

EXPRESSING THE INEXPRESSIBILITY OF THE INEXPRESSIBLE: STRUCTURAL AND
STRATEGIC UNSPEAKABILITY IN *VILLETTE*, *LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET*, AND *THE MILL
ON THE FLOSS*

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By

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ABSTRACT

Nineteenth-century English novelists often wield the English language with what seems like a sense of total command and control. The sheer volume of their collected works and density of prose attests to an unencumbered linguistic mastery. Yet, they, like all writers, must inevitably recognize the limitations of language and ostensibly speak to the nature of the unspeakable. What are the implications when marginalized groups, such as women and working-class individuals who are always already silenced, experience an inability to speak inherent to the structures of language? In this thesis, I investigate the appearance of linguistic failures and gaps in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853), Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), and George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) to illuminate how these authors suggest ethical and productive possibilities for working-class women to understand and highlight the unspeakable. Previous scholars, largely approaching the text through Foucauldian discourse analysis, Caruthian trauma theory, or psychoanalysis, often highlight oppressive systems that require silence to marginalize, dehumanize, or eliminate rebellious ideas. I, rather, use a more formalistic approach with Basil Bernstein's concepts of class language coding to attend carefully to the given words and emphasize how a language's structure can reflect its social utility. I argue that this sociolinguistic method can offer a reparative reading of the silencing of marginalized groups during the mid-nineteenth century.

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Chapter I: Introduction

When Women Writers' Words Won't Work: Unspeakability, Unknowability, and Unthinkability in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Novels by Women

Mid-nineteenth-century English novelists who worked in the realist mode of prose production seemed to possess a comprehensive control of the English language. The sheer volume of their collected works attests to the representational power of particularity in detail. Yet, all authors must inevitably recognize the limitations of language and deliberately speak to the nature of the unspeakable, and those recognitions take on even greater significance in relation to class and gender. How does a writer, tasked with transforming a multitude of human emotions and lived experiences into words, express the inexpressible, and what are the implications for marginalized groups, such as women and working-class individuals who are always already silenced, experiencing an inability to speak inherent to the structures of language? For female novelists and their female protagonists, especially in the mid-nineteenth century, the deliberate use and awareness of these limitations has a social and personal utility for transgressing class and gender boundaries.

Throughout this thesis, I investigate the appearance of linguistic failures and gaps in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853), Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), and George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). These novels have received considerable critical attention, and many scholars have explored the presence of classed and gendered silences in them. Previous scholars have broached this topic primarily through Foucauldian discourse analysis and/or Caruthian trauma theory. The foundational critical argument for my thesis, however, is an expansion of the concept of language class-coding to include all methods of verbal communication and their implications for presentations of not only class but gender and sexuality as well. This sociolinguistic lens permits a view and treatment of the unspeakable in a

manner befitting the period and the novels it produced.

Foucauldian discourse analysis of gendered and classed unspeakability and silences in the nineteenth-century novel primarily focuses on power relationships and their manifestations in interactions among characters and in the narrative. A structured methodology accompanies this approach to literary analysis with a clearly delineated procedure. Gavin Kendall and Gary Wickham outline this five-step method in *Using Foucault's Methods* (1998), which includes the third step of questioning the bounds of what can and cannot be said in a social context: “the identification of rules that delimit the sayable (which of course are never rules of closure)” (Kendall 42). This method helpfully emphasizes hegemonic power systems reflected in cultural artifacts of the mid-nineteenth century that lead to the oppression of women and members of the working class. The Foucauldian method can elucidate important realities about nineteenth-century discourse and its impact on gender and class dynamics, but I focus more on formal and structural concerns that actively limit the sayable and resist the kind of linguistic innovation permitted in the Foucauldian approach.

Critics also take up the issue of unspeakability through the lens of Caruthian trauma theory. This theory suggests that silences or an outright inability to speak stems from a traumatic event in a character's past, and that unspeakability reflects the difficulty of making sense of that event. Over time and through cycles of various forms of revisiting the trauma, individuals who have experienced trauma can speak about it in new ways. Expressions of inexpressibility can constitute large portions of literary representations of trauma as authors attempt to *narrate the unnarratable*. For example, Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick traces sexual trauma and its impact on Lucy Snowe's narration in *Villette*, and of the three novels studied in this project, *Villette* most lends itself to research relating to trauma and silences. Yet it is not the only one; Christopher

Herbert, who suggests that the events of *Lady Audley's Secret* serve as a socially acceptable means of discussing the 1857 Indian Rebellion in a heavily veiled metaphor, views the novel as a means for the British nation to process the collective traumatic unconscious that lingers from the war. The sudden natural catastrophe at the end of *The Mill on the Floss* that leads to the death of Maggie and Tom Tulliver also invites a trauma-theory approach to silence in these narratives. While trauma theory critics reveal how the lingering past could affect an individual's silences, recent critics emphasize the ethical and reparative possibilities of an agential decision not to speak.

Criticism of unspeakability or silences in these three texts often involves either a "symptomatic" reading of suppressed causes or a "just reading" of the given words on the page. Sharon Marcus distinguishes a "just reading" approach to literary analysis, which involves "account[ing] more fully for what texts present on their surface," from Fredric Jameson's "symptomatic" approach, which "proposes a surface/depth model of interpretation in which the true meaning of the text must lie in what it does not say, which becomes a clue to what it cannot say" (Marcus 74-75). Both approaches have advantages and disadvantages, yet the recent scholarly work that stresses the ethical possibilities of the unspeakable often uses the "just reading" method. Marcus claims that an invocation of "just reading" does not "dismiss symptomatic reading," though, and I examine the two readings in conjunction with one another when approaching the case study novels in this thesis.

Each of the three novels contains a certain symptom of unspeakability along with surface-level expressions of that unspeakability. In *Villette*, Brontë's famously elusive narrator, Lucy Snowe, illuminates the simultaneous unspeakability and unknowability in expressions of subjectivity and the interiority of others. In *Lady Audley's Secret*, the narrator demonstrates

time's unspeakability and the value that could arise from silencing time in a quickly modernizing world. In *The Mill on the Floss*, Eliot's narrator, who starts the narrative with a dreamlike reflection on the landscape and the near past, speaks to the unspeakability and unthinkability of desire, and women's desire in particular (Eliot 9). Through expressions of inexpressibility, the symptomatic simmers to the surface level of the text and offers the opportunity for a *just reading* of the given words themselves. This allows a paradoxical *just reading* of the *symptomatic*, which can expose a text's inability to fully suppress that which it not only intends to bury, but must bury because of its unspeakability and unknowability.

To accomplish the *just reading* of the *symptomatic*, I use a sociolinguistic methodology of recognizing the class coding in language and show how it illuminates the presence and implications of unspeakability in discourse. British sociolinguist Basil Bernstein posits that language exists in codes: either "elaborated codes" accessible to anyone through necessity and irreducibility or "restricted codes" accessible to insiders of a delineated group, like a specific social class. Bernstein contends that understanding these codes could help explain class distinctions and the development of hierarchical understandings of class positionality. Members of lower classes have access to a restricted code limited to their group and a minimal access to the elaborated codes. Bourgeois and upper-class individuals have access to the elaborated code and a restricted code of their own. A higher socioeconomic status correlates with greater command of language, and that command reifies class divisions.

Victorian society clearly practiced this privileging of one language code over others. The coding of aristocrats and the burgeoning middle class became synonymous with sophisticated and proper English, and the coding of marginalized groups became marked as improper, incoherent, and, to a certain extent, uncivilized. Exploration of lexical differences between

groups, then, could lead to fruitful revelations about the development of class structures and their intersections with gender and sexuality. While Bernstein did not categorize his theory as a “deficit” model based on one group’s lack of linguistic possibilities compared to another, I propose a different sort of deficit model in viewing *all language* as a deficit in properly capturing and expressing lived human experiences and emotions.¹ This deficit carries varying degrees of weight from one class to another, and the elaborated code of the middle class still experiences societal privileging in developing and relaying a narrative.

While Bernstein and succeeding sociolinguists such as Ruqaiya Hasan have primarily focused on vocalized coding among child test-subjects, the application of these principles to literary texts has received limited scholarly attention. I aim to explore the presentation of varied codes in Victorian literary prose written by women and how those codes emerge both in dialogue and in narration of the novels. Further, I suggest that fiction reveals that all traditionally recognized forms of language are a restricted code incapable of capturing or relating every aspect of a lived experience. Fiction, in how it requires readers to create their own version of the world developed in the narrative, best captures this linguistic reality. Victorian novels frequently contain instances of linguistic shortcomings wherein a concept, idea, or experience seems to transcend the confines of language. This era was replete with socially unsayable realities (especially concerning mental illness, sexuality, and trauma) that authors must euphemistically circumvent. They concern unspeakable realities relating to the discussion of socioeconomic class and its distinctions and the descriptions of living within those classes. These authors present

¹ The sociolinguist Peter Jones argues in “Bernstein’s ‘codes’ and the linguistics of ‘deficit’” that the class code model can *only* be a deficit model. He also argues that the model is inherently flawed and incapable of serving a practical methodology for research (175). This is indicative of the continuing debate surrounding Bernstein’s work and its relevance fifty years later. The model has potential for literary analysis partly for the same reason that it continues to cause debate in the linguistics community for its practical deployment.

language codes for their characters and show their performance of identity within the fictional world while simultaneously performing their own class (and gender and sexual) position in the construction of the narrative and its subsequent publication.

In this thesis, I explore multiple ways that both narrators and characters express unspeakability. For my purposes, I consider two forms of unspeakability: the *structurally* unspeakable and the *strategically* unspeakable. English, with the influence of multiple other languages and its position as a “supercentral” language through imperialism and globalization, seemingly has little room for the unspeakable, as the political sociologist Abram de Swaan asserts: “Almost every conceivable opinion, almost any human sentiment, is expressed in English; there is no language that more fully reflects the variety of human experience” (de Swaan 192). Significantly, de Swaan includes the qualifier *almost*, and it is in that *almost* that the structurally unspeakable appears. Structural unspeakability consists of qualities or aspects of the lived human condition that the English language cannot capture in words, from either the aspect’s intensity, immensity, unknowability, or incomprehensibility. The intersection of the unspeakable and the unknowable includes large philosophical concerns, like the true nature of time, as well as the more locally unknowable like the individual subjectivity of others. The structurally unspeakable exists for all language users regardless of class position or access to education. Inhabiting a higher socioeconomic class and having the possession of a more extensive vernacular could lead to the desire to approximate the structurally unspeakable or situate it within more controllable language. It is through the deliberate recognition and acceptance of the structurally unspeakable that the productive work of challenging class borders and deconstructing hegemonic norms can begin.

In contrast to the structurally unspeakable, the strategically unspeakable does not always

already exist, but rather requires an agential choice. Strategic unspeakability consists of what an individual leaves consciously unspoken or unsaid, and, rather than transcending language across class lines, it appears throughout all written and verbal communication and can have significant class implications. This form of unspeakability directly intersects with epistemological and temporal concerns and raises questions regarding class and gender. Temporal unspeakability refers to both a silencing of a period from the past, which Lucy Snowe does in *Villette*, and a silencing of the passage of time, which Lady Audley does in *Lady Audley's Secret*. Further, anything that appears unspoken or unsaid has an element of the temporally unspeakable. For example, this occurs when someone experiences a loss of words because of the atmosphere or emotions of a specific circumstance, as when Lucy Snowe cannot speak her appreciation for M. Paul Emanuel's speech at the Tribune. To recognize the unspoken, to name it as such, requires an active decision on the part of the speaker. While many people experience a loss of words or choose to remain silent at times, the value in acknowledging and stating a moment of unspeakability can result in an empowering command of language and self. The recognition of the limitations can transform them into valuable tools that authors use to subvert class-based assumptions and strict gender roles.

For their class-transgressing protagonists and varying degrees of realist narrative form, *Villette*, *Lady Audley's Secret*, and *The Mill on the Floss* best serve as case studies for this thesis. The three women who author these novels present female characters who recognize that expressions of inexpressibility have merit in relaying their narratives. The three lead characters, Lucy Snowe, Lady Audley, and Maggie Tulliver, all hold positions of genteel poverty as governesses or teachers, but each experiences different forms of unspeakability. Only one narrative, Lucy Snowe's in *Villette*, contains descriptions of her work. Lucy Snowe refuses to

speak her past, and her status rises throughout the novel until she runs her own *pensionnat* or school. Lady Audley abandons her past and identity to gain a position as a governess and attract the attention of the wealthy Sir Michael Audley, who marries her when she similarly maintains the unspeakability of her past. Maggie Tulliver cannot leave her past unspoken in the highly insulated world she inhabits, and, regardless of her feelings toward them, her desires lead to unspeakable, if brief, happiness and self-fulfillment. Their joys and triumphs do not provide unambiguously successful endings, though, and they gesture more toward the ethical and empowering *possibilities* of signaling the unspeakable, rather than providing a prescriptive or totalizing model to lead to formulaic achievement from consistent or calculating silences.

The historical and generic literary moment in which these writers produce their texts influences the extent to which their heroines can challenge hegemonic norms and achieve success through unspeakability. The three novelists all published their texts in a three-volume format and within a decade of each other (1853-1862). This decade in the middle of the nineteenth century is a crucial moment for the political, economic, and technological progress that defines the century. It falls between the two Reform Acts and includes the publication of Darwin's theories of evolution (1859) and the Indian Rebellion (1857) along with the rapid expansion of the railways. Multiple critics have considered the potential influence of these major historical events on the production of the novels.² Despite this historical significance and progress, the form of the novel goes through a liminal generic phase that moves away from the romantic and gothic to the realist mode. Each of the three novels represents a different stage in

² In *War of No Pity*, Christopher Herbert posits that *Lady Audley's Secret* serves as a veiled metaphor for the 1857 Indian Rebellion. Susan Bernstein, in her essay "Ape Anxiety: Sensation Fiction, Evolution, and the Genre Question," considers Darwin's influence on the sensation novel, and Gillian Beer takes up this issue for the nineteenth-century novel in general in *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot, and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*.

the shift from the gothic and romantic at the start of the century to the realist mode that characterizes its latter half. As the genre bounds of the novels become more and more malleable, the woman in the novels experience greater and greater possibilities for transgressing boundaries of class and gender expectations.

Chapter II: *Villette*

“There is Enough Said”: The Value of Recognizing the Unspeakability and Unknowability of Others’ Interiority

Silence is of different kinds, and breathes different meanings; no words could inspire a pleasanter content than did M. Paul’s wordless presence. (Brontë 403)

In Charlotte Brontë’s final novel, *Villette* (1853), the baffling, frustrating, and evasive narrator, Lucy Snowe, punctuates the narrative of her life with moments of the unspeakable. For Lucy, unspeakability emerges in narrated silences that are results of both linguistic shortcomings and her deliberate choices not to speak. Instances of the former, which include affective experiences that transcend the confines of language and unknowable qualities like the interiority of others, constitute the unspeakable. Instances of the latter, which include details or events from a person’s past, constitute the unspoken or unsaid. Scholarly criticism of the novel often focuses on the curious and, at times, “gratuitous” silences that occur when the narrator does not supply the reader with certain details or information.³ Critics usually view Lucy’s silences either as a symptom of powerlessness or as a sign of agential power. While the silences invite that scholarly debate, the narrator’s deliberate recognition and acceptance of the unspeakable and the unknowable signal an agential power and narrative control. For Lucy, linguistic and epistemological limitations do not correspond to failings in herself or her subjectivity, and she uses her acknowledgement and acceptance of unspeakability as a tool for transgressing class boundaries and societal demands on women.

