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Prospect and Refuge in Villette’s Forbidden Garden

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ABSTRACT
During the Victorian period, the expansion of the domestic sphere into the garden afforded women greater agency within their own physical and psychological landscapes. The Pensionnat in Charlotte Brontë’s Villette (1853) provides Lucy Snowe, the protagonist, with access to a forbidden avenue within the school garden, initially providing her with shelter and solitude. Taking an interdisciplinary approach, this article reads the novel through the lens of the ‘prospect–refuge’ theory developed by the aesthetic geographer Jay Appleton, which considers people’s emotional and psychological responses to their environment. It explores the symbolic uses of the garden space to convey the emotional landscape of characters as well as examining how Brontë positions her protagonist in the garden to allow Lucy freedoms not easily afforded within formal indoor settings.

KEYWORDS
Charlotte Brontë; Villette; garden; prospect; refuge; domestic settings

Charlotte Brontë, in a letter to W. S. Williams, expressed her wish ‘to walk invisible’ to seek refuge from publicity (Smith 2007, 97). In her final novel, Villette (1853), Brontë explored the need for privacy in a world of surveillance and scrutiny. The heroine, Lucy Snowe, a teacher in a girls’ school in the foreign city of Villette, is forced to examine her own emotional boundaries as she begins her long recovery from the initial cultural shock of being a stranger living in the busy communal space of Madame Beck’s school. The refuge offered in the school’s garden, particularly its ‘forbidden path’, or ‘l’allée défendue’, affords Lucy the solitude necessary to facilitate her personal growth, allowing her eventual assimilation into her new home. Recalling Charlotte’s words to W. S. Williams, the garden space allows Lucy to ‘walk invisible’, as she is the only person given permission to enter the garden’s hidden boundary. For Brontë, the garden is not only a refuge for her heroine but also offers Lucy the opportunity to observe the new world in which she finds herself.

In order to examine how Brontë uses the garden space in Villette, this essay will engage with the work of aesthetic geographer Jay Appleton (1975), who facilitates a thought-provoking interdisciplinary approach that can be applied to literary texts.
Although it was formulated in 1975 and might be deemed by many as dated, Appleton’s ‘prospect–refuge’ theory remains a useful and interesting lens through which to analyse the positioning of female protagonists within garden spaces in the work of nineteenth-century women writers. Appleton demonstrates that people engage with the environments they encounter in an attempt to satisfy their needs, and his approach can be widely applied in many different contexts. Most usefully, the ‘prospect–refuge’ theory considers the reasons why certain environments feel safe and secure, in the sense that protagonists experience agency, whereas other spaces invoke the opposite experience of discomfort or fear. Appleton argues that positioning themselves within a landscape without being seen is, in certain contexts, fundamental to human needs.¹ This need is met for Lucy Snowe in *Villette* by the garden space in which she feels securely hidden.

Appleton maintains that the assessment of the aesthetic value of any landscape is based upon fundamentally primitive human behaviours and the requirements necessary to fulfil organic needs. He states that all animals, including humans, primarily seek to fulfil two main objectives—shelter opportunities and exploratory (or investigatory) opportunities—within any given environment to subsequently optimise other natural behaviours such as ingestion, sexual, agonistic, and mutual imitation (Appleton 1975, 63–64). He further describes the links between these natural behaviours and the garden environment as the human pursuit to reconnect with biological needs and ‘refresh his association with his biological background’ (68). The need to refresh one’s association with a biological background is perhaps more vital for nineteenth-century women, given that they were rarely able to possess land itself and were often required to work within a landscape design laid out by patriarchal frameworks. Moreover, social etiquette and constraints further restricted potentially natural behaviours; therefore, a garden (or any natural) environment could potentially offer opportunities to behave more instinctively (or ‘primitively’) than was accepted by polite society. Through seeking out opportunities within the landscape to both shelter and explore as a requisite to fulfil other vital natural functions, women are better able to seek agency within their given physical and social environment.

