BEYOND SEXUAL REPRESSION: THE PARADOX OF ANOREXIA NERVOSA IN CHARLOTTE BRONTË'S *VILLETTE* AND *SHIRLEY*

BY

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Abstract:

Focusing on Charlotte Brontë's fascinating capacity to transcend her own time as well as to penetrate the recesses of female interiority, I delve into the paradox contained in the turbulent ailment of "anorexia nervosa" in *Villette* and *Shirley*, as the embodiment of an obvious self-destructive behavior, and yet a source of partial female power in Victorian England. As a reaction against her contemporary patriarchy, Brontë perceives and unfolds for her reader women's repressed knowledge regarding the reasons leading to "anorexia," not yet categorized as a disease, and its alarming social inescapability. However, at a deeper level the author longs to externalize the intriguing as well as radical female "hunger" so as to attain agency while avoiding patriarchal control, paradoxically at the expense of their physical health.

I. Prologue

> A week or two passed; her bodily and mental health neither grew worse nor better. […] The sound by nature undergo these tortures, and are racked, shaken, shattered: their beauty and bloom perish, but life remains untouched. They are brought to a certain point of dilapidation; they are reduced to pallor, debility, and emaciation. People think as they see them gliding languidly about, that they will soon withdraw to sickbeds, perish there, and cease from among the healthy and happy. This does not happen: they live on; and though they cannot regain youth and gaiety, they may regain strength and serenity. (*Shirley*, 191-192)

Taken from Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*, this epigraph echoes the author's anxiety concerning the paradoxical ailment of "self starvation,"[1] which emerges as a response to correlative suppressive morality in Victorian England. In fact, to be anorexic and to be a woman during this period included a physical and mental collapse, but also social alienation in several respects. This explains how the symptoms that would now be considered those of anorexia were back then primarily related to the notion of "hysterical fasting."[2] However, Brontë subtly topples such misconceptions, suggesting that women might also attain a certain degree of corporeal power and knowledge from their "tortures." Here is precisely where the absolute paradox of Victorian women' anorexia nervosa presents itself. Recalling the opening passage from *Shirley*, the narrator voices this contradiction regarding self-starvation as a source of both "debility" and "strength." In her subversive endeavor to reconcile both anorexia and its consequences—and for that reason draw consideration to women's circumstances—Brontë exposes how this "disorder" has been commonly

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[1] Before it was named "anorexia nervosa," this illness was *commonly* known as "self-starvation," but generally disregarded as a mere anomaly of the "other" Victorians.

[2] This idea establishes a remarkable contrast with nowadays anorexics as they are not socially "marginalized" in the same respects, even though the bases for the disease prove to be quite analogical.

interpreted one-sidedly. Her unique view is that this "illness" endows her heroines with knowledge and therefore power within the realm of an oppressive patriarchal discourse, even while they dramatically seem to fade away in the process. The reader should critically consider these questions: why do Victorian women fall victim to this nightmarish sickness? Do they purposefully choose to make anorexia a part of their person? What incongruities may exist among anorexic women during the Victorian period, and what kind of *power* can really be achieved through their self-starvation? The responses to these questions remain puzzling, as well as at times contradictory mainly because female agency existed solely as a utopian vision at that time.

In the Victorian novels *Villette* and *Shirley*, Brontë exposes the paradox attached to anorexia nervosa as both a protest and a symptom derived from women's oppressive circumstances. Although an anorexic behavior has been interpreted as both a weapon to achieve agency and a form of social protest; nevertheless, it is important to articulate that these are forms with a highly circumscribed arena. On the one hand, women voluntarily practice self-starvation as a result of social demands to conceal their desires and they consequently become emotionally and sexually repressed; on the other, self-starvation allows them to perform a social critique of external control while exposing their conflicting longings for agency. For instance, *Shirley*'s central paradox of agency within constraints appears inevitably connected to the foregrounded scenes with the mill workers who protest their involuntarily-imposed starvation and as a result burn down the mills, displaying violence against the mill owners in the process. These two parallel plots in the novel lead to starvation;

however, that of the mill workers ironically opposes Caroline and Shirley's self-imposed starvation. While Caroline and Shirley can choose not to eat, the workers do not have a choice. Still, neither the mill workers nor Brontë's *anorexic* protagonists are able to achieve total control of their conditions due to their social limitations; but they at least manage to carry out their claims of protest. Brontë's emaciated heroines seek control within a fairly visible lack of control and consequently project their desires onto their own bodies.

Brontë depicts the female protagonists, Lucy Snowe, Shirley Keeldar and Caroline Helstone[3] embodying diverse, although semi-connected, archetypes of anorexics who strive to restrain their "hungers." In *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body*, Anna Silver argues that Charlotte Brontë's "delineation of anorexia represents in a large part a criticism of women's roles, most specifically women's inability, because of constructions of femininity, to speak their sexual desires." (81) Following Silver's argument, Lucy's narrative, in addition to Caroline and Shirley's conditions, denounces Victorian constraints that lead women to anorexic patterns and deplores mental science's disregard towards female fasting. The critic also recalls differences among the female anorexics. Along with these ideas, I acknowledge that symptoms of anorexia are also present in Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, but I decide to exclude this novel from my project since its heroine, Jane Eyre, does not participate within this paradoxical dichotomy as she represses her "hungers" conveyed through her self-starvation.

[3] This character, Caroline, seems to first struggle to fulfill the female ideal of the "angel" within the house while her attitude concerning her disease, whose negative consequences she mostly ignores, allows for another type of the anorexic that I will analyze.

Oppression clearly plays a prominent role in the development of anorexia nervosa within the Victorian time period, and physical hunger stands as a metonymy for female unspeakable desires. In all of Brontë's novels, as well as in other contemporary Victorian works, sexual desires are to be silenced, while they are implicitly present in the narratives; thus the author displays both women's repressive and oppressive life conditions. Indeed, any and all sexual references are literally omitted.[4] Primarily, it must be considered that anorexia expresses something deeper than a physical appetite since it is obvious that women hold more complex motives in addition to their sexual desires. Through her female protagonists in *Villette* and *Shirley*, along with some of their female counterparts, Brontë suggests other desires, whose inhibition incites women to fall into the abyss of anorexia in their struggle to possess what should be socially dispossessed.

Victorian women internalized their personal longing for power, meaning not only sexual liberation, but also economic independence and control over both their bodies and lives. Following this argument, anorexia nervosa dramatizes the unattainable power and oppression that the rigid rules of Victorian society executed over its female members. In *Unbearable Weight*, Susan Bordo points out that "the bodies of disordered women [including anorexics] offer themselves as an aggressively graphic text for the interpreter—a text that insists, actually demands, that it be read as a cultural statement, a statement about gender." (169) In these anorexic narratives, the

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[4] Reference to the opening passage from *Shirley*.

female protagonists must swallow their desires whilst they are paradoxically engaged in a process of self-expression and self-debilitation facilitated by the disease.

II. Frameworks

At the time of the publication of both her novels *Shirley* and *Villette*, in 1848 and 1853 respectively, anorexia was not yet recognized as a disease, but contributed to hysteria. This fact not only exposes society's disregard towards women's conditions and emotions, but it suggests Brontë's awareness of the nature of this ailment. After William Withey Gull[5] named anorexia nervosa in 1873, it became categorized as a serious physical and psychological disease; however, other Victorian physicians derogatorily continued to associate self-starvation with female hysteria.[6] As a result, its categorization carried negative connotations, thus functioning as another mechanism of female subordination. In their introduction to the "Sexual Body" in *Embodied Selves*, Jenny Bourne Taylor and Sally Shuttleworth point out the intrinsic correlation between female sexual repression and hysteria in a parallel struggle for control by the end of the nineteenth-century, arguing that "it was the women who were outwardly the most pure and self-controlled who were liable to suffer the worst attacks of hysteria and other consequences of sexual repression." (166) As these critics imply, female sexual restraint frequently appears in relation to nervous disorders, resembling those presently known as anorexia and bulimia nervosa.

By ignoring anorexia—often experienced by self-controlled women—medical science not only failed to account for Victorian women's oppression, but also to identify other types of "hunger" beyond the physical realm such as longing for

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[5] I refer to Joan Jacobs Brumberg'*Fasting Girls: The History of Anorexia Nervosa*, p. 71.
[6] Sue Thomas' "Rewriting the Hysteric as Anorexic" stresses the lack of attention paid to anorexic as well as hysteric women, claiming that there was a conscious fear that anorexia would deconstruct established patterns of control "within bewitching master narratives or the justifying narratives by which the hysteric [as the anorexic] was mastered." (185)

individuality, freedom and knowledge, which could not be entirely satisfied within their patriarchal context. In this respect, Silver explains that "anorexia nervosa thus represents, as pathology, the self-denial enshrined within the Victorian ideology of femininity." (91) Following her statement, female longing for knowledge, love, and freedom was usually concealed under society and mental science's assumptions toward both self-starvation and female hysteria. Unable to accomplish their aspirations, women were frequently driven into anorexic patterns; hence, self-starvation obviously embodies both their repression and oppression.

In addition, their motives were reduced by society to a sexual impulse and therefore seen as corrupt. For instance, William Acton's "Want of Sexual Feeling in the Female"[7] states that:

> In general women do *not* feel any great sexual tendencies. The unfortunately large numbers whose lives would seem to prove the contrary are to be accounted for on much more mercenary motives. Vanity, giddiness, love of dress, distress, hunger, make women prostitutes. (183)

To assume, as Acton does, that women did not feel sexual urges is quite ironic; if women's desires were not sexual there would be no need to pin them down. Acton, likewise, equates women with prostitutes,[8] and uses the term 'mercenary' in order to repudiate this *improper* female behavior. He mentions other desires—significantly hunger—that have nothing to do with sex yet are considered just as threatening as the sexual impulse just because women were supposed to have no "hungers." In reaction

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[7] See bibliography for full reference.

[8] As Michel Foucault displays in his introductory chapter to *The History of Sexuality*, this misguided archetype of the female that Acton describes includes women as part of "the other Victorians" as they do not follow the Victorian *ideal* of "the angel in the house."

to Acton's misconstruction, Dorice Williams Elliott's *The Angel Out of the House* explains how "unused ambitious desires might lead to illness and hysteria," and how they "might be directed toward trivial and petty concerns with gossip, dress, or accomplishments." (163) In addition, she explains how Victorian women's compulsory repression implies the surrender of individual desires along with sex, a fact that may lead to a nervous breakdown or other kind of psychological and physical illnesses—including anorexia nervosa. By doing so, Elliott disapproves of mental science's endeavor to present a false impression concerning *other* personal reasons which may develop into anorexia.

As far as the relationship between the anorexic body and food is concerned, I follow Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* as Rabelais literary texts break with the hierarchical systems of the Middle Ages in the same respect that the anorexic body becomes grotesque and thus challenges its oppressive social system. According to Bakhtin, Rabelais' characters reach a state of freedom and autonomy that facilitates their detachment from authorities by means of this carnivalesque atmosphere of food festivals. When the body reaches such status, Bakhtin characterizes it as grotesque, which is reminiscent of an identity in a constant process of (de)construction and metamorphosis. Indeed, the Russian theorist argues that: "the grotesque body […] is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created and builds and creates another body." (317) This definition is intrinsically connected to the process of transition that was taking place during the

Victorian period, but more specifically to women's social roles nowadays since, as Bakhtin proposes, their development never culminates into a consistent definition.

The Bakhtinian grotesque concept of the body becomes palpable in the depiction of Victorian women as they strive to fill the expectations of "the angel of the house" ideal by deforming their bodies—as through an anorexic behavior, as well as the wearing of corsets, bustles or crinolines—as amorphous and unable to consolidate their identities. When attempting to fit this ideal type, Brontë's heroines inevitably find themselves unable to consolidate their female identities, which they feel is yet incomplete; their bodies, though supposedly ideal, are thus grotesque. However, like Brontë's anorexic characters, the Backhtinian types are unable to fully embrace freedom due to societal mechanisms that constrict them within the very same paradoxical form.

The main body of this thesis project accompanies its protagonists through their reactionary processes regarding their disease as well as their oppressive social position. In particular, I will consider Brontë's protagonists in both *Villette* and *Shirley*, analyzing what they most hunger for, the context of those "hungers," and the hindrances that they must tackle when seeking or rejecting *food*. I will focus on the way each female character paradoxically represses her desires in diverse or analogous phases: relinquishing them, remaining silent, or by literally not eating. I will ultimately explore how each heroine—Caroline, Shirley and Lucy—emerges from anorexia, as well as the power/self-destruction implications of such emergence for an interpretation of the novels' endings.

CHAPTER 1:

Ambivalent Anorexic Bodies: Struggling to Master the Female Body.