The first-person narrator of *Villette* offers a productive inroad to expressions of inexpressibility since Lucy has more inherent limitations than a distanced omniscient narrator

³ In *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick uses “gratuitous” to describe Lucy’s decision to withhold her knowledge that Dr. John is the same person as Graham Bretton (122).

would have. Furthermore, narrative prose does not permit the presence of total silence – the narrator relies on language to convey information and meaning, or a lack thereof, to the reader. Lucy openly and willingly expresses when she *cannot* and when she *will* not speak. Examples of this unspeakability include information about her family, upbringing, and an associated traumatic event during her teenage years along with the fate of her eventual suitor, Monsieur Paul Emanuel, at the end of the novel.

Critics' fixation on Lucy's role as narrator and the ongoing debate in *Villette* scholarship concerning the degree of Lucy's agency speak to the centrality of the unspeakable in the text. Early feminist critics like Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar view Lucy's narratorial silences symptomatically as a lack or inability indicative of overwhelming personal and societal pressures that suppress the command of her narrative. These early critical readings of Lucy's unspeakability align with the gothic elements of the novel that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick highlights in *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*. Tellingly, Gilbert and Gubar title their chapter on *Villette* "The Buried Life of Lucy Snowe," a title which underscores the relationship between live burial and unspeakability. Their characterization of Lucy as "silent, invisible, [and] at best an inoffensive shadow" suggests a haunting quality in Lucy (Gilbert and Gubar 400). Sedgwick similarly emphasizes the gothic conventionality of the spectral nun who serves as a double for Lucy and her sexual suppression (Sedgwick 126). Curiously, Sedgwick also recognizes the empowering possibilities of Lucy's silence in her interactions with others: "Throughout the novel, when Lucy has power over other people it is most often the power of withholding her own language" (Sedgwick 120). While Sedgwick acknowledges power in

Lucy's silence, she views it only in terms of control over others, and not over herself.⁴

More recent critics emphasize the subversive potential of those silences for Lucy and her identity formation. Kristen Pond, in her essay "The Ethics of Silence in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*," argues that Lucy's use of silence in her interactions with other characters illustrates an ethical approach to understanding the *other* (Pond 773). Lucy's silences prevent an epistemological closure to her subjectivity that accompanies societal demands placed on her from the others with whom she interacts. Her silences reinforce a lack of understanding that corresponds to the inability to access others' interiority; the most effective and truthful way to know Lucy, or anyone, is to recognize and appreciate that you can never fully know them. While Pond emphasizes Lucy's silence in response to queries from other characters, as a narrator, Lucy always *speaks* her silence either in telling her inquisitor that she has no words in response or in informing the reader of that fact. The recognition and naming of the unspeakable here gives Lucy a control over her subjectivity, which permits her to view the arbitrary and malleable nature of social constructs, like class boundaries or gender performativity, and, subsequently, transcend and transgress those barriers.

Critical approaches to this novel often depend on either a symptomatic exploration of suppression, in Fredric Jameson's terminology, or a more surface-level "just reading" of the text, in Sharon Marcus's terminology. Symptomatic readings can provide useful political and deconstructive insights into a text, but they may rely on and reveal too much ideological bias on the part of the reader. Marcus asserts that attending to the givens of the text and focusing on the

⁴ The way in which Sedgwick occupies both poles of the critical divide around the question of Lucy's agency in an earlier text like *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (an expansion of her doctoral dissertation) perhaps speaks to her own evolving critical approaches that culminate in the discussion of reparative readings in *Teaching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*.

words themselves over any other considerations allow the text to speak for itself above all else. However, “just reading” can also imply an unproductive finitude toward critical analysis evident in the multiple meanings of the word “just”: *merely* reading the words on the page and doing *justice* to them. *Villette*’s contradictory, elusive, and inconsistent narrator invites both approaches equally and provides ample ground for a continuing scholarly debate over silence in the text. Marcus stresses that a *just reading* does not exclude a symptomatic one, and, as Sedgwick demonstrates, a combination of the two has fruitful potential. With an unreliable narrator like Lucy Snowe, who constantly reminds the reader of her unreliability, Brontë poses challenges and complications to the possibility of *just reading*.

To circumvent the pitfalls of the *symptomatic* and *just reading* critical approaches, while simultaneously using their respective critical advantages, I propose a somewhat paradoxical “just reading” of the “symptomatic” in the novel. This involves examining the moments in the text when the surface-level words directly speak to repression and the inability to speak. That inability does not reveal a shortcoming or deficiency in Lucy. Rather, it shows an understanding of a restricted language code that limits what individuals can say regardless of their class position. Basil Bernstein, with the concept of restricted and elaborated class codes in language, indicates that everything that can be spoken carries a class dimension related to the speaker’s level of education. If all that is speakable has class implications, then all that is unspeakable does as well. The structurally unspeakable constitutes a linguistic code restricted for every individual who has their own specific lived experiences and subjectivity.

Charlotte Brontë uses this unspeakability to highlight the unknowability of others’ interiority. Lucy methodically relays her impressions of those around her, and she reserves much of her narrative space to the actions of the people she deems more interesting or fascinating.

Lucy seems to resist narrating her own story or acknowledging that she has a narrative worth narrating at all. In the essay “*Villette* and the Ends of Interpretation,” the critic Anna Clark, however, proposes that these narrative gestures allow other characters, and women in particular, to retain control of their narratives just as Lucy does: “Though Lucy’s first-person narration often wields visual description to judge others characters, it also regularly cedes narrative authority to them, refusing to speak on their behalf or to subsume their words into her own” (Clark 361). The most directly evident moments of unspeakability for Lucy revolve around the inability to access others’ interiority. The intrinsic link between the unspeakable and the unknowable extends beyond Bernstein’s classed division of language, and Brontë’s use of a first-person narrator – albeit a reluctant and unreliable one – can illustrate the social significance of understanding the other who occupies a different socioeconomic class. Lucy fills her narration with silences, concealed aspects of her past and current life, and delays in relaying relevant information to the reader.

An emblematic textual moment of the intersection of Lucy’s evasive narration and the unspeakable occurs when Lucy returns to her home after staying with her godmother Mrs. Bretton. Lucy states that she goes home after the visit, which opens the novel, and she ascribes significance to the events that transpired during her preceding eight years at home. However, she does not provide the reader with any of the specific details of the events that occurred during this section of her adolescence. Lucy speaks her silence surrounding the events in a surprisingly loquacious manner that borders on taunting the reader. Lucy speaks to the readerly expectations regarding a journey home, and she allows those to occupy the mind of the reader rather than holding her narrative to any sense of fidelity:

It will be conjectured that I was of course glad to return to the bosom of my kindred. Far from saying nay, indeed, I will permit the reader to picture me, for

the next eight years, as a bark slumbering through halcyon weather, in a harbor still as glass – the steersman stretched on little deck, his face up to heaven, his eyes closed: buried, if you will, in a long prayer. A great many women and girls are supposed to pass their lives something in that fashion; why not I with the rest? (Brontë 37)

Lucy presupposes the reader wants to imagine a blissful reunion with her family, and she “permits” them to hold that belief, without any objection. She clearly demonstrates her narrative dominance in relaying this noninformation and goes on to ironically taunt the reader with mock modesty with an aside of “if you will” to her use of the word “buried” to describe “a long prayer.” What option does the reader have other than to take her symbolic language, especially after she so generously permits an uncomplicated vision of familial peace and happiness? She taunts the unsophisticated reader, and, in a rather verbose manner, precedes not to say anything about what happened, but instead to suggest what is “supposed” to happen when young girls return to their homes. She actively chooses to leave her time at home unspoken, and, using her privileged role as narrator, speaks that silence regardless of what the reader might desire.

While Lucy demonstrates an inability or unwillingness to speak the events at home, her expression of that unspeakability, whether it is an active decision or not, illuminates her narrative control. Critics frequently consider the effect of trauma on Lucy’s ability to speak, but some, like Pond and Ivan Kreilkamp, view that silence in a generative way that positively reflects Lucy’s identity-construction.⁵ Lucy directly mentions her self-control after not describing her eight years at home, and in her claim to independence, she relies on unknowability in relaying the message to the reader: “Thus, there remained no possibility of dependence on others; to myself alone

⁵ Kreilkamp raises highly simple yet provocative questions about presence of silence in the text: “But is silence always powerlessness, speech always power? Is it possible that Lucy Snowe might *choose* not to speak for reasons of her own?” (Kreilkamp 142). He further suggests “tak[ing] Lucy at her word” and performs a just reading of Lucy’s discussions of silence.

could I look. I know not that I was of a self-reliant or active nature; but self-reliance and exertion were forced upon me by circumstances, as they are upon thousands besides” (Brontë 38). She does not know and cannot speak whether she has a self-reliant nature nor can she speak the circumstances that would lead to her having such a nature, but she does assert that she acts in a self-reliant manner. Lucy may conceal some trauma from the reader, but she recognizes that she does so and expresses her decision to leave it unspoken.

Lucy leaves the events that transpired during her return home unspoken throughout the remainder of the novel, but she does not apologize for or justify her silence in any manner to the reader. She generally does not even express how inexpressible the events were for her. Even speaking to a degree of unspeakability could reveal more information that she wishes to leave concealed. Rather, she expresses the unspeakability of her *feelings* towards that time and the association she now has with her homelife. In an essay on “The Autobiographical Voice,” Rachel Ablow emphasizes how Brontë privileges descriptions of affective experiences over the lived experiences themselves: “In *Villette* ... the emotional does not just overshadow the event; it effectively displaces it” (Ablow 281). Brontë exemplifies this when Lucy experiences hardships and difficulties after Miss Marchmont dies, and Lucy struggles to find a new position. She provides a quick explanation for her refusal to return to the comforts and ease of *home* that readers might expect, while further distancing herself from that home with a denial of the word itself:

My state of mind, and all accompanying circumstances, were just now as most to favour the adoption of a new, resolute, and daring — perhaps desperate — line of action. I had nothing to lose. Unutterable loathing of a desolate existence past, forbade return. If I failed in what I now designed to undertake, who, save myself, would suffer? If I died far away from home — home, I was going to say, but I had no home — from England, then, who would weep? (Brontë 54)

Lucy decides to venture forth away from London and her past life in England since she believes

no one will mourn her absence or possible death. She uses the word “unutterable” to describe how she “loathes” her past rather than to describe any circumstances of that past life. Here, again, Lucy speaks to readerly expectations and associations of joy and warmth with home, but she recognizes that her hatred toward that place and time verges into the unspeakable. The unutterable quality refers not only to the social impropriety of loathing the past but also to the immensity of that affect. That unutterable loathing leads to her complete rejection of the word “home” and all of the pleasant connotations it might have. However, she does not just say that “home” is an appropriate word for her situation anymore; she says the word and then backtracks from it. She includes the improper term just to reference its inaccuracy for her situation and cement her disassociation of home with reliability and safety. The inclusion of this self-editing process in her thinking indicates how a word and its signifier can become unspeakable for Lucy. Lucy, who often refers to her language that she does not possess, actively makes herself dispossessed of the word.

Possessing words relates to questions of knowability and class since Bernstein’s restricted code emerges from members of high social classes having greater linguistic command than working-class individuals. Lucy acknowledges and names the times when she does not have access to words, and her embrace of that linguistic shortcoming benefits and enables her class mobility. The advantages are not always immediately evident, though, as in the case of her inability to console the dying Miss Marchmont with any words. Lying on her deathbed, Miss Marchmont ponders her chances at eternal salvation since she has devoted her life to her now-deceased husband rather than to God, and she wonders whether that preference amounts to blasphemy worthy of exclusion from paradise. She poses this question to Lucy and asks Lucy to be her “chaplain” (Brontë 45). The naturally astonished Lucy, who has known this woman for

only a short period, responds with a reasonable unspeakability: “This question I could not answer: I had no words. It seemed as if she had thought I had answered it” (Brontë 45). Lucy does not know the answer to the question (a question that no living person could adequately answer), and rather than supply the dying woman with platitudes or some insupportable assertion of her inherent goodness, Lucy responds with silence. She uses the language of possession – she does not *have* the words – to express her inability to express any verbal response. Lucy presents words, and the deployment of the correct words at the correct times, as a kind of consumer product that she frequently does not own. She does not have the capital that comes from having the right words at the right time, but she provides Miss Marchmont with a telling silence and signals that silence for the reader. That silence demonstrates a greater ethical and compassionate response than attempting to ventriloquize the dying woman’s voice or placate her desire for absolution.⁶

Lucy does not disparage the fact that she lacks a total command of language, nor does she seek to throw as much language as she can at an issue to approximate it; instead, she calmly and unambiguously acknowledges her linguistic shortcomings. Furthermore, despite Lucy not expressing anything in words, Miss Marchmont is able to elicit meaning and understanding from her silence. Multiple critics have noted Lucy’s invisibility and her acceptance of this quality both for her role in society and in her presentations as a narrator.⁷ The invisibility allows others to

⁶ Anna Clark uses this moment as an exemplar of how Brontë allows minor characters to speak for themselves without the authorial dominance of the first-person narrator. Clark wants to divert critical attention from the novel’s almost myopic gaze at Lucy, and, with Bakhtin’s notions of unfinalizability and polyphony, suggest new forms of meaning that can emerge from the text: “Understood in Bakhtin’s terms, *Villette*’s characters serve not just as foils or complements to Lucy but as richly autonomous figures that defy interpretation while at the same time eliciting attention” (Clark 363).

⁷ Gilbert and Gubar notably focus on her invisibility. Interestingly, they also use language of ownership and possession in consideration of Lucy’s invisibility: “Haunted by the person she might have been, she has been dispossessed not only of meanings and goals, but also of her own identity and power” (Gilbert and Gubar 400).

project their own ideas and perceptions onto her without outward resistance, and Lucy seems to have no qualms with this reality. Lucy's last name, Snowe, reflects an even and democratizing effect she can have on those around her. Snow can blanket its environs and offer a unified appearance to the landscape or whatever it might cover. Viewers of that snow-covered landscape can project their own ideas to what may lay beneath the snow. Part of snow's beauty rests in the possibility of the unknown buried beneath it. Similarly, Lucy, with her reticence to speak and willingness not to know, can serve as a blank slate on which others can sketch their own thoughts and beliefs. Nowhere does her invisibility appear more starkly than in this moment beside the deathbed of Miss Marchmont. Miss Marchmont continues her line of thinking seamlessly as though Lucy had provided the perfect answer for her impossible-to-answer question: "Very right my child. We should acknowledge God merciful, but not always for us comprehensible. We should accept our own lot, whatever it be, and try to render happy that of others" (Brontë 45). In Lucy's silence, Miss Marchmont hears the answer to the unanswerable: humans cannot comprehend the incomprehensible, and instead of worrying about that fact, they should welcome and accept their positions in life and work to uplift others and ensure their happiness as well. Lucy exemplifies this approach to life throughout the entire novel through her invisibility and use of the unspeakable. She allows others to speak for themselves and does not pretend to know or control their subjectivity, and she generously allows others, and the reader, to project their own expectations on her without too much resistance.

