

# *Agnes Grey*



Anne Brontë

*With an Introduction and Notes  
by Fred Schwarzbach*

George Stade  
Consulting Editorial Director



**BARNES & NOBLE CLASSICS**  
NEW YORK

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## *From the Pages of Agnes Grey*



All true histories contain instruction; though, in some, the treasure may be hard to find, and when found, so trivial in quantity that the dry, shrivelled kernel scarcely compensates for the trouble of cracking the nut. (page 3)

“You a governess, Agnes! What *can* you be dreaming of?” (page 10)

How delightful it would be to be a governess! To go out into the world; to enter upon a new life; to act for myself; to exercise my unused faculties; to try my unknown powers; to earn my own maintenance and something to comfort and help my father, mother, and sister, besides exonerating them from the provision of my food and clothing; to show papa what his little Agnes could do; to convince mamma and Mary that I was not quite the helpless, thoughtless being they supposed. (page 11)

As an animal, Matilda was all right, full of life, vigour, and activity; as an intelligent being, she was barbarously ignorant, indocile, careless, and irrational, and, consequently, very distressing to one who had the task of cultivating her understanding, reforming her manners, and aiding her to acquire those ornamental attainments which, unlike her sister, she despised as much as the rest. (page 64)

“I really do detest them all; but Harry Meltham is the handsomest and most amusing, and Mr. Hatfield the cleverest, Sir Thomas the wickedest, and Mr. Green the most stupid. But the one I’m to have, I suppose, if I’m doomed to have any of them, is Sir Thomas Ashby.” (page 77)

And I, as I could not make my young companions better, feared exceedingly that they would make me worse—would gradually bring my feelings, habits, capacities to the level of their own, without, however, imparting to me their light-heartedness, and cheerful vivacity. (page 97)

“The human heart is like indian-rubber, a little swells it, but a great deal will not burst it.” (page 106)

It is foolish to wish for beauty. Sensible people never either desire it for themselves or care about it for others. If the mind be but well cultivated, and the heart well disposed, no one ever cares for the exterior. (page 134)

“Instead of *repining*, Miss Grey, be thankful for the *privileges* you enjoy. There’s many a poor

clergyman whose family would be plunged into ruin by the event of his death; but *you*, you see, have influential friends ready to continue their patronage, and to show you every consideration.” (page 15)

“Oh, no matter! I never care about the footmen; they’re mere automatons—it’s nothing to them what their superiors say or do; they won’t dare to repeat it; and as to what they think—if they presume to think at all—of course, nobody cares for that. It would be a pretty thing indeed, if we were to be tongue-tied by our servants!” (page 175)

I shall never forget that glorious Summer evening, and always remember with delight that steep hill and the edge of the precipice where we stood together watching the splendid sunset mirrored in the restless world of waters at our feet—with hearts filled with gratitude to Heaven, and happiness, and love—almost too full for speech. (page 192)

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## Anne Brontë



Anne Brontë was born on January 17, 1820, into one of English literature's most remarkable families. The youngest of Patrick and Maria Branwell Brontë's six children, Anne was only a year old when her mother became ill with cancer. Within months, Maria Branwell Brontë died, the first of many early deaths that would ultimately decimate the large family. Patrick Brontë, by then a curate at Haworth, turned to his wife's sister, Elizabeth Branwell, for help in raising his children; Anne grew very close to her aunt. In 1825 the eldest Brontë children, Maria and Elizabeth, died within weeks of one another, leaving Charlotte, Branwell, Emily, and Anne.

The babies of the family, Emily and Anne created an imaginative kingdom called Gondal that they filled with fantastic characters and stories. Although she attended school at Roe Head for two years, Anne was primarily educated at home, where the children studied literature and poetry as well as the Bible. An illness at school prompted her return to Haworth in 1837 and provoked a religious crisis, raising doubts and concerns Anne would revisit later in life.

Seeking financial independence, Anne found work in 1839 as a governess at Blake Hall, near Mirfield, caring for the unruly children of Joshua Ingham. Within a year, she had left the Inghams and was employed as governess for the family of Reverend Edmund Robinson at Thorp Green, near York. She remained in their household for five years, each summer accompanying the family to the seaside resort of Scarborough. Away from her family, she often turned to poetry for solace, sometimes writing her own. In 1843 Anne secured a position with the Robinsons for her brother, Branwell. In June 1844 Anne resigned and returned to Haworth, followed shortly by Branwell, who, under the shadow of scandal, was dismissed.

Back home, Anne's literary career was initiated by Charlotte's enthusiastic discovery of Emily's Gondal poems. The sisters each agreed to contribute poems to a collection for publication. Under the pseudonyms Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell (Charlotte, Emily, and Anne, respectively), the Brontës published the collection in 1846 at their own expense, to positive criticism but dismal sales. Undaunted, the sisters turned their attentions to novel writing, each bringing a unique and highly inventive style to the effort. In 1847 Anne's labors produced *Agnes Grey*, published jointly with Emily's *Wuthering Heights* in December of that year by Thomas Cautley Newby. Charlotte's *Jane Eyre* had been published two months earlier by a more prestigious house, Smith, Elder and Co., with great success, overshadowing her sisters' novels and surpassing them in acclaim. Less sensational in its subject matter than either *Jane Eyre* or *Wuthering Heights*, Anne's *Agnes Grey* received relative little attention. Nonetheless, Anne began work immediately on her second novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (published by Newby in 1848), which was a commercial and critical success. The novel's frank depictions of alcoholism and violence shocked readers but fueled its popularity. Wild speculation about its mysterious authorship prompted Charlotte and Anne to disclose to the publishers their true identities.