Prospect–refuge theory suggests that an additional source of aesthetic pleasure is provided by the landscape when it affords ‘the ability to see without being seen’ as ‘an intermediate step’ in satisfying those biological needs; therefore, the capacity of an environment to provide this opportunity becomes ‘a more immediate source of aesthetic satisfaction’ (73). Appleton goes on to say that spaces affording either prospect or refuge opportunities can offer each of them literally and symbolically:

Any feature, object or situation which directly facilitates observation or indirectly suggests an opportunity to extend the field of vision fits into the category of the prospect. Any which actually affords, or symbolically suggests, an opportunity to hide or to shelter fits into the category of a refuge. (85)

I argue here that being able to work within the frameworks of the landscape, which includes garden spaces where there are opportunities to see without being seen or to hide completely, is often vital to the survival of the heroines in Charlotte Brontë’s novels.

Brontë’s heroines often desire invisibility and certainly a place in which to seek refuge; the ‘allée défendue’ in *Villette* certainly fits the category of a refuge, at least upon first appraisal. Roger Ebbatson, comparing representations of outdoor spaces earlier in
the century, notes that ‘the landscapes of Jane Austen [for example] are characteristically those of the gentry, and it would not be until the writings of the Brontës that proto-feminist representation of landscape would be imaginable’ (2005, 11). Indeed, the female protagonist of Villette carefully crafts a self-image fit for the social environment in which she finds herself. It is within the garden of the school, this most sublime and gothic of spaces, that Lucy finds solace and refuge from the pupils and even other staff members; it is a place where she hides her true self and explores her emotional landscape, and her sense of selfhood, in private and on her own terms. Michael Waters argues that ‘more than just a soothing refuge, the innermost space of the public garden is an external correlative of inner space: a metaphor for the soul, the heart, the centre of being’ (1988, 205). At the points in the novel when Lucy finds her space breached by unwelcome eyes or bodies, her inner calm becomes unsettled and her carefully constructed persona threatens to become destabilised under the stress of penetration.

Lucy’s refuge, the garden behind the school, is described as ‘large’, ‘pleasant’ and ‘enclosed’, but it is no ordinary space (Brontë [1853] 2008, 106). It houses classes for most of the summer and is a hub of activity for much of the working day. Additionally, it is complemented by its own gothic myth symbolised by the ancient pear tree that dominates the space:

There went a tradition that Madame Beck’s house had in old days been a convent. … something had happened on this site which, rousing fear and inflicting horror, had left to the place an inheritance of a ghost story. … certain convent relics, in the shape of old and huge fruit-trees, yet consecrated the spot; and, at the foot of one—a Methuselah of a pear-tree, dead, all but a few boughs which still faithfully renewed their perfumed snow in spring, and their honey-sweet pendants in autumn. … The legend went, unconfirmed and unaccredited, but still propagated, that this was the portal of a vault, emprisoning [sic] deep beneath that ground, on whose surface grass grew and flowers bloomed, the bones of a girl whom a monkish conclave of the drear middle ages had here buried alive for some sin against her vow. (106)

This gives the space an air of psychological peril, and the description of the nun’s fate and the hanging consumable fruit, like a corrupted Eden, lends a sexually charged atmosphere. Although Lucy dismisses this tale as ‘romantic rubbish’ (106), she does go on to describe her time in the garden using language that one might use to describe a secret romantic love affair. She avoids the ‘broad, vulgar middle of the day’ (107) and prefers to occupy the space at sunrise or sunset ‘to keep tryste [sic] with the moon, or taste one kiss of the evening breeze’ (106–7) in order to ‘enjoy these precious minutes’ (107). For Lucy, the long shadows are clearly preferable to the full illumination offered by intrusive sunlight; her relationship with the garden space is not for public consumption. Lucy’s frequenting of the garden in the evening additionally facilitates the reassertion of her identity as a Protestant, for when the ‘Catholic household were gathered to evening prayer’ (107) she exempts herself and allows a moment longer of peacefulness in the quiet of the walled garden. There are no windows in the backs of the houses from a bordering college (107), so Lucy is able to remain there, with her thoughts, unseen and set apart from the practice of Catholicism. Thus, the space offers her both physical and spiritual safety and refuge.