Personal anxieties over mastering one's life became a daily struggle for Victorian women whose identities were bound by patriarchal assumptions of what femininity should embody. As I have explained, the female body stands as the locus of intertwined personal and social repressive attitudes which are dramatized by an anorexic body. But, what is really being repressed under an anorexic body?[9] What is being achieved at the extremity of such kind of protest? Charlotte Brontë brilliantly unravels the answers, accounting primarily for the close relationship between bodily hunger and self-expression in both *Villette* and *Shirley*. In these novels, anorexia embodies a multiplicity of implications that appear conflicting with each other, and thus the anorexic female body becomes an open text for analysis of women's conditions, in other words, an intertwined paradox.[10]

Following this initiative, a withered body suggests both helplessness and self-government. My analysis of anorexia nervosa in *Villette* and *Shirley* is aimed at portraying its ambivalent role within Brontë's texts. One of these ideas deals with, among other things, exposing how self-starvation exists as a ceaseless hunger for control over women's existence from a social and a personal viewpoint. Therefore, this part of the project will be focused on the analysis of crucial scenes in these novels

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[9] In this rhetorical question, I follow Carl Plasa's "Reading 'The Geography of Hunger'" and his expression of the "epidemic of signification" embedded in anorexia nervosa as being always dependent on the reader's interpretation. One of the aims of this thesis is indeed to address these varied meanings.

[10] This is an allusion to Susan Bordo's conception of the diseased body as a text of femininity offering various possibilities of interpretation. This reference has been taken from *Unbearable Weight*, p. 181.

that exhibit how personal needs are concealed within an anorexic body, as they are incompatible with the domineering social rule. It shall also be presented how anorexia nervosa appears as a metaphorical protest against societal constraints that both "starve" women and silence their multiple hungers, while it ultimately dramatizes their physical and psychological pain.

While constituting a form of oppression that Brontë denounces, her delineation of "anorexia" in both *Villette* and *Shirley* has been interpreted as a subtle and yet radical form of female complaint against patriarchal domination. Deirdre Lashgari's "Hunger as Protest in Charlotte Brontë's Shirley" underlines this initiative describing anorexia nervosa as both a protest and an expression of a longing for control. She explains how "a dysfunctional society starves women literally and metaphorically, and women internalize this dis/order as self-starvation." (142) For instance, *Shirley*'s Caroline, the reserved and unprepossessing niece of the conservative rector, Mr. Helstone, stumbles upon the coldness of Robert, a mill-owner whom she loves.

Lashgari further underlines the narrator's portrayal of Robert and his male counterparts with ironic distance, thus equating the Victorian patriarchy to the coldness of a stone[11] and displaying its insensitivity towards female "hungers." The narrator states:

> You expected bread, and you have got a stone; break your teeth on it, and don't shriek because the nerves are martyrized: do not doubt that your mental stomach—if you have such a thing—is strong as an ostrich's—the stone will digest. (105)

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[11] From Lashgari's "What Some Women Can't Swallow: Hunger as Protest in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*," p. 142.

In addition to Lashgari's argument, Brontë employs the effective metaphor of "the mental stomach" to connect women's minds to their digestive systems, reaffirming the powerful nature and knowledge attached to the female body. The subtlety of Brontë's language establishes a parallel between women's physical and psychological states that exposes the paradox of anorexia as enabling—as a source of agency—and disabling—in the physical sense—at the same time. In fact, this ailment emerges as a result of their physical and/or psychological collapse, while challenging its one-sided vision by going beyond women's sexual repression. Indeed, Brontë illustrates how women suffer both psychologically and physically, both internally and externally, as illustrated in her allusion to the violence conveyed in "the breaking of the teeth" and her reference to the Victorian stereotype of the "martyrized" female hysteric—a label typically attached to anorexic women—while ultimately offering the possibility of strength and empowerment as a result of their sufferings and/or experiences.

As the previous passage expresses, the character of Caroline holds a "wisdom" that is able to endure these hostilities as the narrator describes in relation to women's digestive dispositions. By doing so, Brontë bestows strength to the digestive system, and ultimately the bodies of women, and implies that if a woman can control her own digestion external oppressive forces can be trespassed. This argument follows Susan Bordo's book, *Unbearable Weight* that reaffirms the ambivalence of the female body as a social construction, and hence oppressed. Alternatively, the anorexic body, I propose, symbolizes the female power and control over both their bodies and desires.

Therefore, women were deforming their bodies while at the same time deconstructing their identities in a sort of painful cultural protest.[12]

Self-control was a venerated principle during the Victorian age as self-starvation suggests; however, reversing this initiative of self-control, Michel Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his World* introduces the idea of the human body transporting food through the digestive system as a means of divergence away from political and cultural establishments to configure a renewed cultural atmosphere as well as a grotesque body. Bakhtin theorizes: "in the act of eating, the confines between the body and the world are overstepped by the body; it triumphs over the world, over its enemy, celebrates victory, grows at the world's expense." (283) In *Villette* and *Shirley*, the act of eating emerges as clearly subversive in itself as the female individual manages to distance herself from the world and develop her own autonomy within the oppressive paradigms of Victorian womanliness: hence the boundaries between the body and the world are clearly defined.

Inverting the Bakhtinian initiative, the act of non-eating becomes clearly subversive in itself as it triggers the materialization of a grotesque body: the anorexic. However, it must be considered that eating and non-eating emerge as two binary forms. In fact, self-starvation represents a refusal to bring the external world into the body and thus displays a way to protest against external oppressive forces. Unlike Bakhtin's grotesque body, the anorexic refuses to let external forces in, but, as the Russian critic proposes, it is their relation to food that distinguishes the boundaries

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[12] I recall Susan Bordo's conceptualization of anorexia nervosa as a female weapon to protest against cultural and political conditions that induce it, while unfolding a female longing for total mastering of her body/life.

between the world they cannot control and their own bodies. Similarly, the construction of an anorexic body as a form of protest accounts for the creation of a grotesque body in which "its distinctive character is its open unfinished nature." (281) Considering that this grotesque body appears in an ongoing process of creation, as Bakhtin claims, one should recognize that it will take time for these female characters, along with their Victorian counterparts, to come to terms with their knowledge, as well as to develop their female identity at the expense of the world around them. This domineering initiative is essential as to configure and establish social changes.

As Bakhtin explains, the images related to the control of food are one of the most noteworthy expressions of this grotesque body. Like the characters in *Rabelais* described by Bakhtin, Brontë's heroines develop their own grotesque bodies, but in their case by resorting to non-eating as an alternative. Although apparently unaware of this evolution and the subversive power to transcend societal limits that delineate the grotesque body, Brontë's females have recourse to the self-destructive ailment of anorexia nervosa. As a result, their bodies undergo dramatic changes as they become emaciated and thus grotesque. In addition, these characters manage to control and draw attention to their bodies, and, more importantly, the problematic feminine "ideal" of the Victorian age. As far as the relationship between anorexia and control, Silver's argument reasserts the idea that: "at a time when women had few outlets for their desires for autonomy and freedom, food was one aspect of their lives that they could control." (18) Following Silver's statement, the most obvious connection

between Shirley, Caroline and Lucy and an anorexic woman deals with their obsession with food since their appetites are the only thing they are able to control.

Through an unrelenting pursuit of control of food and therefore their bodies, these heroines seek to gain agency within the social constraints in which they must live. In *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology*, Sally Shuttleworth explains how "rigorous control and regulation of the machinery of mind and body would offer a passport to autonomous selfhood and economic liberty." (23) In order to attain this kind of personal control and autonomy, *Villette*'s Lucy Snowe, for instance, devolves into an exhausted struggle for control of the types of food that she consumes. In fact, Brontë's heroine explains in detail what food is eaten at every meal. This accounts for the noteworthy feminine concern with what types of food women consumed during the Victorian Age.[13] To begin with, a woman should not be seen eating, especially in front of men. This idea accounts for Lucy's reaction when having breakfast in Villette's coffee room, alone among males, as she feels indisposed to eat in front of them. She confesses: "I partook of that meal with a frame of mind not greatly calculated to favor digestion." (54) Her departure from the table marks an early occurrence in the novel in which she subtly reveals to the reader both her oppression and frustration, which have led to this controlled eating imposed by men.[14] Accounting for the heroine's suffocation, Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert in *The Madwoman in the Attic* describe Lucy's suffering and suffocation as "living inside a

[13] As Brumberg explains her *Fasting Girls*, pp. 172-173.
[14] Lucy's first person narration in *Villette* introduces the author's critical view of society's oppressive forces upon women's lives. The expected effect of addressing her reader is to make this reader reflect on this precise social condition of women.

tomb," (401) as she strives to rise above women's constrictions. This metaphor can also be applied to Lucy's apparent anorexia, taking into account that it can likewise be connected to mortality and a possible death.

In addition, I argue that the bodies of Brontë's heroines are oppressed while emaciated. Living inside their anorexic bodies, therefore, stands as a metonym of their leading a life of "hunger," or death, and simultaneously functioning as a mechanism to exhibit both such constraints and the female capability to control her own body, in spite of being at such a high price. In *Villette*, for instance, Lucy expresses her inability to "digest" a patriarchic control over her own body, and her removal from this space can thus be interpreted as a kind of silent protest. Indeed, the continuous anxiety experienced by Caroline, Shirley and Lucy as far as what they eat or what others eat represents an eminent longing to wield total control over both their bodies/lives in their quest for self-definition. In *The Anthropology of Food and Body*, Carole Counihan points out that: "one of the most significant domains of meaning embodied in food centers on the relation between sexes, their gender definitions, and their sexuality." (9) Following Counihan's argument, I argue that Lucy wishes to manipulate her diet aiming to achieve total control over both her identity and her sexuality.

Therefore, Brontë depicts her heroines from *Villette* and *Shirley* as "anorexic" as far as their recurrent preoccupation with the type and quantity of food they consume. In *Fasting Girls*, Brumberg explains how sweet and stimulating foods—coffee, chocolate, salted meats, spices—were thought to stimulate a sexual nature and

passion, and how "food was to be feared because it was connected to gluttony and to physical ugliness." (176) Accordingly, Lucy Snowe restricts the portions of food that she swallows and very frequently skips meals in *Villette*. In fact, Brontë's protagonist confesses to feel relieved when she does not have to eat great quantities of food. She declares: "to my great joy this food was limited to coffee and cake: I had feared wine and sweets." (127) Lucy may be afraid, being both an anorexic and a woman at that time, to eat in front of the watchful male majority. She also feels vital to control her good manners at the table and what and how much food she ingests.

In contrast, Shirley and Caroline, realizing about each other's oppressed condition, rarely refer to the types of food they eat, much less to their self-starvation. This fact does not imply that they are not conscious of the other's voluntary starvation, much less that they are careless about their ailment; but it further verifies the repressiveness and concealment of its nature and paradoxically also exposes their hesitation to talk about it so as to avoid being socially *victimized*. It is only by calling attention to their general well-being that Caroline and Shirley refer to the "disease," even though it was not yet identified as such. For example, the narrator describes Caroline's own reflections as she contemplates her body on the mirror in relation to her realization of her *repressed* body as well as the danger embodied in her anorexia. She wonders:

> 'Am I ill? […] why can I not eat?' She felt a pulse beat fast in her temples: she felt too her brain in strange activity: her spirits were raised: hundreds of busy and broken, but brilliant thoughts engaged her mind: a glow rested on them, such as tinged her complexion. (421)

The narrator underlines the stream of feelings that "glow" with her realization of society's influence on her subjugation while considering her "anorexia."[15] Caroline immediately admits: "I cannot eat," entailing that she is no longer able to "digest" the hardiness of the Victorian constraints that limit both her body and her persona. The narrator moreover expresses her need to undergo a learning process through her anorexia in order to at last come to terms with her knowledge and repression as well as her disease. Significantly, Caroline and Shirley react supportively towards each other during their sickness; nonetheless, it is Shirley who keeps a motherly attitude towards Caroline because, Shirley feels, she "seemed as if she needed some one to take care of her." (224)

In addition, each female character attempts to bestow on the other certain knowledge without, curiously, ever alluding explicitly to their self-starvation, even though they are aware of their contained "appetite." The narrator underlines that "the minds of the two girls being toned in harmony, often chimed very sweetly together." (225) As displayed in several scenes in *Shirley*, neither woman hesitates to be there for the other both emotionally and unconditionally. The reader witnesses such female solidarity displayed each time one of these heroines undergoes a breakdown and the other moves to the other's house in order to assist and comfort each other. In one of their multiple conversations, Shirley and Caroline also exchange subversive ideas in relation to women's equality and their desire to marry for love. In one of their multiple conversations, and here I question the extent of their repression, since they

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[15] I allude to the protagonists' contemplation of their anorexic body, but it not being understood as we perceive this disease nowadays, even though it was serious indeed.

are voicing their inconformity towards patriarchal subjugation and thus releasing their frustration as members of this suffocating social background.

Charlotte Brontë similarly portrays Lucy as a mother-like figure in her relation to other female characters in *Villette*[16] as far as her distress towards "anorexia" and food is concerned. The protagonist is deeply worried with the eating habits of the school girls, however she never foments fasting. In fact, after Polly's arrival, she is alarmed with her refusal to eat as Lucy explains: "a mug of milk stood before her, a morsel of bread filled her hand, which lay passive on the tablecloth: she was not eating." Likewise, the protagonist recognizes that "the effects of time and kindness" (9) will help her—along with her other students—to get acquainted with knowledge that will provide her power to deal with her hungers. Tellingly, Lucy longs to supply her students with her *knowledge*, even though she is aware of the fact that such feelings and knowledge were supposed to be restrained.