In September 1848, Branwell Brontë died, his body destroyed by illness and alcohol. In December

Emily Brontë died of tuberculosis, following a rapid decline. Anne herself became ill with influenza then tuberculosis. Though weak and frail, she determined to travel once more to her beloved Scarborough, ostensibly for the curative powers of the sea air. The trip proved her last; Anne Brontë died on May 28, 1849, and was buried in Scarborough.

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## The World of Anne Brontë and Agnes Grey



- 1820** Anne Brontë is born on January 17, in Thornton, Yorkshire. She is the sixth and last child of Patrick and Maria Branwell Brontë; her father is a curate. The family moves from Thornton to Haworth. Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* and Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* are published. George III dies, and George IV is crowned king.
- 1821** Maria Branwell Brontë dies of cancer. Elizabeth Branwell, her sister, comes to Haworth to care for the family. She and Anne become particularly close.
- 1824** Maria, Elizabeth, Charlotte, and Emily Brontë attend Clergy Daughters' School at Cowan Bridge. The Athenaeum Club is founded in London; the National Gallery opens.
- 1825** In May, Anne's oldest sister, Maria, dies of tuberculosis. The second oldest, Elizabeth, dies shortly thereafter. Charlotte and Emily are withdrawn from school. Beethoven's Ninth Symphony is first performed in England.
- 1830** George IV dies and is succeeded by William IV. Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* is published. American poet Emily Dickinson is born.
- 1831** Charlotte attends Miss Wooler's school at Roe Head, Mirfield. A cholera epidemic begins in eastern Europe and spreads throughout the continent.
- 1832** Lewis Carroll is born. Charlotte leaves Roe Head to teach her sisters at home.
- 1835** Charlotte returns to Roe Head as a teacher, taking Emily along as a student; the latter stays only briefly, and Anne replaces her.
- 1836** Anne writes a poem, "Verses by Lady Geraldine," set in the imaginative world of Gondal. Charles Dickens's *The Pickwick Papers* is published.
- 1837** While at Roe Head School, Anne becomes very ill, sparking the concern of her sister Charlotte. William IV dies; Queen Victoria is crowned.
- 1838** Branwell establishes himself as a portrait painter in Bradford but returns home less than a year later. Emily works briefly as a teacher at Miss Patchett's School at Law Hill, near Halifax. Charlotte leaves her teaching post at Roe Head.
- 1839** Anne becomes employed as a governess at Blake Hall, home of the Ingham family in Mirfield; her duties include the education of the Ingham's eldest children. William Weightman becomes an assistant curate to Patrick Brontë. In December Anne leaves her position with the Inghams and returns to Haworth. Charlotte works as a governess in

Lothersdale and later in Rawdon. In Britain 18,000 people die of pneumonia, 25,000 of typhus, and 60,000 of tuberculosis.

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**1840** In May, Anne moves to Thorp Green, near York, to work as a governess for the family of Reverend Edmund Robinson. She visits York Minster and, in the summer, travels with the Robinsons on holiday to Scarborough, a seaside resort. Branwell works as a clerk on the new Leeds-Manchester railway. Thomas Hardy is born.

**1842** Charlotte and Emily travel to Brussels to study. Once again, Anne accompanies the Robinsons on their yearly holiday at Scarborough, spending six weeks at their resort accommodations. In September, William Weightman (a possible love interest of Anne's) dies of cholera and is buried at Haworth. Aunt Elizabeth Branwell dies in October at age sixty-six, leaving an inheritance to each of her nieces; she too is buried at Haworth. Upon her death, Charlotte and Emily return from Brussels.

**1843** Charlotte resumes her studies in Brussels. Anne secures

Branwell a position as tutor at Thorp Green. They return there together following the Christmas holiday. Anne writes the poems "A Word to the Calvinists," "A Hymn," and "The Consolation."

**1844** Anne writes the poem "Yes, Thou Art Gone." Charlotte returns home and formally advertises for a new school to be run by the Brontë sisters at Haworth; lack of enrollment scuttles the effort.

**1845** Anne begins writing *Passages in the Life of an Individual* and composes the poem "Night." In June she resigns from her position with the Robinsons. Branwell is dismissed from Thorp Green. Anne and Emily travel to York. Charlotte discovers poems written by Emily; despite Emily's protestations, the discovery prompts an effort to publish the poetry of the three sisters.

**1846** Under the pseudonyms Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell, the Brontë sisters' poems are submitted for publication by Aylott and Jones at the Brontës' expense. *Poems by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell* is published, but only two copies are sold. Anne completes *Agnes Grey* her first novel. Edward Lear's *Book of Nonsense* is published.