During her time at the Rue Fossette, seeking refuge is of the utmost importance to Brontë’s heroine. The proprietor, Madame Beck, is an expert in surveillance; she
reads Lucy’s letters, searches her drawers and is generally ever watchful of all the inhabitants of her school. Madame Beck has an uncanny ability to occupy places that always afford her the greatest degree of prospect; she sees without being seen:

The unction, the suavity of her behaviour offered, for one who knew her, a sure token that suspicion of some kind was busy in her brain. From some aperture or summit of observation, through a parted bough or open window, she had doubtless caught a glimpse of that night’s transactions. Finely accomplished as she was in the art of surveillance. (115)

Madame Beck perfects her surveillance skills and ensures a prospect view using many tactics, for example, by peeking through keyholes and listening at doors. Her most obvious way of safeguarding her commanding view is the way she arranges her students around her in a bower-like environment:

Behind the house was a large garden, and, in summer, the pupils almost lived out of doors amongst the rose-bushes and the fruit-trees. Under the vast and vine-draped berceau, madame would take her seat on sunny afternoons, and send for the classes, in turns, to sit round her and read. (75)

Brontë positions Madame Beck in a sheltered and ‘vine-draped’ bower that is also an elevated place, enabling her to oversee her pupils from a place affording both safety and authority; this green space, therefore, offers both prospect and refuge.

Under these watchful eyes, it is critical for Lucy not only to seek solitude and refuge within the general boundaries of the garden space but also to find an unambiguously secluded and safe place that she can call her own. She requires a place to read her correspondence and to fully explore her emotional landscape, and she discovers this in the ‘allée défendue’, or forbidden path. As the name suggests, the pupils are strictly forbidden to enter and teachers, although permitted, choose not to frequent it, consequently it becomes Lucy’s own domain, and she maintains the space herself:

The very gloom of the walk attracted me … by slow degrees I became a frequenter of this straight and narrow path. I made myself a gardener of some tintless flowers that grew between its closely-ranked shrubs; I cleared away the relics of past autumns, choking up a rustic seat at the far end. Borrowing of Goton, the cuisinière, a pail of water and scrubbing brush, I made this seat clean. (108)

The language used of clearing away ‘relics’ and making it ‘clean’ suggests that Lucy is not only clearing away the religious (Catholic) myth that hangs over the garden at dusk but also cleansing her Edenic space of any previous sins. The ‘ranked’ shrubs also suggest an element of military defence, a space that is safe to occupy; it is an avenue that is sheltered whereby Lucy can see potential intruders from her ‘hidden seat’ (108). She establishes herself as the invisible being that she wishes to be and is ‘well convinced that nobody minded’ her (111).

There are, however, early indications that this space of psychological and physical refuge is not as enclosed as Lucy might wish. Dr John, looking for a dropped love letter, is the first to sully her hitherto uncontaminated space:

A familiar shape, tall and grand (as we of the Rue Fossette all thought it), issued from the house, and strode down amongst the beds and walks. It was sacrilege—the intrusion of a man into that spot, at that hour; but he knew himself privileged, and perhaps he
trusted to the friendly night. He wandered down the alleys, looking on this side and on
that—he was lost in the shrubs, trampling flowers and breaking branches in his search—
he penetrated at last the ‘forbidden walk’. There I met him, like some ghost, I
suppose. (113)

The violent and destructive desecration of her Eden directly translates into the
subsequent invasion of her inner peace and foretells of the future space that Dr John
will occupy within her psychological borderlines before she ultimately buries her
feelings for him, both physically (her treasured letters) and symbolically (‘a grief’)
(296), within the ancient pear tree roots. She appears ‘like some ghost’ (113), a
shadow of herself with her carefully composed identity at risk of being deconstructed
by the ‘penetration’ and watchfulness she now feels subjected to, even by the very
flora present:

My alley, and, indeed, all the walks and shrubs in the garden, had acquired a new, but
not pleasant interest, their seclusion was now become precarious; their calm—insecure.
That casement which rained billets, had vulgarized the once dear nook it overlooked;
and elsewhere the eyes of the flowers had gained vision, and the knots in the tree-boles
listened like secret ears. (116)

Her assurance of having a place in which to see without being seen, or a place of
both prospect and refuge, has been completely undone; her sense of self is
temporarily destabilised as a result of this intrusion of a space that she had claimed
as her own. Sally Shuttleworth notes that this process of negotiation of Lucy’s
identity is fragile:

As dominant male, and doctor, empowered by society to diagnose the inner movements
of mind, and legislate on mental disease, Dr John threatens Lucy’s carefully-nurtured
sense of self. Identity, as Brontë has shown throughout *Villette*, is not a given, but rather
a tenuous process of negotiation between the subject and surrounding social forces.
(2004, 242)

Her landscape, according to Appleton’s prospect–refuge theory, no longer affords the
opportunities necessary for her survival; she cannot easily negotiate the physical and
social framework available to her and find a safe path. Her initial assessment of the
value of this landscape has proven to be flawed and her inner peace begins to unravel
as her physical sanctuary and ‘dear nook’ is breached.