Lucy recognizes that words often fail those who desire to speak cogently or thoughtfully. Lucy, who exhibits a consistent reserve, restraint, and self-editing process when speaking to others, wants to select her language with precision and clarity, and when she finds that she is unable to complete that process, she signals to the reader this communicative failure without

providing the exact wording that she used in the moment. Emblematically, after Paul Emanuel delivers a lecture at a banquet hall called the Tribune, Lucy desires to lavish him with complimentary remarks, but she stresses that the appropriate words escape her: “I would have praised him: I had plenty of praise in my heart; but alas! no words on my lips. Who *has* words at the right moment? I stammered some lame expressions” (Brontë 360-361, original emphasis). Lucy cannot summon the proper words to express her admiration for M. Emanuel’s oratory, and she directly considers how they evade her at the exact moment when she needs to convey them. Here, she does not necessarily lack the language needed to offer the compliment, but in these specific social circumstances, she cannot bring them to her lips to relay the exact sentiment she would wish to get across in showing her appreciation for the talk that he gives. Tellingly, Lucy emphasizes the possession of “words at the *right moment*.” She considers the influence of social strictures in conjuring language to properly convey or communicate.

While Lucy serves as a blank canvas for many characters, she rather serves as a mirror or foil to her younger friend Ginevra Fanshawe, who, coming from a wealthy background, struggles to imagine fully the life of someone so different from herself. Ginevra makes her curiosity and confusion explicit to Lucy when the two prepare to attend the lecture by M. Paul Emanuel at the Tribune. Ginevra contemplates, with amusement, how she and Lucy are suddenly interacting within the same social circles and how this change could have occurred in such a short period of time. Ginevra asks a remarkably broad but highly significant question: “Who *are* you, Miss Snowe?” (Brontë 356). Ginevra’s unrestrained curiosity mimics that of the reader, who has not received the details of the protagonist’s personal history. Ginevra cannot fathom that Lucy could have such humble ancestry and find herself in the same high social sphere as herself, so she creates a fantasy that Lucy has some hidden family ties or wealth, which Lucy jokingly mocks

with the suggestion that she is a “personage in disguise.” Lucy’s unforthcoming behavior fascinates Ginevra, and she feels a need to bother Lucy to uncover the details of her heritage. Lucy’s final response to Ginevra’s prodding does not provide any information about her past but instead demonstrates her professional and social mobility: “I am a rising character: once an old lady’s companion, then a nursery-governess, now a school-teacher” (Brontë 358). Lucy continues this forward trajectory, and she ends the novel with her own successful *pensionnat*, essentially occupying the same social status as Madame Beck. Ginevra’s response shows her (and perhaps the reader’s) desire for Lucy to speak her history and relay the secret to her position. Lucy comments on Ginevra’s inability to imagine someone coming from a lower position in life and achieving anything of note:

Throughout our walk she rang the most fanciful changes on this theme; proving, by her obstinate credulity, or incredulity, her incapacity to conceive how any person not bolstered up by birth or wealth, not supported by some consciousness or name or connection, could maintain an attitude of integrity. (Brontë 258)

Lucy, however, perhaps somewhat frustratingly, does not disclose any details of her past or family’s social position. She leaves these facts entirely unspoken and perhaps unspeakable. She claims that concerns over “pedigree, social position, and recondite intellectual acquisition” hold little interest or merit for her in understanding someone else’s (or her own) character, but she admits that she can see the value that society places on these certain attributes. Lucy considers someone who begins at a higher rung of the socioeconomic ladder and eventually falls from it to show how both her personal indifference to social status and society’s fixation on it are valid viewpoints:

There are some people whom a lowered position degrades morally, to whom loss of connection costs loss of self-respect: are not these justified in placing the highest value on that station and association which is their safeguard from debasement? If a man feels that he would become contemptible in his own eyes were it generally known that his ancestry were simple and not gentle, poor and

not rich, workers and not capitalists, would it be right severely to blame him for keeping these fatal facts out of sight – for starting, trembling, quailing at the chance which threatens exposure? ... Wherever an accumulation of small defenses is found, whether surrounding the prude's virtue or the man of the world's respectability, there be sure, it is needed. (Brontë 358)

Typically for Lucy and her evasive style of narration, she alludes to herself and her circumstances in these broader considerations of choosing to leave the particulars of one's past private and unspoken.

The phrase "out of sight" offers the greatest insight into Lucy's conception of the unspeakable, class, and the role of the class transgressor. Moreover, Lucy has consistently demonstrated a persistent and powerful "accumulation of small defenses." She outlines for the reader why she does not and will not speak the circumstances of her past, and as she told Ginevra before they entered the park, she has a "rising character" and continues to find success without giving this information either to those around her or to the reader. Silence and a deliberate deployment of the unspeakable serve as understandable and vital strategies for Lucy in finding success, or even simply peace, in living in a society that so consciously and openly values social standing and familial ties and thus resists transgressions to clearly established class boundaries.

Regardless of her personal views, Lucy understands the significant role socioeconomic status plays in everyday life, but she disregards them despite their social importance. When she first arrives in Labassecour and cannot verbally interact with anyone because of her inability to speak French, she begins to notice the inscription of class on her outward appearance. She claims that this ability amazes her, and despite some bemusement from recognition of the problems this might pose to her prospects in this new country, Lucy stays driven and hopeful:

Much I marveled at the sagacity evinced by waiters and chambermaids in proportioning the accommodation to the guest. How could inn-servants and ship-stewardesses everywhere tell at glance that I, for instance, was an individual of no social significance and little burdened by cash? They *did* know it, evidently: I saw

quite well that they all, in a moment's calculation, estimated me at about the same fractional value. The fact seemed to me curious and pregnant. I would not disguise from myself what it indicated, yet managed to keep my spirits pretty well under its pressure. (Brontë 66)

Brontë highlights Lucy's voyeurism here as she carefully watches and studies servers and merchants calculate a patron's worth based on their class position. A patron who could be, but is not *necessarily*, Lucy. Language concerning the unspeakable and the unknowable moves to the forefront while Lucy ponders how the merchants and servers could truly evaluate an individual's financial worth from their appearance alone. Lucy understands, though, that they somehow *do* know just from looking, and that has serious indications and implications for her in this foreign country where she cannot communicate with words at all yet. However, she does not actually say what it indicates – just that it has significance. While she does not speak it, she does not “disguise” herself from it either and allows her hope and belief in herself and possibilities to remain. Lucy, who unscrupulously watches and evaluates others and ascribes her own ideas about their interiority while recognizing that she can never truly know it, finds it curious that you could measure worth entirely on the basis of the amount of wealth a person has.

While Lucy's appearance and demeanor mark her class and otherness to the people of Labassecour, her inability to speak French separates her even more. Brontë introduces a significant amount of untranslated French into characters' dialogue, and that creates further levels of simultaneous unknowability for Lucy and the reader. The unspeakability and the unknowability in the novel include the use of the French language intermingled with the rest of the text in English. William Cohen takes on this issue and considers that the idiosyncratic use of French contributes to the novel's realism:

In the course of unmooring the referential capacity of narrative discourse (and especially quoted speech), French usage in Brontë's English prose throws into doubt conventional distinctions between first- and third-person narration and

between direct and indirect styles. Such categories, which serve as the traditional basis both for narrative analysis and for the distinctiveness of prose fiction, become precarious in the face of these foreign elements, necessitating a new set of tools for understanding narrative reading practices. (Cohen 174)

To some degree, for any reader who is not bilingual, any use of French in the novel will pose an element of unknowability. Lucy experiences many moments of unspeakability when she journeys to Labassecour and cannot speak the French language that all the natives do. Lucy travels to the establishment of Madame Beck on the recommendation of Ginevra whom she met on the boat traveling from England, and the pair struggles to communicate. Lucy engages in a “most remarkable conversation” with Madame Beck wherein Madame Beck speaks French and Lucy responds in English, and only Madame Beck partially understands any of what transpires. For Lucy, what anyone attempts to communicate when speaking French is unknowable to her, and any response to that initial comment is unspeakable since she lacks any understanding of the French language at all. This naturally creates a problem for the first-person narration in English, but rather than providing understanding by always translating the spoken French into English, the narrator seemingly at random chooses sometimes to translate, sometimes not to, and sometimes to peculiarly combine the two, as Cohen observes in his essay. There are several instances where Lucy deliberately states that she will be translating what she offers for the reader, but those stated intentions crumble shortly thereafter. After the initial attempt at conversing with Madame Beck fails, Lucy continues to try speaking with her anyway, and she eventually decides to provide the translated conversation while acknowledging that, in that moment, she could not understand any of what Madame Beck said to her: “She inquired after my luggage: I told her when it would arrive. She mused. At that moment, a man’s step was heard in the vestibule, hastily proceeding to the outer door. (I shall go on with this part of my tale as I understood all that passed; for though it was then scarce intelligible to me, I heard it translated

afterwards)” (Brontë 73-74). Lucy translates the conversation for the ease of the English-speaking reader. Some of the original French bafflingly remains even after the promise to translate it, though, and she underscores that she did not initially understand the words but would eventually come into that knowledge from another character informing her of what was said. Again, Lucy stresses that the unknowable is not a wholly restrictive obstacle to comprehension or the ability to understand and appreciate others.

Lucy’s initial interactions with Ginevra and Madame Beck place her in a conventionally gothic setting at Madame Beck’s *pensionnat*, and the mysterious continental establishment invites gothic unspeakability. The gothic elements in *Villette* provide one entryway into the issue of unspeakability in the novel. Madame Beck’s school once served as a convent (much like Audley Court will in Braddon’s novel almost a decade later), and the spectral figure of a nun haunts Lucy periodically throughout her stay there. The history of Madame Beck’s establishment presages the opening description of Audley Court in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, and just as time would come to represent the unspeakable symptom in that sensational novel, Lucy cannot speak for a period while discussing the school’s past as a convent:

There went a tradition that Madame Beck’s house had in old days been a convent. That in years gone by – how long gone by I cannot tell, but I think some centuries – [...] that something had happened on this site which, rousing fear and inflicting horror, had left to the place the inheritance of a ghost-story. A vague tale went of a black and white nun, sometimes, on some night or nights of the year, seen in some part of this vicinage. (Brontë 120)

Lucy emphasizes that she *cannot tell* – that the information is unspeakable – for a certain length of time. Significantly, Lucy directly thinks the unspeakable and the unknowable time could be “some centuries,” and this assumptive approach to estimating time recurs throughout this novel as well as *Lady Audley’s Secret* and *The Mill on the Floss*. The tale seems only vague to her, and the place merely has an “inheritance of a ghost story.” Lucy encounters the nun at several points

in the text, and she even seems to confirm its presence from Paul Emanuel who sees it in the garden as well. The ghostly nun, which represents both the Catholic religion that Lucy so adamantly rejects and the relegation and confinement of women who do not fit into traditional societal roles, enhances the gothic tone to the novel, but it has a pragmatic resolution that amplifies the realism and the quick untangling of various narrative plot points that occur at the end.

Upon learning that the nun was Count de Hamal visiting Ginevra Fanshawe all along and after the couple elopes, Lucy receives a correspondence from her young pupil and friend which includes several notable invocations of the unspeakable. Ginevra notes that she chose the attire of the nun to maintain a certain romantic element along with the added pleasure of toying with the devoutly Protestant Lucy, and this reveal illustrates a “Radcliffean deconstruction” of gothic unspeakability (Sedgwick 126). In the inserted text of the letter – addressed to “Tim (Short for Timon)” – Ginevra wonders how Lucy could keep the secret of seeing the nun to herself and what that might suggest about her character: “How could you endure the visitations of that long spectre, time after time, without crying out, telling everybody, and rousing the whole house and neighbourhood?” (Brontë 549). Ginevra, who delights in melodrama, which she makes clear in the letter as well, cannot comprehend why Lucy would not arouse attention and skepticism through informing everyone about the apparition. Ginevra desires that kind of chaotic disruption and drama. She is even amazed at Lucy’s reaction to having the nun appear in her bed, and she uses her calm and collected response to consider her overall character: “I believe you feel nothing. You haven’t the sensitiveness that a person of my constitution has. You seem to me insensible both to pain and fear and grief. You are a real old Diogenes” (Brontë 550). Because Lucy does not act in a voluble or overly dramatic manner, which differs so drastically from how

Ginevra herself would respond in a similar situation, she fails to fully understand Lucy. While Ginevra muses over Lucy's character and to some extent mocks her for her coldness and reserved nature, she also expresses her admiration and appreciation for de Hamal in a direct recognition of the unspeakable: "I cannot sufficiently extol the genius which de Hamal managed our flight. How clever in him to select the night of the fête, when madame (for he knows her habits), as he said, would infallibly be absent at the concert in the park" (550). Here, the fault in language arises for Ginevra in her attempting to describe the cleverness of her suitor, the "genius" as she calls it in executing a plan that would permit their elopement and give the disguised de Hamal one final opportunity to alarm Lucy and attempt to shock her steely sensibilities. After the letter, Lucy provides a few brief closing remarks on her relationship with Ginevra that commenced on the boat to Labassecour and resulted in much of the drama and excitement of her life while working for Madame Beck. When Ginevra returns from the wedding, she cannot help but flaunt her ring and excitement in front of Lucy, and the narrator naturally responds with a self-proclaimed severity that evidently provides much joy for Ginevra: "I said very little. I gave her only the crust and rind of my nature. No matter: she expected of me nothing better – she knew me too well to look for compliments – my dry gibes pleased her well enough, and the more impassible and prosaic my mien, the more merrily she laughed" (Brontë 552). While Ginevra can never fully understand or value Lucy's subjectivity and interiority, she wholly relishes that quality in her friend, and she seeks Lucy's companionship partly because Lucy is so difficult to understand and presents herself as being closed off and with a degree of dismissal and derision.⁸

Ginevra, with a complete command of language and a comfortable class position, does

⁸ Sedgwick refers to this quality in Lucy as a "healthily bitchy sangfroid" (Sedgwick 120).

not have the same opportunities for growth and self-actualization through recognizing the unspeakable that Lucy does. Ginevra finds a cruel and cynical joy in her approach to life, but she holds on to her friendship with Lucy.⁹ They have a certain unspoken and unspeakable bond that arises in Ginevra's intractable lightness of being and general aversion to suffering that contrasts so starkly with Lucy's reserve, traumatic past, and inability to escape the incessant rumblings of her thoughts. Lucy places Ginevra in contrast to Paulina (the former little Polly from her childhood in England at her godmother's house), and a significant difference between the two revolves around language. At the Tribune for M. Paul's lecture, Lucy appreciates how fluently Paulina speaks French in comparison to her companion from the Rue Fossette:

I was charmed with her French; it was faultless – the structure correct, the idioms true, the accent pure; Ginevra, who had lived half her life on the Continent, could do nothing like it: not that words ever failed Miss Fanshawe, but real accuracy and purity she neither possessed, nor in any number of years would acquire.
(Brontë 362)

Paulina delights the Labassecourien gentlemen at the party as well as Lucy, and her usage of French raises her in the narrator's estimation. She excels at using the foreign language because she masters its accents and idioms. A mastery of idioms does not correlate to expressions of unspeakability; the idiomatic speaker can use the idioms to approximate the unspeakable rather than stating that it is unspeakable. Metaphorical and symbolic language can function in the same way as the idiom – to circumvent acknowledgement of linguistic gaps or shortcomings inherent in language.