However, it seems rather paradoxical that *Villette*'s protagonist intentionally chooses to starve herself while the same time developing a nurturing quality toward other girls. This fact explains her struggle to overcome her "disease" while preventing her students falling into anorexia. During the "long vacation" episode at the beginning of her instance in Villette, for instance, Lucy experiences a breakdown as a result of being left alone and with the sole companionship of a young and sick girl, who is curiously described as an anorexic herself, which she is going to take care of. Lucy declares:

[16] In *Charlotte Brontë and Female Desire*, Jin-Ok Kim describes the close female bonds in *Villette* as crucial in the development of a female identity. In addition, I include and analyze female solidarity in relation to women's self-starvation.

> I did my best to feed her well and keep her warm, and she only asked food and sunshine, or when that lacked, fire. Her weak faculties approved of inertion: her brain, her eyes, her ears, her heart slept content; they could not wake to work, so lethargy was their Paradise. (146)

In addition, *Villette*'s protagonist wishes to be a mother, but this role appears to be conflicting with her social position as she is not married and lacks economic support at this early point in the novel. In this respect, anorexia clearly represents her "sterility," especially taking into account that anorexic women are physically less prompt to be able to have children due to their malnutrition.

Lucy's anxiety for younger women's eating habits is further illustrated when she observes the sweet and enchanting Paulina subtly offering food to Graham, a fact that accounts for her knowledge and concern that women should not eat as much as men and instead should restraint their "hungers." Her awareness and understanding of Paulina's feelings must be repressed toward her male acquaintance, Graham Bretton, described as natural at a superficial level, but deeper Lucy longs for herself Paulina's unrestraint of *hunger*. Nevertheless, Paulina does not refuse any food, and joyfully eats next to Graham. Lucy observes: "she selected a portion of whatever was best on the table, and ere long, came back with a whispered request for some marmalade." Later, she finds the two children "breakfasting tête-à-tête—she standing at his elbow, and sharing his fare: expecting the marmalade, which she delicately refused to touch." (20) This shared, merry meal symbolizes Lucy's incapability to control her students' "hungers," while this scene also functions as an antecedent for Lucy and Paul's eating scenes, which I will later analyze.

Considering that this anorexic behavior reflects women's struggle to restrain both their knowledge and their more personal wants, it is not being implied, however, that Brontë's protagonists are fully aware of the dramatic consequences of their self-imposed starvation—as understood in modern day society—nor that they are openly drawing on this sickness to call attention to their needs. I would rather argue that these heroines are partially, or somehow, exploiting the disease.[17] As I will show later, Brontë's heroines must undergo a learning process that will allow them to understand the extent as well as the reasons lying beneath their starvation to ultimately be acquainted with the necessity to surmount their sickness, and thus expose their self-control over their developing grotesque bodies.

In spite of the fact that self-control represents a major issue in both anorexia and repression, it should not be solely connected to the repression of sexuality.[18] In *Repression in Victorian Fiction*, John Kucich underlines women's struggles for self-control and highlights the necessity for suppression in order to avoid being both morally and socially displaced. He explains that "the enlargement of one's personal repressive force comes to signify a superiority of self-development and self-knowledge." (13) The reader, I would stress, is expected to react to these women's "hungers" and possibly decode the meaning encapsulated in anorexia as a cry for attention. This fact would have been even more significant in Brontë's contemporary

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[17] As far as the ambivalent role of anorexia, I reiterate that this disease was not exclusively a conscious protest on women's part towards their subordination by men, because it is, in any case, impossible to exclude the negative connotations attached to the pains and circumstances spinning around the anorexic. Like an anorexic nowadays, these women may not fully realize that they are trying to attain society's attention—such is indeed the dramatic extend of female social repression, but comprehend their position as being socially *diseased* and for this reason react against it.
[18] Reference to Foucault's *History of Sexuality*.

readership. In *Shirley*, for example, Brontë adopts a defensive attitude—one may even argue that she takes a position of superiority—when addressing her readers,[19] by which she forces them to reflect upon both standardized assumption on female repression and "wasting" condition in their contemporaneous Victorian contextual frame.

For instance, after Caroline's visits to "the old maids," who Brontë depicts as both sexually and emotionally repressed, the narrator abruptly pauses in order to push the reader to reflect on what lies beneath female suppression. The narrator proclaims:

> Reader! when you behold an aspect for whose constant gloom and frown you cannot account, whose undervarying cloud exasperates you by its apparent causelessness, be sure that there is a canker somewhere, and a canker not the less deeply corroding because concealed. (180)

The "canker" to which Brontë alludes, in my interpretation of its undertone, refers to the ignored female torments including the degenerative ailment of anorexia. The author is simultaneously promoting the reader's consciousness towards this female "hungers" as well as the ailment of anorexia nervosa, not yet named nor known as such.

However, this *feminine* restraint of desires implies, as Kucich describes, the attainment of a particular knowledge regarding their condition and the unwarranted repression to which they are led, an act that is unquestionably powerful in itself. Although concealed, Charlotte Brontë endows her female protagonists with an emanating knowledge and power. In *Villette*, Lucy admits having these desires,

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[19] It would be important to point out that Brontë's address to her reader is continuous throughout all her novels. She seems to do so in order to subversively force her readers to reconsider rooted misconceptions concerning women's roles and therefore promote a general change.

though concealed: “I had feelings: passive as I lived. Little as I spoke, cold as I looked, when I thought of past days, I could feel.” (101) By voicing her oppression, Lucy is exposing her pain as well as claiming her agency. In *Shirley*, Shirley’s words echo Lucy’s earlier reflections. She laments:

> Men, I believe, fancy women’s minds something like those of children. Now, that is a mistake. […] If I spoke all I think on this point; if I gave my real opinion of some first-rate female characters in first-rate works, where should I be? Dead under a cairn of avenging stones in half an hour. (352)

Like Lucy’s words in a previous quotation suggest, here, it is Shirley who openly explains how women are forced to repress their feelings as well as their own individual abilities to both love and reason. *Shirley*’s fascinating heroine, far from repressing her ideas, exposes a fierce critique towards patriarchy’s disregard of women’s subjugation, but more importantly, she voices her knowledge and need to be recognized rather than being subordinated.

It should be noted that Shirley’s complaint to the patriarchal entity becomes much stronger than that of *Villette*’s protagonist/narrator. While Lucy merely speaks her feelings to the reader, Shirley overtly questions and attacks those values that limit her persona. In addition, *Shirley*’s protagonist shares both her pain and her belief in gender equality with Caroline and at the same time undermines patriarchal misconceptions on female intellectual inferiority. With this purpose, Shirley underscores her own intelligence as a woman, and refers to female writers[20] whose intelligence, she declares, should likewise be acknowledged. These female characters

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[20] Brontë introduces a metatextual allusion here seeking to validate Shirley’s feminist protest.

long to control their oppression and thus make use of anorexia to act their agency and as a sort of social protest. However, it must be stressed that these heroines may be able to achieve agency but with limits, hence: going back to the everlasting paradox involving anorexia.

Shirley Keeldar's first appearance in the novel takes place at the end of the first volume, bringing forward a tumult of oppressed desires voiced through her own anorexic body when she struggles to attain agency and control. Reflecting on Shirley's health, Caroline depicts her as a troubled *anorexic* that claims social consideration to her needs, but never referring to her own self-starvation. Caroline contemplates her friend's face, significantly after one of Shirley's encounters with Louis, with whom she falls in love, as: "pale, as if her pride bled inwardly." (459) Later in the novel, Caroline's description is supported by the narrator's when Shirley disapproves Sir Philip's *romantic* advances. The narrator underlines that Shirley's "face showed thin, and her large eye looked hollow, there was something in the darkening of that face and kindling of that eye which touched as well as alarmed." (498) Through t Shirley's characterization as an anorexic, Brontë denounces social cruelty toward women who navigate beyond their social limitations, and proposes a kind of female empowerment derived from their ability to cope with their knowledge and affliction. In this scene, Shirley's anorexia emerges not just as the projection of her inner pain due to her incited oppression, but in defiance to male authority.

Pain, as a natural symptom of anorexia, becomes one of the most dramatic and revealing consequences. Jacqueline Banerjee's "Pain in Charlotte Brontë" describes

the costs of painful physical as well as psychological female circumstances as "actively deployed to stave off illness and death." (3) In fact, Banerjee suggests that all anguish originates in suppression; however, it can radically contribute to women's overpowering of sickness as they are forced to face their disease at a certain point, in analogy to some anorexics who understand the necessity to overcome their ailment. Brontë likewise emphasizes that pain should not be simply connected to sexual repression, but other kinds of desires in *Villette* and *Shirley*. This explains Shirley's refusal to be regarded as a sick and weak woman in that she denies her illness throughout the novel. Her cousin, Henry Sympson, one of Louis Moore's students, informs his tutor about Shirley's looks since he is alarmed about her sickness.

Concurrently, Henry acknowledges that she will never admit either her ailment or the reasons that have led to her condition. He declares: "I believe, sir, if she were dying, she would smile, and aver 'Nothing ails me.'" (500) Immediately after this encounter, Shirley explains to Louis that she may be thinner and being unable to sleep, but arguing that "it is not because I am ill." (506-507) By doing so, Shirley aims to avoid being victimized as the figure of the female "hysteric," and thus call attention to the reality of her *troubles*. She certainly succeeds in receiving attention, but the novel does not portray any social initiative to aid her in disease or despair. Brontë seems to imply that the key element to beat such constrictive values must lie, initially, in the individual, even though it may be impossible to change rapidly society's assumptions and oppressive actions. Like Shirley, women who were trapped within a maze of sickness and subjugation were neither capable of dealing with these social

impediments, mainly due to their social limitations, nor to manage their aching entirely.

If food equals death, women's *voluntary* abstinence of food would also account for their longing to overpower their induced subjugation. For instance, Caroline's anorexia originally appears as a representation of her repression, but it develops into a plea to be relieved of her torments as well as a critique of her oppression. Once she returns to her uncle's household after visiting Hollow's cottage, she admits having lost her appetite, meaning that she must be subjugated to her uncle's patriarchy, thus linking anorexia to oppressive conditions in the sense that the protagonist whishes to control her life as she controls her body. The narrator voices Caroline's feelings stating:

> Caroline went home from Hollow's cottage in good health, as she imagined. On waking the next morning, she felt oppressed with unwonted languor: at breakfast, at each meal of the following day, she missed all sense of appetite: palatable food was as ashes and sawdust to her. (421)

This observation on the part of the narrator displays Caroline's frustration concerning her inability "to eat," or in other words, to liberate both her personal needs and feelings. Concurrently, her negative reaction towards food as death conveys her unwillingness to succumb to male "feeding" or control while reaffirming her personal disposition to be independent and free from moral constraints.

The loss of appetite displayed in these heroines alludes to their suffering as they are unable to reconcile their oppression and their "hungers." Throughout *Villette* and *Shirley*, Brontë's female protagonists seek to be taken into consideration by their

patriarchy as they develop their own form of the Bakhtinian grotesque body. This is understood as a body liberated from authorities, which, in Brontë's heroines' case, has been achieved through their awareness of the social oppression imposed on them as well as the *control* of their own emaciation. The dramatic physical and mental changes that these characters undergo illustrate the evolution of their grotesque bodies. This initiative allows these heroines to be increasingly responsive to this power and to utilize it. As a result, they become more mature and independent while gaining both power and knowledge in their relationships with men towards the end of the novel. With the purpose of attaining such power, these heroines benefit from the painfulness attached to the disease; even so, they must learn how to control their anorexia in order to assert real and steadily total control over it.

Anorexia nervosa problematizes the established assumptions concerning gender roles and validates other commonly repudiated female desires, including independence, social equality and both sexual and emotional bonds. Susan Bordo in *Unbearable Weight* refers to the emphasis on control displayed by the anorexics as "feeling their life to be fundamentally out of control, and on the feeling of accomplishment derived from total mastery of the body." (152) After having left Bretton and lost Miss Marchmont's support once she dies, Lucy feels: "faint, at last, and hungry (it was years since I had felt such healthy hunger), I returned, about two o'clock, to my dark, old, and quiet inn. I dined on two dishes: a plain joint, and vegetables." (44) This clearly illustrates that Lucy is starving herself influenced by the

values exhibited in Victorian society, which implements women's need to be repressed.

More importantly, however, this episode illustrates Lucy's recognition of her personal choice to starve herself in order to contain and control her own body. Thus, by describing her self-starvation as "healthy," Lucy suggests that she is experiencing another type of hunger for control, a desire to achieve independence and knowledge. This feeling emerges as she spends such a long time without experiencing such "healthy" freedom. Undoubtedly, as soon as she leaves Bretton, she feels released. Thus, *Villette*'s protagonist understands the value encompassed within the restraint of her "hungers," and her small meal, consisting of a combination of a tiny portion of meat and vegetables, sustains this argument.