Consequently, on finding herself in a strange environment having fainted in the
streets of Villette during a storm following the deterioration of her mental health, her
first observation is the wind in the trees ‘denoting a garden outside’ (168) and she
seeks to immediately and instinctively gain some prospect of her own through
viewing the scene from the unfamiliar window:

I traced the line of an avenue, where yellow leaves lay in heaps and drifts, or were
whirled singly before the sweeping west wind. Whatever landscape might lie further
must have been flat, and these tall beeches shut it out. The place seemed secluded, and
was to me quite strange: I did not know it at all. (169–70)

Clearly, Lucy attempts to locate herself within her landscape here, but she is also
relieved to find it a secluded refuge space. Noting that this ‘was … quite strange’
as she has not known real seclusion at the Rue Fossette for some time, she ‘did
not know it at all’. Not only is the physical landscape unfamiliar but also the
feeling of not being under continual surveillance, and the new psychological landscape that this brings is strange too. The room in which Lucy finds herself at the Bretton’s house is described as ‘like a cave in the sea’ (181). This calming refuge allows her the time and space, both physically and emotionally, to gather herself as she shelters in this refuge space that looks out onto a garden. Here, Brontë reiterates the importance of the refuge space to women before they attempt to seek prospect opportunities in the ‘sea’ of patriarchal society that they must navigate safely. Lucy has hitherto observed Graham Bretton from an ‘unseen’ position and has waited until she feels it appropriate to reveal her identity. This new but oddly familiar house is a place offering both refuge and potential prospect positions for her.

It is at this point that Lucy willingly reveals herself to the reader and to Dr John, who never recognised his old acquaintance, thus suggesting that her self-created identity has been quite convincing, and she only feels able to disclose her true self when the opportunity for both prospect and refuge (as her current situation temporarily allows) is present. Lucy attempts to position herself in places of prospect or refuge in this way for very specific reasons, for example, peering out of windows as she does here to orientate herself, or hiding in attics and retreating to hidden garden spaces to discuss the truths of Ginevra’s heart (149) or to secure her own psychological privacy. ‘Prospect’ is often denied Lucy Snowe for much of her time at the Pensionnat, and the closing chapters of the novel show her struggle to gain a position affording her both prospect and refuge within her own landscape.

Upon her return to the school, Madame Beck slowly begins to trust Lucy and feels less inclined to constantly survey her. Lucy contemplates the nature of this new domain that she has become a part of; she notes that it is ‘a strange, frolicsome, noisy little world … [where] great pains were taken to hide chains with flowers: a subtle essence of Romanism pervaded every arrangement’ (127). The strange mix of freedom and restraint echoes the necessity of both prospect and refuge (however superficial) to one’s well-being. However, Brontë does not allow her heroine what Appleton (and Wenner) would describe as a ‘zone of safety’ for too long, and the garden, once again, becomes Lucy’s battleground of emotions. M. Paul Emanuel unveils himself as her observer:

‘That,’ said he, ‘is a room I have hired, nominally for a study—virtually for a post of observation. There I sit and read for hours together: it is my way—my taste. My book is this garden; its contents are human nature—female human nature. I know you all by heart’. (363)

In exercising his patriarchal privilege, and penetrating the female garden space, he disquiets Lucy; she is further shocked on discovering that he is able to access the space of the school and its garden via a secret door:

‘The knowledge it brings you is bought too dear, monsieur, this coming and going by stealth degrades your own dignity’. …

‘Monsieur, I tell you every glance you cast from that lattice is a wrong done to the best part of your own nature. To study the human heart thus, is to banquet secretly and sacrilegiously on Eve’s apples. I wish you were a Protestant’. (366)
Sally Shuttleworth argues that Brontë explores the penetrating gaze of both religion and medicine through the two intruders into Lucy’s sequestered space:

Lucy vehemently repudiates M. Paul’s methods: ... the phrase ‘Eve’s apples’, used in connection with the voyeuristic practice of spying on women, takes on a decisive sexual charge. The implicit connection, made throughout the book, between Roman Catholicism and the threatened exposure, and suppression, of female sexuality is here brought to the surface. (2004, 225)

M. Paul’s advantageous position of prospect supplants any prospect or refuge that Lucy might regain as Madame Beck appears to allow her a freer rein within the school environment.