Metaphors can substitute recognitions of unspeakability, but Lucy often uses them when

⁹ Sharon Marcus, among other critics, explores the homoerotic and homosocial bond between Lucy and Ginevra. Marcus notes that Lucy does not necessarily consider an erotic desire for Ginevra unspeakable: "Lucy's demeanor toward Ginevra is contradictory, but the openness with which she expresses attraction to her suggests that Lucy's scorn is not the negation of an erotic desire she is barred from articulating" (Marcus 103).

she silences part of her narrative. This occurs most strikingly in the metaphor of a shipwreck for the emotions she experiences in her years at home after the visit to Bretton: “Picture me then idle, basking, plump, and happy, stretched on a cushioned deck, warmed with constant sunshine, rocked by breezes indolently soft. However, it cannot be concealed that, in that case, I must somehow have fallen over-board, or that there must have been a wreck at last” (Brontë 37). This metaphor does not enhance the reader’s understanding of what might have occurred, and it only deepens the obfuscation Lucy develops surrounding this time in her life. However, a shipwreck carries greater symbolic weight at the end of the novel with the possibility of a literal shipwreck taking the life of M. Paul Emanuel. The novel’s ambiguous ending has attracted considerable critical attention, and in that ending, Lucy leaves the fate of her primary love interest, M. Paul Emanuel, unknown to the reader:

Here pause: pause at once. There is enough said. Trouble no quiet, kind heart; leave sunny imaginations hope. Let it be theirs to conceive the delight of joy born again fresh out of great terror, the rapture of rescue from peril, the wondrous reprieve from dread, the fruition of return. Let them picture union and a happy succeeding life. (Brontë 573)

Lucy exhibits a sense of urgency toward silence and the unspeakable fate of Paul Emanuel. She abruptly halts the flow of the narrative and continues to illustrate a forceful command over the reader with the immediacy and forcefulness of not just stopping but instructing the reader and herself to “stop at once.” Despite its jarring nature, Lucy presents her decision to stop speaking the story of Paul Emanuel’s journey home with a sort of gentleness in allowing the reader to imagine a traditional happy ending that was completely absent in the ironic and taunting permission to envisage a joyous return home earlier in the text. It is not, though, an entirely pleasant invitation toward imagination – words like “sunny,” “delights,” “rapture,” and “wondrous” are interspersed with “terror,” “peril” and “dread.” Lucy follows the invitation to

imagine the ending that the reader chooses with an incredibly curt couple of sentences to conclude with the fates of Madame Back, Père Silas, and Madame Walravens.¹⁰ Appropriately, to Lucy's identity and sense of self, she concludes with a kind of rapid-fire listing of success stories for more minor characters. While Lucy experience success at the new pensionnat that M. Paul procures for her, she leaves her future entirely unspoken.

In Lucy and M. Paul's last encounter before his departure, when he informs her that he acquired the building for her to establish her own *pensionnat*, Lucy experiences several emblematic moments of spoken unspeakability. Paul Emanuel shows Lucy the house he purchases for her and the papers placing it in her name as directress of the establishment, and Lucy overflows with questions about it: "Did you do this, M. Paul? Is this your house? Did you furnish it? Did you get these papers printed? Do you mean me? Am I the directress? Is there another Lucy Snowe? Tell me: say something" (Brontë 563). She questions the reality of the situation and his motives. She doubts her own sense of identity with the query about a second Lucy Snowe, and when she requires words to explain the situation, Paul Emanuel only offers smug speechlessness. Lucy finally demands that which she so often eschews throughout the novel, knowledge, from the man: "How is it? I must know all – *all!*" (Brontë 563). Despite Lucy's frequent descriptions of and speculation about the thoughts of Paul Emanuel, she can never actually understand what or even how he thinks; his interiority, like that of all the people she encounters, is unspeakable and unknowable to her. When he details how he accumulated his savings and the purchasing of the house for Lucy, he leaves only their future together left

¹⁰ Charlotte Brontë addresses this in a letter to her publisher George Smith: "Drowning and Matrimony are the fearful alternatives. The merciful ... will of course choose the former and milder doom — drown him to put him out of pain. The cruel hearted will, on the contrary, pitilessly impale him on the second horn of the dilemma, marrying him without truth or compunction to that — person — that — that — individual — 'Lucy Snowe'" (Brontë xx).

unspoken and all the more wondrous and powerful to Lucy for its unspeakability: “...you shall mind your health and happiness for my sake, and when I come back—’ There he left a blank” (Brontë 564). Brontë uses an em-dash to represent the unspoken in M. Paul Emanuel’s speech, and then Lucy narrates the silence, the blank at the end of the sentence that contains a possible future that exists beyond language. Lucy provides her expression of gratitude and appreciation to Paul Emanuel, but just like mere words failed to properly convey her affective experience after he delivered the lecture at the Tribune, she directly states the insufficiency of language: “In such inadequate language my feelings struggled for expression: they could not get it; speech, brittle and unmalleable, and cold as ice, dissolved or shivered in the effort” (Brontë 564). Lucy, verbose and loquacious in her prose narration but reserved and calculating in her given speech to others, recognizes the fragility and rigidity of language. Silence, the unspeakable, and the unknowable are much more malleable than meager words, and Brontë demonstrates that when a woman accepts and embraces that fact, class and gender boundaries are much more malleable as well.

Chapter III: *Lady Audley's Secret*

It Lingers: Needing Temporal Unspeakability and the Subversive Potential of Class Transgressions in *Lady Audley's Secret*

At the end of this avenue there was an old arch and a clock tower, with a stupid, bewildering clock, which had only one hand—and which jumped straight from one hour to the next—and was therefore always in extremes. Through this arch you walked straight into the gardens of Audley Court. (Braddon 41)

In *Lady Audley's Secret*, the unspeakability of time and class distinctions are inextricable. Time always holds class implications in the correlative relationship between class status and possibility for leisure, and that relationship plays out in Braddon's sensation novel in disparate ways for the lead characters depending on their initial class position and gender. Braddon offers her protagonist, Lady Audley, the chance to use time's unspeakability to transgress and thrive in the bourgeoisie, but she also shows the potential consequences for a woman daring to challenge and subvert predetermined gender and class roles. Braddon renders time unspeakable to show that a working-class individual transgressing their class boundaries results in a necessary silencing of their previous life, and the breaking of that silence leads to removal and further, or final, silencing.

The unspeakable in a novel like *Villette* (1853) with its setting in a fictional kingdom on the Continent, ghostly nun, and withheld information fits well within the gothic. While the novel often defies categorization with its incessant strangeness, it does follow the gothic mode as many of the Brontës' works do, and that strangeness often resonates with the gothic. Eve Sedgwick characterizes the convention of the unspeakable in gothic fiction both as linguistic failure *between* people and *within* an individual. She defines the unspeakable as “an interpersonal barrier where no barrier ought to be ... [that] is breached only at the cost of violence and a deepened separateness” and as the “privation exactly of language, as though language were a sort

of safety valve between the inside and the outside” (Sedgwick 16-17). Lucy Snowe frequently erects barriers in communication between herself and those she interacts with along with barriers within herself in choosing not to vocalize an affect or experience. The novelist combines the unspeakable, even at a linguistic level, with other conventions of terror and mystery that reveal speechlessness on their own through their very nature. Moreover, the novel’s distant setting from the English home lessens the sense of immediacy in escaping potential voicelessness.

A decade after the publication of Brontë’s *Villette*, the gothic tenet of the unspeakable in the novel enters the local sphere in an unprecedented manner with the advent of the sensation novel.¹¹ The nexus of this genre rests in three novels published between 1859 and 1862: Wilkie Collins’s *Woman in White* (1859), Mrs. Henry Wood’s *East Lynne* (1861), and Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862). While Wilkie Collins most often receives credit as its progenitor, Mary Elizabeth Braddon cemented it and established its prominent position both in popular and academic literary circles. The sensation novelist ostensibly mixes romantic and gothic elements with a realist setting that effectively elicits a sensational response from the reader. The titillating content of these novels (bigamy, murder, arson) speaks directly to the reader’s nerves and senses, and the nerves and senses in turn provide an invariably nonverbal phenomenological response (*Quarterly Review* 482). An 1863 *Quarterly Review* article, for example, discusses this effect of the sensation novel on the reader: “A class of literature has grown up around us, usurping in many respects, intentionally or unintentionally, a portion of the preacher’s office...by ‘preaching to the nerves’” (488). The gothic influences on the

¹¹ Richard Albright succinctly captures the sudden, brief, and powerful impact of the sensation novel on Victorian society and literature in general: “The decade of the 1860s was the decade of sensation fiction. The sensation novel seems to have burst onto the scene, experienced a brief, dizzying period of popularity, and then ... it began to fade from fashion” (Albright 168).

development of the sensation novel led to the phenomenological response the authors attempted to elicit from their readers. This link between the gothic and the sensational is explicit in one part of Eve Sedgwick's definition of gothic unspeakability; she claims that the unspeakable emerges in the response to terror that renders the reader speechless from the various reactions of the sympathetic nervous to the written material.

The sensation novel compounds this effect with its elements of realism that contribute to the genre's pervasive popularity. The sensation novel garnered public interest and curiosity because it *hits close to home*, both in the physiological space of the embodied reader and in its proximity to the space which the reader inhabits (their literal home in England). The sensation novel emerged as a new literary mode that transferred gothic conventions, including the unspeakable, from romanticized distant Continental castles to the realistic bourgeois estates of England. In an unsigned review of Braddon's work in 1865, Henry James detailed the allure of this transition: "Instead of the terrors of 'Udolpho,' we were treated to the terrors of the cheerful country-house and the busy London lodgings. And there is no doubt that these were infinitely the more terrible" (James 593). The use of "treated" here suggests the pleasurable sensation that arises from considering "terrors" that appear locally. Descriptions of terrible situations that could plausibly happen or that unfold in a familiar setting are exponentially more effective in maintaining the reader's attention. While James and, based on its sales and wide scope, the reading public in general reveled in terrors near at hand, other contemporary critics discussed the insidious possibilities of such tales. A *Quarterly Review* overview of sensation novels through 1863 considered how to qualify them: "The sensation novel, be it mere trash or something worse, is usually a tale of our own time" (488). "Mere trash" in novels seems to indicate dime-store romances or pornography (in the sense of excess without narrative) or another text with no

discernible literary merit which gets readily thrown out, but the reviewer entertains the possibility of “something worse” than that. The review cannot name or speak it, but “something worse” than *mere* trash indicates that one cannot simply dispose of it, that it lingers or perhaps invades in a pernicious manner. The unspeakable quality of the sensation novel here resonates with issues of imminence that correspond with vicinity. The *Quarterly Review* article visualizes this in a striking manner: “Proximity is, indeed, one great element of sensation. It is necessary to be near a mine to be blown up by its explosion” (488). Of course, a viewer of an explosion wants to witness it without literally being “blown up.” You want to feel the heat without the full force of its decimation, and you want to have time to retreat to safety. The sensation novel, especially *Lady Audley’s Secret*, complicates the ability to find comfort and safety, and when the novelist makes time unspeakable, escaping the explosion becomes all but impossible. If temporal unspeakability remains, the explosive impact of the sensational material can impact the reader at any moment without signals or warnings that allow readers to brace themselves or simply stop reading.

Time and its unspeakability in *Lady Audley’s Secret* relate to the historical moment of the genre’s emergence, and the consequences of a familiar need to speak time reflect anxieties surrounding changing views of class and gender. The sensation novel “enters the scene” between the passage of the First Reform Act in 1832 and the Second Reform Act in 1867, the same year Darwin introduces the theory of evolution in *On the Origin of Species* (1859), and two years after the Indian Rebellion of 1857. The genre exists in this liminal literary space between romanticism and realism that inherently blurs boundaries in expressions of the rapidly advancing modern age of technological and social changes. Multiple critics have discussed the emphasis on technological improvements in transportation and communication such as the railway and the

telegraph, which demonstrate a growing concern with time and its precision for the bourgeois English.¹² Henry James notes this especially with regard to Lady Audley:

The novelty lay in the heroine being, not a picturesque Italian of the fourteenth century, but an English gentlewoman of the current year, familiar with the use of the railway and the telegraph. The intense probability of the story is constantly reiterated. Modern England – the England of to-day’s newspaper – crops up at every step. (James 593)

He calls her an “English gentlewoman,” a designation which highlights the national appeal of her scandalous narrative practically ripped from the headlines, but, notably, Lady Audley marries into the gentry, and the desire for class mobility initiates the series of events that ultimately results in her institutionalization and death in Belgium. She transgresses class boundaries, and the unspeakable in the novel directly relates to the permeability of boundaries and the implications and consequences of having those boundaries breached. These can result in violence and dramatic silencing as in the gothic novel, which Sedgwick relates to the breaching of interpersonal barriers. This occurs when Lady Audley pushes George Talboys down a well – itself a transgressed boundary extending above and below the ground – to prevent him from revealing her faked death and bigamous marriage to Sir Michael Audley. Contradictions naturally arise with the crossing of boundaries, such as a woman who grew up in poverty and then commits murder (or so she thinks) and arson (that one definitely happens) in an attempt to preserve her new social status. The desire for preservation of her class position reveals its essential precariousness. For Lady Audley, her social status hinges on time remaining unspeakable, yet the demands of the modern world challenge that.

¹² Venerable examples of critical studies on the impact of modern technologies in the sensation novel include Nicholas Daly’s *Literature, Technology, and Modernity, 1860-2000*, Eva Badowska’s “On the Track of Things: Sensation and Modernity in Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret*,” and Beth Seltzer’s “Fictions of Order in the Timetable: Railway Guides, Comic Spoofs, and *Lady Audley’s Secret*.”

