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# Anorexia, self-repression, and neurasthenia: Lucy's psychological characteristics from the perspective of spatial theory

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**Abstract.** In Charlotte Brontë studies, Villette has received comparatively limited scholarly attention, with most existing research focusing narrowly on women's issues while neglecting the relationship between spatial dimensions and character psychology. This paper draws on the spatial theories of Henri Lefebvre and Edward Soja to explore the psychological characteristics of Lucy Snowe in Villette. Across three layers of space—bodily, private, and urban—Lucy displays symptoms of anorexia, self-repression, and neurasthenia, respectively. Her psychological predicament stems from the disciplinary nature of social space. The interrelation between her neurasthenia, anorexia, and self-repression is one of mutual causality, highlighting the broader dilemma of Victorian women in their pursuit of self-worth.

**Keywords:** *Villette*, spatial theory, Charlotte Brontë, neurasthenia

## 1. Introduction

Charlotte Brontë, one of the most distinguished British female novelists of the nineteenth century, is widely acclaimed for her profound engagement with women's issues. Since the twentieth century, foreign scholarship has largely centered on feminist consciousness in Brontë's works. Notably, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists* from Brontë to Lessing analyzes how *Jane Eyre* innovatively deconstructs the psychological structure of Victorian women [1]. *The Madwoman in the Attic*: *The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* deconstructs the character of Bertha Mason to reveal Brontë's dual narrative strategies [2]. *Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialis*m argues that Bertha Mason is a product of the collusion between imperial discourse and gender oppression [3]. In addition to thematic analysis, scholars have examined recurring images in Brontë's works, such as her portrayal of dogs [4]. From a reader-response perspective, some researchers have explored the Victorian reception of *Jane Eyre*, and how literary criticism intersected with political commentary [5]. Comparative studies have also examined thematic parallels between Brontë's work and that of Virginia Woolf [6]. In China, scholarly interest in Brontë surged after the 1990s, with a strong emphasis on thematic studies. Many researchers focus on gender issues, discussing how her works reflect women's consciousness [7] or explore their social conditions [8]. Scholars have also examined historical elements [9], maternal themes [10], and character portrayals [11]. In analyzing these themes, researchers often employ theories such as Freudian psychoanalysis [12] and Maslow's hierarchy of needs [13].

Among Brontë's works, *Villette*, published in 1853, stands out for its autobiographical elements. Drawing from her own experiences in Brussels, the novel centers on the life of the English orphan Lucy Snowe at a Belgian girls' boarding school. Foreign scholars have examined symbolic objects in the novel: for instance, Lucy's letters are seen as a substitute for personal relationships [14], and the symbolic use of violets has also been studied [15]. Gothic elements, particularly the "nun's ghost," have received considerable attention for their artistic significance [16]. Additionally, from a spatial perspective, some scholars have applied Jay Appleton's "prospect-refuge" theory to analyze garden spaces in the novel [17]. While Chinese scholarship has long focused on Jane Eyre, serious attention to Villette did not emerge until the late twentieth century. Domestic studies have primarily examined themes of femininity [18], theories of the gaze [19], and Gothic elements [20]. Although existing research touches on female consciousness and Gothic tropes—and even includes an analysis of garden space in *Villette*—it has yet to consider Lucy's psychological characteristics within the dynamic production of space. It overlooks the connection between multilayered spatial structures, character psychology, and the broader sociohistorical context. This paper argues that multilayered spatiality is a salient feature of *Villette*, and that Lucy's complex psychology is refracted through different spaces. Therefore, by integrating Lefebvre's

 

theory of social space with Soja's "Thirdspace" concept, this study investigates how Lucy's psychological traits are spatially constructed and reveals their entanglement with the disciplinary forces of Victorian society.

