

## Students as Scholars

### Holly Walker-Dunseith: Prof Duncker on 'Villette and The Gothic'

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For today's first post, Holly Walker-Dunseith comments on Prof Duncker's lecture about Charlotte Brontë's novel 'Villette' and its 'gothic power'. Based on George Eliot's definition of gothic power, Prof Duncker set to demonstrate how the novel itself can be seen as haunted by the fantastic and by feelings of loneliness and catastrophe.

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#### Professor Patricia Duncker's Lecture: *Villette* and The Gothic (Holly May Walker-Dunseith)

Having attended Professor Patricia Duncker's lecture on the 6<sup>th</sup> June 2015, regarding *Villette* and The Gothic, I left inspired and enthused by her knowledge, words, and passion for Victorian Literature and the Brontë novels.

This lecture, delivered in Haworth itself, began with the interesting idea that *Villette* and arguably the gothic, in George Eliot's words, have '...something preternatural in its power' [1]. Indeed, as Professor Duncker argues, this 'something preternatural' is difficult to pinpoint. This could create the question of "what is this power that permeates the novel?" and "How does Brontë create this gothic power?" As well as Victorian Literature, Professor Duncker's research interests involve Romanticism, Contemporary Literature, and also creative writing – her most recent novel is titled *Sophie and the Sibyl: A Victorian Romance*. Her lecture, which was a privilege to attend, was based on the topic of 'The Gothic' in relation to Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*.

In her critical argument, Professor Duncker suggested that 'the novel itself is haunted by object romance, the supernatural, the fantastic, and the traditional.' This statement is incredibly interesting because it implies that even the structure is haunted by the gothic, perhaps more than the characters are haunted by this concept (which is, indeed, a difficult concept to pinpoint). This difficulty was deemed, in the lecture, the 'champion of Charlotte Brontë'. Professor Duncker introduced *Villette* by claiming that 'it is a novel about being alone. It is about survival in a place of complete isolation. It is about a sense of aloneness' and this means that the novel also includes a sense of escape as well as the endurance of solitude. This brings us to Professor Duncker's main argument that isolation 'to an extent, reassesses the 19<sup>th</sup> Century novel over the novel romance' and that these two genres have been 'unsettling each other' in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, because isolation seems more prominent in this text than in a 'traditional' romantic novel.

In *Villette*, the ending is as important as the opening and, indeed, there seems to be 'an open ending of *Villette*' that gives readers the power to interpret their own ending. This shows, according to Professor Duncker, 'different representations of Victorian femininity and masculinity'. Charlotte Brontë's refusal to provide a 'safe ending' was also analysed in the lecture. The effect of happy and sad endings are interesting in any creative work, and readers perhaps remember the supposed 'safe, domestic, Victorian, happy, family ending' (in Professor Duncker's words) of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. The short address to the reader is famous: 'Reader, I married him' [2]. However, Professor Duncker then asked the fabulous question of "where is the real ending?" This "real ending" of *Jane Eyre* is a quotation from the Bible, 'Amen; even so come, Lord Jesus!' [3] – which Professor Duncker deems to be an 'overwrought rhetoric' and 'a deeply unsafe ending'. Charlotte Brontë herself wrote that 'every reader should settle the catastrophe for himself' [4].

This article, however, will finish on a happy ending. To summarise, Professor Duncker argues that the isolation in *Villette* 'to an extent, reassesses the 19<sup>th</sup> Century novel over the novel romance' and also poses the wider argument that 'the novel itself is haunted by object romance, the supernatural, the fantastic, and the traditional'. Professor Duncker's lecture was fascinating, encapsulating, a joy to listen to, and a privilege to attend. The lecture not only informed the audience of her fabulous ideas, but also presented her passion for both her subject and the work of the Brontë Sisters. Her interesting ideas were presented from the opening to the ending of her lecture, and indeed, the ending of the lecture was a happy one. The audience and I left with cutting-edge ideas regarding both *Villette* and The Gothic.

[1] George Eliot writing to her friend Cara Bray, 15<sup>th</sup> February 1853 *Letters*, II, p. 87.

[2] Brontë, Charlotte, *Jane Eyre* (London: Penguin, 2006) p. 517.

[3] Brontë, Charlotte, *Jane Eyre* (London: penguin, 2006) p. 521.

[4] T.J Wise and J.A. Symington (Eds.), *The Brontës: Their Lives, Friendships and Correspondence*, 4 vols. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1932 reprinted 1980), iv, pp. 55-56. Cited in the Penguin Classics Edition of *Villette* Edited with Introduction and Notes by Helen M. Cooper (London: Penguin Books, 2004), p. 603.