Blurred and transgressed boundaries, simultaneously overspoken and unspeakable time, and implicitly hidden secrets and mysteries all place the sensation novel in a realm of contradictions and paradoxes that make it difficult to construct a linear and coherent narrative. Richard S. Albright addresses the common presence of aporia in the sensational novel that arises from inherent contradictions in these texts, and he posits that “narrative plays a significant role in attempting to resolve the contradictions that have been created, for the desire to make sense of our lives in time by constructing a coherent narrative is as strong as ever” (Albright 169). A coherent narrative unfolding linearly over time could provide meaning and structure to resolve contradictions, like a woman who “changes her name and marries a baronet, even though she is already married.” He suggests, however, that even a linear narrative might not have the capacity to sustain the contradictions, and that results in the aporia: “In fact, the only ‘resolution’ that can be achieved is through the imposition of a social taboo – a prohibition against speaking of the matter (by not speaking the offending name). This results in a social constraint against articulating the inarticulable. If we *cannot* articulate it, then we *will* not” (Albright 169).

For Albright, the erasure of doubt and uncertainty rests in not acknowledging the source of that doubt. The “social taboo” accounts for some silences and unspeakability in the text, but it does not explain all of them, and I propose a critical exploration of an alternative to the idea of a “social constraint against articulating the inarticulable.” While the futility of an attempt to speak what cannot be spoken poses a seemingly insurmountable obstacle to reconciling the novel’s contradictions, instances of blatant recognition of that impossibility – articulating the *inarticulability* of the inarticulable – provide a productive entry into the text’s various vagaries in the presentation of time. By focusing on the surface-level words on the page, when the author lacks a word to give, a critic can reveal the novel’s secrets even while the text works to suppress

them. Considering the emphasis on class transgression in *Lady Audley's Secret*, the sociolinguistic theory of *restricted* and *elaborated* codes, along with Sharon Marcus's concept of "just reading," serves as a lens for attending to the givens on the page. Members of a set socioeconomic class utilize a restricted code in communication with one another while everyone, regardless of class position, has access to the elaborated code. What code does an individual use when transported from one class to another, and can that individual access different restricted codes in detailing the lived experiences of the poverty-class to a member of the bourgeois or landed gentry?

Braddon suggests that for a woman to maintain her new position after moving from a lower class to a higher one, she must make her past life in that lower socioeconomic position an unspeakable secret. The essence of a secret speaks to a temporal unspeakability, since it remains a secret only if it is not stated. Secrets demand silencing, and the narrator employs that temporary silence to speak to the readers' nerves as they eagerly and voicelessly anticipate further stimulus. The revelation of what was previously unsaid later in the novel produces the sensational effect Braddon desires to elicit from her readers, as her correspondence to Edward Bulwer-Lytton demonstrates: "I want to serve two masters. I want to be artistic and to please you. I want to be sensational and to please Mudie's subscribers" (Braddon 14). The initial serialization of the novel and the subsequent subscription model benefited the sensational mode as well since the distribution of the text incorporated delayed gratification and heightened expectancies. Braddon emphasizes that she wishes to serve the second master alongside the sensational, and serving that second master involves a vague notion of "artistic" achievement or mastery. Henry James evidently believed she succeeded in serving both masters, and he praised her artistic ingenuity in his review and suggested that quality translates to her novels' popularity as well: "There have

been plenty of tales of crime which have not made their authors famous, nor put money in their purses. The reason can have been only that they were not well executed. Miss Braddon, accordingly, goes to work like an artist” (James 594). The sensation novels work in part because of their high-quality production, which transcends their content from “mere trash” into something else. James clearly specifies, though, that “well executed” does not necessarily equal literary merit: “Let not the curious public take for granted that, from a literary point of view, her works are contemptible. Miss Braddon writes neither fine English nor slovenly English; not she. She writes what we may call very knowing English.” The somewhat ironic tone aside, the suggestively Jamesian “very knowing English” places Braddon in a well-informed literary tradition and corresponds with the curious class position of the narrator of *Lady Audley’s Secret* and the theory of the restricted class codes.

The novel’s paratextual dedication situates Braddon’s text within a legacy of the gothic that explicitly concerns the inexpressible. Braddon dedicates her novel in its completed form to Bulwer-Lytton “in grateful acknowledgement of literary advice most generously given to the author” (Braddon 39). Braddon fervently admired the works of Bulwer-Lytton and communicated with him throughout her literary career in developing both her artistic and mass-appealing sensibilities. Bulwer-Lytton, though widely read and popular in the nineteenth century, now has a legacy that largely consists of the infamous first sentence to his 1830 novel *Paul Clifford*: “It was a dark and stormy night” (Bulwer-Lytton 1). This sets the gothic tone and atmosphere for his novel in a clear and direct manner devoid of subtlety – the reader absolutely knows what to expect from the novel. In *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, Eve Sedgwick notes the totalizing extent of this effect in the gothic novel: “Surely no other modern literary form as influential as the gothic novel has also been as pervasively conventional. Once you know

that a novel is of the gothic kind (and you can tell from the title), you can predict its contents with unnerving certainty” (Sedgwick 9). While Bulwer-Lytton’s title does not speak gothic, his opening line screams it at the reader.

Braddon, familiar with and admiring of Bulwer-Lytton’s works, tellingly opens *Lady Audley’s Secret* in a similar fashion and with the same word as him – *it*. Braddon’s comparable opening to Bulwer-Lytton’s indicates the often-congruous relationship between the sensational mode and the gothic, but it also reveals their sometimes subtle differences including the function of the unspeakable. Just as Bulwer-Lytton deliberately telegraphs the gothic nature of his novel, Braddon signals her sensational mode and intentions in the novel’s opening words: “It lay down in a hollow” (Braddon 41). In an appropriately sensational use of language, she develops an idyllic scene resplendent with glorious pastures, curious cattle, and a general lack of disturbances. Bulwer-Lytton details his *it*, the night, consciously and with loaded gothic terminology like “dark and stormy,” whereas Braddon merely positions hers in a small valley in the English countryside. While Bulwer-Lytton makes the *it* clear within a few words in this brief but memorably predictable sentence, Braddon compounds hers with multiple clauses and a paragraph-length sentence that does not reveal *its* referent until the end:

It lay down in a hollow, rich with fine old timber and luxuriant pastures; and you came upon it through an avenue of limes, bordered on either side by meadows, over the high hedges of which the cattle looked inquisitively at you as you passed, wondering, perhaps, what you wanted; for there was no thorough-fare, and unless you were going to the Court you had no business there at all. (Braddon 41)

It denotes the *Court*, and the reader does not have to wait excruciatingly long to learn *its* referent, but Braddon does create an element of delayed gratification while concurrently promising to uncover secrets and mysteries for the reader. The respective openings of the two novels demonstrate the transference of the gothic conventions from continental castles to domestic

estates in Britain for the sensation novel. Rather than a blatantly macabre and melodramatic atmosphere and tone that overtly reveals its gothic intentions, Braddon's opening description presents an excessively restful world that *must* cover a salacious secret close to home: "It was almost oppressive, this twilight stillness. The very repose of the place grew painful from its intensity, and you felt as if a corpse must be lying somewhere within that gray and ivy-covered pile of building—so deathlike was the tranquility of all around" (Braddon 64). Braddon uses her narrator to establish a sort of gilded existence for the bourgeoisie wherein language facilitates propriety and the maintenance of respectability for its members.

Braddon opens with a small mystery characteristic of the larger ones to follow, and that mystery ultimately concerns a class marker and time's unspeakability in architecture. The first clause in the novel offers no information about the *it* besides *its* somewhat indistinct location in the hollow and the luxuriant qualities of *its* environs. The use of this reverse anaphora or cataphora (pronoun that precedes its referent; from the Greek "to carry down or backward") provides a microcosm of suspense for the reader that informs the reading of the text. Notably, the usage of the pronoun *it* frequently refers either to a tangible object or to an indefinable and abstract quality of excellence or the exceptional (e.g., She has *it* and is going to be a star). Braddon refers to the concrete Audley Court with *it* rather than as an abstract quality or as a dummy pronoun (*It* was raining). Opening the novel with a pronoun steeped in solidity and corporeality establishes the importance of objects – consumer goods – for most of the characters in the novel but particularly the middle-class ones and Lady Audley. Braddon's narrator employs the *it* not just for the tangible Audley Court, but also to refer the novel's secrets that the narrator will uncover over the novel's duration. The temporarily undefined *it* that lay down in the hollow is Audley Court, which is both a (fictional) physical location and the primary setting of the

novel. The *it* – the sensational narrative itself which could prompt scandalized whispers of “have you heard about *it*?” from the pleased Mudie subscribers – lay down in that hollow.

This opening grammatical gesture creates a complicated relationship between narrator and reader. The reader might look toward the title of the chapter to locate an antecedent for the “it,” but the first chapter’s title – “Lucy” – refers to a character rather than an object. The narrator places the *it* “down in a hollow” hidden away from the outside world in lush woods and pastures – a dangerous secret hidden within natural beauty. The narrator presents Lucy Audley in the same way constantly throughout the remainder of the novel – a natural and pristine youthful outward beauty that covers a sordid secret. The cataphoric use of the pronoun *it*, though, complicates the implications of the speakability of secrets – does a secret that precedes its antecedent require exposure?

In the second independent clause of the novel, the narrator speaks directly to the readers and makes them consider the disruptive behavior from visiting the *it* down in the hollow: “*You* came upon *it* through an avenue of limes, bordered on either side by meadows, over the high edges of which the cattle looked inquisitively at you as you passed, wondering, perhaps, what *you* wanted” (Braddon 43; my emphasis). The reader continues to learn details of the area surrounding the *it* before knowing its referent or any descriptors. The narrator specifies the reader – you – would come upon *it* rather than deliberately seeking *it* out, and your discovery would be so accidental that even the cattle would question your presence there. The narrator permits the cattle a certain degree of agential sentience since they look *inquisitively*, but the qualifier perhaps limits that sense of consciousness and stresses the perspective and interpretations of the narrator. Narrators inherently manipulate their readers, and this manipulation occurs to varying degrees of readerly comfort. Braddon positions her narrator to

guide not only the gaze of the reader but the opinions of the objects of the gaze as well. The hypothetical concern of the cattle regarding your intentionality about positioning oneself near the *it* raises further awareness of *its* privacy and secrecy. The cognizance of *its* unspeakability and secrets extends even to the speechless livestock whose perception of a disruption always already transcends the confines of language.

At the end of the first paragraph, the narrator reveals *it* to be the “Court” – a secluded and perhaps unwelcoming estate: “for there was no thorough-fare, and unless you were going to the Court you had no business there at all” (Braddon 43). The reader may have already inferred the *it* to be a certain location which Braddon confirms that at the end of the paragraph, but her narrator has yet to reveal any specifics about the Court other than its seclusion and mystery. Here the narrator addresses the reader directly once again – “*you* had no business being there” – which further develops the inexplicableness of the locale since its secrets demand covering and do not want disturbance from this nebulous *you*. However, the presence of the narrative and the narrator’s direction of the reader’s attention deliberately violate the privacy and seclusion of the estate, and Braddon intimately places the readers where they seemingly do not belong (at least according to the cattle).

The narrator further guides the reader’s gaze to the estate Audley Court, and the court introduces the intersection of both time and social class. The introduction of details about Audley Court corresponds with the first reference to an unspeakability of time in the peculiar clock on the clocktower at *its* center. Along with the detailed description of the *it* at the start of the novel, and before revealing its current name of Audley Court, Braddon presents a clock with a missing minute hand: “there was an old arch and a clock tower, with a stupid, bewildering clock, which had only one hand – and which jumped straight from one hour to the next – and was therefore

always in extremes” (Braddon 43). The selfsame instrument designed to maintain and transmit time cannot “speak” it properly, and the narrator underscores this conception within the first few paragraphs of the text. While critics disagree over the exact degree of dysfunctionality in the clock tower, it does not express time with the precision and reliability necessary for proper functioning in the modern world. Beth Seltzer connects this impotent timepiece to the bucolic imagery that starts the novel: “*Lady Audley’s Secret* initially opens in what appears to be a pre-modern world free from specificity of times. This archaism is symbolized in the novel by the opening image of the Audley Court clock tower” (Seltzer 49). The natural setting, everything described surrounding the *it* at the start, does not speak any particular time, and the *it* itself, Audley Court, has a complex relationship with time. Sir Michael Audley and Lady Audley walk along the avenue of lime trees in this opening tableau beneath the clock tower that fails to speak time, and their entrance into the diegetic space of the narrative seems to defy narrative conventions of time as well.

Braddon’s narrator utilizes the same cataphoric construction in introducing the titular Lady Audley shortly after providing the details of Audley Court. The narrator’s first mention of Lucy Audley situates her solely within her relationship to her older husband, Michael: “Sir Michael Audley would stroll up and down [the avenue of lime trees] smoking his cigar, with his dogs at his heels, and his pretty young wife dawdling by his side” (Braddon 44). While the *it* from the first sentence does not refer to the chapter’s title “Lucy” and instead references an object [Audley Court], the first time Lady Audley appears in the novel, the narrator presents her as a possession of the casual cigar-wielding baronet whose family name designates the *it* at the start of the novel. (Perhaps relevant, Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Braddon’s literary idol and mentor, was also a middle-aged baronet.) Before confirming this “pretty young wife” as a Lucy,

the narrator provides the primary designator she will use much more frequently than her actual name (which, incidentally, is *not* her *actual* name): “*my lady* played dreamy melodies by Beethoven and Mendelssohn till her husband fell asleep in his easy chair” (Braddon 46; my emphasis). The usage of “my lady” reveals a class position for the narrator below that of the wife of a baronet. Curiously, Robert, with his peculiar classed position as both the nephew of a baronet and a lawyer, also refers to his young step-aunt as “my lady” at several points in the text. The referential term also shows a possessive quality; Lucy Audley is *my lady* for the narrator perhaps both in her own presumed middle-class status as well as in her position as the narrator’s heroine/villainess.

The novel begins with Sir Michael and Lady Audley already married, a fact which defies the conventions of the marriage-plot, which typically ends in the appropriate marriage for the protagonist. Lady Audley first appears to the reader as the wife of a baronet, a woman who inhabits a pre-modern space that refuses to show time properly. The narrator backpedals to reveal some of her early working-class upbringing and the expedited courtship by and betrothal to Sir Michael once he notices the charming young governess in town who could fulfill his fantasies of a second marriage predicated not on timeliness or necessity to conceive a male heir, but on what he imagines as pure unadulterated love. With the teleological endeavors of his life mostly passed since the death of his first wife, Sir Michael can relax in the ease and leisure that his class position offers him. Noticing Lucy Graham affords him the chance to enact a kind of romance he knows from novels, but he does ponder the potential incompatibility arising from their age disparity. Sir Michael Audley desires time’s unspeakability, but he possesses a heightened awareness that it already marks him, and his middle-aged body plainly states a passage of time in defining his love toward Lucy: “But this was love – this fever, this longing,

this restless, uncertain, miserable hesitation; these cruel fears that his age was an insurmountable barrier to his happiness; this sick hatred of his white beard; this frenzied wish to be young again” (Braddon 48). For Sir Michael, love and time intertwine, and the awareness of his aging physique and limited remaining time on earth spark the passionate desire for Lucy that he never experienced with his now-deceased first wife.