Shirley's Caroline similarly flees from her uncle's household to Robert's home, Hollow's Mill, where his sister, Hortense, educates her. Taking into account that repression was a social requirement for Victorian women, it initially involves the self-restraint of personal desires as it prevents their growth and independence,[21] whereas the mastery of one's own body propitiates a breach with oppressive institutions. Moreover, Caroline is conscious that her desires must be kept under control in what she defines as "the meager diet of wishes." (350) Remarkably, she sadly attempts to escape her oppressive situation and consequently confronts her conservative uncle, Mr. Helstone: hence her declaration of feeling "a longing wish for something." (430) In fact, she had previously stated her desire "to be a governess" as

[21] I should note that I am aware of the ambivalences contained in these two statements; however, my aim does not rely on discarding one and validating the other, but rather on revealing a new interpretation of repression in relation to anorexia nervosa within a Victorian framework.

well as to "long for a change." Caroline's anxiety regarding her wishes for independence, work and education are, drastically rejected by her uncle as "feminine […] fancy." (190-191)

Soon after, Caroline starts to make use of the "disease" attempting to direct attention towards her oppressive circumstances in *Shirley*. She consequently claims: "I feel weaker than formerly. I believe I should have more to do," but Mr. Helstone[22] still refuses to relieve her *hunger* and by doing so he disregards both her personal desires and anorexia. (190-191) As a result, Caroline projects her frustration and distress onto her anorexic body. After their argument, Brontë's heroine resorts to her illness in an effort to expose the oppression of her personal needs and as a way to rebel against patriarchal restrictions. The narrator depicts the protagonist as a suffering anorexic while stressing her knowledge about the reasons lying under her questionable repression. The reader learns that: "her appetite was diminished; she knew the reason: it was because she wept so much […] Her strength was lessened; she could account for it: sleep was coy and hard to be won; dreams were distressing and baleful." (192) The narrator also underlines Caroline's fascinating capacity to struggle for her happiness as well as control over her disease. The narrator declares: "yet Caroline refused to succumb: she had native strength in her girl's heart, and she used it." (185)

Allegorically, Shirley's anorexia stands as the most open form of protest among these three women, even though she never admits starving herself purposely;

[22] His last name, Heldstone, recalls the stone symbolism that Brontë introduces throughout the novel in order to undermine men's cold indifference or/and toughness towards women's "hungers." From Lashgari's "What Some Women Can't Swallow: Hunger as Protest in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*."

paradoxically, her anorexic body is repeatedly described as being "wasting" throughout the novel. (503) Moreover, Shirley's refusal to eat is fairly evident as she participates passively in the meals depicted throughout the novel. When inviting her cousins, Isabella and Gertrude, to enjoy a leisure day in her company, the narrator observes that "a summons to luncheon called her in: she excused herself from the meal, and went up-stairs." In this respect, Brontë's protagonist skips a meal albeit Isabella recalls "she said she was hungry." (497) This scene reveals Shirley's self-imposed starvation as well as her willingness to make others participate in the painfulness embodied in her "hungers." Brontë's heroine's purpose relies on calling attention towards her condition, and she indeed succeeds in doing so, in order to involve her cousins in her knowledge, and, of course, denying the idea yet again of her sickness with the resolute assertion: "I *am not*." (497) After Shirley's withdrawal to her bedroom, everybody is concerned with her "alteration," but yet unable to account for "the cause for the change." (498)

As an anorexic, it is significant to highlight that Shirley constantly exposes her subversive ideas on female unrestraint, and for this reason she is not repressing her desires. Like Caroline, she displays her longing for education, as she is interested in both poetry and philosophy—she confesses to her cousin Henry.[23] In addition, Shirley takes time reading literature, especially French revolutionary novels containing the ideals of the French Revolution—closely associated with freedom, equality and independence, but condemned as *poisonous* by Victorian patriarchy. Her uncle, Mr.

[23] In "Charlotte Brontë and Desire (to Write): Pleasure, Power, and Prohibition," Patricia Johnson analyzes the female fervent desire to be educated and at the same time to be able to write; thus, forcing the reader to participate in women's anxieties and "knowledges."

Sympson, questions her libertarian ideas based on “imbibed French principles” (550) and attacks her for being “not proper.” (558) However, Shirley is unable to achieve an unambiguous agency, which would be defined and socially accepted, within this patriarchal society, but she is at least able to undermine these oppressive values. In this respect, I argue, Brontë’s protagonist accomplishes her desire to expose her need to possess further control when voicing her concerns.

In opposition to her uncle’s ideas, Shirley reaffirms her belief in gender equality, even within the institution of marriage itself. She proclaims her wish to exercise her free will, or to put it in her own words: “to do just as I please.” (550) In assertion of Victorian morality, Mr. Sympson had previously referred to her behavior as being “unwomanly” or “unladylike.” (473) As a result, Shirley sees in her anorexia the only means to call attention to her needs, even though she seeks to do so at the expense of her own health. With this purpose in mind, Shirley clings to her sickness throughout her appearance in the novel.

It has been exposed how Brontë’s three heroines, Lucy, Shirley and Caroline, are knowingly controlling their diets in their effort to control their “hungers,” however this level of self-control can become suffocating and unbearable. In *Reading the Brontë Body*, Beth Torgerson underlines that under “extreme conditions, healthy self-control becomes unhealthy self-control, which ultimately leaves one vulnerable to psychological illness, which may manifest itself as hysteria, hallucinations, or

monomania."[24] (71) According to Torgerson, this control, which is firstly aimed to contain women's wishes, may enclose negative, or "unhealthy," consequences to the individual who has imposed this extreme self-control upon herself. In this respect, I include the ailment of anorexia nervosa to Torgerson's statement, and thus expose the paradox contained within the disease. This is the case of the female protagonists in *Villette* and *Shirley* as they undergo a mental breakdown, due to their illness and their oppression and sufferings, while experiencing an empowering process that allows them to voice their concerns through their anorexic bodies.

Furthermore, Brontë's portrayal of her heroines as anorexic in *Villette* and *Shirley* is intended to mirror the negative consequences of their compulsory oppression, but on a deeper level, it also represents a plea for affection. Since the anorexic lacks affection, she is led towards a life of repression. In *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body*, Anna Silver depicts Lucy's anorexia in *Villette* as the manifestation of her emotional emptiness. She accounts for both "Lucy's emaciation symbolizing the lovelessness of her emotionally sexually repressed life," and "her simultaneous longing for food, particularly sweet food," as attesting to "her need for affection." (100) Hence, Lucy's "hunger" should not be seen as exclusively sexual, but also emotional.

Villette's protagonist can be sexually repressed, but she also feels other types of affectionate needs. A lonely Lucy experiences an intense yearning for eating that

[24] It must be noted that "monomania" was a medical term used by Victorian mental science as "a disease of sensibility […] caused by thwarted love, by fear, vanity, wounded self-love, or disappointed ambition," as Jean Étienne Esquirol's "Mental Maladies" explains. Taylor and Shuttleworth, pp. 256-257. Naturally, one should question the validity of this argument.

stands as a metaphor of her desire to be loved and receive support from a patriarchy that alienates her. She declares:

> Notwithstanding all I had undergone—the bodily fatigue, the perturbation of spirits, the exposure to weather—the fever, the real malady which had oppressed my frame, was abating; for, whereas in the last nine days I had taken no food, and suffered from continual thirst, this morning I experienced a craving for nourishment. (161)

Mainly due to Graham's disregard at this point in the novel, Lucy feels heartbroken, as conveyed by her "continual thirst" for recognition and affection. As a result, Lucy suffers a nervous breakdown and deliberately represses her desire to eat in order to inhibit her emotional hunger. Then, she drastically feels a craving for nourishment, an important reversal that illustrates her desire to free her body from the pain caused by both anorexia and patriarchal constricting authority.

Correspondingly, *Shirley*'s Caroline Helstone experiences emotional needs while at the same time she is able to reconsider the circumstances resulting in her physical breakdown. She admits to her maid, Fanny, feeling unfulfilled and "solitary," (175) a statement that, similar to Lucy's, recalls her helplessness in reference to her emotionally repressed life. In addition, the narrator describes the pain conveyed in her loneliness as a source of introspective knowledge. The reader understands: "in her heart she deemed it deeply dreary because it was so loveless—to her ideas so forlorn." (183) In her struggle to restrain her body, she falls into the abyss of anorexia, even though she paradoxically exploits the disease to draw attention to her affective needs.

Caroline's "gray life" in terms of loneliness is underscored by Brontë's images of both physical and psychological pain. (184) Using a type of Romantic imagery the

narrator observes her torments and describes her helpless situation in relation to her anorexic body:

> These efforts brought her neither health of body nor continued peace of mind: with them all, she wasted, grew more joyless and more wan […] an elegy over the past still rung constantly in her ear; a funeral inward cry haunted and harassed her: the heaviness of a broken spirit. (184)

This scene, which takes place immediately before Caroline's mental collapse, exposes the protagonist's inner anxiety for control of both her oppressed life and her illness. By contrast, Shirley emerges in the novel as a much stronger woman who embodies darker features that make her different, and therefore "extraordinary." In this respect, her emotions are not recollected in the tranquility that characterizes other female protagonists in Brontë's novels. Nevertheless, towards the end of the novel Shirley seems to be wasting away while her claims for equality are repudiated by her patriarchy. Eventually, through their processes of perception and shifting thoughts, Brontë's heroines appreciate the power conveyed in their "weaknesses."

As far as women's concern to control their diets, Brontë's heroines, Shirley, Caroline and Lucy, along with other Victorian women, feared that their appetite for food would lead to a misinterpretation of their other "appetites." In this regard, Brumberg's *Fasting Girls* explains that "because appetite was regarded as a barometer of sexuality, both mothers and daughters were concerned about its expression and its control." (172) Even though Brumberg narrows her analysis of Victorian women's anorexia to an apparent sexual repression, it cannot be denied that women held sexual desires that were typically repressed as they were attempting to fit into the Victorian ideal of the nonsexual and emaciated female, therefore they resort to anorexia with the

intention of appearing gaunt and unnourished and avoiding to be regarded as sexually appealing. Taking this into consideration, Lucy, Caroline and Shirley may originally fall into anorexia as they intend to pursue the Victorian idealization of the female body as skinny, which can be *easily* controlled, but at cost of their health. Caroline's anorexia seems primarily a symptom that develops into a form of control, whereas Shirley's ailment embodies the suffering of her oppression and her rebellion through the mastering of her own body.

Therefore, anorexia nervosa is neither a mere pursuit of slenderness, as Brumberg and other critics have asserted, nor are sexual desires exclusively being repressed. As demonstrated by Susan Bordo in her introduction to *Unbearable Weight*, anorexia nervosa in the nineteenth century stands as "complex crystallization of culture." (35) In this regard, Bordo compares the anorexic body to a "cultural text" (165) accounting for other types of "hunger" in the female. She states:

> The female hunger—for the public power, for independence, for sexual gratification—be contained, and the public space that women be allowed to take up be circumscribed, limited. On the body of the anorexic woman such rules are grimly and deeply etched. (171)

According to Bordo, the anorexic body personifies all the social depravations imposed on Victorian women, including their independence and equality. Therefore, Shirley's body, for example, exposes a relentless struggle for attention towards her anorexic body, and thus the protagonist acts her agency within a social background that constricts it.

Recalling Shirley's cousin's concern about her debilitating state, Henry Sympsom describes her as "a strange being—so fair and girlish;" similarly, he also

points out that his cousin is "wasting: her hands are growing quite thin, and so is her cheek;" and yet "reckless," (503) thus unnoticing the reasons of her sickness. Louis had purposely summoned Henry to learn of Shirley's condition after her mysterious retreat, and when Henry returns from meeting her, he stresses Shirley's own anxiety concerning her health. Once more she attempts to draw attention towards her condition while refusing to be equated with the debilitating and vulnerable figure of the diseased female. However, Henry misjudges her as the embodiment of the girlish, beautiful representation of "the angel in the house," an image that Shirley had previously repudiated in one of her meetings with Caroline.

These female characters refuse to admit their sickness when others refer to it, thus establishing their agency within the Victorian patriarchy. Reminiscent of Shirley, Lucy rejects the image of herself as a vulnerable and anorexic being[25] in *Villette*. As she glances at her reflection in the mirror, Lucy describes herself as a spectacle of starving flesh: "I looked spectral; my eyes larger and more hollow, my hair darker than was natural, by contrast with my thin and ashen face." (156) However, the image that Lucy perceives in the mirror does not correspond to the persona she conceals inside her starved body as she feels herself stronger than the debilitating figure before her. Drastically, she considers herself in control of her body, even though it is at the expense of her own health. Nonetheless, it must be recognized that, like other Victorian anorexics, Lucy cannot completely comprehend the harmful consequences of her "anorexia" since it has not been recognized as such and for that reason will

[25] It is essential to consider that Lucy, as the anorexic, was in many cases, unaware of having a disease. They of course struggled to be thin and, as I argue, some of them viewed this restriction of appetite as the means to obtain some form of power/attention.

never publicly disclose her "illness." Indeed, she is confused by such a vision and refuses to support the image of a helpless female. For the first time, *Villette*'s fascinating heroine witnesses and understands the consequences of the collapse between oppressive and repressive attitudes that shape the female body such as her own.

