

# (Un)observed: Deceptive Narration and Trauma in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*

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## Narration in *Villette*

Why does Lucy lie? In Charlotte Brontë's novel *Villette* (1853), narrator and protagonist Lucy Snowe repeatedly misleads her readers on important plot points. In addition to withholding plot information from the reader, Lucy further withholds details about her traumatic past and uncertain future throughout the novel.

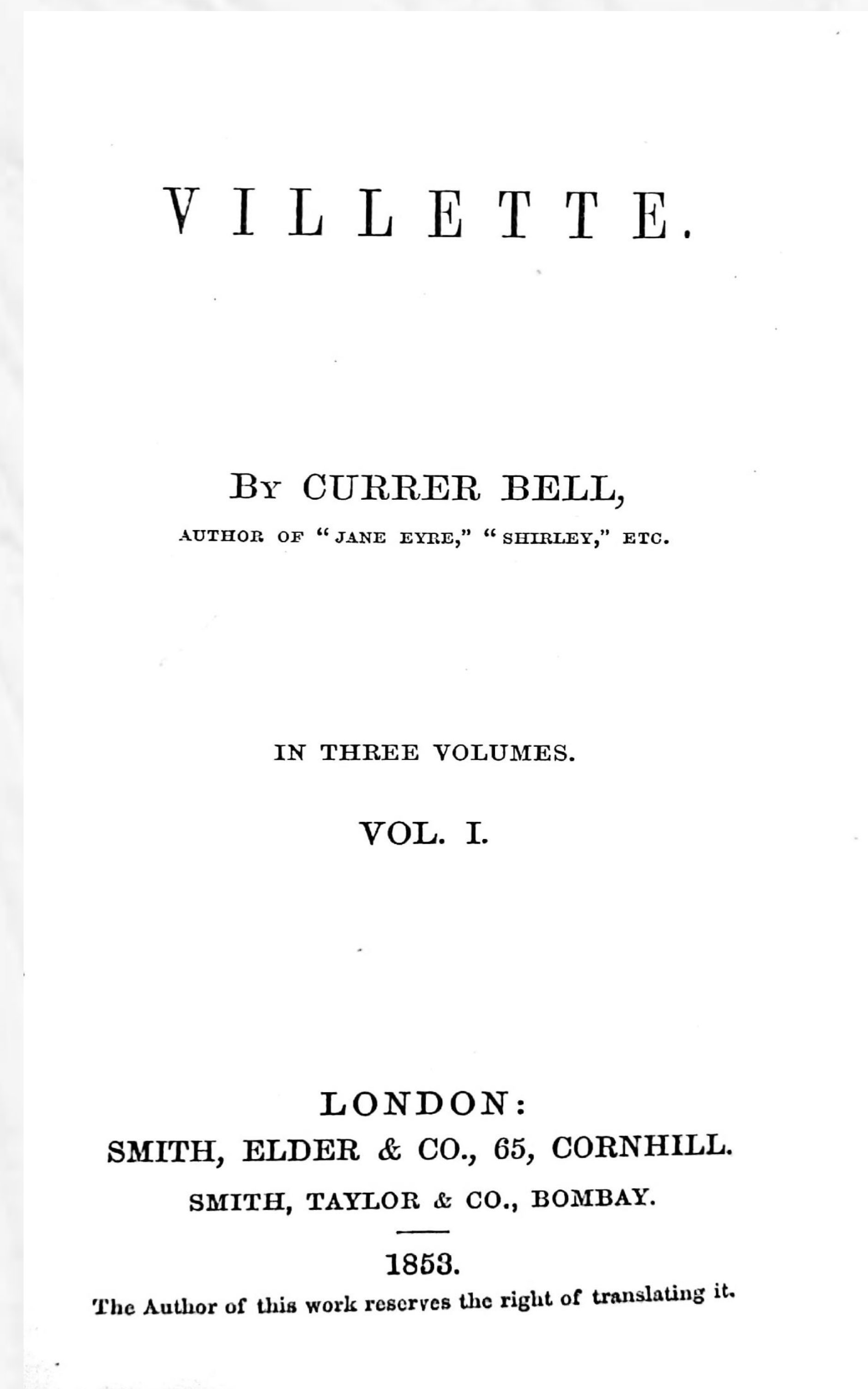
Despite her vague allusions to being in "mourning dress" (Brontë 101) and having a "bereaved lot" (100), Lucy refuses to disclose the specifics of her trauma within her narrative. I propose that Lucy lies as a way of coping with the traumatic events that ultimately remain beyond her narration. I thus reclaim *Villette* as a trauma narrative to explain Lucy's deceptive narration and resistance to being observed.

## Works Cited

Balaev, Michelle. "Literary Trauma Theory Reconsidered." *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014 pp. 1-14.

Brontë, Charlotte. *Villette*. Edited by Kate Lawson, Broadview, 2006.

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Title page from the first edition of *Villette* (1853).



Portrait of Charlotte Brontë. Courtesy of the University of Texas Libraries.

## Trauma in *Villette*

Since the medicalization of trauma in the 1980s that began with medical professionals coining the term PTSD, literary scholars have used trauma theory to discuss how trauma functions in literature. Though the definition of trauma is contested, scholar Michelle Balaev defines literary trauma as an "unrepresentable event" (1). This conception of trauma particularly reflects Lucy's inability to articulate her trauma to her readers.

The novel formally recreates this unrepresentable trauma not only through Lucy's narrative omissions but also by forcing other traumatic events outside of the narrative, making them inaccessible to the reader and leaving this trauma unresolved. Thus, just as the details about Lucy's childhood remain unknown to the reader, so too does her uncertain future after she alludes to the tragic death of her love interest.

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**"For, reader, this tall young man—this darling son—this host of mine—this Graham Bretton, was Dr. John: he, and no other; and, what is more, I ascertained this identity scarcely with surprise." (*Villette* 244)**