**1847** Charlotte's novel *The Professor* is rejected for publication. Her second novel, *Jane Eyre*, is published in October by Smith, Elder and Co. under her pseudonym, Currer Bell, to immediate success. Emily's *Wuthering Heights* and Anne's *Agnes Grey* are published in December by Thomas Cautley Newby under their respective pseudonyms, Ellis and Acton Bell. Anne begins work on *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and the poem "Self-Communion."

**1848** Anne finishes "Self-Communion." *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is published by Newby, under the name Acton Bell. Its immense popularity triggers speculation about the novel's mysterious authorship, prompting Charlotte and Anne to travel to London to disclose to the former's publisher their true identities. A second edition of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, with an added preface, is published. Following years of alcohol abuse and illness, Branwell Brontë dies in September at age thirty-one. In

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December, Emily Brontë dies of tuberculosis after a short illness; she and her brother are buried at Haworth. Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* and William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* are published.

**1849**

Weakened and ill, Anne is diagnosed with advanced tuberculosis. Despite Charlotte's protestations, she arranges to visit Scarborough. Accompanied by Charlotte and family friend Ellen Nussey, Anne uses her inheritance to lodge at the resort hotel and spa she first visited with the Robinsons. On May 28, Anne Brontë dies at age twenty-nine. She is buried in St. Mary's graveyard in her beloved Scarborough rather than at Haworth, where the rest of her family is interred. In October Charlotte's novel *Shirley* is published.

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## Introduction



It is impossible for any of us to approach the Brontës without calling up the Brontë myth. We are all familiar with its outlines. The isolated family house on the edge of a bleak Yorkshire moor. The four young children, Charlotte, Branwell, Emily, and Anne, their mother and elder sisters all dead, now in the care of a stern Calvinist aunt. The Reverend Patrick Brontë, a failed writer himself, reclusively brooding, and subject to periods of dark rage. Then, through the agency of a present of toy soldiers, the children begin writing sagas in which the soldiers come to life. All four are gifted, though Branwell drinks himself to an early death, while the three young women precociously develop writing careers—Emily dying young of the family curse of tuberculosis, and Charlotte living longer, only to die shortly after her marriage. Anne, the youngest, is also the quietest and least talented; modest, religious, and industrious, she too dies of TB at an early age.

The narrative, like any myth, partakes of some truths but embodies a great deal of fantasy—and a great deal of that linked to the famous Wyler-Olivier-Oberon film of *Wuthering Heights* (1939). To begin: The parsonage was at the edge of a large, bustling mill town; the aunt appears to have been loving and kind and an evangelical Methodist, a far cry from Calvinism; Patrick Brontë was active and engaged in the affairs of the parish and the community, and clearly much concerned with the education and welfare of his children; and so on. But the myth is probably most unfair in its relegation of Anne Brontë to a bit player in the family drama—in fact, she was, though the youngest, probably the most precocious of them all as a writer, producing two novels and a substantial body of poems before the time she died at twenty-nine.

Anne's relegation to a minor role within the family happened not long after her death. Her second novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*—the story of a wife who abandons her husband to live under an assumed name and who commits the even greater moral crime of falling in love with another man while her husband lives—was nothing short of scandalous in its subject matter. By contemporary standards, no young woman could write about immoral acts without either knowing of them firsthand or by being tainted by having imagined them—in either case, her reputation was tarnished beyond repair. After Anne died, Charlotte tried to defend her sister against charges of moral impropriety by controlling the public representation of Anne's character (and, similarly, that of Emily, whose reputation suffered from her authorship of *Wuthering Heights*), and it was she who began constructing the image of a quiet, passive, deeply religious (and by implication not as talented) Anne. Deeply religious she was, but far from quiet and passive—and she was very talented.

A useful starting point will be the facts of her life, which shed some considerable light on her character and her interests. The circumstances of the family are somewhat exceptional: Anne's father was very much a self-made man, even making of his humble Irish surname (Prunty or Brunty) the rather more impressive, aristocratic, and vaguely French-sounding Brontë. The son of a farmer, and first a blacksmith's assistant, he was by age seventeen a village schoolmaster, but in 1802 his prospects changed dramatically when he managed to secure a scholarship to St. John's College, Cambridge, where he prepared for a clerical career. He rose through the ranks of the church, acquiring

along the way, in 1812, a respectable and mature wife, Maria Branwell. By 1820 they were settled in Haworth, where Reverend Brontë was perpetual curate (that is, he held the office for life) of a large populous parish. Anne, the sixth and last child, was born on January 17, 1820, three months before the move to Haworth.

Not long after, in 1821, Mrs. Brontë died. Her sister Elizabeth joined the family to superintend the children and the household. But further tragedy was in store, when the two eldest girls, Maria and Elizabeth, returned from school ill in 1825 and soon died. (Charlotte and Emily had followed the sisters to the same school but now were brought home.) This may have been due to the arrival of what would, sadly, be their only lasting legacy to the family—tuberculosis, which many years later would carry off Emily and Anne, and possibly Branwell, too. One effect of this was Patrick's determination that he would educate the remaining children at home, at least for the major part of their schooling; another effect was that the remaining children became extremely close emotionally, tied to each other to their aunt, to their father, and to Haworth itself.