While Sir Michael’s outward physical appearance harshly speaks his age to a viewer, Lucy’s does the exact opposite: “As she was very young nobody exactly knew her age, but she looked little more than twenty” (Braddon 49). Lucy demands time’s unknowability to maintain her youthful appearance, which attracts the attention of the ineffective baronet and secures her move from the genteel poverty of a governess to the relative comfort and ease of the gentry. The narrator stresses Lucy’s youthful appearance, allure, and demeanor to underscore her juvenility and its pleasing quality especially to the members of the bourgeoisie:

That very childishness had a charm which few could resist. The innocence and candor of an infant beamed in Lady Audley's fair face, and shone out of her large and liquid blue eyes. The rosy lips, the delicate nose, the profusion of fair ringlets, all contributed to preserve to her beauty the character of extreme youth and freshness. (Braddon 90)

Braddon’s descriptions of beatific beauty abound throughout the novel. For all the concerns of unspeakableness and secrets, beauty remains wholly and excessively effable. The inexpressible emerges regarding Lucy’s exact age – the actual amount of time she has spent on the earth dazzling others with her loveliness. Her outward physical appearance falters in speaking her age, and the narrator seems uncertain whether Lucy chooses to speak it properly either: “She owned to twenty years of age, but it was hard to believe her more than seventeen” (Braddon 90). Lucy *owns* to the age of twenty, which no one believes, but that merely shows her self-reporting time which can drastically differ from her actual lived age since she shows no qualms in lying about

aspects of her identity (her name, her marital status, how many people she attempts to murder etc.). Moreover, as Albright notes, before her marriage to Sir Michael she “look[s] little more than twenty,” and after the marriage, “it was hard to believe her more than seventeen” (Albright 191-192). Not only does her appearance render time unspeakable, it is almost as if it works in reverse as the novel progresses.

Sir Michael Audley utilizes the language of romance while courting Lucy, and he proposes to her to fulfill fantasies of acquiring a young bride and removing a young girl from a lower status with “a love that should recall to her the father she had lost.” Lucy considers the proposal and reminds him that she comes from poverty, and she attempts to articulate the qualities of her childhood life in poverty:

Remember what my life has been; only remember that! From my very babyhood I have never seen anything but poverty. My father was a gentleman: clever, accomplished, handsome—but poor—and what a pitiful wretch poverty made of him! My mother—But do not let me speak of her. Poverty—poverty, trials, vexations, humiliations, deprivations. (Braddon 52)

Lady Audley ruminates on the prospect of receiving money and comfort with a marriage to the baronet, and she stresses to him that after her life in poverty she cannot *not* consider the practical and financial benefits of the match. She begins to discuss her mother and then catches herself before she can properly reveal any information about her and requests of Sir Michael that he not “let” her speak of her. She recognizes that some negative consequence could arise from speaking of her mother, and she makes that woman’s life, at least temporarily, unspeakable. She repeats the words *poverty* and *poor* multiple times without ever actually qualifying what that life consists of or means. Her entire life she has “never seen anything but poverty,” and yet she cannot fully capture those lived experiences in applicable words. She underscores this reality of linguistic dissonance to Sir Michael and forces him to consider the practical benefits of the marriage that

have no place in his romantic ideal:

You cannot tell; you, who are among those for whom life is so smooth and easy, you can never guess what is endured by such as we. Do not ask too much of me, then. I cannot be disinterested; I cannot be blind to the advantages of such an alliance. I cannot, I cannot! (Braddon 52)

Lucy informs Sir Michael that he “cannot tell” – which indicates both that he does not know or fully understand what life in poverty consists of and that he cannot speak it. However, neither can Lucy, especially in this instance, and “Beyond her agitation and her passionate vehemence, there is an undefined something in her manner which fills the baronet with a vague alarm” (Braddon 52). That “undefined something” may refer to the latent inherited madness from her mother, but it could relate to her class and desire to leave it.

With George Talboys’s introduction at the start of the second chapter, he receives the same cataphoric treatment as Audley Court and Lady Audley. The second chapter sees a shift of the setting from “glorious old” Audley Court to a boat on the liminal space of the water between the reaches of the empire in Australia and the English countryside. Braddon begins the second chapter in a similar manner as she does the first with the pronoun “he” and no antecedent: “He threw the end of his cigar into the water, and leaning his elbow upon the bulwarks, stared meditatively at the waves” (Braddon 54). This as yet unknown *he* evidently does not refer to any character from the first chapter since the appearance of the water and *bulwarks* markedly shows the action has moved away from Audley Court to a ship. The reader receives the physical description of the man before learning his identity to be George Talboys. Once again, the narrator wants the reader to learn the quality of a principal player in the novel before offering their full identity -- just as the genuine identity of “my lady” becomes increasingly clear before the narrator outright states it. In the second chapter, this contributes to the growing and imminent sense of mystery that prevails until Lady Audley discloses her genuine identity and the

presumed-dead George Talboys dramatically reenters the narrative.

The narrator projects a degree of uncertainty around George when he learns of the “death” of his wife in a curious occurrence of narratorial obfuscation. George receives the newspaper announcing the death of Helen Talboys, and before the narrator reveals this information (perhaps already presumed by the attentive reader), she proclaims uncertainty at the duration of his examining the paper: “*I cannot tell* how long he sat blankly staring at one paragraph among the list of deaths, before his dazed brain took in its full meaning” (Braddon 76; my emphasis). Braddon’s narrator lacks the capability to communicate a piece of the narrative, and she deliberately draws attention to this communicative barrier – not *one cannot*, or *his companions cannot*, but *I*, the narrator, *cannot*. The narrator – who has shown the reach of her scope into the private thoughts of the characters within the first few chapters – cannot access George’s interiority in this instance of processing and comprehending the shocking and traumatic news of his wife’s death.

The use of the word *tell* here suggests a dual meaning relating to both unspeakability and unknowability: the narrator is either both unsure of the duration and therefore incapable of conveying it to the reader or possesses the exact length but is unwilling to share it. Revealingly, this moment of attempting to express the inexpressibility of the inexpressible centers on an issue of time – “I cannot tell *how long*.” Braddon includes precise times and its exact measurements invariably as the narrative unfolds, particularly with regards to Robert and his investigation into the sudden disappearance of George Talboys. Critics have noted the “punctuality” of the sensation novel and its reliance on modern technologies like the railway and the pocket watch to maintain that sense of regularity. Yet, at pivotal moments in the text, like the establishing of the setting at Audley Court and the discovery of George’s wife’s death, time refuses to be spoken

either fully or properly. In processing traumatic information, time's knowability and speakability entirely disintegrate for the narrator and for George. Tellingly, George receives this shocking information from a newspaper entitled *Times* (Braddon 76). Braddon diminishes the impact of the revelation with the further divulgence of its falsity: George Talboys's wife did not die but, rather, faked her death, changed her name to Lucy Graham, and married an elderly and wealthy baronet.

George realizes the truth about his wife's faked death when he and Robert secretly enter her chamber one night to look upon an ostentatious pre-Raphaelite painting of her that results in an analogous scene of George looking speechlessly at a revelatory piece of information for an unspecified amount of time. The incalculable amount of time spent in looking at the newspaper reflects the gravity of the information he had to process, but the narrator understates the moment when George stares at the painting: "But strange as the picture was, it could not have made any great impression on George Talboys, for he sat before it for about a quarter of an hour without uttering a word – only staring blankly at the painted canvas" (Braddon 107). A quarter of an hour sounds exact, but the addition of "about" undermines the exact measurement. Braddon repeats the description of his gaze, "blanking staring," from when he looked at the newspaper, but he does not fully process the information in the moment as he eventually does with the announcement of her death. He must reconcile the fact of her death with this meticulously detailed pre-Raphaelite representation of her living presence. Naturally, he can only do this "without uttering a word."

George Talboys's discovery of the painting and recognition of its subject initiate the series of events that lead Robert Audley to begin speaking time. He enters the novel as a "handsome, lazy, care-for-nothing fellow" disinterested in the passage of time. Despite his

profession of barrister, he never actually tries a case or hears a brief (Braddon 71). Because of his family and inheritance, he has the opportunity to spend his entire life in leisure and luxuriating in unspoken time. The disappearance of his childhood friend, however, sparks his maturation process into timeliness. When Robert realizes that George is missing, he attempts to establish a timetable, which involves asking a waiter the last time he saw George and determining the difference in time between then and when he first wakes up without George beside him (Braddon 117). That night, after George disappears, Robert's increased mental exertion and forced awareness of time causes him to experience time's unspeakability, for the first time in his life, in a negative way:

The usual lazy monotony of his life had been broken as it had never been broken before in eight-and-twenty tranquil, easy-going years. His mind was beginning to grow confused upon the point of time. It seemed to him months since he had lost sight of George Talboys. It was difficult to believe that it was less than forty-eight hours ago that the young man had left him asleep under the willows by the trout stream. (Braddon 129)

Robert cannot speak time properly here, and that makes him feel uneasy and lacking control in his life. He vows to determine the fate of his friend and, in effect, learn to know and speak time. Robert's ability to speak time poses a tremendous threat to Lady Audley, and his increased timeliness leads him to confront Lady Audley about her past. Robert, a wealthy man who comes to speak and know time, cannot accept that this woman leaves it unspeakable.

Robert forces Lady Audley to confess her crimes; all of which stem from her attempts not to speak her past or her attempts to preserve the ability to leave the past unspoken. Those crimes include the attempted murder of George Talboys, which she commits in order to leave her past unspoken. George realizes the true identity of Lady Audley precisely because her picture simultaneously preserves her in a moment of time and reveals the past that intersects with his own. However, Robert cannot know those exact details until he forces Lady Audley to confess,

and it is the realization that she burned down the Castle Inn that finally prompts him to demand the confession. Lady Audley, who has used unspeakability and unknowability so deftly to secure her status up to this point, initially resists Robert's demand:

“Shall I tell you by whose agency the destruction of the Castle Inn was brought about, my lady?”

There was no answer.

“Shall I tell you?”

Still the same obstinate silence. (Braddon 353)

Her obstinate silence demonstrates her recognition of the value of silence and realization of how well it has served her before. Perhaps she remains silent to force Robert to reveal all that he knows, or perhaps she remains silent to force Robert to speak more and allow her to consider her options now that her secret must be revealed. Regardless, Robert continues to speak, and he knows almost everything about her, which he knows from evidence gathered in his investigations into her past and her time spent married to his uncle: she grew up in poverty under the name “Helen”; she married George Talboys; when he left for Australia, she faked her death; she changed her name to “Lucy Graham”; she attempted to murder George Talboys, and set fire to a local inn. After he reveals all this, he offers the opportunity for her to confess. He assures that that the confession could mitigate the punishment she receives for her crimes from him and her husband. She relents to his demands with a striking comment on Robert's insistence in forcing her past to be spoken: “God knows I have struggled hard enough against you, and fought the battle patiently enough; but you have conquered, Mr. Robert Audley” (Braddon 354). Robert has consistently perturbed her, just like the incessant ticking of a clock that refuses not to speak or allow its listener a reprieve from the passage of time. Lady Audley summons Sir Michael Audley to reveal all and leave nothing of her life left unspoken: “Bring Sir Michael; and bring him quickly. If he is to be told one thing, let him be told everything; let him hear the secret of my

life!” (Braddon 355). Lady Audley understands that once a part of what she wishes to remain unspoken must be said, then nothing truly remains unspeakable. Apparently, the secret that constitutes her life demands revelation.

Mary Elizabeth Braddon highlights the unspeakability of time and the benefit it can have for a working-class woman to transgress her class boundary, but she also underscores the temporary nature of this possibility. Lady Audley needs time’s unspeakability, but a man like Robert Audley cannot accept or admit that which he does not know or cannot speak. Time’s unspeakability can serve as a tool for a working-class woman like Lucy Audley, but the longevity of her ability to wield that tool is rather precarious. The burgeoning bourgeois requires a control of time for themselves that permits both speakability and unspeakability: time should be unspoken during increased opportunities for leisure but highly spoken during working hours. Time’s unspeakability is not unambiguously productive or destructive for Mary Elizabeth Braddon. Lady Audley can attest to that fact after she loses her comfortable home at Audley Court and dies from a *maladie de langueur* – a fatigue from too much restfulness, or from an excess of time’s unspeakability.

Chapter IV: *The Mill on the Floss*

“Express Ourselves in Well-Bred Phrases”: Failure to Speak and Know Women’s Education, Desire, and Narratives

Stephen was mute; he was incapable of putting a sentence together, and Maggie bent her arm a little upward toward the large half-opened rose that had attracted her. Who has not felt the beauty of a woman's arm? The unspeakable suggestions of tenderness that lie in the dimpled elbow, and all the varied gently lessening curves, down to the delicate wrist, with its tiniest, almost imperceptible nicks in the firm softness. (Eliot 460)

In George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), the recognition of the unspeakable most often concerns mid-nineteenth-century women’s educations, desires, and narratives. The sensation, or gothic, modes invite the presentation and direct expression of moments of unspeakability much more than a strictly realist mode does. Eliot generally adheres to strictly realist conventions, but, in her earlier novels, she frequently speaks to the unspeakable and considers its unequal role in the development of English boys and girls. In *The Mill on the Floss*, Eliot embraces and highlights the generative possibilities of unspeakability through more indirect forms of recognition than those found in *Villette* (1853) or *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862). Eliot reveals the unspeakability, unknowability, and unthinkability of desire, women’s desire in particular, in an insular English community with rigid class and gender distinctions and expectations. Expressing the inexpressibility of desire does not negate the desire but, rather, expands its capabilities for achieving self-actualization.

The realist author uses particularity in detail to achieve a heightened sense of verisimilitude and attempts to replicate believable truths through fiction.¹³ This quality of the

¹³ When referring to “realism” in this chapter on Eliot, I am using Ian Watt’s classic definition of “formal realism” from *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), wherein he claims, “Modern realism, of course, begins from the position that truth can be discovered by the individual through his senses” (Watt 12). While Watt’s text deals with the eighteenth-

realist mode resists this recognition of linguistic gaps or shortcomings of language as a tool for communication, and global realist authors subsequently produce tomes like Eliot's *Middlemarch* or Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* in English or Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* in Russian that function within what nineteenth-century French novelist Gustave Flaubert might call the application of *le mot juste*. For the realist author, the essence of quality writing lay in always precisely selecting the best possible word for every possible circumstance. This presupposes that *le mot juste* already exists, and that it is the onus of the author to seek it out and ensure that it is used accordingly. This hardly allows for expressions of the unspeakable: reality is speakable and the author speaks reality. While this applies to the narrator of a novel like *Middlemarch* where Eliot devotes considerable narrative time and space to characters' interiority, earlier novels like *Adam Bede* and *The Mill on the Floss* show Eliot experimenting with the realist mode, especially in their endings, and allow for those productive expressions of the inexpressibility of the inexpressible.

