buried alive, for some sin against her vow" (119). Out in the garden, she can fully see and recognize her romantic love, before she consciously decides to bury it:

I knew there was such a hollow, hidden partly by ivy and creepers growing thick round; and there I mediated hiding my treasure. But I was not only going to hide a treasure—I meant also to bury a grief. That grief over which I had lately been weeping, as I wrapped it in its winding-sheet, must be interred" (Brontë 333).

Lucy recognized the value of repressing her emotions when she first attended Catholic confession and reaffirms the value again with this new burial. The convent is re-established as a place of death in this scene, but death reframed, not as horror, but as a conscious release of a burden.

The image of death is less gloomy here, since it's the death of a sorrow, "a treasure," and "grief" that will be interred into the ground. The convent allows her to safely bury these feelings and move on with her life. After Lucy buries the letters, she feels "strong with reinforced strength," able to deal with anything. Immediately after this burial, Lucy sees the nun again. In E. D. H. Johnson's analysis of the nun, he writes that the nun marks Lucy's emotional growth, appearing after significant emotional encounters with her love interests, M. Paul and Doctor John. Johnson argues that the burial of the letters is an implicit challenge to the nun specter; "The burial symbolically takes place at the foot of the old pear-tree in the alle'e defendue, the very spot from which the nun's ghost is reputed to come forth. With the accomplishment of this act of self-negation there flows through her an exhilarating sense of inner vitality...As if conjured up by this mute challenge, the apparition again appears to Lucy" (Johnson 330). When she again sees the nun, she is able to confront the specter, "I felt, if not brave, yet a little desperate...I advanced one step. I stretched out my hand, for I meant to touch her" (Brontë 334). The garden burial is both death and metamorphosis, just as burial strengthened her in the earlier confession scene. After acknowledging her emotions and burying them, she is no longer afraid to confront the nun, the symbol of repression, since she has already faced painful emotions and renewed her sense of identity in this burial space. Burying her grief leads to a renewed strength and the ability to face hidden terrors, whether these terrors are a nun-ghost or her own feelings.

Exiting the Convent

Another key part of her new convent life is her growing relationship with M. Paul, who is shown to be one of the only true practitioners of Catholicism in the text. He is true to his principles and tries to live a good life, though he is oppressed by the burden of his religion. Living a priest-like existence because of religious obligation, M. Paul feels that he cannot freely romantically interact with Lucy. Their relationship is similar to a forbidden relationship between a priest and a nun. M. Paul tries to repress any sort of romantic feeling for Lucy. The third time Lucy sees the nun, she is talking with M. Paul about their affinities- the nun comes to interrupt this emotional moment, but this time, Lucy is not alone in seeing the nun; M. Paul sees it also, “With a sort of angry rush—close, close past our faces—wept swiftly the very NUN herself! Never had I seen her so clearly.” (416). Once again, the nun comes to disrupt a growing romance; that M. Paul also shares this vision is significant on two levels. The first is that he is on the same emotional plane as Lucy; this time her feelings are shared and thus her horror is lessened. The second reason that this is significant is because it shows M. Paul suffers the same restrictions as Lucy; this nun, the specter of Catholicism, won’t allow him to form emotional attachments either.

The two are warned away from developing romantic feelings; the convent forbids it. It is also telling that Lucy is once again in the garden while talking with M. Paul. The garden is the place she habitually goes to feel and express her romantic feelings, but even this spot, though more freeing than the suffocating inside of the school, isn’t free from this Catholic shadow. Immediately after this nun scene, as if to promote the idea that Lucy is forbidden from romantic love, she focuses instead on the blossoming romance between Doctor John Bretton and Paulina Bassompierre. Her love is repressed and blighted, so instead focusing on the ruin of the garden

scene by the nun, Lucy instead pours her energy into describing this healthy Protestant romance, free from ghosts or repression, out in the open air of society.

Being outside the convent benefits their relationship, just as being outside in earlier scenes bolstered Lucy's health. This is shown when M. Paul takes the students and teachers away from the school, going out into the countryside for breakfast. Here, outside of the school, is a beautiful warm morning where everything is growing, and M. Paul and Lucy are both able to change out of their oppressive everyday wardrobes into lighter, airier clothes. When the two are out in the open air of the countryside, they get along well and are very happy:

“The deepest happiness filled his blue eye and smoothed his broad forehead. I, too was happy, happy with the bright day, happier with his presence, happiest with his kindness...he asked, by-and-bye, if I would not rather run to my companions than sit there...he asked whether, if I were his sister, I should always be content to stay with a brother such as he...again he inquired whether, if he were to leave Villette, and go far away, I should be sorry...” (433).

Even this happy day is blighted by M. Paul's Catholic obligations. This moment of happiness is fleeting; M. Paul knows he cannot stay with Lucy. Additionally, while he lays claim to her affections, he couches it not in romantic terms, but in terms of a brother-sister relationship, as if he's a priest talking to a nun. Though there are no previous constraints on either of them, these two independent adults cannot enter a romantic relationship, or even couch their affections toward each other in romantic terms.

Right after this brief day of happiness, M. Paul leaves, and Lucy cannot even say goodbye to him within this oppressive school atmosphere. When Lucy discovers M. Paul's history, his past doomed relationship with a Catholic girl and his continued support of her family and an old priest, she sees again the flaws of Catholicism when viewing a painting of the girl:

Imperfectly seen, I had taken it for a Madonna; revealed by clearer light, it proved to be a woman's portrait in a nun's dress. The face, though not beautiful, was pleasing...I say

again it was not beautiful; it was not even intellectual; its very amiability was the amiability of a weak frame, inactive passions, acquiescent habit...(442).

Just as she found the earlier paintings of domestic women and Cleopatra lacking, Lucy does not find anything to admire in this portrait of a young nun. This path is also not a viable one for Lucy; she cannot respect the woman who has chosen this life. This description of M. Paul's first love, who is immortalized in portrait form, shows the futility of idealization and excessive devotion; M. Paul's life has been drained away by this obligation to a dead woman.