Still, though none of us can choose our parents, it was a great stroke of luck for any girl at this time to be the daughter of a clergyman. Young women of the lower ranks of the professional and middle classes rarely were allowed any education beyond music, drawing, and the smattering of general knowledge deemed sufficient to entertain prospective husbands by the distaff side of the hearth. But a clergyman's daughter had access to both a learned father and his library, and the Brontë girls were luckier still in that Patrick seemed ready to teach them fully much as he did Branwell. Certainly it was also fortuitous that Patrick was an author himself, a writer not only (necessarily) of weekly sermons but a published poet and essayist of some genuine local repute. They read widely in the standard works of English literature; they subscribed to leading periodicals; and they had access to a lending library an easy walk away in the next town, Keighley. Anne could not have known this at first, but she was receiving excellent training to be a governess, learning music, drawing, and even Latin along with more general studies in literature, history, and geography.

Another key event in their lives was the seemingly inauspicious arrival of a set of toy soldiers purchased by Patrick in 1826. The eldest children, Charlotte and Branwell, apparently soon began transforming the figures into favorite semi-historical characters and inventing plays and tales involving them; the youngest, Emily and Anne, were brought in on the game as well. The writing developed over time into a remarkable series of extended prose manuscripts relating to a fictional kingdom called Glasstown, which the children located at the mouth of the Niger in Africa. Eventually Emily and Anne split off to form a rival kingdom in the North Pacific known as Gondal. Here they imitated and wove together elements from all of their reading—newspapers and magazines, historical poetry (including George Gordon, Lord Byron), and fiction (principally Sir Walter Scott)—in a series of interlinked narratives and poems.

Clearly, this was not an unhappy family, despite many adversities, yet there was one impediment to any prospect. Patrick Brontë was fortunate in his rise from humble circumstances to become a gentleman in England, yet he had few financial resources beyond his stipend as perpetual curate in Haworth. Moreover, his income must cease with his demise; and, with a family as large as his, he had no opportunity to save in order to provide a professional or university education for Branwell or dowries for the girls. No doubt from an early age all the children were aware of the fragility of their social and economic standing, and all were driven to a greater or lesser degree to establish some security against their father's inevitable death. (It was sadly ironic that he was to outlive all of his children by many years.)



Anne's character seems to have been distinct from a relatively early age. Anecdotes about her as a child show her as tenacious and determined—qualities that were tested later in her service as a governess. As adolescents and young adults, her sisters and brother—whatever the reasons—had difficulty settling upon any situation or project for very long. Branwell in particular drifted from career to career and position to position without success. Anne alone appears to have had the ability to adapt to her circumstances, beginning in 1835, when she was sent to replace Emily at Roe Head School, where Charlotte was serving as a teacher. She stayed until 1837, when illness (perhaps the first active episode of TB infection) forced her return to Haworth.

It was during this illness that she appears to have undergone a spiritual crisis over the nature of salvation. Anne's religious devotion cannot be doubted—her faith informs almost all of her poetry, which is largely autobiographical, and much of her fiction as well. Anne took from her father (and probably from her Aunt Branwell's Methodism) a firm evangelical cast of mind, that is, a belief in the immediacy of Christ's message, a desire to transform one's whole life into an act of worship, and a commitment to good works. In her illness, she was attended by the Reverend James La Trobe, a Moravian bishop, and probably at this time she adopted (or confirmed) her universalist convictions (shared by Charlotte). This was a belief of universal salvation—in other words, that every soul was potentially capable of good, and that God allowed even the most abject sinner multiple opportunities to repent, to accept Christ, and to be saved.

She was at the time of her leaving Roe Head just about to turn eighteen, but despite her place as the “baby” of the family, she evidently was quite determined to go off and earn her own keep. The family record was not encouraging: At this time, Emily had only recently returned from a short engagement as a governess; Charlotte had several times gone off to teach and come back as well. What was it, then, that drove Anne at this age to seek employment as a governess? Patrick now was sixty-two, quite an elderly man by the standards of the day, and with three daughters and a wayward son in his household, he must have worried ceaselessly about the future. Anne seems to have been gifted (or cursed) with a premature sense of responsibility to her family, no doubt reinforced by her evangelical inclination. Her decision expressed her determination to make her life meaningful in all ways; a life devoted to work not only removed her as a cause of worry to her family but allowed her to do the work of God in the world in her own right.

Her first family (found through a distant connection) were the Inghams of Blake Hall, Mirfield, supposedly the originals of the Bloomfields of *Agnes Grey*. The children, apparently, were both dull and undisciplined, and it would seem that Anne was never given the authority to reign them in; she was summarily dismissed at the end of the year. At home there was, perhaps, the distraction of what may have been affectionate attentions from her father's curate, William Weightman, though there is now no way to know how serious he might have been or how she may have responded. But even if she were attracted to him, Anne was never one to shirk responsibility: By May 1840 she was on her way to the family of Reverend Edmund Robinson at Thorp Green, near York, where she would remain until the summer of 1845. (In any event, Weightman died suddenly in 1842 without their relations having advanced greatly in the interim.)