## 2. Spatial theory and villette

The concept of "space" can be traced back to the Latin word spatium, which refers to the interval between two objects. In Plato's Timaeus, space is envisioned as a container that provides a dwelling place for all created things. This container-based view of space has, to a large extent, permeated the historical development of Western modernity. However, since the 1990s, interdisciplinary discussions surrounding the concept of "space" have emerged, challenging the dominant spatial perceptions of earlier eras. Spatial theorists argue that social space is neither an independently existing, concrete entity nor a standardized product generated on an assembly line. Rather, it resembles a constantly evolving container—not only storing various human-made objects but, more importantly, embodying the complex interrelations among those objects. These relations manifest both in the simultaneous existence and interaction of different entities within real-world contexts, and in the patterns or irregularities by which these elements are organized. In this light, space is no longer merely the stage upon which social change unfolds, but a result of human cultural activities.

This article primarily draws upon the spatial theories of French philosopher Henri Lefebvre and American urban geographer Edward Soja, whose works are closely connected in a succession of intellectual thought. In Lefebvre's spatial theory system, social space is interpreted as a dynamic network of relationships. It not only includes various objects created through human labor but, more crucially, it sustains the complex interactions among these material entities. As a product of past human activities, social space both lays the groundwork for new actions and imposes constraints upon certain behaviors. It underpins the production of goods while also facilitating their consumption, ultimately forming a multifaceted whole encompassing a range of experiential understandings. Lefebvre thus advocates a "spatial triad" that transcends binary oppositions, proposing that every socially produced space is composed of three intertwined elements: "spatial practice," "representations of space," and "representational spaces," which correspond to perceived, conceived, and lived modes of cognition, respectively. Edward Soja enthusiastically embraced and further developed Lefebvre's spatial theory. In his Thirdspace, Soja explicitly stated: "I return once more to The Production of Space, that grand and complex book, to extract a clearer understanding of what I mean by Thirdspace and the scope of its critique." [21] Integrating Lefebvre's theory of spatial production with the symbolic significance of Jorge Luis Borges's magical realist short story The Aleph, Soja introduces the more open-ended concept of "Thirdspace": "It is the space in which all places are contained, seen from every possible angle, with each object clearly visible; and yet, it remains a secret, conjectural entity, full of illusions and allusions, familiar to all, yet never fully seen or comprehended [21]." Soja's Thirdspace is distinct from both physical and mental space, while also transcending them—open to all forms of thought and critical engagement.

Charlotte Brontë's Villette powerfully embodies the traditions of social spatial theory articulated by Lefebvre and Soja. The protagonist, Lucy Snowe, is a young woman who has lost her parents and is forced to drift alone in search of survival. She moves through various cities—Bretton, London, Villette—residing sequentially in places such as Mrs. Bretton's house, Miss Marchmont's sickroom, Madame Beck's home and school, La Terrasse, the Hôtel Crécy, and finally, the school she establishes herself. In the course of these movements, Lucy maintains a close connection with the spaces around her. At Madame Beck's school, for instance, Lucy refers to the nursery as a "watchtower [22]" from which she observes and interacts "to be compelled into closer intercourse with this little world of the Rue Fossette [22]." This action strongly echoes Lefebvre's experience: "He and Catherine had been forced out of their wonderfully ramshackle old dwelling place on the rue Rambuteau by the machinations of the Parisian property market, closing forever the windows through which Lefebvre so brilliantly viewed the rhythms of everyday life [21]." It was also Lefebvre who asserted, "Man does not live by words alone; all 'subjects' are situated in a space in which they must either recognize themselves or lose themselves, a space which they may both enjoy and modify [23]." This assertion provides theoretical support for investigating individuals' daily lives, psychological transitions, and developmental trajectories through the lens of space. The intricately constructed spatial dimensions in Villette reflect the complex psychological states of its protagonist, Lucy Snowe. The following sections will explore how Lucy's experiences within specific spatial configurations—marked by bodily control, repressed desire, and eventual psychological breakdown—mirror her descent into neurasthenia and her sense of disorientation within the urban environment.