Petermann says that Lucy looks for hidden meanings in art, "She expects art to contain truth — more than just mimesis, art should hint at interior truth within or beneath its surfaces, whether that truth be character, emotion, or other form of meaning" (Petermann 283-284). The truth Lucy sees in this painting is the truth of M. Paul's life; M. Paul is devoted to someone who even before she died was inactive, feeble and unintellectual. Everything about this situation is dead and lifeless, a drain on his life. It also becomes a strain on Lucy herself, since M. Paul's maintenance of his dead fiancée's family leaves him in near-poverty, unable to marry or afford anything for himself. Lucy sees, this dedication was pointless; the girl became a nun and died in the convent. Additionally, the priest explaining the situation to Lucy turns out to be the one who tried to convert her earlier. Once again, he tries to convert Lucy, taking advantage of this confused emotional state:

"I coveted the direction, in behalf of the only true faith. Nor have I for a day lost sight of you, nor for an hour failed to take in you a rooted interest. Passed under the discipline of Rome, moulded by her high training. Inoculated with her salutary doctrines, inspired by the zeal she alone gives—I realize what then might be your spiritual rank, your practical value; and I envy Heresy her prey" (446).

Not only does the priest bar her from M. Paul with this explanation of his duties, he also tries once again to convert Lucy. In his home, a closed, dark space supported by the generosity of M. Paul, the priest tries to get Lucy into this unprofitable closed off life, to join the ranks of the dead

and dying. The words he uses in this conversion speech are also significant; “under the discipline,” “moulded,” “inoculated,” all of these words imply submission and a sort of oppression, where Lucy must submit and quietly listen, disciplined by a heavy doctrine. Luckily, Lucy is firm in her Protestant faith; she is not swayed by the priest’s logic, or his praise of M. Paul’s saint worship as healthy. She sees clearly that this Catholicism leads to a decaying, repressive life, cut off from the world and dependent on draining the lifeblood of those who support it. While she likes the engaging pageantry of the Roman faith, she finds it hollow and unstainable.

The divide between Catholic and Protestant begins to interfere between her and M. Paul; having failed to convert her, Pere Silas seeks to alienate M. Paul from her, saying that this close relationship cannot exist between a Protestant and Catholic:

“I found that Pere Silas (himself, I must repeat, not a bad man, though the advocate of a bad cause) had darkly stigmatized Protestants in general, and myself by inference, with strange names, had ascribed to us strange ‘isms;’ Monsieur Emanuel revealed all this in his frank fashion...almost trembling lest there should be truth in the charges.” (473).

M. Paul is shown to be under the thumb of the priest, who refuses to let him have Lucy’s company, even as a sister, without a fight. The priest employs underhanded tactics to keep the two apart. Though eventually Lucy and M. Paul make up their differences, the priest and Catholicism continually keep the two apart. Before M. Paul leaves on his long journey—which he undertakes because of his religious obligations to his dead fiancé’s family—he again tries to sort out his feelings for Lucy, torn between his faith and his attraction to her. Finally, when he is about to kiss her, they are once again interrupted by these two Catholic figures, Madame Beck and Pere Silas:

“His eloquent look had more to say, his hand drew me forward, his interpreting lips stirred. No. Not now. Here into the twilight alley broke an interruption: it came dual and

ominous: we faced two bodeful forms—a woman’s and a priest’s—Madame Beck and Pere Silas” (498).

The two, a priest and an abbess-figure effectively prevent the romance from happening; Lucy cannot have romantic fulfillment in the convent atmosphere, despite other freedoms offered there.

When she leaves the school to create her own school, an endeavor partly funded by M. Paul, she is full of strength and purpose, able to create and maintain a space solely for her, halfway between a convent and a home, but one that is alive and full of warmth. Lucy makes a corrected Pensionnat, the fully realized version of a Protestant convent. She describes this new space as one made out of love for M. Paul, “My school flourishes, my house is ready: I have made him a little library, filled its shelves with the books he left in my care: I have cultivated out of love for him (I was naturally no florist) the plants he preferred, and some of them are yet in bloom.” (554). There is a library, blooming plants, and love, all run and supervised by Lucy. While she never gets romantic fulfillment, since it is heavily implied that M. Paul died on his return voyage, the end result of all her struggles is this: a space of her own.

Villette is a novel about spaces; primarily female-centered spaces and what they can look like, what they should look like. Lucy cannot function in the repressive societal space and she cannot function in the Catholic convent space; for her to reach fulfillment, she must create a space of her own halfway between the two, one without Victorian societal expectations and without the twisted morals of the Catholic convent space. At the end of the novel, she creates her own version of a convent, a freeing, intellectual space of love and growth, instead of the oppressive atmosphere she finds in the Pensionnat.

Chapter 2: Spaces in *Middlemarch*

In George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, written between 1871-1872, the protagonist Dorothea Brooke is trapped in a convent-like situation when she marries the decrepit Rev. Casaubon. Throughout the novel, Dorothea is driven to find a worthy cause, some meaningful way to spend her life. As a wealthy and beautiful girl with little formal education, she struggles within the limited space of her society before deciding to marry Edward Casaubon, an elderly scholar, because she believes his project, *A Key to All Mythologies*, will give her the purpose she seeks, and that he would show her a higher form of existence. However, Dorothea finds herself spiritually imprisoned in his residence, stuck in a more limited space than before. Dorothea's marriage and Lucy's Pensionnat both function as literal and physical enclosures; the heroines' spiritual struggles unfold in these limited spaces. Dorothea's marriage is her proving ground, her fight to define herself against an unfit moral guide as seen in Casaubon, just as Lucy fights against Madame Beck's shoddy morals. Neither can leave their chosen space, Lucy out of financial considerations, and Dorothea out of her attachment to Casaubon.