Terry Eagleton distinguishes between the voyeurism of M. Paul’s prospect view and the potentially seductive watchful care he takes of Lucy:

Being watched is objectionable, but in so far as it involves being watched over—cared for—it is clearly desirable. To be critically scrutinized by another at least implies a negative form of interest on his part, perhaps the most you can hope for in a hostile, treacherous society. Paul’s constant secret surveillance of all the school’s inmates from his lattice-window links him closely to the oppressive world of Villette but also lends him a seductive air of divinity, raises him above routine pettiness and plotting. Even so, Lucy does not allow herself to be seduced without a struggle. (1975, 69)

Lucy perhaps recognises M. Paul’s fiery nature in her own and the fact that he really knows her true self, albeit via secretive means, adds to his attraction. In addition, he is presented as a gardener, he ‘liked to tend and foster plants’ (410) and this, Lucy observes, ‘soothed his nerves’ (411). He wanders away ‘fondling the spaniel in his bosom, calling her tender names in a tender voice’ (412) as, in a role reversal, Lucy observes him; he is presented here as a caregiver and nurturer within the domesticised garden, and Lucy’s initial feelings of sororal love are cultivated. These binary oppositions of nurturer and spy are perhaps summarised best by Lucy herself as she observes M. Paul’s conflicting attributes: ‘never was a better little man, in some points, than M. Paul: never, in others, a more waspish little despot’ (303).

Parallels can be drawn here with Brontë’s Jane Eyre (1847). In the scene where Mr Rochester is to propose to Jane, the chapter begins with a description of an Eden under surveillance. Jane is walking in the garden but detects the scent of a cigar from a window providing a prospect view of her movements; she removes herself to the orchard to seek a more refuge-like space:

I knew I might be watched thence, so I went apart into the orchard. No nook in the grounds more sheltered and more Eden-like. It was full of trees; it bloomed with flowers. A very high wall shut it out from the court, on one side; on the other, a beech avenue screened it from the lawn. ... Here one could wander unseen. (Brontë [1847] 2019, 241)

As another example of a Brontë heroine seeking her own Eden-like refuge, Jane, like Lucy, shares the love of the evening garden and equally takes this opportune moment to observe Mr Rochester, and she hopes (in vain) that ‘if I sit here he will never see me’ (242). He knows that she is there and has appeared to read her character from his prospect vantage point in the same way that M. Paul has read Lucy. As a stern and serious man, Mr Rochester is in some ways similar to M. Paul, in that he is also
represented in this moment as a considerate lover of nature and a lover of the garden space, a man of contradictions:

Eventide is as pleasant to him as to me, and this antique garden as attractive; and he strolls now lifting gooseberry-tree branches to look at the fruit … now stooping toward a knot of flowers, either to inhale their fragrance or to admire the dew-beads on their petals. A great moth goes humming by me; it alights on a plant at Mr. Rochester’s feet; he sees it, and bends to examine it. (242)

After hiding in the refuge of the shrubbery and attempting to slip by Mr Rochester, a passionate scene of confessed feelings of love ensues and, in this sense, the garden becomes more like a garden space within an Austen novel whereby each character is free to express their innermost thoughts and private desires. Jane Eyre and Edward Rochester’s connection here is a similar meeting of minds to that of Lucy Snowe and Paul Emanuel in that they share a love of the garden refuge, and Jane is reserved outwardly but hides a passionate nature, as does Lucy.

Although Lucy Snowe does succeed in being indecipherable to many other characters who ask her who she really is and call her mysterious, it is M. Paul who appears to connect with her and attempts to understand her character: ‘In seeking to avoid the surveillance of religious, educational and medical figures, trying to render herself illegible, Lucy attempts to assume control over the processes of her own self-definition’ (Shuttleworth 2004, 242). The control that she seeks within her physical and psychological landscapes through finding areas of prospect and refuge, particularly in the garden environment, is recognised by M. Paul, who arguably represents all three of these figures. He is certainly a religious man, he practises the pseudo-medicine of phrenology, and he is an educator both to the students and to Lucy herself. The control and self-definition that she seeks is perhaps unattainable by navigating completely alone within the social structures and frameworks apparent, particularly at the Rue Fossette.