In *Shirley*, Caroline Helstone, rather than being proud of her bony body, rejects the image she faces on the mirror. The narrator recalls Caroline's reflections of her anorexic body as follows:

> She could see that she was altered within the last month; that the hues of her complexion were paler, her eyes changed—a wan shade seemed to circle them, her countenance was dejected: she was not, in short, so pretty or so fresh as she used to be. (176)

Similar to Lucy Snowe in *Villette*, Caroline Helstone in *Shirley* seems to fade away, both literally and figuratively, as she becomes anorexic. Her contemplation of the remarkable physical change that she has undergone[26] clearly illustrates both her apprehension and the further dramatic use of this ailment to acquire social attention. In addition, her deliberate communication of this "alteration" to Fanny displays her awareness, not only concerning society's disregard towards anorexia, but also her own knowledge of the imminent need to control the disease in order to avoid being criticized, or more importantly to avoid death. Therefore, both Lucy and Caroline evidently refuse to become the thing they most hate: victims of society. Being the body analogous to female identity, these women seek to undo the social "ideal" by

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[26] She is ironically portrayed as the beautiful and contained ideal of the Victorian female at the opening of *Shirley*, which obviously differs from the frail and bony figure described at this point in the novel.

resorting to anorexic patterns that contribute to this deconstruction and correspondingly delineate their grotesque if freed bodies.

Furthermore, Brontë's female protagonists develop an inferiority complex that represents an influential factor in relation to anorexia since they neither *feel* physically beautiful nor able to attract society's attention, but primarily due to their need to wield control of their lives. In *The Thin Woman*, Helen Malson argues that "anorexia nervosa is also associated with self-esteem, with a lack of sense of self, of independent autonomy and control, as well as with a fear of fat or relentless pursuit of thinness." (93) Like modern day anorexics, Victorian women, who were expected to be skinny, normally resorted to anorexia nervosa as a result of their oppression and lack of identity, since they were constrained by a patriarchal society: they were literally *starving* for attention.

In relation to this longing for attention, it must be recalled that "anorexia nervosa" was deeply connected to Victorian fashion in the same regard that anorexia and fashion are inseparable nowadays, since anorexia defines the construction of the female self and disregards what true womanliness should encode foremost: freedom and equality. Both the "disease" and women's clothing of the period stand as a representation of identity in the female endeavor to be considered as equal citizens in society. According to Elizabeth Wilson's *Adorned In Dreams: Fashion and Modernity*, Victorian fashion trends were deliberately designed to fit the "ideal" of the "Angel in the House." The critic points out:

> The dress of the nineteenth-century […] had subtly to convey family status as well as personal desirability: seductiveness, albeit virginal;

> along with apparent submissiveness and a willingness to obey, the ability to run a household should be suggested; […] Appearance became more and more mixed up with identity. (123)

Paradoxically, the Victorian dress, even though controlled, was supposed to give the impression of "sufficient health," as Wilson mentions. Far from being healthy in different respects, anorexia accompanies these female protagonists as they suffer internally on account of their relentless struggle to be valued as individuals within the realm of the Victorian patriarchy. Their ceaseless pain is thus further emphasized through the fashion of the era in that women traditionally wore garments that controlled and constricted their bodies. Caroline Helstone, for instance, rejects these constraints on her body declaring: "I wear a high dress and a collar […] and I should feel suffocated." (80)

Susan Bordo also acknowledges the pain experienced by the anorexic due to these fashion trends.[27] She depicts anorexia as "a debilitating affliction" in *Unbearable Weight*. (147) In *Villette*, Lucy Snowe, speaking of her hunger of power, reflects on the anguish she finds when attempting to release her desires. The heroine invokes:

> This longing, and all of a similar kind, it was necessary to knock on the head; which I did, figuratively, after the manner of Jael to Sisera, driving a nail through their temples. Unlike Sisera, they did not die: they were but transiently stunned, and at intervals would turn on the nail with a rebellious wrench; then did the temples bleed, and the brain thrill to its core. (153)

[27] *Unbearable Weight*, p.189.

Her account of the tale of Jael and Sisera depicts her physiological pain, psychological collapse, and the social drama of self-repression, thus describing the inner conflict between the social self and personal desires.

The violence depicted here could be compared to the daily violence imposed on Victorian women, dressing themselves according to "modern" fashion standards. The corset, a commonly used clothing item, forced women to constrain their bodies, thus causing themselves physical pain in order to conform to social norms. This daily ritual may be viewed as a type of violence against the female body, one which, similar to Lucy Snowe in *Villette*, Caroline and Shirley participate in as they too mutate their bodies by forcing themselves into the corset while at the same time depriving themselves of food. These protagonists are thus obliterating their sexuality and the natural state of their body. Following the Foucauldian idea of mastering the body as a means to achieve power, Susan Bordo explains that the corset represents "an emblem of the power of culture to impose its designs on the female body," (143) which I have analyzed.

Charlotte Brontë's fascination with her heroines' response to society's oppressive morality confirms its importance in *Villette* and *Shirley*, especially as these novels undermine their patriarchal system. With regard to the corset and its effects on the female body, Caroline and Shirley appear, in chapter nine of *Shirley*'s second volume, helping each other to get dressed. In this scene, the reader witnesses the reactions of the female protagonists to their own bodies, whose goal lies in drawing awareness towards their "disease" and concerns. Both women manage to direct

attention towards their anorexic bodies, recognizing implicitly their oppressive conditions.

In this concrete scene, Caroline and Shirley display two distinct views in reference to their situations. Shirley embodies a kind of feminist discourse seen through her rejection of the repression imposed on her by society, whereas Caroline does not perceive any other alternative or escape from a social position in which the Victorian norm disregards, misunderstands and oppresses women. For example, the narrator accounts for this suppression in the way Caroline dresses herself up. The reader learns: "she dressed herself, as usual, carefully, trying so to arrange her hair and attire that nothing of the forlornness she felt at heart should be visible externally." (351) This declaration portrays Caroline's repression and melancholic state displayed through her anorexic body.

However, Shirley declares that they, Victorian women, have feelings and attributes and knowledge that *should* not be disregarded. She claims: "they imagined we little knew where they were to-night: we *know* [but this has to be concealed] [28] they little conjectured where we were." In reaction to Shirley's assertion, the narrator points out that Caroline "fastened her dress and clasped her girdle" as to underline their social need to be contained. Regarding conditions of repression, Caroline demands that Shirley hold back her thoughts symbolically while wearing the corset. She exclaims: "Shirley, you chatter so, I can't fasten you: be still." (352) Even now, Caroline herself confesses that she feels "suffocated" (80) by the tight garments she

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[28] Although women "know," according to Shirley, where men go at night, they must usually repress this knowledge.

wears in an earlier scene. Therefore, she refers to a more figurative corset that is created by social restrictions placed upon women.

Patricia McEachern in *Deprivation and Power* suggests, following the French Flaubert's ideas on the corset, that the corset as anorexia nervosa may be used weapons used by women to cultivate fragility as to conceal their knowledge while gaining social consideration.[29] She underlines: "despite the fact that it was to their disadvantage in the long term, women were socialized to cultivate an exaggerated image of their own fragility." (141) Accordingly, I would like to stress that Shirley does not complain or reject wearing the corset—even though some may maintain that this is a symbol of her submission to the patriarchal oppressive ideal—but, on the contrary, she embraces the corset as a means of accentuating her fragile and bony figure, and in this way to show her control of her body as well as the creation of the grotesque body, which allows for a construction of a new model of femininity, one in which the female has the control over her own body. For her, the corset does not constrain nor oppress her, but rather serves as a marker of her identity and her sexuality, and hence she wears it displaying that *she* proudly controls her body. Therefore, the ambivalence displayed by the corset may be summarized in Wilson's words as "a powerful weapon of control and dominance" encoding "simultaneous subversive qualities." (209)

Lucy Snowe rigidly follows the fashion standards seen throughout *Villette*, only to go to the concert with Mrs. Bretton and John, her son with whom Lucy has

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[29] McEachern describes the empowering aspects of the corset in chapter four, "The Cult of Fragility: How Enfeeblement Leads to Empowerment," in relation to anorexia nervosa.

first fallen in love. In this scene, she wears a pink dress that Mrs. Bretton had given to her as a present to cheer her up. This bright dress stands, as noted by many critics, as a symbol of her sexuality,[30] which must be repressed. She is eager and nervous to go out with Graham—and his mother—but feels uneasy about her sexuality and thus seems to fear the colored dress. However, Brontë's selection of the pink dress in this scene opens the door for other conjectures beyond the repression of female sexuality. It may also be regarded, as many critics have argued, as an expression of the female sexual being that must be controlled. It hence explains why its brightness "scared" Lucy. (196)

In addition, the pink dress significantly stands as an assertion of femininity as well as love. In this regard, it asserts Lucy's identity as a woman while simultaneously hides her anorexic body temporarily. It must yet be recognized that it is only when Graham "took no further notice of the dress than was conveyed in a kind smile and satisfied nod," that Lucy overcomes her "sense of shame and fear of ridicule." (196) As a result, she is able to "face the great mirror" and "enjoy the 'giftie' of seeing" herself and accept both her sexuality and attributes. (198) She experiences an ephemeral feeling of happiness at the concert, mostly due to the attention she gains from others, including Graham at first. This particular event makes the protagonist appreciate her own natural attributes. As a woman dealing with anorexia, Lucy's happiness concerning her own body, though brief, is crucial to gain control of her

[30] Reference to Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 432.

illness. Tellingly, it is partly as a result of the male approval that she is able to cope with her sexuality, as I will explain.

CHAPTER 2:

Powerless bodies & Powerful Minds: Beyond Sexual Anorexia.

"Self-starvation is above all performance," explains Maud Ellmann concerning the entangled meanings of self-starvation and culture in *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing, and Imprisonment*. (17) Following her argument, an apparently defenseless body diminishes itself to perform its inner hungers. In this respect, Victorian women resort to anorexia nervosa to expose their longings for agency when displaying their oppression by means of their emaciated bodies or their refusal to eat. I would like to include and underline the importance of the body concerning an empowering learning principle that originates in anorexia and by which the female anorexic manages to attain knowledge as well as to expose her need to control her life; thus, I avoid reducing the mastery of the body to the mere acquisition of sexual knowledge, although there is not particular secret that women yearn to disclose, but rather an essence or knowledge that many perhaps saw as unattainable, and others might have never experienced.

In her novels, Charlotte Brontë displays a feminist approach with the intention of using anorexia nervosa as a mechanism to; alternatively, confer strength and power to the "helpless" female. In order for these anorexic protagonists to attain such control, they must embark on a learning development that their ailment facilitates and accordingly come to terms with their "illnesses." Throughout *Shirley* and *Villette*, the reader accompanies Brontë's heroines in their quest and longings for knowledge and power. Shirley, Lucy and Caroline acknowledge that they are concealing personal

desires, along with their unspoken consciousness of the ailment of anorexia nervosa. In this respect, they achieve knowledge as far as their social oppression and its threats are concerned. As a result, they are ultimately able to elude patriarchal control when their bodies are paradoxically uncontrolled. In *Reading the Brontë Body*, Beth Torgerson argues:

> It is crucial to be aware that in spite of the dangers offered by the illness, the loss of self-control experienced during illness paradoxically can be seen as a necessary first step toward greater self-authority. Illness, by allowing time for reflection and analysis, can grant greater cultural and self-awareness. Even more important than time is the actual bodily experience of illness, which radically challenges accepted notions of the self in relation to the culture. (73-74)

In relation to Torgerson's statement, Bontë's delineation of anorexia in these texts is intended to delineate alternative subversive identities for her female protagonists, meaning that they can transcend their attributed social roles, thus detaching themselves from its suffocating inconstancies in order to redefine them. It is my purpose to illustrate how Brontë deliberately plays with the ambivalence conveyed through the anorexic body as both a source of knowledge and a symptom whilst aiming to initiate a challenge to social subjugation and to inflict a certain amount of power on her heroines, mainly obtained from the development of their grotesque bodies.[31]

Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* and *Shirley* follow first and foremost a type of exceptional feminist discourse in regard to the development of women's learning processes through their anorexia. Brontë's heroines exteriorize their oppression in

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[31] Following a Bakhtinian approach, these bodies can be paradoxically seen in analogy to the anorexic one, and therefore distorted while at the same time liberating.

their own "sickness" and bodies; they are able to comprehend its dramatic consequences and, in their reaction, they struggle to keep it under control while exploiting it as a plea for consideration. After visiting the "old maids,"[32] Caroline witnesses the effects of both anorexia and repression on the female body in her revealing process of self "discovery."[33] Upon meeting Miss Mann, she observes the devastating consequences of female self-constraint. Caroline laments:

> she had passed alone through protracted scenes of suffering, exercised rigid self-denial […] sacrifices of time, money, health for those who had repaid her only by ingratitude, and now her main—almost her sole—fault was, that she was censorious. (179)

This image represents, she fears, a projection of herself in the near future. She is hence afraid of turning into this image of the anorexic: depressed, abandoned and withered. At the same time, she is compassionate towards her—as with the other old women she meets—and, more importantly, she has now acquired the crucial knowledge to cope with the repression she encounters. In fact, the narrator asserts her power, derived from her reflections and understanding, stating: "Caroline became aware of the power a most serene, unselfish, and benignant mind could exercise over those to whom it was developed." (182)

In *Villette*, Lucy Snowe undergoes a parallel learning development and consequently gains gradual control over both her life and body. It becomes obvious that Lucy's depiction of herself regarding her own ghostly features inescapably links

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[32] This describes the female solidarity that Brontë displays in these two novels, among others, to which I have referred.