At the beginning no happier there than in her first post, over the years Anne seems to have become close to the Robinson children, and she remained in contact with the elder girls even after she left the house. But her last year was clouded by yet another of Branwell's employment disasters. Her brother had come to Thorp Green as a tutor to the son (presumably on Anne's recommendation) in January 1843. But by the summer of 1845, Branwell apparently convinced himself that he was in love with

Mrs. Robinson and she with him; whether her conduct was in any way at fault remains a mystery. ~~Whatever may or may not have happened between them, he was turned out of the house, and Anne~~ resigned her post. From this time on, she remained at Haworth with Emily and Charlotte, the three watching helplessly as Branwell began his decline into alcoholism and total lethargy.

She must already have commenced writing *Agnes Grey*. She had been writing poetry for many years, at first in connection with the Gondal saga, later (like Emily) more personal lyrics. When Charlotte discovered that her sisters were writing verse in the autumn of 1845, the project was born to publish a joint volume by all three; *Poems by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell* (Charlotte, Emily, and Anne respectively, as they styled themselves pseudonymously) appeared in May 1846, though it was spectacularly unsuccessful in sales. By this time *Agnes Grey* was completed, and the sisters were approaching several publishers serially about three unconnected works of fiction: *Agnes Grey*, Emily's *Wuthering Heights*, and Charlotte's *The Professor*. T. C. Newby accepted Emily's and Anne's manuscripts, publishing them together as one three-volume work (Anne's novel was the third volume) in December 1847.<sup>1</sup> Charlotte's rejection by Newby turned out to be fortunate, as her "governess" novel, *Jane Eyre*, had already been published by the more prestigious firm Smith, Elder two months earlier.

Coming, as it did, at the tail end of *Wuthering Heights*, Anne's quiet, spare novel was barely noticed by the critics. Both her sisters' novels were far more sensational in their choices of subject, and reviewers (many of them hostile) focused mainly on their work. Endless speculation followed about the identity of the Bells: Were they male or female, and were they three or only one? Anne, however perhaps the most determined to be a professional writer of them all, by now already had made good progress on her new novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, with its thoroughly sensational subject. The time, Anne's work attracted attention in its own right, though much of it (predictably) was unfavorable on moral grounds.

Newby was inherently unreliable, if not an out-and-out scoundrel, and for his own purposes he actively promoted confusion about the identity of the author of *The Tenant* in June 1848, suggesting it was the suddenly famous Currer Bell. George Smith (of Smith, Elder) wrote to the Bells/Brontës that he suspected Currer/Charlotte was playing tricks with him, and so in July, to reassure him, Anne and Charlotte paid him a surprise visit in London. In person they hoped to persuade him that they were indeed two writers and not one; to his credit, Smith responded graciously and generously. This was Anne's only visit to the metropolis.

Soon after, by early winter, Emily and Anne both were quite ill; Emily refused medical attention (not that any then available would have prolonged her life) and died in December. Then, in January 1849, Anne was given the death sentence—consumption—and from that point on she knew her time left was brief. She rallied just enough in May to make a journey with Charlotte and their close friend, Ellen Nussey, to Scarborough, where she had spent summer holidays with the Robinsons. There she died on May 28.

This outline of Anne Brontë's life is relevant to our reading of *Agnes Grey* for many reasons, especially because Anne's own experience as a governess seems to have developed into the subject matter of the novel. From the time of her death—in truth even before—readers have wanted to treat the novel as if it were unvarnished and unmediated autobiography. Her biographers and critics alike have read the novel to explicate the life and have used the life to explicate the novel—a tautologic

circle that may be interesting but is hardly productive, for the available details of Anne's working life between 1840 and 1845 are sketchy and almost certainly now never will be further illuminated. What we now know is what we are likely ever to know. More to the point, the biographical dimension to the novel in fact is a serious distraction. *Agnes Grey* portrays the awkward and at times painful situation of the governess—how could it not, given Anne's life and work—but it goes far beyond mere reportage.

Not that the reportage is unimportant: We look to the Victorian novel (as did so many of its contemporary readers) in part to learn vicariously about the lived experience of people in diverse and interesting circumstances far from our own. And it seems that in the 1840s Victorian readers were interested greatly in the secret lives of governesses. Indeed, governesses were much in the news in the 1840s, with articles in the periodical press, novels devoted to their plight, and the signal event of the foundation of the Governesses Benevolent Institution in 1843 (for no Victorian social problem was really a legitimate problem until a national charitable institution had arisen to solve it). Governesses feature as characters in many novels of the decade, ranging from sweet and noble Ruth Pinch in Charles Dickens's *Martin Chuzzlewit* to scheming and seductive Becky Sharp in William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*. We have fictional governesses who are pathetic, incompetent, and passionate. Given all this attention, we remind ourselves that governesses probably numbered some 25,000 at midcentury, but it was not their relatively small numbers that was at issue so much as the almost unimaginable anomaly of their situation.