In the prelude to *Middlemarch*, Eliot comments that many Saint Theresas fail to reach their potential since they are born into an oppressive society for women, where there is, "no coherent social faith and order which could perform the function of knowledge for the ardently willing soul." (Eliot 1). Instead, the efforts of these unfortunate women are stymied and ultimately fruitless; these passionate souls are doomed to inefficiency, with no proper outlets. By opening the novel with these words, Eliot heavily implies that Dorothea is one of these unfulfilled Saint Theresas, with abundant religious fervor and passion, but no outlet. Saint Theresa of Avila was an early reformer of the Roman Catholic Church, devoted to bringing the principles of contemplation and austerity to the forefront of the Carmelite way of living. As a

founder of 17 Carmelite Convents, she was able to conceptualize and create the spaces she envisioned, effecting a huge expansion of female religious life on her own terms. In contrast, Dorothea's attempt to create space of her own fails. Her main project before she meets Casaubon is drawing up architectural designs for cottages, hoping to eventually create safe and comfortable homes for the tenant farmers living on her uncle's estate. No one in her social circle takes this endeavor seriously, and like her other undertakings, it comes to nothing despite the amount of passion and work she pours into it. Instead of continuing with this project, she marries Casaubon and folds herself into his space. Unlike Lucy, Dorothea is not able to sustain a viable space of her own, though she is not happy living in the constrained space created by others. Something about Dorothea's upbringing or the society she lives in, or even something within herself forces her away from the type of creation Saint Teresa achieves.

Throughout the novel, Dorothea is simply trying to attain some sort of meaning, some way of living that would bring her spiritual fulfillment and help those around her. Her marriage mimics typical convent descriptions: Casaubon's home is described in mausoleum-type terms; his house entombs Dorothea's young and vibrant life, he himself monitors and represses her, and Dorothea experiences growing dissatisfaction in her choice to marry him. Dorothea's marriage to Casaubon and her life inside Lowick follow the literary style of the escaped nun narrative. There are three main scenes that show these stereotypes, markers of her growing disillusionment with her husband and the futility of this marriage as a fulfilling spiritual path. The first scene showing her assimilation into Catholic convent stereotypes is the honeymoon scene in Rome, where Dorothea is admired by a young German painter for her Madonna-like beauty and is used as a model for Saint Clara. Dorothea becomes a lifeless religious symbol; she is turned into art to be evaluated and looked at. She becomes the spiritual opposite of Lucy Snowe, who is continually

looking at and evaluating paintings of women, able to move freely in the world rather than imprisoned in place like Dorothea. Dorothea is reduced by this painting; she is categorized and put away. The painting is the first sign of her being tucked away from the living world. The next relevant scene is her return from the honeymoon, where she feels oppressed by the gloomy atmosphere of the house.

While Lucy finds her way as the only Protestant in a crowded school filled with young people, Dorothea suffers from complete isolation, with only Casaubon and research to fill her time. Like Dorothea, Lucy functions in a scholarly capacity, but her knowledge is much more alive; she is teaching young minds and being taught by M. Paul, and this knowledge is fundamentally social and functional; she uses it to advance her quality of life and better function in the social circles she finds herself in. By contrast, Dorothea's acquired knowledge is associated with the squandering of vitality and youth; Casaubon wastes his life trying to cobble meaning out of various fragment myths and religions and tries to tie Dorothea's life to the work as well, as seen throughout their marriage and in his last request to Dorothea, where he asks her to continue his scholastic endeavors for him after his death.

Lured into the Convent: Dorothea's Search for Fulfillment

From their first meeting, Dorothea idealizes Casaubon; she thinks that he is the key to a worthy pursuit, something she has been searching for her whole life:

For to Dorothea, after that toy-box history of the world adapted to young ladies which had made the chief part of her education, Mr. Casaubon's talk about his great book was full of new vistas...Something she yearned for by which her life might be filled with action at once rational and ardent; and since the time was gone by for guiding visions and spiritual directors, since prayer heightened yearning but not instruction, what lamp was there but knowledge? Surely learned men kept the only oil; and who more learned than Mr. Casaubon? (Eliot 79-80)

Dorothea's trusting nature and search for meaning let her easily believe in Casaubon's scholarly prowess, and especially in the importance of his all-consuming scholarly work, *Key to All Mythologies*, his attempt to link all mythologies with a unifying theme. Casaubon's work is strongly religious in nature and purpose, undertaken to find some great universal truth by which God's way would be shown. By devoting herself to his pursuit, Dorothea hopes to finally find true spiritual enlightenment. This passage shows that Dorothea has been failed in two fundamental ways: through religion and education. Both are Protestant women with good breeding who find themselves entrenched in convent-type situations as a result of trying to find freedom in a society that does not necessarily have their best interests at heart. Both are disillusioned by this pseudo-convent, and both eventually find freedom, somewhat aided by male romantic interests that are also entrenched in the convent atmosphere.

However, Lucy is significantly better equipped in her fight against her unhealthy convent-type situation because of her education, which is the reason she is able to earn a living as a teacher in Madame Beck's school, and her Protestantism, which holds up even under the pressure of a priest trying to convert her. Although Dorothea is more abundantly blessed in family, wealth and beauty than Lucy, she is weaker, mostly due to the lack of worthwhile pursuits and of an education that gives her more than a "toy-box history of the world." Dorothea and Celia were educated "on plans at once narrow and promiscuous, first in an English family and afterwards in a Swiss family at Lausanne" (Eliot 4). Dorothea's knowledge is fragmented, overeducated on some subjects and ignorant on others. While not much mention is made of Lucy's education before she reaches the Pensionnat, it is established early on that she received a formal school education, described briefly when she mentions a former acquaintance, "different as were our social positions now, this child's mother and I had been schoolfellows...I

remembered her—good-looking, but dull—in a lower class than mine” (Brontë 49). In this small aside, the reader is informed that Lucy did well in school, and that she went to a school of good repute, where students of at least decent social standing attended. There was some structure to Lucy’s learning, while Dorothea’s education was basically constrained to whatever the families she lived with thought was important. The use of “toy-box” is very evocative; it shows that Dorothea has been infantilized; she has a very basic understanding of history, only given to her in an attempt to amuse her, as a child would be amused.