[33] At the beginning of the new chapter, "Old Maids," the narrator anticipates Caroline's process of self-awareness as she will be progressively influenced by womanly experiences, which make her heart shrink while simultaneously function as catalysts in the acquisition of her self-knowledge, p. 179.

her to the supernatural figure of the NUN.[34] Both, certainly, may be associated with repression, but this figure may also represent the control of the *soul*. In this way, by means of her repression, Lucy is conscious of her power to exert control over her body and life and is consequently able to control both her desires and knowledge; at the same time, she manages to gain attention toward these enclosed inquietudes by means of her starved body. Accordingly, the Brontë's protagonist recognizes: "if I feel, may I *never* express?" (216) This question does not simply indicate her undermining of female subjugation, but also exposes her acknowledgment that she may be expressing certain feelings, which her starved body conveys, and that she will never be able to openly articulate her feelings, but ultimately a reality in which she makes her readers participate in her need for agency.

Accounting for Brontë's protagonists' developmental progress, Lucy Snowe in *Villette* embodies the knowledge achieved through the control of eating. Accordingly, she realizes about the deadly connotations derived from her refusal to eat, and starts to rise above anorexia as food/eating acquires a positive meaning. In spite of Lucy's feeling of being "consummately ignored" (90) by Graham as he is attracted to other women who are sexually more appealing to him, she does not fall into a nervous breakdown this time; instead, she goes back home determined to go on with her life regardless of Graham's indifference. Gilbert and Guber underline Lucy's development as a result of her anorexia accounting for the accomplishment of "self-knowledge through her illness." (419) At this crucial point in the novel, Lucy understands

[34] The figure of the NUN has been broadly analyzed by many critics as the extension of Lucy's repressed life, but it should be important to reflect on its ambivalences in relation to her self-starvation.

Graham is not meant to be hers, not due to his sexual lack of interest in her, but because Lucy has learned that she, unlike other women, cannot underestimate herself for a man. Once in her bedroom and about to enjoy a meal, the protagonist admits:

> Martha had not forgotten us; a cheerful fire was burning, and a neat super spread in the dinning room […] I took off my pink dress and lace mantle with happier feelings than I had expected in putting them on. Not all, who had shone brightly arrayed at the concert could say the same; for not all had been satisfied with friendship—with its calm comfort and modest hope. (213)

This suggestion further reinforces Lucy's refusal to be controlled and objectified as a mere sexual being by men and likewise displays her knowledge as far as both her sexuality and power over men, who intimately consider women as sexual trophies and thus disregard their other "gifties."

In addition, Silver emphasizes the idea that women's bodies in *Villette* become a metaphor for food; they seem mere pieces of meat for the visual and sexual consumption of a male audience, thus, echoing her words: "men consume and women are consumed." (104) Hence, Lucy's anorexia nervosa represents a refusal to be devoured by men, and it gives her power over her own body; nonetheless, she must first overcome her "disease" in order to fully embrace such power and be able to enjoy any healthy relationship with men. As described in the previous example, Lucy celebrates friendship as a more pure and sustaining sentiment in association to the moment that she enjoys dinner with Graham.

Paradoxically, Lucy's anorexia inevitably leads her into a dull and suppressed life, but it simultaneously explains the power she finds in such repression, since, as Foucault's *History of Sexuality* manifests, knowledge equals power and in this respect

it is better than ignorance. Lucy's recognition that "it was better to be stoical" verifies her awareness and strength when having to disguise her sickness and her desires for independence and love, (101) while at the same time underlines her affliction regarding the incompleteness of her longings, as both Caroline and Shirley have likewise described. In the relationship between Lucy and Paul, one of the teachers working at Villette with whom she falls in love, Lucy, for example, undergoes a kind of heroic sacrifice as they both try to repress their feelings toward the other, mainly due to their different religious beliefs in addition to their social backgrounds: hence following the set Victorian morality. The couple understands that knowledge must be contained for the sake of the collective, especially taking into consideration that both should stand as models of behavior for their students; more importantly in Lucy's case, she longs to make her pupils participate in her knowledge and for that reason to *nourish* them rather than to *starve* them, as her "feeding" of the young female students in Villette suggests.

Shirley's female protagonists, Shirley and Caroline, paradoxically decide to hide from society's surveillance while concealing their "pale face and wasted figure" (192) and their desires and desolation in order to gain social attention. First and foremost, this epitomizes their "hunger" to have a voice within society. However, their withdrawal corresponds to a moment of crisis that these women face and long to overcome; however, on a deeper level, it represents a need to control their own lives, along with their disease, without being negatively affected by others' expectations of both their bodies and actions. According to Beth Newman's *Subjects on Display*,

these heroines must face personal contradictory demands of wishing to be seen, meaning to be respected, while having to follow the code of idyllic unnoticed female. Newman explains: "Brontë explores a normal desire to be seen, calling attention to the sustaining, benevolent aspects of the other's look and to the profound deprivation involved in its withdrawal." (46) In comparison to *Villette*'s controversial figure of the NUN, Shirley's withdrawal as she seeks refuge in the countryside seems an introspective act to purify her soul as well as free her persona from external constraints, which is constantly threatened with debilitation from the oppressive effects of patriarchy exerted upon her life and body.

Shirley and *Villette*'s protagonists had retreated into anorexic patterns as a result of their social oppression, but at this point they become aware of the threats of their situation and realize the impending need to overpower their disease. It should be noted that Caroline, Shirley in *Shirley* along with Lucy and her students in *Villette* had significantly supported each other in this process of self-reassurance of their individuality accounting once more for the fascinating female solidarity displayed throughout these two novels.[35] This process of self-realization begins not restraining their hunger in front of men. For instance, early in the novel, after one of the meals at Bretton, Lucy admits: "I partook of that meal in a frame of mind not greatly calculated to favor digestion." Her words suggest a sense of guiltiness and concern by which, I argue, it is demonstrated that she has realized that she must eat in order to survive, but recognizing that this vital need conflicts with her use of anorexia to call attention to

[35] In chapter five, '*Shirley*: The Influence of Female Friendship,' from Kim's *Charlotte Brontë's and Female Desire*, the centrality of female friendship between Shirley and Caroline is depicted is exposed in association with the achievement of a certain degree of power, p. 65.

her repressed hungers. In fact, she immediately reconsiders this idea addressing her reader: "consider the desert I had left, note how little I periled: mine was the game where the player cannot lose and may win." (54) Lucy's last words reveal her own contemplation of the disease as empowering, rather than debilitating. There is nothing left to lose, since, Lucy feels, she never had anything to lose but the repression imposed upon her by society.

Shirley similarly loses her appetite and grows considerably thinner as she silently suffers the torments of repression after being led to a temporary life of retreat in *Shirley*. In a conversation between Shirley and Louis Moore, he remarks: "not only have you lost sleep, appetite, and flesh […] but your spirits are always at ebb." (507) He calls attention to her anorexic body as well as her distress. Nonetheless, Shirley instantaneously dismisses the idea that she is sick. Following previously mentioned reflections on women's roles, I argue that Shirley is aware of the fact that she is growing thinner, since other characters point out this fact, including Louis; yet, she wishes him to recognize the real reasons that have led to her "disease." This male protagonist, nevertheless, attributes her marked thinness to mental causes, as any mental scientists of the period would likewise have avowed. Indeed, it was easier to disregard women's needs and attribute their "anomalies"[36] to psychological troubles.

As a representative of Victorian morality, Louis denies Shirley's oppression as well as her "disease." However, Brontë subtly challenges these misconceptions, and

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[36] This is another allusion to William Acton's "Want of Sexual Feeling in the Female" in reference to women who did not behave according to the Victorian rigid morality, and therefore their actions and behavior were regarded as an anomaly. This reference also echoes Foucault's regards towards "the other Victorians," which I previously refer to.

her description of Louis in this scene points at the fact that there is something else that is left unsaid. Sally Shuttleworth's *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* points out that this kind of narrative undermines patriarchal assumptions of both anorexia and female repression as it "dissolves the real into the imaginary, challenges male constructions of the social and the psychological world," (233) among other things. In affirmation of Victorian ideas regarding female starvation and other related diseases, Louis upholds his opinion referring to her psychological state; he tells her: "your pain is mental;" however, he immediately blushes at contemplating Shirley's "wasted little hand" when trying to fit her ring on her finger. (507) His blushing is obviously indicative of his *knowledge* regarding her "anorexia"—not yet completely understanding the disease as we do nowadays—and the repression that has led to it. In addition, the fact that he encourages Shirley to confess the reasons leading to her distress both reaffirms his sensitivity and hints at his wish for Shirley's unrestraint and happiness.

Charlotte Brontë undermines patriarchal constraints and negative influence on women's anorexia by paradoxically inverting this ideology, attributing the role of *aides* to their main male counterparts in her two novels: *Villette* and *Shirley*. Brontë's presentation of these male types is meant to construct new models of manhood in a parallel process of changing women's oppressive social roles. In *Charlotte Brontë and Sexuality*, John Maynard points out that "whether tasting, eating, or drinking […] deep physical and emotional interaction is imagined as a kind of giving to eat or drink of the self." (172) According to Maynard, eating in Brontë's novels, represents a

reciprocal emotional exchange; thus, the fact that these couples are seen eating together proclaims the triumph of feelings—life—over sickness. After being locked away in the attic of Villette, Lucy Snowe experiences yet again a growing physical hunger. The heroine declares: “I, who had eaten nothing since breakfast, grew excessively hungry. Now I thought of the collation, which doubtless they were just then devouring in the garden below.” (126) Her hunger in this scene represents a much healthier and thus positive expression of her willingness to defeat self-starvation along with her repression.

As soon as Paul comes to *release* Lucy, she likewise seeks to relieve her hunger; nevertheless, she controls both her appetite and food selection, and implicitly her attraction toward Paul. In the attic, Lucy states:

> How he guessed that I should like *petit pate a la crème* I cannot tell; but he went on and procured me one. With considerable willingness I ate and drank. M. Paul superintended my repast, and almost forced on me more than I could swallow. (127)

M. Paul plays a primary role as a caregiver, as he is repeatedly described feeding Lucy, as this scene illustrates; therefore, he becomes a positive figure while being exceedingly influential in Lucy’s struggles to overcome her fears as well as her “eating disorder,” which he perceives, but never speaks about. Yet, her refusal to eat can be interpreted in terms of her rejection to be fed by men—patriarchy—and consequently lose power within conflicting gender ideologies. Brontë also portrays Lucy’s refusal to eat as an assertion of her self-control, an illustration of her own predilection in defiance of those imposed by Victorian patriarchy, while realizing that eating can satisfy her desires as it grants her comfort and pleasure.

In contrast to Graham from whom Lucy does not receive any satisfaction or comfort Paul therefore raises reciprocal feelings of desire in her and his affectionate emotions contribute to her nurture both physically and emotionally. It is evident that by previously forcing Lucy to stay for a considerable amount of time locked up in the attic without company or food, M. Paul strives to exert control over her sexuality as well as her "hungers"—as he has to repress his own—but her *release* suggests his understanding that there are certain feelings that he cannot escape; hence, his love declaration. Paradoxically, by forcing her to perform the role of a man at the theatre he is asking her to play out sexual desires and display her femininity in public.

At this point, Paul's motives deal specifically with his desire to express his feelings rather than to restrain them. In fact, M. Paul is unable to control his growing attraction toward Lucy, and consequently declares his love to her. Lucy, having already perceived his feelings, states: "I saw over all M. Paul's face a quick rising light and fire," (41) a fact that illustrates his attraction to Lucy from the very first moment he contemplates her. Symbolically, when they declare their love to each other, they are once more seen enjoying a meal together, just as in the earlier attic scene. Lucy apparently seems to have found someone on whom she can rely unconditionally and somebody who would allow her to *express* her desires so that she no longer has to entirely conceal them, at least not by hurting herself.

Lucy's final acceptance of Paul's love has implications of her growth as she becomes a more autonomous woman whilst she seems to start freeing herself from the deadly claws of anorexia nervosa by the end of the novel. Whether M. Paul survives

the wreck or not, it should be noted, nonetheless, that Lucy has developed a distorted body by means of her anorexia, being understood at this late point in the novel as a body that has achieved independence and self-control; in other words, it represents the culmination of the bakhtinian body that emanates strength of will and independence from societal constraints, which still restrict the total fulfillment of her "hungers."