It is only when M. Paul offers her romantic love and commitment that she finds a safe path in which to break free from the confines of the ‘allée défendue’ and its illusory refuge: ‘Paul Emmanuel [sic] does finally offer Lucy, as Rochester ultimately offers Jane, both emotional fulfilment and a sheltered refuge. He sets her up in business as a private teacher, providing her with a well-appointed residence’ (Eagleton 1975, 73). In recognising the importance of the garden environment, this well-appointed residence at Faubourg Clotilde is immediately associated with the natural garden environment and the opportunity for times of solitude, and refuge, that Lucy requires to thrive: ‘The vestibule was small, like the house, but freshly and tastefully painted; its vista closed in a French window with vines trained about the panes, tendrils and green leaves kissing the glass. Silence reigned in this dwelling’ (Brontë [1853] 2008, 485). The silence of Lucy’s new home is in direct contrast to the bustling world of the Pensionnat, which afforded her only limited refuge without interruption or penetration from others. The newly painted decor has resulted in the cleansing of any stains that previous tenants may have created, much as Lucy cleaned her hidden seat in the ‘allée défendue’. The importance of nature and the garden is evident as Lucy is shown around her new home:

There was a French clock, a lamp: there were ornaments in biscuit china; the recess of the single ample window was filled with a green stand, bearing three green flower-pots, each filled with a fine plant glowing in bloom … and a glass filled with violets in water.
The lattice of this room was open; the outer air breathing through gave freshness, the sweet violets lent fragrance. (485)

The encroachment of greenery and flowers into the domestic space here illustrates the growing interest in the garden, particularly for women, and their efforts to expand their domestic sphere. The refuge that Lucy has fought for can seemingly only be achieved through Brontë’s careful combining of the natural environment and the domestic space; her new surroundings offer Lucy the opportunity for both prospect and refuge through this expansion of the domestic and the professional into the natural, and vice versa.

Dümpelmann argues that with increasing industrialisation, a ‘new importance of the domestic sphere led to the garden not only becoming a domestic sanctuary and extension of the house, but to the house becoming an extension of the garden’ (2013, 31). The role of nineteenth-century women within this extended domestic sphere was being constantly redefined and re-examined. It is within the latter part of the novel that Brontë allows Lucy some redefinition and re-examination of herself within a landscape that blends domesticity and labour, prospect and refuge. The schoolroom element of Lucy’s new accommodation echoes the space that she sought to carve out for herself within Madame Beck’s establishment:

The well-scoured boards were carpetless; it contained two rows of green benches and desks, with an alley down the centre, terminating in an estrade, a teacher’s chair and table; behind them a tableau. On the walls hung two maps; in the windows flowered a few hardy plants; in short, here was a miniature classe—complete, neat, pleasant. (Brontë [1853] 2008, 486)

Significantly, the benches form a green walkway, or allée, for Lucy to be mistress of; the estrade affords her an overview of her surroundings so that she cannot be observed without her knowledge of the viewer. There are plants in the window to bring the natural world into the domestic sphere, and the maps on the walls flank the space symbolising a prospect view over entire countries and perhaps the world. Here is the inarguable control of her own environment and landscape presented to her in one home.

The scene on the balcony ‘under the [refuge of] screening vines’ (488) couples domestic bliss, romantic possibilities and an overview of the leafy suburbs that Lucy is to reside in:

This balcony was in the rear of the house, the gardens of the faubourg were round us, fields extended beyond. The air was still, mild, and fresh. Above the poplars, the laurels, the cypresses, and the roses, looked up a moon so lovely and so halcyon, the heart trembled under her smile; a star shone subject beside her, with the unemulous ray of pure love. (488)

Within this idyllic scene, M. Paul’s voice is described as ‘harmonious’ with the surrounding ‘breeze, fountain, and foliage’ (488), once again associating him with nurture, nature and the garden secret space shared by Lucy. Only his proposal completes the perfection of this scene.