## 3. The multi-layered spatial dimensions in *Villette*

Charlotte Brontë's Villette presents a multi-layered spatial scale. These spatial layers range from the bodily, domestic (or other private spaces), urban, national, to global dimensions, with the novel primarily focusing on the first three. Among these, the second dimension—private space—mainly revolves around Lucy's own private sphere, as she lacks a traditional family home and lives as a rootless orphan. This section will delve into the psychological characteristics Lucy exhibits within the bodily and private spatial dimensions, while the next section will focus on the dimension of urban space. The multi-layered spatiality in Villette serves as a projection of Lucy's complex psychological landscape, revealing the deep spiritual constraints faced by women in the Victorian era and the consequent crisis of lost individual value. As Brontë herself stated: "The prisoner in solitary confinement, the toad in the block of marble, all in time shape themselves to their lot [2]."

### 3.1. Lucy's bodily space

At the core of Henri Lefebvre's theory lies the "spatial triad," or the threefold dialectic of space, which conceptualizes the production of space in three interrelated dimensions: perceived, conceived, and lived space. Perceived space refers to the material elements of space as experienced through the senses; conceived space is associated with the intellectual activities that produce assumed knowledge; and lived space emphasizes the direct, personal experience of space. Lefebvre argues that analyzing the triadic structure of social space provides a cognitive path for understanding bodily existence. When the body is considered a fundamental element of social practice, it constitutes a perceived space. Meanwhile, scientific knowledge about the body influenced by ideology, along with the body's relationship to its environment, belongs to the domain of conceived space. Lived bodily space is more complex, encompassing cultural elements such as symbolic meanings and traditions. Lefebvre further asserts the productive nature of bodily space: "Each living body is space and has its space: it produces itself in space and it also produces that space [23]." Lucy's bodily space in Villette precisely illustrates Lefebvre's spatial triad and reveals the anorexic tendencies of Victorian women, which are inextricably linked to a loss of female autonomy and individual value.

As a material existence, the body is a perceived space, serving as the foundational medium for engaging with the external world. In Villette, Lucy's physical self-awareness reflects her inclination toward anorexia. She sarcastically criticizes the Church, saying: "The CHURCH strove to bring up her children robust in body, feeble in soul, fat, ruddy, hale, joyous, ignorant, unthinking, unquestioning. 'Eat, drink, and live!' she says [22]." She instinctively associates "robust in body" and being "fat" with "feeble in soul" and "ignorant," equating the Church's encouragement of consumption with the devil. When confronting the detestable Madame Beck, Lucy mocks her by encouraging indulgence: "Make your own bed warm and soft; take sedatives and meats, and drinks spiced and sweet, as much as you will [22]." Lucy also ridicules an aristocratic lady at a concert for her "boasted contours as robust and solid as those of a stout Englishwoman of five-and-twenty [22]" noting their inability to "translate rationally a page of The Vicar of Wakefield [22]" and yet their appetite for "the quantity of household bread, butter, and stewed fruit, she would habitually consume at 'second déjeuner' was a real world's wonder [22]." Clearly, Lucy equates gluttony with stupidity, despite no factual basis for such an association. At an art exhibition, she describes Cleopatra—a voluptuous woman—as "the pulpy mass [22]" mocking that "this lady, put into a scale of magnitude, suitable for the reception of a commodity of bulk, would infallibly turn from fourteen to sixteen stone" [22] implicitly characterizing her as idle and indulgent. Lucy's tendency to associate gluttony with ignorance and fatness with moral decay reflects a degradation of female desire. As Julia Kristeva noted, such reactions are essentially rejections of "things that muddy identity, disrupt the system, and violate order [24]." Her fixation on body shape, fear of indulgence, and desire for control reflect a classic anorexic logic.