In Kelly Hamren’s article on education in *Middlemarch*, she analyzes the negative impact of insular learning, giving Casaubon’s directions to Dorothea as a prime example of the dangers of the disconnect between knowledge of the world and academic knowledge:

Whatever knowledge of human nature Casaubon may have gained in his study of mythology, he fails to integrate it with his knowledge of the world so that the respective spheres of learning might inform one another. His manner of "educating" Dorothea illustrates his narrowness even further. Either he ignores her and pursues his research on his own (as in Rome), or he has her read to him or copy manuscripts. When he does attempt to teach her, he offers a collection of particulars, as evidenced by the geography lesson she returns to after his death...Dorothea's study requires little thought because Casaubon did not see fit to teach her why Paphlagonia was significant (Hamren 61).

Dorothea remains very naive because of this shortage. Lucy would never need to marry a scholar like Casaubon simply because of his knowledge; she is the intellectual equal of M. Paul and treated as such. But without Lucy’s education or comfort in her religion, Dorothea’s only option is to cling to Casaubon, hoping that he will be able to supplement what she is lacking in, that he will be able to “open up new vistas.” Instead of the expanded space she hopes to exist in, Dorothea’s space contracts within Lowick’s pseudo-convent walls.

Like Lucy, she is identified as very Protestant in manner, wearing simple clothes and refusing any adornment; “Her hand and wrist were so finely formed that she could wear sleeves not less bare of style than those in which the Blessed Virgin appeared to Italian painters; and her

profile as well as her stature and bearing seemed to gain the more dignity from her plain garment..."(Eliot 3). Though she dresses simply and scolds Celia, her sister, for wanting to wear jewels, she ends up giving in to the temptation of jewelry when she finds a beautiful jewel set among her late mother's collection. Dorothea tries to justify her love of the jewels by conflating them with religion: "It is strange how deeply colors seem to penetrate one, like scent. I suppose that is the reason why gems are used as spiritual emblems in the Revelation of St. John. They look like fragments of heaven'... 'They are lovely,' said Dorothea, slipping the ring and bracelet on her finely-turned finger and wrist...All the while her thought was trying to justify her delight in the colors by merging them in her mystic religious joy" (Eliot 9-10). Her acceptance of the gems shows her weak principles: Dorothea stands against adornment until she finds some that she truly loves. Unable to resist, she decorates her hand and wrist, which before appeared in a Blessed Virgin-like style. The jewel scene shows that Dorothea's convictions and principles are not fully formed; she has energy and passion, but no deeply rooted beliefs. While Lucy's religion is her moral pillar that keeps her safe from temptation even amid a den of Catholics, Dorothea's lack of fulfillment in her religion partly results in her relationship with Casaubon; her religion drives her into his arms.

Lured in by promises of a fulfilling life that would finally contain meaning, Dorothea enthusiastically marries Casaubon. Like Lucy in her relationship with Madame Beck, she thus voluntarily puts herself under the thumb of an imperfect moral guide who controls her time and heavily monitors her every social interaction. Casaubon's faults are different from Madame Beck's; instead of being a snooping middle-age woman, he is a wealthy, elderly man who spends his time researching and writing unnecessary works, proving obscure points and reaching outdated conclusions. Casaubon's work centers on the idea that there is some great unifying

theory; he hopes to prove that all mythical systems were bastardizations of one true tradition, a “vast field of mythical constructions,” “luminous with the reflected light of correspondences.” (Eliot 19). In short, he is looking to prove the truth of his religion by portraying all other faith traditions as reflections of his own. Ruth apRoberts further clarifies his research in her analysis of the clergy in *Middlemarch*, saying that Casaubon’s work was based on “Mythography,” the idea that all primitive religions were based on misinterpretations of the original revelation, and that all languages were originally based in Hebrew:

It depended on the most naive biblical literalism and required the researcher to stretch and finagle his evidence. It developed a wildly lunatic fringe of Druids and lost Atlantises and British Israelitism. George Eliot knew, and Will Ladislaw knew, that in Germany Karl Otfried Müller had published a Prolegomena to a Scientific Study of Mythology in 1825, which exploded the whole "Mythography" enterprise. Müller exposed the absurdity of Casaubon-style etymological "proofs" relating various myths to a Hebrew origin, and demonstrated that mythologies develop independently. (apRoberts 34).

But Casaubon’s search for meaning is more about his ego than any deeper search for truth; he is not driven by a desire to expand knowledge, but by his own insecurities, which lead him to bury himself into a ceaseless, incohesive scholarly endeavor. In Hilary Mackie’s analysis of the work, she focuses on the difference between external and internal knowledge, monitoring Dorothea’s growth through this lens. Dorothea first trusts Casaubon’s external knowledge, before eventually relying on her own internal knowledge:

Still more pertinent to Dorothea's concerns and interests, it gradually becomes clear that Mr. Casaubon has no real interest in bringing the past into meaningful and illuminating alignment with the present. Instead, his "futile scholarship" can be viewed as a strategic evasion of everyday life and, indeed, of relationship itself. In the beginning, Dorothea had asked him when he would begin to write the book that would make his "vast knowledge useful to the world"; in the end, she recognizes that his interpretation of myth is "as free from interruption as a plan for threading the stars together," and dreads the thought that after his death she might be obliged to continue sorting evidence and data...(57).