Moreover, Brontë's heroine has learned how to cope with her sexuality. She is fully aware that repression in Victorian England meant female respectability and women who were sexually appealing were potentially more likely to succeed in getting a husband. The conflict emerges when Lucy refuses to sacrifice her autonomy in favor of a man's will; as a result, conflicting feelings for independence and marriage emerge. Accordingly, the protagonist may decide to restrain her sexual feelings for the sake of maintaining both her power and independence, and not simply because her patriarchal society dictates so.

In *Shirley*, Brontë similarly establishes a fundamental change in the relationships between the heroines and their lovers in relation to the control of anorexia nervosa. Both brothers Robert and Louis Moore become the epitome of Brontë's self-aware idealization of the amenable and comforting male. As a reminiscent of Paul and Lucy's eating scenes, Caroline dreams of enjoying the graciousness of sharing an intimate meal with Robert and being supported by him in her call to alleviate her "hungers." Early in the novel, the narrator voices the protagonist's longing to be uninhibited. The narrator praises:

> her imagination was full of pictures: images of Moore; scenes where he and she had been together [...] sharing the September treasure of nuts

> and ripe black-berries,—a wild dessert which it was her morning's pleasure to collect in a little basket, and cover with green leaves and fresh blossoms, and her afternoon's delight to administer to Moore, berry by berry, and nut by nut, like a bird feeding its fledgling. (173)

Caroline displays her need to nourish rather than being fed in a kind of motherly action—conveyed through the bird imagery—as she wishes to satiate his appetite. The kind of fruits that she describes are exotic and sexual; however, it is not just her sexuality that Caroline longs to unfold, her *feeding* may be interpreted as a transmission of her knowledge and her self-control to the man she loves. In her endeavor, she ultimately longs for comfort and support in Robert, but it should be noted that she is unwilling to be fed by him, what, as I understand, would stand as a submissive act.

Robert Moore undergoes a parallel learning process in relation to repression and anorexia. By the end of the novel, Robert realizes not just Caroline's repressed feelings and her resulting self-starvation, but also his own. In openly declaring his love for the first time, Robert confesses feeling as depressed and lonely as she does, a fact that Caroline contemplates as hope to overcome now her *disease* as well as a reaffirmation of her identity. He admits: "I believed I should never see you again; and I grew so thin—as thin as you are now: I could do nothing for myself—neither rise nor lie down; and I could not eat—yet, you see I am better." Caroline subsequently declares feeling comforted by his confession and recognizes that his love is returned. She openly states: "Comforter! Sad as sweet: I am too feeble to say what I feel; but, while you speak, I *do* feel." (583) In fact, it is love that Caroline most desires as the means to help her to cope with her social demands for oppression and endure a life of

externally imposed restrictions. The reciprocity of their emotions enfeebles the theory that men function as oppressors; however, Robert must be regarded as an unusual representative of the male realm. Indeed, Brontë portrays him, as it has been illustrated, as an anorexic pertaining to repression, which originates in his liberal political views. In "What Some Women Can't Swallow: Hunger as Protest in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*," Deirdre Lashgari underlines that towards the end of the novel "Robert has begun to unlearn the patriarchal hardness that determined his treatment of Caroline before," and therefore "his 'non eating' constitutes a dis/ordering of his masculinist assumptions." (15)

As far as Caroline's control of anorexia is concerned, the character of Robert functions as a catalyst in her motivations to recover. He becomes aware of her personal needs for love and unrestraint, but more importantly, he seems to sincerely support her. Under their happy sentimental attachment, Caroline's health seems to be restored. Upon seeing her at Moore's household, his sister, Hortense, calls attention to her "recovery." The narrator presents her observations describing:

> They assembled round the table […] She congratulated Caroline on the evident improvement in her health: her colour and her plump cheeks were returning, she remarked. It was true: there was an obvious change in Miss Helstone: all about her seemed elastic; depression, fear, forlornness, were withdrawn: no longer crushed, and saddened, and slow, and drooping, she looked like one who had tasted the cordial of heart's—ease, and been lifted on the wing of hope. (598)

It should yet be considered that Caroline is not willing to desert her mother, Mrs. Pryor, not even for Robert, as she had taken care of her, feeding her and supporting her—even when unaware of their natural bond—while she was sick and lonely.

Supported by her mother, Shirley and Robert, Caroline is finally able to develop her grotesque body, which her anorexia has developed, and which now determines the proclamation of her female identity.[37] Furthermore, this body fosters her recovery from the devastating consequences of anorexia and repression, but is still in a continuous developmental process. Defeating her disease, Caroline understands, implies defeating social restrictions that limit her persona; as a result, she is capable of, even though partially, affirming her individuality within her marriage. Whereas Caroline contemplates as an imperative to move beyond her repression and anorexia, Shirley seems to cling to her illness following her self-empowering principles faithfully.

In contrast to Caroline's beat of anorexia, Shirley emerges by the end of the novel as unwilling to rise above her disease. First and foremost, Brontë, who entitles the novel with the character's name, exploits the character and personality of Shirley as an anorexic in order to unfold the dramatic results of oppression. Her struggle has been focused on being taken into equal consideration among men who pine for seeing her *shrunken* and controlled. Being an anorexic, Shirley amazingly embraces the powerfulness paradoxically conveyed in the disease that can subvert patriarchal dictatorial attitudes. In spite of being described by many critics as a symbol of her failure to be heard and thus being silenced, Shirley's final marriage to Louis and "fading" from the novel propitiates her rising above her social constriction since she is

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[37] In *Foucault and Feminism*, Lois McNay addresses the dichotomy between body and identity as to portray the multiplicity of norms upon which it is constructed, p. 17.

finally able to confront her illness and manages to make Louis participate in her power scheme regarding gender equality.

As far as Shirley's control of food is concerned, Brontë dramatically describes her heroine as depriving herself food while at the same time feeding others. In this respect, Shirley functions as an administrator of food, meaning knowledge towards other characters. She voluntarily participates in the serving of food displayed in the novel. During one of the meals at Briarfield, Shirley is presented as the ideal hostess in so far as she delights all those present with her nurturing and friendly manners. According to Carole Counihan, "the control of alimentation is a source of power because food is a very special substance." (47) The narrator describes her as the perfect hostess providing food to the multitude as:

> She herself measured out the milk, and distributed the bread round the cozy circle […] She then took the post of toaster-general; and kneeling on the rug, fork [symbolizing her power] in hand, fulfilled her office with dexterity.(466)

Like her co-protagonists Caroline Helstone and Lucy Snowe in *Villette*, Shirley desires to "feed" Louis, along with the other guests, with her growing knowledge. In fact, she acknowledges being aware of the kind of foods that he likes while at the same time longing to control his meals. Shirley declares: "I can tell what sort of dinners you like best—perfectly well. I know precisely the dishes you prefer___" (515). Both Louis and Shirley tellingly enjoy several meals together. For instance, when Louis falls sick as a result of a *fever*, Brontë's heroine visits him and carries fruits to later attempt to feed him. The narrator declares:

> From the rich cluster that filled a small basket held in her hand, she severed a berry and offered it to his lips. He shook his head and turned aside his flushed face. (480)

This scene illustrates Shirley's attempt to control Louis's eating, and therefore his knowledge and values, and accordingly Louis' refusal to accept food from Shirley at this point of the novel shows his reluctance to surrender to her control as upheld by the social norm.

However, he paradoxically participates in her "feeding" when accepting food from her hands as illustrated in the following example. In opposition to Louis' previous rejection, the narrator displays Shirley's knowledge and intention to attract others' attention using food, while being conscious of her need to share her hungers rather than repress them. The narrator comments:

> But Shirley was cool and lofty no longer—at least not at this moment. She appeared unconscious of the humility of her present position—or if conscious, it was only to taste a charm in its lowliness. […] It did not scare her that while she handed the bread and milk to the rest, she had to offer it to him also; and Moore took his portion from her hand as calmly as if he had been her equal. (467)

Upon contemplating Shirley's serving of food, Louis confesses a feeling of "unpleasant restraint" as he must hold back his feelings for her in the presence of the rest of the guests. Louis' response as contentedly accepting Shirley's feeding reminds the reader of the mutual perception of their love within an oppressive background. Special as it is indeed, the act of preparing and providing food emerges for Shirley's benefit as a source of control as well as a trigger to stimulate the development of the female identity, not as a passive agent, but as a purveyor of knowledge. In this respect, Shirley compares eating to life, understood as a source of knowledge and

regeneration. She happily tells her cousin, Henry, "here is your toasted oat-cake—eat and live!" (464). Shirley's association of eating with life seems quite paradoxical as she deprives herself from this vital act, since, she feels, it is a necessary sacrifice that will expose social restrictions and contained desires that she projects onto her anorexia.

In spite of Shirley's stated ideology towards marriage as oppressive, Brontë's heroine is capable of reconciling her needs for agency and her repressed longing to marry Louis Moore, which she only considers in terms of equality, as the narrator underlines. Even after Louis' marriage proposal, she reaffirms her desire to be treated as equal. (622-623) This scene depicts Shirley finally embracing marriage and therefore following Caroline's steps; however, her last description in *Shirley* alludes to a fully independent character, or, as Robert Moore points out, "tameless as a leopardess." (623) In fact, Caroline later learns about Shirley being "naughty as ever [...] melancholy or nonchalant [...] half wistful, half reckless." (639) The central point to this argument lies in the proclamation of her Bakhtinian grotesque body as representative of an unfinished state that "outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits." (26) Like Foucault and many other theorists of body and power relations, Bakhtin fails to describe gender relations, and the idea of a *female* grotesque body remains undefined or repressed. Whether or not she overcomes her illness or starts to eat more, Brontë never reveals: it remains purposely ambiguous.

Along with this initiative, Brontë structures *Shirley* using two parallel eating scenes—corresponding to the curates devouring the succulent meals that women lay

on the table—that frame the narrative while recalling the Bakhtinian festive atmosphere of the carnivalesque and the grotesque body. In *Rabelais*, Bakhtin describes carnival as an ephemeral instance of freedom within an oppressive discourse. As far as carnival, the Russian theorist underscores its

> wide popular character, its radicalism and freedom, soberness and materiality were transferred from an almost elemental condition to a state of awareness and purposefulness. In other words, carnival incorporates a new free and critical historical consciousness. (73)

This "festive liberation" (89) is perceived in momentary flashes in which Shirley releases her "hunger" before others in order to act her controversial insubordination. She is thus publicly asserting her unrestraint as she satiates both hers and others' appetites.

Privately, however, Shirley seeks to rely on *not* eating in order to exhibit her self-control and power over her own body and life, or in her own words: "to be quiet—and to do just as I please." This reaffirms her relationship with the world around her as she is supposed to be submissive. (550) As far as the relationship between Shirley and Louis by the end of the novel, Rebecca McLaughlin argues that "Brontë successfully negotiates an ending that allows for a subversive 'alternative view of woman's power and potential' within the conventional role of wife"[38] in her article regarding Shirley's final acceptance to marry Louis Moore "'I Prefer a Master:' Female Power in Charlotte Brontë's Shirley." (218) In this respect, McLaughlin places Shirley's subversion beyond the constraints of marriage; in fact, the protagonist

[38] In this regard, Rebecca McLaughlin addresses the polemic of the "woman question" in Brontë's *Shirley* in relation to the emerging as well as controversial ideal of the "New Woman," which Shirley embodies.

had been challenging the traditional institution of marriage, particularly the truth that marriage excludes female independence and power. This explains her being regarded as one of the other Victorian "freaks," (639) but more importantly, it reflects her disregard to be seen or criticized as a "freak" in the same respect that anorexics were treated in the Victorian period, but on condition that she can control her life and expose her needs, thus releasing her frustrations.

A central episode in *Villette* mirroring Shirley's need to retain her independence and equality regarding her relationship with men is linked to the imagery of male penetration, yet not limited to a sexual significance. Through the sensual language that Brontë employs, Lucy expresses both an implicit desire to be "deflowered"—and thus enjoy not just sexual liberation but knowledge to challenge her social "chains," thus being able to recognize and cope with her everlasting social oppression. In addition, this male intrusion represents an impending threat to female autonomy in the same way the corset does. Similarly, when describing Vashti's purity, Lucy compares it to a secret and uncultivated landscape that also alludes to their anorexic characteristics: "a dell deep-hollowed in forest secrecy; it lies in dimness and mist: its turf is dunk, it herbage pale and humid; high summer pours her blue glory that till now the starved hollow [an allusion to female genitalia] never saw." (238) Sexual resonances are quite evident in this instance; however, a menace to female independence is likewise conveyed. As Paul approaches her in the garden path, she confesses:

> I know not what doom, if I ever trespassed the limits proper to my sex, and conceived a contraband appetite for unfeminine knowledge. Alas! I

> had no such appetite—self-repressed—what I loved, it joyed me by any effort to content, and these feelings were known to me by briefest flashes. When M. Paul sneered at me, I wanted to possess them more fully. Before I had penetrated to motives, that sneer made my heart ache; by and by it only warmed the blood in my veins, and sent added action to my pulses. (331)

Accordingly, Lucy ironically feels "grief," as she is trapped within a need to conceal her "appetites" and her wish to have male support to satisfy her "hungers" when struggling to preserve her self-sufficiency. Such conflicting emotions could be analyzed in terms of the anorexic who struggles to control her own body by refusing to eat, but loses control over her eating and eventually her life.