At a time when a gentleman was defined as a person of no fixed occupation, and when no respectable middle-class woman was ever employed outside the home, the position of the governess was, in class and social terms, a virtual oxy-moron, almost an impossibility. For if, in fact, the governess was a respectable gentlewoman (as she must be if she were to care for one's children), then she could not be an employee; but since she was working for her own living, she must be an employee and thus could not be a gentlewoman. This was a veritable conundrum.

Thus, how to treat the governess was a constant source of perplexity for the writers of domestic manuals, no doubt reflecting the lived anxiety and confusion of many middle- and upper-class households. Rising prosperity, of course, meant that more families were able to afford governesses but as yet lacked experience in dealing with them, perhaps not knowing even the prevailing wages. For while governesses typically were from good families—proverbially down on their luck either because the father had died or lost his fortune in speculation—their wages classed them with servants. Salaries ranged typically from £15 to £50 a year (though in a very few genteel and elegant establishments perhaps as much as £150). In many if not most households this figure was less than the salary of the housekeeper or a lady's maid, and perhaps even less than the cook's. While room and board obviously were included, most governesses were responsible for their own laundry, as well as travel "home" once or twice a year and their clothing; few could have had left more than £20 a year to save or spend on anything else. This, of course, Anne Brontë knew from her own service. From what she depicts in the novel, she was well aware of the different ways in which a family could make a governess feel ill at ease, and while a governess might achieve a limited independence by supporting herself (barely), few could save or send money home; the only substantive financial benefit to her family would be to remove herself from being a financial burden.

Yet, the worst aspects of the governess's situation were not financial but social. As critic Katharine West wrote in *Chapter of Governesses: A Study of the Governess in English Fiction, 1800-1949*

(1949):

... the core of the problem of a governess's happiness or the reverse [was] that she was thwarted of her natural woman's life. The fonder a girl was of children, the more she must long for children of her own. The more she wished to be mistress of a house with her own things in it, the more she was oppressed by the splendour of other people's possessions. The more she loved society, the more lonely she felt. The fonder she let herself grow of charges and their parents, the more she hated leaving them. The greater her love for books and music, the more her girls' stupidity or coarseness galled her (pp. 84-85).

And, finally, the most telling problem of all: Governesses were unlikely to marry.

This, then, is where we can begin to understand Anne's novel: Governesses occupied a social position that was both intensely marginal (in their own families, in society at large) and intensely central (in that they were concerned with the care of children). We see this from the start of Agnes Grey's career. She begins in the center of her loving (if economically unstable) middle-class family, the beloved younger child of loving parents. Once she leaves to take up her first position with the Bloomfields, she is cast adrift in a family that hardly seems to be aware of her existence, except to plague and abuse her. On the evening of her arrival, she is greeted with excessive formality by Mr. Bloomfield and served a tough, cold dinner that seems but a symbolic foretaste of her service in general. Mrs. Bloomfield is "cold, grave, and forbidding" (p. 21), far from the warm, motherly presence Agnes has in her naivete envisioned; the servants ignore her as if she were an inferior member of the staff (as in truth she is); and Mr. Bloomfield is as ill-tempered and abrupt with her as he is with his own wife. Time does not lead to any improvement, and Agnes's pain is deepened when she is summarily dismissed.

The Murrays are a family somewhat less "dysfunctional" (to use contemporary jargon), and with them Agnes is not as completely excluded from family life, but the children are no less in need of discipline and direction. The elder daughter, Rosalie, is ignorant, self-centered, and vain; the next, Matilda, is a thorough "hoyden" (p. 56), or tomboy, interested only in horses and hunting, who "has learnt to swear like a trooper" (p. 65) to boot. Even more serious is that the two lack any moral sense whatsoever. Though Agnes sees their faults, she has learned from her first post that a governess who criticizes her charges to their mother (in this novel fathers take no interest in their children's education) will find herself out of a job posthaste.

Here, then, we have a hint of what Anne Brontë sees with clear and unerring vision as a gaping void at the center of middle-class family life. Children, she suggests, receive from their parents unconditional love, but beyond that they require moral training, exercise in self-discipline, and genuine education (not rote learning). Yet none of the mothers and fathers we see are fit to provide this genuine education. The former indulge one kind of moral laxness (vanity, lethargy), the latter another (thoughtless violence, selfishness). Neither parent in either family is capable of serving as a model of anything except what is to be avoided at all costs. Girls are trained to grow into witleless ornaments, boys into heartless brutes.

It is these moral monsters who then must form their own families. They are brought together in marriage hardly knowing one another and doomed at best to loveless coexistence in unions of family convenience. It is no wonder that the families we encounter through Agnes are wholly devoid of marital affection. (Even Agnes's parents' marriage, though one of enduring love, is far from faultless. As Agnes herself observes, her father's original economic improvidence is compounded by her

inability to rouse himself to any action to repair his fortune, thus dooming Agnes herself to this life of genteel penury. Only after his death can she return home.)