Dorothea finally gains insight into Casaubon's work, understanding the implications of his research and his procedures and conclusions. Her expanded scholarship leads her to the conclusion that she has placed her faith wrongly; this project will not lead her to any new spiritual knowledge. Casaubon's scholarship is a way to avoid life rather than understand it.

Exit from Society: Imprisonment

Whereas Madame Beck is a forceful presence, Casaubon is more noticeable for his complete lack of presence; he functions as the antithesis of most things, dry and unfeeling. Casaubon is not only passionless and joyless, but also vain, as seen in his honeymoon trip to Rome with Dorothea. Here, he is tricked into allowing an increasingly unhappy Dorothea's picture to be painted by a young male artist, a friend of his young relative Will Ladislaw:

So Mr. Casaubon's patience held out further, and when after all it turned out that the head of Saint Thomas Aquinas would be more perfect if another sitting could be had, it was granted for the morrow. On the morrow Santa Clara too was retouched more than once. The result of this was so far from displeasing to Mr. Casaubon, that he arranged for the purchase of the picture in which Saint Thomas Aquinas sat among the doctors of the Church..." (Eliot 206).

By appealing to his ego, and having Casaubon pose as the model for Saint Thomas Aquinas, a noted philosopher and theologian, the painter is able to gain his true objective of getting Dorothea as a model for Saint Clara. This scene does two things: it reinforces the idea that Casaubon is not a fit guardian for Dorothea, and shoehorns Dorothea into the passive role of creation, rather than the creator she yearns to be. The two young men are both struck by her beauty, framing her in religious terms, a perfect madonna, the living portrayal of a saint. After what could be considered her "initiation" into the convent, her taking the vows of marriage with Casaubon, this scene solidifies Dorothea's nun status, with her beyond the romantic grasp of these two men.

This time in Rome also showcases the emptiness of convent life as portrayed through their marriage; Dorothea becomes more and more saddened when she sees the life and great art of Rome and inevitably contrasts Casaubon with it. In one honeymoon scene, she visits St. Peter's Cathedral and becomes overwhelmed:

All this vast wreck of ambitious ideals, sensuous and spiritual, mixed confusedly with the signs of breathing forgetfulness and degradation, at first jarred her as with an electric shock, and then urged themselves on her with that ache belonging to a glut of confused ideas which check the flow of emotion. Forms both pale and glowing took possession of her young sense... (Eliot 184).

In Rome, she sees all sorts of different ways of living, different religions and philosophies embedded in the art. Dorothea feels an “electric shock,” an “ache,” a “glut of confused ideas.” Rome is the expanded space she thought she would find with Casaubon. Rome offers her a creative space filled with thousands of different things, ranging from intellectual ideas to art to new emotions, new stimuli for her senses. However, she cannot utilize this space, since she has already committed herself to living within the limited space of Casaubon's world. She is nothing more than living art as Casaubon's wife, more distanced from any sort of purpose than ever before. Try as she might, she is enclosed in her solitary little world, with only Casaubon's feeble research to keep her company. The painting scene in Rome supports this idea that Dorothea's marriage to Casaubon is a veiled depiction of convent life since the German artist conceptualizes and paints her as a beautiful Benedictine nun, mirroring the tradition of painting these religious portraits of beautiful women. But even in painting form, Dorothea falls a little short. She has even less agency than a Catholic nun; Santa Clara was able to inspire a whole religious movement, while Dorothea struggles to establish her own spirituality.

Dorothea's sense of entrapment, of disillusionment, is further seen when she returns to Casaubon's residence, Lowick. While the boarding school had frequent nun hauntings and many

vices, it was at least alive; Lucy had purpose and constant activity. Lucy is always fighting at Madame Beck's, struggling against Catholic conversion attempts, her students, and even M. Paul at times. Lucy has to constantly advocate for herself and assert herself in the midst of this Catholic den of vice. Lucy even describes the school's education as a sort of enforced stupidity: "Each mind was being reared in slavery...the church strove to bring up her children robust in body, feeble in soul, fat, ruddy, hale, joyous, ignorant, unthinking, unquestioning" (Brontë 143). Lucy's first impression of her pseudo-convent, Madame Beck's school, is warmth and people; though it is a suffocating, unclean warmth and the first children she sees are tended by a drunkard, it is still a place where there is room for life, no matter how immoral. It is a place, "as merry a place as a school could well be...the broad folding-doors and the two-leaved casements stood wide open: settled sunshine seemed naturalized in the atmosphere; clouds were far off...We lived far more in the garden than under a roof..." (Brontë 143). There are young people, sunshine, and merriment, with the doors and windows always pushed wide open. While this welcoming exterior is described as a cover that hides the moral pitfalls of the school, an attempt to "hide chains with flowers," the school still contains much more life than Dorothea's moral prison.

Lucy's sunny garden is vastly different from Dorothea's first view of her pseudo-convent:

Meanwhile there was the snow and the low arch of dun vapor...Marriage, which was to bring guidance into worthy and imperative occupation, had not yet freed her from the gentlewoman's oppressive liberty: it had not even filled her leisure...Her blooming full-pulsed youth stood there in a moral imprisonment which made itself one with the chill, colorless, narrowed landscape, with the shrunken furniture, the never-read books, and the ghostly stag in a pale fantastic world that seemed to be vanishing from the daylight (Eliot 261).

She and Casaubon are the only residents of Lowick; there is no life to be seen, no battles to be won; even nature itself is dead and inaccessible to her. All the imagery implies cold lifelessness; “snow,” “dun vapor,” “chill,” “narrowed,” “colorless,” “shrunken,” “ghostly.” Though Dorothea herself is still young and full of life and vitality, she is doomed to waste away in this unfulfilling setting. Dorothea has to conclude that marriage, something she had hoped would give her life meaning, was a complete failure, leaving her more disillusioned and purposeless than ever. She is trapped in this physical and moral prison, one that has no relation to ordinary human life, a “pale fantastic world,” that does not even have sunshine.