Although Lucy’s new domesticised Eden is M. Paul’s gift to her, Brontë is clearly unwilling to allow Lucy to become subject to yet more control by a male figure in her life and thus M. Paul is to travel abroad for three years, during which time Lucy builds a life and a successful business for herself. The three years of absence are described as the happiest of her life (493) and, although she acknowledges the paradox, this happiness is derived from gathering the fruits of her own labour and
building her life and business to be independent and self-sufficient. M. Paul is still credited as her energy source, as his ‘full-handed, full-hearted’ (494) correspondence is demonstrative of love and care for Lucy; these letters are in direct contrast to those from Graham written in friendship and buried in the ‘allée defendue’. M. Paul’s letters require no burial and are ‘real food that nourished’ (494) during their time apart and probably beyond. She awaits his arrival:

And now three years are past: M. Emanuel’s return is fixed. It is Autumn; he is to be with me ere the mists of November come. 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. I thought I loved him when he went away; I love him now in another degree; he is more my own. (495)

Lucy professes not to be a gardener and yet she has some plants still in bloom late into the season. She has therefore become self-sufficient and thriving within the framework in which she is positioned having assumed most of M. Paul’s roles. She is afforded both prospect and refuge within this landscape, gifted by him but wholly maintained by herself in his absence. An inheritance of one-hundred pounds also permits Lucy to expand her business (493) using her own fortune, and she joins this to the property she considers herself to be ‘steward’ of (487). This also allows her a degree of financial independence separate from that provided by M. Paul, offering her further opportunity for self-definition. The ambiguity of Brontë’s ending to the novel suggests that M. Paul is never to return, the Banshee ‘keening at every window’ (495) and the news of storms at sea implies his death, but we are left to wonder if he will return to his fiancée or not. Brontë leaves us with the image of a heroine with purpose and prosperity in her own right, mistress of her own physical and psychological landscapes ‘in a new state of circumstances, a wonderfully changed life, a relieved heart’ (494).

The heroine of Brontë’s novel, arguably a prisoner of the patriarchal frameworks that confine her, seeks the refuge of the garden space when privacy or exploration of her cognitive landscape is required. For example, Lucy takes her letters out into the garden space at the Rue Fossette in order to read them and to explore her own emotional reactions to their contents. During her time at her new school, however, there appears to be no necessity to remove herself to a similar garden space when she opens her love letters from M. Paul; her new environment offers her a sufficiently safe habitat of refuge and prospect in which to explore her emotional landscape. The encroachment of greenery into this space has afforded her a domestic space that offers at least the illusion of refuge where natural biological needs can be met, acted upon and explored in safety. In Brontë’s novels, particularly *Villette*, free and frank discussions, especially in matters of the heart, are often placed out of doors. In this sense, the secluded spaces of gardens lend the heroine a place to wander physically freely, but equally safely, remaining within an extended domestic sphere. The expansion of the house into the garden (or the garden into the house) offers Lucy Snowe an acceptable level of physical and psychological freedom.
A concern to seek both prospect and refuge, as well as the opportunity to shift position more easily in a garden environment, is evident throughout Villette (and to a degree in Brontë’s other novels). A heroine who finds a space affording both opportunities might be persuaded to share that space on her own terms; this is not a relinquishment of her personal agency in that space, but an acceptance of ultimate ownership and a reflection of reconnection with her biological needs. Returning to Appleton’s theories, garden landscapes offer an opportunity to fulfil the primitive biological urge to recognise actual or symbolic prospect and refuge spaces, and therefore permit other natural behaviours and allow psychological and emotional freedoms to develop. Flirtations, passions, difficult feelings and shocking secrets, for example, are all explored within these garden spaces in ways that they cannot be as easily realised indoors.

When it comes to matters of the heart, perhaps it is the setting of the garden space that caused Charlotte Brontë to find the writings of Jane Austen lacking. In a letter written in 1850 to W. S. Williams, on concluding a reading of Emma, Brontë states that Austen is only concerned with the manners of her characters and not with the passions within (Smith 2007, 161–62). Her earlier assessment of Pride and Prejudice, in letters to G. H. Lewes, is even more acerbic:

Why do you like Miss Austen so very much? I am puzzled on that point. What induced you to say that you would have rather written 'Pride & Prejudice' or 'Tom Jones' than any of the Waverly [sic] Novels?