Lucy's anorexic tendencies are one facet of Victorian women's self-restraint and are inseparable from the body as conceived space; they are also logically consistent with lived space, aligning with Lefebvre's trinitarian ideal. Conceived space refers to "a knowledge... which is always relative and in the process of change" [23] and in this context, it manifests in Victorian society's constructed notions of women and their bodies. Women were expected to be selfless givers of love and care, serving as the moral centers of both family and society. Silver, citing Joan Jacobs Brumberg's Fasting Girls, notes: "The woman who put soul over body was the ideal of Victorian femininity. The genteel woman responded not to the lower senses of taste and smell but to the highest senses—sight and hearing—which were used for moral and aesthetic purposes. One of the most convincing demonstrations of a spiritual orientation was a thin body—that is, a physique that symbolized rejection of all carnal appetites. To be hungry, in any sense, was a social faux pas [25]." To conform to this ideal image, society demanded that women suppress their physicality, particularly their appetites. Mealtimes in the Victorian era became opportunities to "demonstrate discipline, spirituality, and refinement, with women expected to display limited appetites and consequently slender physiques [26]." Under societal pressure, women developed anxiety about their bodies and even revulsion toward normal appetites. These conceptualizations of the female body extended to the cultural level, in line with Lefebvre's claim that "the lived, conceived and perceived realms should be interconnected [23]." Contemporary feminist theorist Susan Bordo highlights the cultural roots of anorexia: "The psychopathologies that develop within a culture, far from being anomalies or aberrations, are characteristic expressions of that culture... the crystallization, indeed, of much that is wrong with it [25]." Anorexia, in this sense, becomes a covert yet highly effective mechanism of control, convincing women that the suppression of appetite is a necessary path to moral perfection. Lefebvre sharply remarked: "Under the pressure of morality, it is even possible to achieve the strange result of a body without organs - a body chastised, as it were, to the point of being castrated [23]." Female anorexia, as a form of self-inflicted punishment, is a vivid embodiment of the Victorian regime of gender discipline. "The gendered body is performative [27]." Through dieting, women perform their bodily selves to conform to the socially constructed image of the moral ideal. Such behavior not only strips women of autonomy over their own bodies but also entraps them in a cycle of self-denial. Their thoughts are controlled, and they ultimately lose their individual value, becoming victims of patriarchal society.

### 3.2. Lucy's private space

Transitioning from bodily space to private space, Lucy's tendency toward anorexia further intensifies into a form of passion control. In Villette, Lucy's private space constitutes a second level of spatial structure, mainly represented by the attic of Madame Beck's school and the "the allée défendue." These spaces resemble what Gaston Bachelard described as "corners"—concealed zones for imagination, much like the protagonist Emily's private space for play aboard the ship in A High Wind in Jamaica [28]. The two

locations form a thought-provoking binary: the attic is a hidden corner for the release of desire, while the allée défendue is a space of desire repression. Yet both reveal a psychology of self-repression. At Madame Beck's school, Lucy retreats to the "deep, black, cold" [22] attic to read Graham's letters in peace. Even with such caution, her private space is invaded at a moment of emotional intensity. That intrusion comes in the form of a spectral nun, "all black and white; the skirts straight, narrow, black; the head bandaged, veiled, white [22]." In Victorian England, the lifestyle of nuns was typically ascetic and austere, marked by strict discipline. This ghostly figure seems to serve as a warning against Lucy's indulgence, forcing her to repress herself once again—indeed, she is so frightened that she loses Graham's emotionally symbolic letter. "The apparition embodies her anxiety not only about the imagination and passion, but about her very right to exist [2]." This ghost functions much like the panopticon tower in a surveillance prison—a materialized projection of Victorian disciplinary power in the private realm. Michel Foucault argued that power should be visible but unverifiable: the prisoner must always see the surveillance apparatus but never know whether they are being watched, thus internalizing fear and repressing desire [29]. Lucy narrates, "tell me I was nervous or mad; affirm that I was unsettled by the excitement of that letter; declare that I dreamed" [22]—a reaction that exemplifies the self-policing outcome of panopticism. At this point, power operates efficiently through unconscious internalization, turning Lucy into the jailer of her own passions.