Dorothea’s life is couched in terms of martyrdom. She has sacrificed herself to Casaubon for ideals that do not exist, an intellectual world that seemed so promising but in reality was nothing, just a wasted life and wasted pursuit. This attitude corresponds with common complaints about convents, such as those described by Carol Engelhardt Herringer:

Manifesting the prejudice that convent life was so unnatural that women stayed only when they were forced to, convents were also described as prisons where Protestants as well as Catholic women were held against their will...this attitude led to a rash of paintings depicting the nun as a beautiful woman who was turning her back on the joys of the world to be shut up in a gloomy convent (Herringer 90).

Dorothea’s life when she returns to Lowick embodies these stereotypes. She is imprisoned in Lowick, she can no longer feel the “joys of the world,” and she is lonely and unhappy.

Entombing Young Beauty

The worry of her friends and family further reflects this stereotype of convents as tombs; Dorothea’s much more domestic sister Celia, happily married herself, expresses constant disapproval of Dorothea being trapped at Lowick with only Casaubon, “She had only begun to feel disgust at the possibility ...Celia felt a sort of shame mingled with the sense of the ludicrous” (Eliot 42). A respectable neighbor of the Brookes, Mrs. Cadwallader comments that the match is

“frightful.” When Sir James, Dorothea’s original suitor and Celia’s husband, hears of the union for the first time, his immediate reaction is revulsion; “Perhaps his face had never before gathered so much concentrated disgust as when he turned to Mrs. Cadwallader and repeated, ‘Casaubon?’” (Eliot 52). Sir James can hardly believe in the possibility of this relationship, a reaction that almost everyone has. Everyone who knows the two thinks that the union is unnatural.

The disgust Dorothea’s social circle feels at the marriage reflects ideas of the convent as a tomb; they think she is insane for throwing herself away like this and are disgusted that her beauty will be wasted on Casaubon, who will never appreciate her young charms. In one of Protestant Reverend James Henderson’s lectures in the 1830s, later published in book form in the 1850s, he describes how the Roman Church entices young women into the nunnery: “The most artful lures are laid to entice young persons of devout dispositions and ardent feelings to take the veil; and the Council of Trent compels, even by force of arms, constancy to their rash and often involuntary vows” (134). While Dorothea is not forced to marry Casaubon, the idea of artful lures that entice those who are devout and full of ardent feelings describes her perfectly. She is enticed by the idea of Casaubon as an extremely knowledgeable scholar and lured in by all of his talk about his groundbreaking work, which is later found to be nothing; when she accepts his proposal, she is “a neophyte about to enter on a higher grade of initiation,” words that evoke not a marriage but religious initiation.

By the time Dorothea and Casaubon return from their honeymoon in Rome, there is disillusionment on both sides, and the relationship has turned from a fervent novice dedicated to a moral superior, to an imprisoned nun and her neurotic convent supervisor. Additionally, Eliot’s descriptions of the union between Casaubon and Dorothea show that this marriage is not really

satisfactory; Casaubon does not even seem to be a real husband. Casaubon is not able to feel joy in his marriage to Dorothea: “He determined to abandon himself to the stream of feeling, and perhaps was surprised to find what an exceedingly shallow rill it was” (Eliot 57). He cannot muster up any passion for the woman he married, even wondering if it was her fault that he could not feel anything strong for her. This brief look into Casaubon’s mind shows how; on one side there is fanatical religious devotion, and on the other just a pale shadow of affection by a man too dried up to feel anything. Casaubon himself is not fulfilled by this life, always tormented by his failure to produce meaningful work and unable to really feel things due to his age and temperament:

Mr. Casaubon had never had a strong bodily frame, and his soul was sensitive without being enthusiastic: it was too languid to thrill out of self-consciousness into passionate delight...thinking of its wings and never flying...Mr. Casaubon had many scruples: he was capable of a severe self-restraint; he was resolute in being a man of honor according to the code...even his religious faith wavered with his wavering trust in his own authorship...it is an uneasy lot at best, to be what we call highly taught and yet not to enjoy...never to be fully liberated from a small hungry shivering self (Eliot 266-267).

Casaubon has potential that is doomed to be unfulfilled. He is defined by self-restraint and is duty-bound not by any kind of chivalrous feelings, but by a code. But perhaps most damningly, he is a reverend whose religion is weak and “wavering,” dependent on his sense of success as a scholar. This narrow personhood, his “small hungry shivering self” is definitively not a good moral guide for anyone; he is not really even a man or a person, just a sad soul in a weak body.

Convent Life after Casaubon: Romance and Exit

Casaubon’s only driving force seems to be his jealousy of his young and charming second cousin, Will, and his need to trap Dorothea into a lifetime of repression, first stipulating

that she would lose all property by marrying Will, and then by trying to make her promise to carry on his work when he is close to death:

It was clear enough to her that he would expect her to devote herself to sifting those mixed heaps of material, which were to be the doubtful illustration of principles still more doubtful...and now she pictured to herself the days, and months, and years which she must spend in sorting what might be called shattered mummies, and fragments of a tradition which was itself a mosaic wrought from crushed ruins—sorting them as food for a theory which was already withered in the birth of an elfin child (Eliot 455).

The words here are again couched in anti-Roman Catholic rhetoric; she must devote her life to a piecemeal, fruitless cause that will illustrate nothing and only cause her misery. It is not enough that she has devoted two years to him—she must go from a decrepit man to a decrepit work, and even harsher fate. While she can survive her years with Casaubon because of her sense of duty and purpose, even Dorothea is not fanatical enough to take this final step and bury herself completely without trepidation. As in *Villette*, images of burial are prominent; Lowick is couched as a place of death for Dorothea. She realizes how unfair Casaubon's expectations are; she knows already that nothing is likely to come of this work, it is all "shattered mummies," "fragments," "crushed ruins," all descriptions reminiscent of long-dead civilizations, where there was maybe life once, but not for a long, long time. The final thought Dorothea has here, that these decrepit bits and pieces would serve as food for a theory "already withered in the birth of an elfin child," borders on the grotesque with this unnerving image of an unnatural child, surviving on a strange and nutrition-less diet.