There are two particular incidents that reinforce this message with chilling force. The first is when Agnes finds Master Tom Bloomfield in possession of some fledglings he has taken from their nest. With the encouragement of his uncle, he is determined to torture and torment them. Unable to persuade the boy to return the birds to the nest, she kills them herself so that at least they will not suffer longer. This is bad enough, but she is immediately rebuked by Mrs. Bloomfield for interfering with the boy's fun.

If this suggests that men socialize boys to repeat all the errors of their own upbringing, women do no less damage to girls. Mrs. Murray's relentless pressure on Rosalie to marry an aristocratic libertine solely for his social position is fully as blameworthy. Again, Agnes is the only one to see anything amiss, and the only one who speaks her mind:

I made no pretension to "a mother's watchful, anxious care," but I was amazed and horrified at Mrs. Murray's heartlessness, or want of thought for the real good of her child; and, by my unheeded warnings and exhortations, I vainly strove to remedy the evil (p. 136).

It goes without saying that neither Rosalie nor anyone else listens to her warnings or cares about the impropriety of an innocent girl marrying a thoroughly immoral rake. Needless to say as well, we later learn that the marriage is a complete disaster for Rosalie. As if to insist that readers see the full horror of the way that failed families perpetuate themselves, Rosalie is later seen as a careless and unloving parent to her own child. Thus, we see as in a series of facing mirrors each generation molding its successor in its own degraded image.

We might sum up, then, by saying that Anne Brontë creates in the figure of her governess one whose very presence marks the failure of the nuclear family, the institution that ought to be the foundation and mainstay of all social life. On the one hand, it is the financial failure of the governess's own family that has made it necessary for her to enter the world of work as a wage slave (let us remember Jane Fairfax in Jane Austen's *Emma*, who without irony compares her impending fate as a governess to that of victims of the African slave trade). This is bad enough, but worse still is that the families that employ governesses do so because their own female heads are unable or unwilling to accept the domestic responsibilities as wives and mothers. The governess stands in for the mother, providing the moral training for the children of that failed or incompetent mother when no one else can or will do so.

In short, Brontë effectively uses Agnes's travails to expose both the fragility and the hypocrisy of the Victorian family. But what does she oppose to this horrifying analysis? What basis is there in the world of the novel for individual goodness and, by extension, for a foundation that might redeem the sacred institutions of marriage and family life? In other words, is there any way that a single individual, like Agnes, can lead a decent life and perhaps begin to change the world for the better?

The key word in the preceding paragraph—and one that is difficult for contemporary readers to accept as it was intended—is "sacred": for to the daughter of an Anglican clergyman, marriage was a sacrament. Marriage was, in effect, an institution that marked the intersection of the divine and the human; like the Church, it served to bind man, woman, and God together. A successful marriage, then, was a human contract modeled on the divine order, creating a foundation for the moral redemption of

man and woman and the beginning of a moral life for their children. A failed marriage was a sacrilege, an utterly wasted and blighted opportunity to bring man into harmony with the divine will. Here, then, is the crux of the problem as well as its solution, for all of the marriages we see in *Agnes Grey* are travesties.

Yet in all this moral chaos, Anne stands apart. We must recall that as a deeply religious *evangelical* Christian (and we must not forget how freighted with significance this distinction was for Victorians) Anne Brontë saw life as a gift from God, one that imposed upon the recipients (we mortal mortals) responsibilities both to scrutinize our own conduct relentlessly at all times *and* to love our fellows as much as Christ had loved all humankind. This double imperative took form in good deeds that were to be accomplished not with a view toward laying up capital in Heaven, but rather as an act of worship. Anne's universalist convictions led her to believe that perhaps the greatest work we could do on earth was to have as much faith in the possibility of salvation for each and every one of us as does God. Through our own humble efforts, any soul might be saved.

Here, then, are the roots of Agnes's quiet, almost stoic perseverance. Time and time again Agnes sees the essential immoral dimensions of conduct that others view as socially acceptable or even desirable; time and time again she speaks her mind, though no one will listen. But it is also this abiding faith that gives Agnes the strength to endure isolation, deprivation, and disappointment. Her disappointments are many, but none so devastating as those involved in her relationship (if it can be called that) with the somewhat elusive curate, Mr. Weston.

Mr. Weston—who is destined to be Agnes's future husband—is, like her, modest, unobtrusive, undistinguished in appearance, and yet a figure of surprising endurance and strength. Agnes does not take long to decide that he is “a man of strong sense, firm faith, and ardent piety, but thoughtful and stern” (p. 98)—all of these in her mind strong recommendations. Then, in chapter XII, she finds that he also possesses “true benevolence, and gentle, considerate kindness” when she accidentally encounters him in the cottage of a poor elderly woman. She is there as part of her quiet efforts to help the local poor (reading to the woman and mending her son's shirt); then he walks in holding the woman's strayed cat. It is a quiet, domestic moment, quietly observed (even to the detail of the cottager brushing the cat hair off his coat), but Agnes learns a great deal about Mr. Weston from it. He is kind to animals (he has rescued the cat); he is kind to the humblest of his parishioners (he knows how the old woman will worry about the animal); and he is serious about his duty (not only is he out in the rain but he has risked angering Mr. Murray, who sharply reproveth his concern for a mere beast). Though Agnes is hesitant to reveal to herself (and thus to readers) her true feelings for Mr. Weston, despite her claim that she will keep no secrets from them, it takes no great cleverness to see that from this moment on she is profoundly in love with him.