The allée défendue is another private space where Lucy enacts self-repression. Located beside the garden of Madame Beck's school, this path is deeply loved by Lucy for its seclusion and dimness, becoming a site where she buries her emotions. During her time in Bretton, Lucy developed feelings for Graham, and after returning to Madame Beck's boarding school, she awaited his reply with anticipation. But with the return of the beautiful and captivating Paulina, Graham's letters ceased. Realizing the futility of her affection, Lucy decided to bury the five letters Graham had previously sent her, declaring, "But I was not only going to hide a treasure—I meant also to bury a grief [22]." On the surface, this act appears to be an attempt to escape pain, but in essence, it is another suppression of passion. She inscribed the letters' package with the word "Ichabod"—a symbol of disgrace—and buried it beneath an old pear tree along the allée défendue. Significantly, "Ichabod" originates from the Old Testament's 1 Samuel, and the old pear tree is the legendary burial site of a medieval nun who was entombed alive by her convent. Lucy's actions mirror Sigmund Freud's diagnosis of melancholia: "the object may not actually be dead, but is lost as a love-object (for example, a jilted fiancée)" [30] leading the melancholic to depreciate their own value, to blame themselves for moral or personal failings, even to seek abandonment or punishment. Lucy did not truly lose Graham, but painfully recognized the disillusionment of love—aligning closely with Freud's definition of melancholia. Her inscription of biblical words and choice of burial site—where a nun was once interred—suggests a deliberate submission of her desires to religiously informed moral judgment. In this sense, "object-loss becomes ego-loss, and the conflict between ego and the loved object is transposed into a rift between the ego and the critical agency which has identified with the lost object [30]."

Lucy's actions within these private spaces symbolize the Victorian woman's internalized self-repression. She must suppress her inner passions to conform to society's prescribed norms of femininity, thereby losing her sense of independent self-worth. Graham's diagnosis of Lucy reveals this truth: "I think it a case of spectral illusion; I fear, following on and resulting from long-continued mental conflict [22]." This points to the contradiction between Lucy's feminine nature and the moral codes of society. Advances in medicine during the Victorian era led to the belief that female sexuality was nearly non-existent. The renowned physician William Acton claimed, "The majority of women (happily for them) are not very much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind [1]." As a result, "strong sexual desire was treated as the primary symptom of female moral degeneration, harshly punished and regarded as deviant or pathological [1]." Women were idealized as "angels in the house," even considered "a second conscience" for men, and were forced to suppress their passions and present themselves as paragons of self-restraint. Lucy's condition aligns with this. As Robert Keefe observed, "Lucy has, after all, gone the medieval nun one better: she has buried herself before she can sin [31]." In the allée défendue, Lucy confides: "About the present, it was better to be stoical; about the future—such a future as mine—to be dead [22]." Yet this self-repression was not her true desire: "I did long, achingly, then and for four and twenty hours afterwards, for something to fetch me out of my present existence, and lead me upwards and onwards [22]." However, she quickly corrects herself, acknowledging the impropriety of such yearning: "This longing, and all of a similar kind, it was necessary to knock on the head [22]." On this, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar insightfully point out that Lucy "has bought survival at the price of never fully existing, escaped pain by retreating behind a dull, grave camouflage [2]." She tried to imprison her emotions within the cage of reason, constantly pleading for rationality to suppress her feelings—only to spiral toward mental breakdown. This will be the focus of the next section.

## 4. Thirdspace in *Villette*

When we examine the city in Villette from the perspective of the "Thirdspace," Lucy's movements within the urban space become dynamic semiotic codes for decoding her psychological state. The concept of the "Thirdspace" was proposed by American urban geographer Edward Soja, based on Henri Lefebvre's theory of social space. In the introduction to his book *Thirdspace*, Soja writes: "Thirdspace is a purposefully tentative and flexible term that attempts to capture what is actually a constantly shifting and changing milieu of ideas, events, appearances, and meanings [21]." In his view, Thirdspace can be understood as a breakthrough from binary cognitive paradigms, grounded in the examination of the objective material world (i.e., Firstspace) and the interpretive analysis from the perspective of cultural symbols and conceptual constructs (i.e., Secondspace). Thirdspace is not merely a superimposition of these two perspectives; rather, like the all-encompassing "Aleph" in Jorge Luis Borges' fiction, it transcends both material and