With Eliot's predilections toward realism and her privileging of the expressible, the method of "just reading" the "symptomatic" does not serve an analysis of unspeakability in *The Mill on the Floss* as well as it does *Villette* or *Lady Audley's Secret*. Rather, Eliot provides a methodology within the text itself when the narrator muses on the possibilities and limitations of symbolism in expression. Appropriately, Eliot uses descriptions of an educator, Mr. Stelling, to introduce these considerations, and through them she provides a kind of *ars poetica* for realist novelist production that contrasts the mode with the overly lyrical romantic or fantastical gothic modes. The narrator mentions the schoolmaster's "favourite metaphor" in believing that "the

century novel, his establishment of realist conventions relates to Eliot's early novels in the same way that the gothic conventions relate to *Villette*.

classics and geometry constituted that culture of the mind which prepared it for the reception of the subsequent crop” (Eliot 147). With this rather pointed intrusion into Mr. Stelling’s mind to seize upon the mention of metaphor, the narrator embarks on tangential journey about the relative value of metaphors applied in certain situations. This culminates in an invocation of Aristotle — one of Mr. Stelling’s favorites as well — and his equation of the use of metaphors with the qualities of a genius. However, Eliot’s narrator believes that the ancient philosopher might temper his adoration of metaphorical language in her contemporary world if he could see how frequently “geniuses” rely on metaphor for expression:

O Aristotle! If you had had the advantage of being ‘the freshest modern’ instead of the greatest ancient, would you not have mingled your praise of metaphorical speech as a sign of high intelligence, with a lamentation that intelligence so rarely shows itself in speech without metaphor, — that we can so seldom declare what a thing is, except by saying it is something else? (Eliot 147)

Eliot does not celebrate the potential symbolic capability of language but, rather, deems it worthy of a “lamentation” that this metaphorical methodology is required to speak. She seems to speak directly to the romantic tradition in these tangential comments wherein the masters of that literary mode rely heavily on the use of metaphor to circumvent the true quality of something by placing in contrast with another. She bemoans the need for this sort of speech in demonstrating intelligence, or quality writing, and it provides an early defense of the realist mode that so heavily defines her literary career. However, Eliot suggests a sort of proto-deconstructionist method to approaching language with the recognition of deferred meaning through relational difference (Derrida 476).¹⁴ This method suggests a productive lack of closure in meaning, and it is through that lack that I approach the moments of recognized inexpressibility in the text.

¹⁴ Following the Derridean method further could suggest an even greater unspeakability inherent in language. This would imply that language *only* consists of expressions of the inexpressible.

The ending of *The Mill on the Floss* speaks to the difficulty of a realist author to provide complete closure not just to meaning, but to a narrative as well. After using detailed realistic depictions of country life in these two novels, Eliot seems to struggle with how to reconcile the contradictions that arise from Maggie's struggles to either accept or renounce her desires. In *Adam Bede*, the characters experience a rather contrived happy conclusion with the sudden appearance of one character to rescue another, while *The Mill on the Floss* includes a *deus ex machina* in a force of nature that unceremoniously kills the main two characters. *The Mill on the Floss*, then, shows the unspeakable functioning at a much broader narrative level, and since it includes the intersection of the unspeakable and the unknowable surrounding issues of gender and class division that at times resonate with *Villette* and *Lady Audley's Secret* and at times significantly complicate them, it appropriately serves the project of exploring how the recognition of shortcomings in language can benefit lower-class female protagonists. The issue of thinkability arises in the provincial English setting and the limitations of class-based decorum and propriety placed on the behavior of women and members of different socioeconomic classes.

George Eliot sets her novel roughly a quarter century before its publication date, and this decision allows her to retroactively consider the impact of modernization on the class dynamics of a small provincial town. *The Mill on the Floss* was published in 1860 shortly before Braddon's sensational novel and roughly a decade after Brontë's genre defying but largely gothic one. While biographers and critics frequently note the autobiographical elements, many, including the historian Nancy Henry, note the importance of Eliot's deviations from her own story in the representation of Maggie. Henry provides a considerable caveat to reading Eliot's biography into the novel: "While acknowledging the biographical dimensions of *The Mill* in particular, it is equally important to recover the ambiguity signaled by [J. W.] Cross when he

wrote that the book reflected and recalled her ‘feelings in her childhood’ rather than any particular events” (Henry 114). In fact, the novel appears largely ahistorical other than a passing reference to the end of the Napoleonic Wars. Further, while the novel’s setting has literal parallels in Eliot’s life and travels throughout England, the eponymous river and the nearby town St. Oggs are fictional. The insulated provincial setting and ahistorical quality make the novel simultaneously separate and timeless and local and immediate. These inherent contradictions enhance Eliot’s ability to examine the contradictions that accompany the growth and development of the two main characters and the contradictions within the conventions of the novel of development as well.

Numerous critics note that the novel falls under the bildungsroman category, but that it does not completely or neatly follow those conventions. Eliot differs in the traditional presentation of the development novel with a dual bildungs of both a young girl, Maggie, and her brother, Tom.¹⁵ Both receive education and experience the hardships that young protagonists often learn to overcome to achieve the knowledge and success of a Jane Eyre or a David Copperfield. Yet Tom and Maggie do not achieve success and full maturation by the end of the novel, and instead, they, along with all their hopes and dreams, perish in a flood. With the dual bildungs as well, Maggie’s narrative always seems to compete with Tom’s, and that tension ultimately results in both narratives collapsing in the flood. Tom works diligently, almost excessively, to the point of eschewing starting a family or any other long term obligations, to save Dorlcote Mill after his father loses the mill from poor investments and a lawsuit that does not resolve in his favor (and sours him even more to the lawyer Wakem), and Tom’s

¹⁵ J. H. Buckley famously formulated the dual bildungsroman in relation to George Eliot in *Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding* (Buckley 94). Susan Fraiman recontextualizes this idea and considers how the novel occupies the “double view of women as agents as well as victims” (Fraiman 138).

expectations of his role as the masculine provider for the family often supersede or even squelch the desires, dreams, and passions in Maggie.

In conjunction with discussions of the novel's possibility as a bildungsroman, critics often focus on the characters' fall from a comfortably bourgeois socioeconomic standing to one closer to poverty and the level of sympathy that this garners from the reader. Eliot's development of sympathy in the novel immediately prior to *The Mill on the Floss*, *Adam Bede* (1859), illustrates the significance of the unspeakable in eliciting sympathy for *The Mill on the Floss* specifically. In *Adam Bede*, Eliot demands readers' sympathy towards the suffering of her characters, and she provides a pleasant resolution to relieve them of their suffering and reward readers' care and sympathy for them. In *The Mill on the Floss*, Eliot does not speak so directly to the readers' sense of sympathy for the characters as she does in *Adam Bede*, but then she kills them in such a dramatic fashion that she seems to dare an unfeeling reader not to feel pity for the characters who reach such a tragic ending befitting an ancient Greek play or biblical allegory. The reader clearly understands Tom's motives and desires from early in the novel. Maggie's remain more nebulous and unspeakable, and with the flood, they are entirely unrealizable. Eliot seems unable to speak not only the female protagonist's desires but any of those desires properly coming to fruition.

Unspeakability and desire are central to the issue of education in *The Mill on the Floss*. The differences among Tom's, Maggie's, and their father's interest in education and procuring knowledge is illustrative of the unspeakability and unknowability of women's desires. In *Villette*, Lucy Snowe revels in and wields unknowability to her advantage, but Maggie desperately desires to know and to receive an education at least equal to that offered to her brother Tom. The reader receives access to the siblings' childhood, and the initial conflict of the text involves Mr.

Tulliver's decision to send Tom to a new school to increase his cultural capital, which could theoretically benefit his employment prospects. Tellingly, a major influence on Mr. Tulliver's desire for Tom to receive a more thorough and detailed education involves Tom developing a mastery of the use of language, and Mr. Tulliver wonders whether a parson, and a religious institution in general, could provide that pedagogical prowess: "My notion o' the parsons was as they'd got a sort o' learning as lay mostly out o' sight. And that isn't what I want for Tom. I want him to know figures, and write like print, and see into things quick, and know what folks mean, and how to wrap things up in words as aren't actionable" (Eliot 25). In heavily dialectical English, Mr. Tulliver imagines the power of garnering a command of language that allows the speaker to understand and know information quickly. The hot-tempered Mr. Tulliver, who never received a proper education, views words as a means to function civilly and resolve disputes without action. However, he does not recognize the value in mastering language for his daughter to achieve a sense of civility and decorum, and he makes this abundantly clear when speaking with his associate Mr. Riley about new schooling options for Tom: "A woman's no business wi' being so clever; it'll turn to trouble, I doubt" (Eliot 20). Even from her earliest childhood years, Maggie's family wants her to leave her intellectual capabilities and desires unspoken. While Maggie recognizes the need to leave her intellectual curiosities unspoken, to adults mostly, she fosters her interests and fuels those desires for knowledge through private reading and occasionally speaking to her contemporaries about topics that interest her.

Maggie does not always willingly accept the unspeakability of her desires, and she even attempts to run away and leave the past behind her when she runs away to join the gypsies after pushing her cousin Lucy Deane into a swampy mud. Like Lucy Snowe and Lucy Audley, who successfully abandon their previous lives and pasts to seek opportunities where that past life

could remain unspoken, Maggie attempts a similar move to distance herself from the expectations and demands of her family and home, but her plan quickly fails. Maggie misses the comforts of her home, and she cannot overcome her family loyalty and the “need of being loved,” which is “the strongest need in poor Maggie’s nature” and a “wonderful subduer” (Eliot 42). Maggie’s placating nature and desire to please others supersede her other desires throughout the novel and prevent her from achieving the same level of triumph as either of the Lucys. Moreover, that need for being loved stems from her provincial society’s expectations for a young girl to appear pleasant and pleasing, rather than thoughtful and challenging.

Maggie struggles to reconcile her “strongest need” for receiving love and acceptance with her other desires for knowledge and opportunities for creative expression that remain primarily unspoken. For example, before Maggie attempts to abandon Dorlcote Mill and join the gypsies, she informs Tom that his rabbits died while he was away at school and worries about losing Tom’s love because of it. Maggie directly pleads with Tom to forgive her and continue loving her, and the narrator suggests that course of action works in childhood and is lost in adults: “We learn to restrain ourselves as we get older. We keep apart when we have quarreled, express ourselves in well-bred phrases, and in this way preserve a dignified alienation, showing much firmness on one side, and swallowing much grief on the other” (Eliot 43). The narrator indicates a sort of emotional temperance that accompanies growing up, and that involves restraint, isolation, and the use of “well-bred” phrases. Part of the *bildung*’s process, then, involves a greater attention to and care for the use of language, and the unspeakable naturally expands with considerations of propriety and candor even when dealing with a confrontation. This self-editing behavior in conflict appropriately corresponds to class position as well, and the narrator continues with the distinction between the more animalistic fighting behaviors of youth and the

proper decorum associated with the upper class: “We no longer approximate in our behaviour to the mere impulsiveness of the lower animals, but conduct ourselves in every respect like members of a highly civilised society” (Eliot 43). This language of approximation reflects the musings on the nature of metaphorical language where an intelligent speaker can express something only “by saying it is something else.” Moreover, the reference to behavior mimicking that of “lower animals” removes that behavior entirely from the realm of language since it is the ability to communicate through verbal language that separates humans from animals. The class dimension of the narrator’s aside about behavior is all the more striking for its reference to animals and the frequent conflation of animalistic behavior with members of the lower classes. Yet, the aspects of lived human experiences that constitute the structurally unspeakable create a more productive connection between the speechlessness of animals and human expression. However, Eliot unambiguously presents the disastrous effects of an inability to conduct oneself as a member of a civilized society when Mr. Tulliver exhausts himself to death when he attacks the unsuspecting lawyer Mr. Wakem with a horsewhip. Mr. Tulliver’s fate, while dramatic and unspeakably horrifying for his children, appears inevitable, and he seems unable to escape a forceful predetermination that haunts all of the characters in the novel.¹⁶

Eliot interweaves her thoughts about determinism and desire with Tom’s ultimate disinterest in and disuse of the education he receives from Mr. Stelling. She offers a counterexample of someone who outwardly benefits from that kind of education in Stephen Guest. Eliot briefly mentions Stephen, the affluent son of a prosperous business where Uncle

¹⁶ Critics have frequently examined the issue of determinism in *The Mill on the Floss* along with Eliot’s novels in general (Ermath and Levine). Kristie M. Allen takes up the issue in “Habit in George Eliot’s *Mill on the Floss*,” which deals with the evolution from custom to habit in the modern world of the mid-nineteenth century. Habit has fascinating implications for examining specific moments of unspeakability in the text.

Deane works, early in the novel in reference to the quality of his education and the kind of life he should expect because of it. Mr. Deane alludes to the wealthy Stephen when he considers the prospects of his eager-to-work nephew Tom: “Your poor father went the wrong way to work in giving you an education. It wasn’t my business, and I didn’t interfere; but it is as I thought it would be. You’ve had a sort of learning that’s all very well for a young Stephen Guest, who’ll have nothing to do but sign checks all his life, and may as well have Latin inside his head as any other sort of stuffing” (Eliot 245). Mr. Tulliver’s efforts to educate Tom so he can have a career of a higher station than mill-keeper ultimately appear fruitless to any actual need for work, and Mr. Deane uses Stephen as the exemplar of an individual who needs not learn any specific trade nor acquire seemingly practical skills.

Stephen Guest neatly encapsulates Bernstein’s notion of the restricted language code available to the middle and upper classes who have access to substantial formal education. Stephen’s initial reticence to recognize when he experiences moments of inexpressibility speaks to the kind of privileged relationship with language that his upbringing affords him. Tom’s knowledge of Latin, however (and as little as it may be), serves him little in providing for the family and reacquiring the mill after its sale to Mr. Wakem. Mr. Deane also directly references the sort of determinism constantly working in the novel with his aside about not interfering in the decisions regarding Tom’s formal education. Mr. Deane allows Mr. Tulliver to take whatever course he likes regardless of whether that course might make sense for a person in his position even though he knows that it will eventually cause Tulliver’s ruin and Tom’s inability to succeed. That determinism works against Tulliver’s wishes to have Tom receive the more classical education of the upper classes as well, but Tom dismisses his education with Mr. Stelling, and his *bildung* essentially resets in an apprenticeship with his Uncle Deane. Maggie

does not have the option to reset her education's path, and her imaginative and scholastic interests, while vast and much superior to Tom's, seem even more impractical and counterproductive to the family's success and longevity at this critical juncture. These qualities make her more attractive to the artistically minded Philip Wakem, and perhaps to the newly introduced Stephen Guest. The quick aside about Stephen offers the only knowledge of him in the first two volumes — that his class position permits him to indulge in whatever scholarly, artistic, or bourgeois endeavors he might desire. The “stuffing” inside his head does not matter to his inheritance of the family business, and he has guaranteed financial security and an able body, which makes all the more a suitable suitor to Maggie.