Many readers have found unsatisfactory the courtship that increasingly dominates the novel as it moves quickly toward its close. In fact, there is relatively little that by conventional standards can be deemed to be courtship. Here Brontë no doubt portrays what many Victorian romances must have been like: For a governess like Agnes and a poor country curate like Mr. Weston, there were few opportunities to meet and even fewer where they might be alone for more than a moment. Yet if the limited scope for interaction made it difficult to get to know one another, it was not impossible—and the more important, then, that they learn as much as possible from the chances they had. For both Agnes and Mr. Weston, skilled as they are in self-examination, each carefully scrutinizing the other and learning enough to make the right judgment, given the few moments they have together, it is a challenge they can and do meet.

The plot, then, that keeps them largely apart from one another is no accident on Brontë's part. For they are good readers of each other's characters and hearts, each will persist in believing in the other's love. The lack of any traditional expected sign of that love (trysts, letters, betrothals) is only proof of its depth. Yet there is more tested here than just the old maxim that absence makes the heart grow fonder. Agnes must learn one more painful lesson: that Hope (as she personifies it in her musing) itself is a human failing. Only God knows our fates, and only by serving him can we lead any life worth living. Thinking, in her disappointment, that she would rather die than live without her love requited, she eventually realizes that happiness is not her right—and that her life should be devoted to promoting the welfare of those around her. Only now, properly chastised, is Agnes ready to be rewarded by union with the man she loves. We see Mr. Weston only through Agnes's eyes, so we are unable to view his struggles as fully he might see them himself, but ultimately we are assured that Mr. Weston is also living the very same lesson.

When, after long absence, Mr. Weston at last does reappear (hardly an accident, since he has been searching for her for months) and offers his proposal of marriage (properly speaking with Mrs. Grey before he even approaches Agnes on the subject), the atmosphere is reminiscent of Mr. Knightley's proposal to Jane Austen's Emma—we know as he speaks that he has long been in love with her, but he must be tested by being obliged to wait until the right moment to speak. And, just as Mr. Knightley says that when he feels deeply he must speak plainly, Mr. Weston engages in no sentimental repartee with his intended: "'You love me then?' said he, fervently pressing my hand. 'Yes'" (p. 192). Agnes says afterward, as she remembers this moment, that their "hearts filled with gratitude to Heaven, and happiness, and love." The order here is significant—first, God, who should be everyone's first concern; then happiness, available to any individual (as it was to Agnes) who serves God; and finally the loving union of two of God's servants.

Within a few more pages the novel is over, readers granted only a short sketch of the productive (and is that, rather than happy) life of the pair, now married and with children of their own. The established, few novels have concluded with so quiet a statement as this: "And now I think I have said sufficient." But if the reader has been attending to the Christian message that underpins Anne's narrative throughout the novel, this is indeed sufficient, for the rest of her story will be one of quiet dedication to her domestic circle, her husband, her family, and her parish.

The modern secular reader, perhaps in the wake of William Empson's rewriting (in *Milton's God*, 1961) of *Paradise Lost* as a tale of sympathy for the devil, prefers religious novels to embrace doubt, disbelief, and disharmony; loss of faith is the inevitable outcome of struggle. In sharp contrast, we have in *Agnes Grey* a novel in which faith triumphs, and it does so not by separating itself from everyday concerns, but by immersing itself fully in them. Its great success is to discover the sacred in the everyday, thus remaining loyal to both the divine and the human. To the modern reader, this simple message may smack of religiosity, yet to at least some of Anne Brontë's contemporary Victorian audience, such abiding faith would have rung true. Agnes and Mr. Weston seal their faith and their love in a marriage that signals the promise not only of individual happiness, but also of hope for the redemption of the whole community. It is a sign of Brontë's quiet power in the novel that even in our secular age we can share in their joy.

Fred Schwarzbach serves as Associate Dean and teaches in the General Studies Program of New York University. He is the author of *Dickens and the City*, the editor of *Victorian Artists and the City* and *Dickens's American Notes*, a contributor to the *Oxford Reader's Companion to Dickens*, and the author of scores of articles, essays, and reviews on Victorian life and letters.

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## NOTE

1. The standard format for the publication of new fiction from the 1820s to around 1890 was the “three-decker,” three octavo volumes published at the set price of 31 shillings sixpence (one and one half guineas); since the Brontës’ works separately were too short to fill the format, they sensibly proposed combining them. Anne and Emily also subsidized the publication in return for a share of profits, a fairly standard arrangement for unknown authors’ first books. They later suspected that Newby cheated them of their profits, which was very likely true.



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