mental space, embodying infinite openness through their integration. As the core vehicle of human activity, the city is a typical manifestation of Thirdspace. "The city exists as a series of doubles; it has official and hidden cultures; it is a real place and a site of imagination. Its elaborate network of streets, housing, public buildings, transport systems, parks, and shops is paralleled by a complex of attitudes, habits, customs, expectancies, and hopes that reside in us as urban subjects. [32]"

According to Soja, in cities as *Thirdspaces*, hyperreality and the resulting neurasthenia are especially pronounced. Hyperreality is defined as a term that "has come to be widely used to define and conceptualize this growing confusion and fusion of the real and imagined" [32] referring to movements situated "outside" the realm of reality. Under the shroud of hyperreality, individuals find it difficult to distinguish between what is real and what is imagined—often a trigger for neurasthenia. In this regard, Soja cites Celeste Olalquiaga's the *Artificial Kingdom*, where she defines neurasthenia as "a disturbance in the relation between self and surrounding territory, psychasthenia is a state in which the space defined by the coordinates of the organism's own body is confused with represented space [21]." Lucy, while believing herself to be in a clear-minded state, once described a terrifying scene: "The ghastly white beds were turning into spectres—the coronal of each became a death's-head, huge and sun-bleached—dead dreams of an elder world and mightier race lay frozen in their wide gaping eyeholes [22]." This was followed by a growing desire to escape the city: "I was sure this hope would shine clearer if I got out from under this house-roof, which was crushing as the slab of a tomb, and went outside the city to a certain quiet hill, a long way distant in the fields." [22] This alludes to the city as the very source of her illness, with recovery contingent upon departure from the urban environment. Shortly afterward, Lucy throws on a cloak and leaves the house. Unknowingly, she finds herself in a church and begins confessing to a priest. Regarding this behavior, Charlotte Brontë commented in a letter to her friend W. S. Williams that "what drove her to confession was not a healthy emotion," but rather a state of "semi-insanity" [33]. Unsurprisingly, mental collapse accompanies the experience of hyperreality. Upon exiting the church, Lucy gradually becomes disoriented in the urban space: "But I had become involved in a part of the city with which I was not familiar; it was the old part, and full of narrow streets of picturesque, ancient, and mouldering houses. I was much too weak to be very collected, and I was still too careless of my own welfare and safety to be cautious; I grew embarrassed; I got immeshed in a network of turns unknown [22]." In the end, she collapses in the street, exemplifying the state Fredric Jameson describes as becoming lost in "placeless dissociation [21]."

Lucy's experience of hyperreality and nervous breakdown in the city carries gendered symbolic significance. The true source of her illness does not lie in the body—this is why she insists that "no doctor could cure me [22]." Hyperreality itself implies discipline: "Hyper-reality is what you get when a Panopticon evolves to the point where it can convince everyone that it doesn't exist; people continue to believe they are free, although their power has disappeared… [32]". Soyen argues that gendered power relations are inscribed in space. In the city, Lucy is followed by a man and consequently loses her way: "But they had driven me beyond my reckoning: when I could collect my faculties, I no longer knew where I was [22]." This implies that as a single woman wandering the streets, her marginalized body—coded within patriarchal spatial structures—cannot escape the urban environment. On the day of her nervous breakdown, she delivers a fervent monologue: "My heart did not fail at all in this conflict; I only wished that I had wings and could ascend the gale, spread and repose my opinions on its strength, career in its course, sweep where it swept [22]." The phrase "repose my opinions on its strength" originates from Canto III, stanza 73 of *Lord Byron's Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* [34]. As a youth discontent with reality yet finding no way out, Byron's Harold resonates with Brontë's Lucy in a kind of intertextual spiritual affinity. Just as Harold gains no spiritual redemption at the end of his wandering, Lucy collapses on the street after her outcry. Lucy's walking evokes Michel de Certeau's concept of "tactics," inspired by Henri Lefebvre. Tactics are the calculations of the weak made "within the space of the other... fragmentarily infiltrating it, unable to grasp it as a whole, and unable to withdraw from it" [35]. "A goddess reveals herself through her steps [35]." Walking, in this sense, can be seen as an attempt to construct personal space within the urban environment, thereby affirming self-worth. However, the temporary nature of tactics cannot resist the long-term infiltration of urban strategies. Ultimately, Lucy loses herself in a city that strictly disciplines women.