The unspeakability of Maggie's desires, which include potential physical relationships with either Philip or Stephen, simultaneously facilitate and threaten her construction of self and her ability to experience complacency, let alone genuine happiness. While she attempts to suppress her desires and make her own sense of happiness subservient to that of her family's security and longevity, she always fails to do so for any extended amount of time, and her imagination and dreams subsume her very being. She desperately wants to please others and even believes that character trait defines her more than anything else, especially as a child, but her dreams remain. Maggie's narrative, along with her desires, is ultimately unspeakable and unsustainable through to the novel's conclusion. Through not fully sharing Maggie's desires and dreams with the reader, Eliot preserves a sort of mystery around them and permits the reader to question what those dreams might consist of, a fact which further underscores the unknowability of desire by leaving it unspoken. But the construction of the narrative itself does not ever allow them to be speakable. In this sense, women's desires and narratives are ultimately both unspeakable and unknowable. Maggie expresses her need to suppress her desires when Philip

Wakem suggests that they could achieve greater happiness if they were to see each other more frequently despite her father's and brother's objections toward the Wakem family in general, but Maggie states that they cannot spend more time together regardless of how much happiness it could bring to them: "I've been a great deal happier [...] since I have given up thinking about what is easy and pleasant, and being discontented because I couldn't have my own will. Our life is determined for us; and it makes the mind very free when we give up wishing, and only think of bearing what is laid upon us, and doing what is given us to do" (Eliot 314). Maggie equates the possibility of happiness with the need to deprive herself of hopes and dreams. Maggie claims that "it makes the mind free" not to concern oneself with desires beyond what one currently possesses, an assertion which implies an inward unspeakability, more an unthinkability than anything else. Despite this, Maggie fails to deprive herself of expanding her happiness beyond what is given to her, and she desires to share her imagination with the incredibly willing Philip.

True to form, Maggie renounces Philip at Tom's behest, and that desire to please continues to render her desires, or even their possibilities, unspeakable. The sudden appearance of Stephen in the narrative provides Maggie with the greatest chance to satisfy her desires, but she denounces him as well. Early feminist critics like Gilbert and Gubar, Elizabeth Ermath, and Elaine Showalter note Maggie's resignation and tendency toward renunciation against her own desires, but I join Susan Fraiman, among others, who recognize Maggie's simultaneous agency and disempowerment in the decision not to elope with Stephen Guest (Fraiman 137-138).

Further, I suggest that it is through her recognition of the unspeakability of her love for Stephen and the nonverbal manner in which she rejects him that Maggie's agency appears most evident. Rather than representing a denial of herself and her desires, her renunciation of Stephen illustrates the same kind of narratorial and agential control that Lucy Snowe and Lady Audley

find in the embracing of language's limitations.

Stephen Guest suddenly enters the novel at the start of the third volume, and his intrusion into the text complicates Maggie's relationship with her desires and the extent of their speakability. He appears initially as a lover to Maggie's cousin Lucy but quickly becomes infatuated with Maggie, much to the chagrin of early reviewers of the novel.¹⁷ Stephen poses a threat to the match between Maggie and Philip (an even more insurmountable one than Tom's hatred toward Wakem and his son), but he has a companion in Lucy Deane. Despite this, his presence leads to Philip experiencing the unspeakable when his highly active and complex imagination considers endless possible obstacles that could arise and prevent them from evening seeing one another: "What is the matter, Maggie? Has something happened?" Philip said, in inexpressible anxiety — his imagination being only too ready to weave everything that was fatal to them both" (Eliot 431). In his questioning despair about the specific circumstances that could lead to their complete separation and downfall, Philip experiences an "inexpressible anxiety." Eliot's narrator most often recognizes the unspeakable or unsayable with regard to either affect or propriety. What renders Philip's anxiety inexpressible is, in part, the intensity of the affective experience, but it is more about outwardly performing such an intensity. Social decorum demands more control and self-possession, the self-restraint that the narrator mentions earlier in the text that individuals must adopt as part of the maturation process. Maggie responds with her typical denunciation of her pleasures and desires: "No - nothing," said Maggie, rousing her latent will. Philip must not have the odious thought in his mind: she would banish it from her

¹⁷ Charles Algernon Swinburne, a contemporary poet to Eliot, praises the first two-thirds of *The Mill on the Floss* but views Stephen Guest as an unspeakable "thing" that represents the height of cynicism: "If we are really to take it on trust ... that a woman of Maggie Tuliver's kind can be moved to any sense but that of bitter disgust and sickening disdain by a thing – I will not write, a man – of Stephen Guest's [sic]; ... in that ugly and lamentable case, our only remark, as our only comfort, must be that now at least the last word of realism has been spoken, the last abyss of cynicism has surely been sounded and laid bare" (Swinburne 32-33).

mind” (Eliot 431). While Philip cannot name his exact concern about what Maggie has done, she recognizes that she must leave it not only unsaid but unthought as well. She worries about the effect that knowledge would have on Philip, and she fears recognizing the desire within herself for Stephen Guest. She must “banish” the thought from her mind in an attempt to protect both Philip and herself. She then expresses the latency of her desires without speaking them and suggests the undesirable implications of those desires: “Nothing except in my own mind. You used to say I should feel the effect of my starved life, as you called it, and I do. I am too eager in my enjoyment of music and all luxuries, now they are come to me” (Eliot 431). The emergence of the creatively stimulating in her life with her visit to St. Oggs provides her with an enticement that she feels obliged to neglect for her predetermined social roles and familial obligations. Maggie notices the visibility and speakability of the desires of the members of the social circles in St. Oggs, and she wants to resist that influence on her own desire. In her typical desire to please others, she also does not want Philip to realize her interests and desire could extend to him as a potential romantic match.

Eliot infuses Maggie’s reassuring comment to Philip with her unspoken desire, and the possibility of a fulfilling and self-actualized future outside of the constraints of her current life rests in that unspeakability. Philip, and the narrator, recognize her nonrecognition of the exact nature of those desires and the effect they might have on her. Philip wonders whether Maggie withholds or leaves unspoken a deeper cause for her unhappiness other than the oblique reference to the delights of the luxuries. In free-indirect-discourse for Philip, the narrator characterizes Maggie’s tendency toward conflicting feelings surrounding her desires: “It was quite in Maggie’s character to be agitated by vague self-reproach” (Eliot 431). Her desire here is not entirely unknowable, and Eliot, from the moment Stephen and Maggie meet each other,

makes it abundantly clear that a mutual attraction exists that would interfere with the present state of happiness for the pair as well as for their respective probable partners, Lucy and Philip. Philip's anxiety, while inexpressible, seems well-founded in the relationship that develops between Stephen and Maggie. The narrator speaks to the readiness of Philip's imagination to seize upon those negative possibilities, which demonstrates a further unspeakability towards Philip's latent insecurity that largely arises from his deformity.

While Stephen represents the *potentiality* of her desires and a possible future of bourgeois security and fulfillment, he is not her desire, and Maggie chooses to renounce him because of the unspeakability of her desires. Appropriately, Eliot places the encounter of her renunciation on a boat in the River Floss, a location which signals a sense of false mobility for Maggie and serves as the site for her heroic rescue of Tom and their final reconciliation in death. Before Maggie receives this opportunity for martyrdom at the end of the novel, she must receive the opportunity to reject Stephen's proposal for elopement. Stephen appears as a preferable love-interest for Maggie, but she initially rejects him and scorns his approaches because of her attachment to Philip and Stephen's attachment with Lucy. Maggie repeatedly spurns his advancements, until fate seemingly places them without the accompaniment of Lucy or Philip alone together on a boat passing through the idyllic English countryside that speaks to Maggie's desires and deepest conceptions of love and pleasure. As the boat travels down the river, the couple glides slowly with few words exchanged between them as they sit in an unspeakable reverie that language could only disturb: "Some low, subdued, languid exclamation of love came from Stephen from time to time, as he went on rowing idly, half automatically: otherwise, they spoke no word; for what could words have been, but an inlet to thought?" (Eliot 484). The narrator reduces words in this instant merely to "an inlet to thought," and in thinking of language as a conduit to interiority,

the pair relishes the silence that allows the unspeakable and the unknowable to flourish in their solitude and tranquility. The narrator further asserts that the inappropriateness of thought in their journey down the river: “And thought did not belong to that enchanted haze in which they were enveloped — it belonged to the past and the future that lay outside the haze” (Eliot 484). The unknowable, unspeakable, and unthinkable merge together in this dreamlike state. Maggie fully inhabits the present for a rare moment in her life, and when she can separate herself from societal demands that are always in her thoughts.

Maggie frequently dwells on her past and family history that tie directly into her future — the preservation of that lineage. Maggie’s desires and a narrative with infinite possibilities do not correspond with her mental preoccupations that arise from incessant and properly spoken outside pressures from her father, her brother, her aunts and uncles, and the high society of St Oggs. Maggie and Stephen experience the unspeakability of time that resonates throughout *Lady Audley’s Secret*, but just as it eventually must be spoken for Lady Audley, the expression of time catches up to Maggie when she realizes the boat has passed the last port at which it would be possible to exit the river and return home on the same day. Once again, Maggie’s narrative and fate are beyond her control, and she does not have the opportunity to speak her own desires beyond that predetermination. Stephen professes his love for Maggie and implants the idea of eloping into her mind. The narrator describes Stephen’s words as “nectar” to Maggie’s mind, and she imagines a world “in which affection would no longer be self-sacrifice” (Eliot 489). Maggie can envision a world wherein that equating of emotion with restraint and deprivation does not have to occur, and through Stephen’s words, her mind can structure her desires into the material, into something that can be spoken, but a love that cannot:

Stephen’s passionate words made the vision of such a life more fully present to her than it had ever been before; and the vision for the time excluded all realities

— all except the returning sun-gleams which out on the waters as the evening approached, and mingled with the visionary sun-light of promised happiness — all except the hand that pressed hers, and the voice that spoke to her, and the eyes that looked at her with grave, unspeakable love. (Eliot 489)

While Stephen's words construct the possibility of their future together, their love remains unspeakable. Maggie enjoys this brief moment of release from her thoughts and entertains the satisfying idea of a life with Stephen, but that life could only exist outside of all realities. Stephen assures her that the society of St. Oggs will accept them if they elope, but Maggie chooses to leave him and return to the mill. She allows her desires to stay unspeakable, and she rejects Stephen not to satisfy Tom or the society of St. Oggs, but to satisfy herself and make the decision of her own volition. Maggie places herself in command of her narrative, and she returns to the mill even though she knows that Tom will not allow her to stay there after the scandal that emerges from her disappearing for several days with a single man.

The scandalized reaction of the public in St. Oggs reflects a salacious undercurrent that Eliot leaves unspoken in Maggie's interactions and relationship with Stephen. However, Eliot uses the society of St. Oggs to comment on public interest in titillating material rather than to pass any judgement on her protagonist. The unspoken sexuality and sensuality connect Eliot's text to the sensation novels that would dominate the decade after its publication, but Eliot, with her realist tendencies, seems less interested in unambiguously speaking to the nerves. A sensation novelist like Braddon wants to "please" her readership, but, as William Cohen notes, "Eliot admonishes the public within *The Mill on the Floss* for its fascination with and castigation of the story's scandal victim" (*Sex Scandal* 132). The admonition of the public within the novel extends to the novel's projected audience, and Maggie's sudden death while living in this scandalized position offers further critique on the influence of society on the possibility of women's narratives.

Chapter V: Conclusion

Struggling to Sustain the Speakability of Women's Narratives

All three of these novels speak to an unspeakability of working-class women's narratives in the nineteenth-century novel. *Villette* concludes ambiguously with the reader unaware of the fate of M. Paul Emanuel, and *Lady Audley's Secret* includes a neat and pleasant ending for everyone except the titular woman whose death only appears in a brief mention in the final chapter that details the happily-ever-after of the others in their fairy cottage. Maggie dies in a flood instead of having any of the pieces of her narrative neatly resolved or being offered a lifetime of happiness in the fairy cottage. This largely speaks to the unspeakable qualities of women's lives and the events that simultaneously elicit the conflicts and potential for growth that constitute a story and the unspeakability and eventual closure of that narrative. Tolstoy speaks to this quality in the opening lines to his realist novel *Anna Karenina*: "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way" (Tolstoy 1). While this quotation has received widespread attention, Eliot expresses a similar sentiment in *The Mill on the Floss*. As an older Maggie, nineteen at this point in the narrative, plays the piano with her cousin Lucy and Lucy's suitor Stephen (who clearly already has some unspoken infatuation with Maggie despite the narrator's insistence that he does not love her but rather experiences only an intense curiosity toward her), Maggie does not notice the "furtive" and admiring gaze Stephen directs at her. The narrator explains her failure to notice this social cue arises from her poorer upbringing, but that upbringing and the struggles it subsequently causes result in the value of her narrative for the reader:

Such things could have had no perceptible effect on a thoroughly well-educated young lady with a perfectly balanced mind, who had had all the advantages of fortune, training, and refined society. But if Maggie had been that young lady, you would probably have known nothing about her; her life would have had so few vicissitudes that it could hardly have been written; for the happiest women,

like the happiest nations, have no history. (Eliot 400)

The narrator presents Maggie's narrative because of the struggles and difficulties that she experiences, and if she had led a peaceful and happy, then her story would be entirely unspeakable and unnecessary for the reader. Specifically, Maggie's experiences in poverty that have arrested her possibility for the "advantages of fortune, training, and refined society" render her story worthwhile for the discerning reader. In general, though, the narrator suggests that the life with "few vicissitudes" hardly merits being written down. According to the narrator, this indicates a different kind of unspeakability, that which *needs not* be spoken. It stays unspoken because speaking it offers little value or opportunities for change or growth. This inexpressible happiness differs from what Lucy experiences when Paul Emanuel professes his love for her, for example, in that the joy does not transcend words; instead, it does not necessitate them at all. The assertion that the "the happiest women, like the happiest nations, have no history" is especially provocative. A lack of history implies, more than happiness, a consistency and stability particularly in terms of class position and level of wealth. While Lucy Snowe and Lady Audley evidently have histories, they make the decision to stay silent about them and leave them unsaid, not because they are not worth saying, but because they are able to strategically make that history unspeakable and see mobility in their class position because of it. Yet, as Lady Audley learns, that class transgression can be tenuous, and when others force this woman to reveal details of her past, she is shipped away to the Continent. Lucy Snowe refuses to reveal what she wishes to leave concealed, but she finds her most enduring happiness when she forces herself, along with the reader, to pause and leave the fate of M. Paul unspoken. Under the auspices of an omniscient realist author-god and the social expectations of insulated communities in rural England, Maggie cannot choose to silence her history in the same way as either of the Lucys.

They can access and construct their pasts however they please, but Maggie cannot conceal it from the reader or others around her in her community. The unspeakability of her desires extends to the unspeakability of a time when those desires could be realized, and the unspeakability of women's narratives seems to define this period of women's novels in the mid-nineteenth century.

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