Anorexia nervosa, like womanly innocence, suggests that its repression could have resulted appealing to some men as it entails vulnerability. However, Lucy is aware that her "hungers" go against her expected social role and she characterizes them as a kind of "contraband appetite," implying that she feels personal inquietudes, not merely sexual ones, which must be contained, but admitting to display them in "briefest flashes," as her flirting with M. Paul illustrates. The release of her emotions, she confesses, makes her feel more content and comfortable with her sexuality; in other words, she overcomes the limits circumscribed to her oppressed being, and develops a more independent and powerful one, albeit conflicting with her social need to be suppressed. There is no question that Lucy seems to have acquired knowledge beyond her social reach in relation to the paradox attached to her anorexia and as a result she can manage her life independently.

By the end of *Villette*, Lucy undergoes a major change that moves her away from both the abyss of anorexia and repression. Happily, by the end of the novel, we

see her preparing breakfast, what she defines as a "merry meal." (359) For her this represents a joyful occasion as she does not repress her hunger as she eats blissfully next to Paul. At the same time, she no longer inhibits her emotional feelings for him once they declare their love to each other. By revealing her true feelings, Lucy challenges the depiction of the nun offered by Gubar and Gilbert's in *The Madwoman in the Attic*. These feminist critics characterize this figure as the:

> projection of Lucy's desire to submit in silence, to accept confinement, to dress in shadowy black, to conceal her face, to desexualize herself; the nun's way is also symbolic for Lucy of the only acceptable life available to single women—a life of service, self- abnegation, and chastity. (426)

However, Lucy's development facilitates an alternative ending for the novel in which the lurking nun no longer stands as such. Both feminists indeed account for such growth suggesting that "Lucy's nun would be no longer buried" (427) as her sexuality will be no longer hidden. Even so, a nun (buried or not) is still a nun, and she realizes there is little she can do to transform or subvert Victorian oppressive morality: hence she realized about the contradiction of her ailment. She consequently recognizes that she must contain her feelings—not just sexual ones—as well as her knowledge about the negative power that the patriarchy imparts upon her. Yet, as Foucault suggests, her silence and knowledge become a source of admirable power,[39] even if it is limited, because it embodies a first step in its growth and recognition.

Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* and *Shirley* accompany their female protagonists, Lucy Snowe, Shirley Keelder and Caroline Helstone, in their development and

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[39] Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, p. 86.

struggles as socially oppressed "anorexics." The importance of controlling the food they consume, their melancholic characters, as well as their struggle to fit within as well as defy the ideals of female behavior stand as the major symptoms of their symbolic starvation. Even though it is obviously established that anorexia nervosa emerges as a result of repression induced by Victorian patriarchal society, there are other motives that are being repressed within the anorexic body, which should not be disregarded. It has been argued that most Victorian women long for control and love, even if these desires are repressed, that would satisfy their needs for independence and support within an oppressive social context, but these "hungers" are in conflict with each other as these women were also expected to pursue social respectability as submissive individuals.

In a Victorian society that unbendingly follows imperialistic values based on self-discipline for the sake of the collective, the female body may be analyzed as a microcosm of the nation, as both were meant to be self-restrained and kept under control.[40] This facilitates a comparison between Victorian women and members of a low or poor class as they were "starved" by society and yet unable to "digest" subjugation. In "Reading the Geography of Hunger," Carl Plasa describes the controversial power gained through starvation in *Shirley*. He intentionally recalls the scene of the mill workers' revolt, which has been previously analyzed, explaining:

> Like the starving bodies of the working-class men in the novel, the anorectic bodies of its middle-class women disguise and disclose at

[40] The entrance of colonialism in the body is shown as indigestion in Sue Thomas' "Rewriting the Hysteric as Anorexic." From Moran and Heller's *Scenes of the Apple: Food and the Female in Nineteenth-and Twentieth-Century Women's Writing*, p. 186.

> once the traces of what is indeed, to put it mildly, a "troubling instance of local colonialism." (43)

An anorexic woman—like Lucy, Shirley or Caroline— should not be reducibly regarded as the victim of her own body, but rather of the "cultural body."[41] Exploring this female oppression in association with anorexia nervosa, Charlotte Brontë condemns a patriarchal system that reduces women's bodies as objects to be kept concealed and therefore controlled, or in other words, literally and metaphorically starved. Her powerful insight lies in her depiction of anorexia as a female instrument to accomplish knowledge and power against their oppression.

In these novels, Brontë also challenges her readers to problematize the moral authority of a patriarchy that prided itself on a liberal parliament but relegated its entire female population to a position of various restraints: social, economic, sexual and personal. Brontë manages to do so by exposing the drama of anorexia nervosa, thus forcing the reader to reflect on women's *real* motives for their diseases, beyond simplistically inscribing those to sexual ones. The author allows her heroines both to trespass societal boundaries, as they can primarily control their own bodies, and eventually illustrate the drama of their painful subjugation. In their introduction to *Victorian Heroines*, Kimberly Reynolds and Nicola Humble suggest that the benefits enclosed in the control of their own body stand as the means to amend society's assumptions on femininity. These critics argue:

> The Victorian woman who wanted control over her body, her health, and the size and well-being of her family had much to gain from a

[41] This is another reference to Bordo's *Unbearable Weight* in relation to her metaphor of the body as a microcosm of the cultural background that constricts women's rights as individuals.

> cultural construction which made her sexually remote […] accustoming both sexes to the idea that change was necessary and acceptable. (8-9)

According to these critics, the emergence of a social change, which was being negotiated, is essential to accustom the reader to consider major changes within the socially built female "ideal."

Female fasting embodies the ambivalence conveyed in the anorexics' effort to hold back their desires and their wish to defy social conventions. In his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault constructs alternative truths about social repression as he explores other "subjugated knowledges,"[42] which have been fundamental for the purposes of this project. As the anorexic body mirrors both social restrictions imposed upon women and the repression of their hungers, it more specifically exposes women's struggle to come to terms with the everlasting paradox of their repressed "hungers:" desires for autonomy and the imperative to be subject to Victorian principles. Brontë's portrayal of Lucy, Caroline and Shirley as undiagnosed anorexics is clearly subversive of those ideals of femininity, even though it refers to the imminent need to follow their patriarchy. Yet, Brontë advocates for the liberation of women within an oppressive society even though, she knows, there was no possibility for this longing to be fully satisfied at that time.

Therefore, hunger persists in the lives of Brontë's female protagonists towards the end of *Villette* and *Shirley*. These heroines comprehend that they will never be

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[42] Reference to M. E. Bailey's "Foucauldian Feminism: Contesting Bodies, Sexuality and Identity" in C. Ramazanoğlu, *Up Against Foucault Explorations of Some Tensions Between Foucault and Feminism*, p. 180.

able to enjoy complete independence or happiness as members of a society that does not favor their anxieties. Hence, Reynolds' and Humble's emphasis on the ambivalence enshrined within the Victorian female ideal is "empowering as well as enfeebling."(8) However, Brontë further underlines how Caroline, Shirley and Lucy start to move beyond their subjugation as a result of having undergone such dramatic experiences like anorexia and oppression. More importantly, these heroines no longer feel the need to rely on their patriarchal approval in order to develop their own identity and individuality, albeit these must be repressed. In this respect, *Villette*'s protagonist, Lucy Snowe, stands as a magnificent example as she experiences a remarkable change as she becomes more independent—a result of her education and economic stability—and consequently attaining further personal control over both her sickness and her life.

By the same token, Brontë reformulates the basis of female submissive roles in marriage as a subversive expression for the achievement of female happiness and independence. Rather than further oppressing them, marriage, in its implied affection and support desired by most human beings, allows for Caroline and Shirley's fulfillment of the emptiness left by repression and the disease. Moreover, they can rely on their husbands' support to overcome the disease as it, they feel, no longer needs to be used to call social attention just to later be hopelessly disregarded. Lucy Snowe seems to rise above her anorexia nervosa as she begins to eat independently, but, it should be indicated that she originally counts on the support of her male counterpart,

M. Paul.[43] Still, in order for Lucy, as well as Caroline and Shirley, to completely defeat their eating disorders by attempting to transform society's moral values, Brontë acknowledges that a fairly large amount of time must first go by; this explains the imperative for these women to pursue and contribute to the emerging social change while having to come to terms with their social restrictive background. In the meantime, these characters navigate the performance of their gender under the policing view of those who relentlessly strive to prevent them from becoming psychologically, physically and socially self-determining. Some of these women might have been capable, similar to Brontë's female characters, to move away from the socially imposed suffocating ideals of womanhood that reduce their independence in multiple ways, as their control of anorexia clearly evocates.

For this purpose, Brontë bestows her heroines in *Villette* and *Shirley* with noteworthy feminist power in relation to the delineation of their grotesque bodies. Recalling Michel Bakhtin's conceptualizations of food metaphors and the culmination of the grotesque exposed in *Rabelais and His World*; Lucy, Caroline and Shirley participate in the deformation of their bodies by means of anorexia nervosa that leads them towards a culmination of the grotesque body. As Bakhtin illustrates in *Rabelais*, the grotesque embodies all the peculiarities of a subversive body: it is transgressive, open, unlimited and yet ambivalent. It should be noted that Victorian women were caught in a maze of a time period that inhibited their ability to witness a shift regarding their social function. Yet, they realize that it takes time to develop an

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[43] This represents an allusion to the previously considered ambivalence regarding men's roles as oppressors and yet helpers in women's sufferings and fulfillment of their desires.

interior self—who they are—and thus it is essential to struggle to reconcile their oppressive social constraints with their inner longings for affection, support and social equality.

The anorexic body presents an implicit critique of the Victorian social order while at the same time expressing other female "hungers." This is precisely where the ambivalent connotation of the disease emerges as it represents a source of control and power over their own bodies while it also hurts women in this process in order to gain recognition. Bakhtin refers to such ambiguity in relation to the developmental nature of the grotesque body and its constant transformation. He asserts:

> This is typical and very strongly expressed grotesque. It is ambivalent. It is pregnant death, a death that gives birth. There is nothing completed, nothing calm and stable in the bodies of these old hags. They combine senile, decaying, and deformed flesh with the flesh of new life, conceived but as yet unformed. (25-26)

It should be noted that by deforming their bodies, Brontë's protagonists configure their grotesque bodies, understood by Bakhtin as freed from authoritarian and repressive systems. They thus genuinely transform their identities as a result of their knowledge of the reasons that have led them to repression and anorexia.

Within this multiplicity of semantics attached to the anorexic body, pain, sexual desire, independence and love appear intertwined to constitute the expression of women's needs. In this respect, anorexia nervosa emerges as an exultant manifestation of women's attempts to shape their identities even if conflicting with their sociocultural background. Accordingly, in *Scenes of Reading: Transforming Romance in Brontë, Eliot, and Woolf*, Nancy Cervetti argues that "Brontë reveals how

selfhood' is only constructed in the experiences of social conflict." (50) In both *Villette* and *Shirley*, Charlotte Brontë relies on this amalgam to establish the importance of considering women's precarious and repressed conditions, thus aiming to challenge and promote a change in the morality of the contemporary Victorian society. Being socially disregarded subjects, Brontë suggests that this initiative should originate in women themselves. Hence, she bestows on them power and knowledge to manipulate society's assumptions of their "well-being;" thus, Caroline, Shirley and Lucy resort to anorexia on account of their subjugation; soon after, however, they learn to employ the disease as a way to unfold their power as well as their torments.

Brontë further emphasizes her heroines' power as they struggle to control their sickness and, by extension, their lives at the end of the novels. In spite of its controversial portrayal, the author delineates anorexia nervosa in these two works focusing on this its empowering connotations. I recall Lucy's words in *Villette* to illustrate the prevailing and self-controlling nature ambivalently embedded in female anorexia, which is displayed by the protagonist's need to control her ailment and consequently her life so as to confront social oppression. Lucy admits:

> longing deliriously for natural and earthgrown food, wildly praying Heaven's Spirits to reclaim their own spirit-dew and essence—an aliment divine, but for mortals deadly. It was neither sweet hail, nor small coriander seed—neither slight wafer, nor luscious honey, I had lighted on; it was the wild savory mess of the hunter, nourishing and salubrious meat, forest-fed or desert-reared, fresh, healthful, and life sustaining. (225)

Villette's heroine comes to terms with her "natural longings" that are socially oppressed while understands the necessity to control food in order to control her

“disease,” and consequently achieving what she regards as a more “healthful” and “sustaining” existence. Therefore, the reader witnesses how Brontë’s heroines “unlearn” the necessity to cope with their self-starvation to enjoy food, to celebrate their independence, to have a healthy relationship that would support them, and ultimately to feel confident with what they know and who they are: this will enlighten and guide their personal knowledge as their most secure and everlasting treasure.

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