This passage compounds Dorothea's long imprisonment by showing the horrors yet to come for her; she must live in an even more dismal world than before. There are elements of the Gothic depiction of imprisoned nuns here, with this strange combination of despair, the living beauty being trapped in a sort of unnatural half-life based on the ruins of other civilizations. Images of burial in *Middlemarch* and *Villette* establish the need for resurrection of the heroines;

Lucy and Dorothea are both threatened with the fate of being buried alive. Lucy is haunted by the specter of the nun, her own repression of feelings she buried. Lucy is able to face the nun and leave her convent, but Dorothea decides to bury herself deeper into her convent.

Having deluded herself this far, and with none of her belief in Casaubon or his work left, but with no new sense of purpose or spiritual fulfillment, the only thing left to her is her duty to her husband. Dorothea thus steels herself to agree to Casaubon's demand. This scene is striking in the sense of helplessness; Dorothea is essentially going to negate her individuality and her future for Casaubon:

She simply felt she was going to say "Yes" to her own doom: she was too weak, too full of dread at the thought of inflicting a keen-edged blow on her husband, to do anything but submit completely. She sat still and let Tantripp put on her bonnet and shawl, a passivity which was unusual with her, for she liked to wait on herself (Eliot 458).

While other passages imply a religious relationship between Casaubon and Dorothea, this passage focuses on marital obligation and repression. Dorothea agrees to what she feels is her own doom, even though she is full of dread and knows the work is useless. Her recourse is to "submit completely," to sit still and be dressed like a child. She chooses to let herself become essentially a wife for Casaubon instead of a person, which she has done throughout the text, but never with such high stakes. Her complete resignation is most upsetting here, when she lets Tantripp, her maid, dress her, when she has a "passivity which was unusual for her." But even in this scene of marital repression cannot be entirely disentangled from the religious themes that dominate the text; Tantripp, before she was in service with Dorothea, was trained by the "Sisters at Lausanne." Adding this detail about Tantripp at this pivotal moment is significant; Dorothea is dressed and prepared to resign her freedom by someone associated with convent life.

When Dorothea, dressed and newly resolved, goes to tell Casaubon her decision in the garden, the imagery here also adds to the overwhelming sense of confinement:

When Dorothea was out on the gravel walks, she lingered among the nearer clump of trees, hesitating, as she had done once before, though from a different cause...she dreaded going to the spot where she foresaw that she must bind herself to the fellowship from which she shrank. Neither law nor the world's opinion compelled her to this—only her husband's nature and her own compassion, only the ideal and not the real yoke of marriage (Eliot 458).

While this is an intense moment for Dorothea, going outside provides her with a little more freedom than the enclosed repressed atmosphere of the house. While Lowick itself is basically a tomb, the garden gives momentary relief, with walks and yew trees. The garden, as in *Villette*, serves as a space where things that are repressed in the convent can be seen; while the grounds are still part of the stifling convent atmosphere, there is space for processing, a space where feelings can be acknowledged. As depicted in "Convent Thoughts," the garden allows space for deep contemplation, a way to process inner emotional life.

This glimpse into Dorothea's psyche is also valuable; it is reaffirmed that Dorothea's idealism is to blame for this immolation of self, the "ideal and not the real yoke of marriage." Lucy would never be in this position because she does not have Dorothea's borderline fanatical idealism, which is strengthened again by lack of fulfillment in all other areas of her life. Luckily, fate intervenes in this decision, with Casaubon dying before Dorothea can promise this to him: "It occurred to her that he might be resting in the summer-house, towards which the path diverged a little. Turning the angle, she could see him seated on the bench..."(Eliot 459). While Dorothea is hysterical over his death, it frees her from this monstrous commitment. Her release from both the demand that she continue his work and the demands of marriage occur outside, and not in Lowick. She is physically moving herself along the paths outside, not just passively sitting. While the focus before was her lack of movement and Casaubon's movement, his death reverses this, making her the active one and him the inactive one. But again, left to her own

devices, Dorothea would never have freed herself from the pseudo-convent she finds herself in. It is an act of fate that saves her from her own all-compassing idealism.

After Casaubon's death, Dorothea is whisked off to Freshitt Hall, where she sits with Celia in the "prettiest of up-stairs sitting-rooms...Celia all in white and lavender like a bunch of mixed violets, watching the remarkable acts of the baby" (Eliot 463-464). This scene mimics the *Villette* scene where Lucy wakes up at the Bretons after her collapse at the confessional. The abrupt change of scene, the whisking off of the heroine away from the grim tomb of the convent reinforces the convent as a tomb, a space of enclosure. The description of Celia's home, with pretty rooms, herself in bright colors, and an active baby give a nice portrayal of domestic bliss, a complete contrast to the "chill, colorless" Lowick. But instead of being happy with this change, Dorothea longs to go back to Lowick in order to carry out any instructions Mr. Casaubon might have left her in his will. She is still not free from the lure of the pseudo-convent and the dramatic purpose she still hopes it can provide her. Only after Celia tells her that Casaubon made a codicil to his will, stating that if she married Will Ladislaw, she would not inherit any property, does she finally break with Casaubon. She did not care if the codicil banned her from marriage completely; "That is of no consequence," as she states. Her decision not to remarry reinforces the portrayal of her as a nun. Dorothea will not break her vow and leave the convent

When Celia tells her the codicil only prohibits marriage to Will, two things happen:

Casaubon's hold over her is finally broken, and she finds her new cause in Will:

She might have compared her experience at that moment to the vague, alarmed consciousness that her life was taking on a new form, that she was undergoing a metamorphosis ...One change terrified her as if it had been a sin; it was a violent shock of repulsion from her departed husband, who had had hidden thoughts, perhaps perverting everything she said and did. Then again she was conscious of another change which also made her tremulous; it was a sudden strange yearning of heart towards Will Ladislaw. It had never before entered her mind that he could, under any circumstance, be her lover...(Eliot 467).