"This virtual and spatial identity crisis is thus associated with a blurring of the distinctions between the body, the self, the city, and each of their represented spaces, their imagined or simulated forms. [32]" At its core, Lucy's nervous symptoms are causally linked to the earlier mentioned anorexia and self-repression, rooted in the deprivation of independent female value by Victorian gendered power. As Lefebvre emphasizes, ideology does not produce space; it belongs to space. Lucy's struggles across physical, private, and urban dimensions embody the disciplinary mechanisms of patriarchal spatial power. "Living inside this tomb, she discovers that it is anything but imageless; it is a chamber of terrible visions, not the least of which is that of being buried alive [2]." Historians and critics note that the Victorian middle class pursued the construction of the ideal home and woman with unprecedented fervor. Martha Vicinus summarizes the typical image of a Victorian middle-class woman: "The ideal woman should be physically chaste, devoted to domestic life, confined to the household, and responsible for managing household expenses [36]." Numerous Victorian works promoted chastity as a core female virtue, such as Patmore's The Angel in the House and Ruskin's of Queen's Gardens, which outlined behavioral norms for women as "angels of the house." Victorian women were expected to remain passive in social and gender interactions, preserving the purity of their body and soul. "The glorification of female self-sacrifice accompanied increasingly stringent constraints on women's selves, giving rise to their anxiety over lost identity [37]." Consequently, at the physical level, they consciously controlled their bodies and feared overindulgence, exhibiting typical anorexic tendencies; at the psychological level, they suppressed natural emotions and entered a state of self-repression. When women's value is perpetually dependent on external standards such as men, the Church, and social morality, the construction of an independent self becomes impossible. They, like Lucy, are prone to fall into a nervous collapse stemming from the loss of personal

value. As Brontë herself declared, “Anyone who lived her life would inevitably become morbid [33].” Lucy’s predicament is not only a tragic footnote to the myth of the Victorian “angel in the house,” but also a profound allegory of gender, power, and subjectivity from the perspective of spatial theory.

## 5. Conclusion

This study, grounded in the spatial theories of Henri Lefebvre and Edward Soja, analyzes the psychological characteristics of Lucy Snowe in *Villette* across bodily, private, and urban dimensions, thereby revealing the widespread predicament of lost female autonomy in the Victorian era. Lefebvre’s theory of social space and Soja’s concept of the “Thirdspace” have long been influential in sociology and urban studies, yet have rarely engaged in dialogue with feminist literary criticism. This research bridges spatial theory and gender studies, offering a reinterpretation of *Villette* from a spatial perspective that highlights its modern significance. Looking ahead, spatial theory can be further applied to Charlotte Brontë’s other works to explore the coherence and variations in her spatial constructions. At the same time, future research must account for the intersectionality of race, class, and gender to avoid the oversimplification of spatial theory as a singular analytical lens. “Still, even if there can be no joyous celebration, not even abundant recompense, at least Bronte provides in *Villette* an honest elegy for all those women who cannot find ways out and are robbed of their will to live [2].” Although contemporary society has shed overt moral constraints, it continues to shape the “ideal woman” through implicit aesthetic norms, consumerist discourse, and social media. Lucy’s plight reminds us that the affirmation of female subjectivity requires not only resistance to external oppression but also vigilance against the internalization of cultural discipline. Only by reconstructing the power relations embedded in space and discourse can women truly move toward liberation.

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