I had not seen 'Pride & Prejudice' till I read that sentence of yours, and then I got the book and studied it. And what did I find? An accurate daguerrotyped portrait of a common-place face; a carefully-fenced, highly cultivated garden with neat borders and delicate flowers—but no glance of a bright vivid physiognomy—no open country—no fresh air—no blue hill—no bonny beck. I should hardly like to live with her ladies and gentlemen in their elegant but confined houses. (99)

Given the garden spaces made available to Austen’s heroines, and the almost half-century separating these two authors, Brontë’s assessment is superficial at best. Obviously, the landscapes of Austen’s novels are far more formal in their aesthetic design and very different to that of the gardens within Brontë’s novels, but the symbolic function of the garden space is ultimately similar. Each novelist allows their characters to have the freedom to explore their emotions within garden settings as an expansion of the safety offered by the domestic space. In this sense the garden takes on traditional attributes of the home, becoming a symbol of the head and heart. Representing women’s new relationships with outdoor spaces suggests that women writers were increasingly aware of women’s new sense of authority and belonging in a protected environment.

Wenner’s assessment that Austen’s heroines are often positioned in liminal spaces in between prospect and refuge in order to find ways to negotiate their landscapes seems to be borne out upon further examination. She also notes that Brontë’s assessment of Austen appears to be somewhat lacking:

When Brontë mentions the ‘confined houses,’ she does not seem to recognize that most of the major events in the stories of Austen’s heroines occur outdoors. In fact, Austen’s landscapes that give the heroines the energy and confidence to find personal freedom were not so different from those of Brontë herself—in some ways landscapes become
part of the heroine. ... Although Charlotte Brontë had no great admiration for Jane Austen’s novels, both Brontë and Austen situate their heroines similarly as active participants in the landscape where women recognize their own ambivalence over landscape control and the potential danger of a male presence trying to objectify them. (2016, 113)

This male presence might not necessarily be a physical voyeur, it is omnipresent in the design, control and maintenance of the garden space; it is present in the legal landscape in which women are placed in terms of ownership of land, and in the physical and psychological boundaries set for women by men.

However, it is when nineteenth-century literary heroines recognise that the garden space provides the potential for agency and freedom, and to gain confidence in assessing their own position in the landscape in terms of its potential to provide prospect and refuge, they appear to be in a more effective position to navigate their social landscapes and are better able to challenge physical and psychological boundaries. *Villette*’s Lucy Snowe appears to be one such heroine, and although her path to a safe space is not a smooth or uncomplicated one, she ultimately triumphs in terms of her position within her own physical and emotional landscape. The garden space may be an extension of the domestic sphere, but it is a space that affords the nineteenth-century heroine more opportunities for freedom than any of the ‘confined houses’ that they may find themselves in.

**Note**

1. Explorations of the garden settings and their symbolic uses in Brontë novels are beginning to gain more recent interest, although this is an area that still seems somewhat neglected. For my own purposes it is necessary to acknowledge the prior scholarly works focusing on a wide range of elements of garden spaces that provided an important context for my own thoughts. For example, this article owes much to Barbara Wenner’s (2016) application of aesthetic geography theories to the works of Jane Austen and later authors. In addition, Sarah Bilston’s book *The Promise of the Suburbs* (2009) and subsequent article of 2011 in *Victorian Review* offer valuable insights into the rising popularity of suburban gardens and their role in creating a middle-class identity in the Victorian period. Bilston notes that as the century progressed, more is made of the suburban garden’s ability to provide privacy, particularly for women (Bilston 2009 and 2011). Elizabeth Chang’s *Novel Cultivations* is mainly focused on the importance of plants as narrative engines in Victorian novels and argues that urban gardens in gothic fiction tear a disruptive space in the coherent cityscape (2019, 52), but she does suggest that Lucy Snowe’s ‘shaded manner’ is echoed in the dark walkway and that she frequents it in order to find refuge from Catholic ritual (62). Amy King’s *Bloom* (2003) focuses on the ways that the novel and popular science together created a cultural figure, the blooming girl, central to both fictional and scientific worlds. This article, however, takes a slightly different direction and focuses on the positioning of women within those garden settings and the ways that Brontë provides exterior settings to meet biological needs, particularly the notion that a space offering an opportunity to see without being seen, or conversely a wholly prospect view, allows women to seek agency much more successfully and find their place in the patriarchal frameworks at play.
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Notes on Contributor

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References


Additional Resources