Conventional domesticity, married life, and romantic love as portrayed by Celia have no appeal to Dorothea; only when it is complicated and made into a dramatic statement does she suddenly experience a “strange yearning of heart” for Will. Casaubon’s codicil made her realize how petty and jealous he was, and she cannot continue to idealize him. So instantly, with one idol fallen, she must construct another one of Will Ladislaw. The change in her feelings is described as an extreme mental disturbance, “alarmed,” “metamorphosis,” “terrified,” “violent.” This look into her psyche again shows how perfectly she emulates anti-Catholic convent fears; she is exactly the kind of “rash” young woman who, as Henderson notes, has a devout disposition and “ardent feelings.” But this time, her choice of Will Ladislaw is seen as much more natural; her feelings are inadvertently steered into an appropriate channel by Casaubon’s will. All the different wills just reinforce that Dorothea does not really have a will of her own. She goes from following Casaubon’s will to marrying and devoting herself to Will. In both marriages, there is a burial of self. She has less agency than Lucy Snowe, who refused to change her religion or any part of herself for her suitor, M. Paul.

While there is enough at stake to make this romantic choice appealing to Dorothea, such as the threatened loss of her property and the loss of her family (with Sir James and Mr. Brooke vowing not to see her if she marries him due to family politics) this relationship with a young, charming man breaks her out of the pseudo-convent lifestyle for good. By accepting Will, Dorothea essentially becomes a normal wife and mother at the end of the novel, helping Will in his political goals:

Dorothea could have liked nothing better, since wrongs existed, than that her husband should be in the thick of a struggle against them, and that she should give him wifely help. Many who knew her, thought it a pity that so substantive and rare a creature should have been absorbed into the life of another, and be only known in a certain circle as a

wife and a mother. But no one stated exactly what else that was in her power she ought rather to have done...(Eliot 792).

She jumps from Casaubon and his main scholarly effort, *the Key to All Mythologies*, to Will Ladislaw and his political fight against injustice, giving him “wifely help,” in the struggle against wrongs. While Dorothea has not essentially changed, her new “religion” as it were, is much more fruitful; she is now finally where she wants to be, given a concrete cause that requires much energy and activism. She becomes a wife and mother; this role is glorified as part of her dedication to Will and his cause. Dorothea fulfills the Madonna imagery in this scene; she goes from depiction of her as virgin maiden to idealized wife and mother. This relationship, though couched in happier terms than her previous one, is still a form of self-burial. Dorothea is “absorbed into the life of another,” instead of living her own life. Though Lucy Snowe’s beloved dies and she never becomes a mother or a wife, she has more agency, a stronger sense of self.

People who knew Dorothea “thought it a pity,” that she only has this domestic role, but again, there is no other way for her to exist, and no one could think of a concrete purpose for her, “no one stated exactly what else was in her power.” Dorothea herself does not know, since she has no firmly developed sense of self. At least she finds purpose and happiness in the domestic role, happiness that she would never be able to feel trapped in the pseudo-convent of Lowick, with Casaubon as a harsh and repressed priest. In *Villette*, Lucy is able to use her convent time as a sort of training ground; she hones her morals, her individuality and her knowledge against this sharply Catholic background and thrives. While Dorothea gains intellectual knowledge in *Middlemarch*, she is ultimately unable to use the convent space for effective self-introspection and growth, unlike Lucy.

Dorothea gains enough self-knowledge to realize that Casaubon’s ambitions are not suitable for her, but never fully understands herself or what is suitable, leaving her and those

around her always wondering what “she ought rather to have done.” The convent space served as a proving ground in both novels and Lucy emerges triumphant, while Dorothea is forced out with no clearer sense of self. Dorothea does not choose to leave the convent; she is pushed out by the death of her husband, and even then, plans to return until confronted with evidence of Casaubon’s rejection of her. Lucy starts her own successful school, while Dorothea only occupies the role of mother and wife. Dorothea chooses this role for herself though as a young, beautiful and wealthy widow, she could have followed through with her charitable endeavors such as the cottages or pursued anything she wished to. In the end, Dorothea is no Saint Theresa; she does not know how to make her own space because she does not know herself. Dorothea leaps from convent space to domestic sphere, and never digs herself out of the tomb space of the convent; rather, she buries herself deeper.

Conclusion

In the years after these novels were published, women's colleges became more prevalent. Victorian women were pleased by the rapid progress they had made during the Queen's reign, from increasing educational opportunities to more chances to make their voices heard. In an 1897 article from *The Ludgate*, "Women in the Queen's Reign," several women writers were quoted about their optimism, including Sophie Byrant and Mrs. Mannington Caffyn, author of *The Yellow Aster*. Looking back at the Victorian era, Sophie Byrant said that female education was on the rise; "I think there can be little doubt about the leading feature in the progress of women during her majesty's reign. In the last fifty, or even forty years, the whole present system of girls' schools and women's colleges has come into existence" (214). Byrant concluded this statement by saying that she was confident women would soon be allowed into older, male-only universities, since 758 women qualified for these universities over the previous decade.

Caffyn agreed with Byrant; "There is no getting behind the fact that woman in these six decades has undoubtable become audible, and the necessity that has driven her into expression—let loose upon the land her vast and amazing reserve force—must be reckoned with" (216). Spaces for women were rapidly becoming accessible; education provided expanded opportunities for these later Victorian women, who would not face Lucy and Dorothea's struggle between marriage and convent as the only viable options for women. There was finally more space.

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