

Agnes Grey: A Cultural and Educational Critique

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The aim of this study is to have an analysis of the plot and the characters in the novel, *Agnes Grey*, in terms of the perspectives of education and culture. Anne Brontë's first novel focuses on the life of Agnes, who is a young governess living in the Victorian era. In the novel, the narrative shows a period of time in English literature, when industrialization has a significant impact on the aspects such as social life and education, in a way in which women experienced many kinds of struggles for holding on to their lives and reaching their dreams. Agnes Grey, the main character of the novel, came from a middle-class family. She lived to tell the adventures of starting her career as a governess, and the difficulties she experienced. It didn't take long for Agnes, who started her first experience with the Bloomfield family, to face the rich upper-class culture and see the difficulties in educating children from another social class. The Murray family, with whom she stayed for a longer time, was the place where Agnes gained expression that extended into the adulthood. Agnes' teaching shows not only a kind of class struggle, but also a balance between the dialectical poles of the ideal and the reality. Agnes returned, in her adulthood, to her family with her teaching experiences. By keeping a concept of love in her mind, Agnes would be able to have the sense of reality in which culture and education came to offer.

Keywords: women, education, culture, social class, Anne Brontë

Introduction

Agnes Grey, published in 1847, is Anne Brontë's first novel. It is also a biographical novel about the life of a governess, in a way in which it also reveals some aspects of the Anne Brontë's own life. Being a governess herself, Brontë seemed to be re-living her own experiences while writing her novel (Walker, 2011). Anne was largely home-schooled and later became a governess. Anne Brontë worked as a governess for about 6 years before publishing her first novel. In some ways, *Agnes Grey* became a governess when her family had a catastrophic financial hardship. To be a governess, Agnes Grey would be able to contribute to her family financially. She would also be able to declare her independence as a woman. But Agnes' enthusiasm in teaching quickly faded away, as she struggled firstly to deal with the unmanageable Bloomfield children. Later, she experienced another painful situation with the arrogant Murray family. The only courtesy she received is from the sober young pastor, Mr. Weston. Drawing from her own experiences, Anne Brontë's novel offers a compelling

personal perspective, in a way in which the helpless plight of unmarried, but educated young women, who made governess a respectable career in the Victorian society.

The Cultural and Educational Features of the Victorian Era

Agnes Grey is set in Victorian Britain in terms of plot. In order to understand the events, people, cultural elements and educational situations in the novel, it is necessary to know the characteristics of the period. Because it is one of the novels that reflect the cultural and educational dimension of the Victorian period well. Therefore, first of all, understanding the characteristics of the Victorian period will make it easier to internalize the novel.

The Victorian Era represents the dynasty of Queen Victoria in England from 1837 to 1901 (Meena, 2022). The social attitudes developed during this period, defined by the term “Victorian era”, are representative of the morals and behaviors of the people. With the rise of industrialization leading to an increase in Britain’s population, there has been an era of great change and financial growth (Winter, 2004). With the increase in wealth and population, the people of Victorian Britain developed a distinct class divide. Each social hierarchy had its own moral behavior, social life, and perceptions of education, which were influenced by class expectations and religious values. In this period, class distinction could be clearly observed from the clothes and the behavior of the people (Whelan, 2011). Although the class distinction was evident, the regions in which the classes lived in the society were not different. For the most part, they lived together. This provided the interaction between classes with the development of the economy and social life. In general, among the characteristics of the Victorian era, good moral qualities, sense of duty, respect and social responsibility came to the fore (Marsden, 2014). To better understand Victorian literature, it is helpful to understand the class structure, as many of the writings of the time reflected the attitudes and behaviors of the classes they described.

Upper Class Victorians were made up of the financially wealthy ruling class. Their wealth was often hereditary, and their work was too abundant to be necessary. At the top of the Upper Class were the royal family, then the lords and barons, and the lower echelon industrialists. Etiquette dominated professional and social interactions with a strict set of rules for dating and behavior. The household had more than one maid, which left Upper Class women much free time for socializing and art hobbies. Young women of the Upper Class were expected to never be left unaccompanied for fear of exclusion, and a high level of decency was expected at all levels of socialization (Rasuloyna, 2022).

The Middle Class of Victorian Britain included the “white collar” working class; while the men of the households were in civil service, there were also artisans and craftsmen. Their clothes were less extravagant, but as timid as the Upper Class. Attitude was comparable to that of the Upper Class, but more modest financially and focused on status and appearance in society. The Lower Class of Victorian Britain consisted of workers and the poor. Salaries were meager, and workers only earned enough to shelter and feed their families. Often women and children supplemented their income by taking factory jobs.

The Victorian era was a period when the interest in education increased with the increase of industrialization. It is a period in which studies related to education have increased and the number of educational institutions has increased. Education, especially by the upper class, began to become a focal point during this period. There was not much schooling at this time, so upper-class families often provided their children with homeschooling opportunities. These trainings were also given by female governesses (Peterson, 1970). The governesses lived

with the families and were responsible for all the education of the children. Boys went to public schools when they were ten years old, but girls did not go to school at this time. Homeschooling was mostly for girls and boys up to the age of ten. The educational opportunities of children from poor families in the lower class were much more limited. They had the opportunity to go to church schools, but the education level and opportunities of church schools were very limited.

Education and Its Challenges

The book is about the life of Agnes Grey, the youngest daughter of the Grey family, from her youth to adulthood. Agnes, who grew up in a middle-class family, is a character who strives to achieve social acceptance and dreams. Agnes is the daughter of Richard Grey, a charitable pastor who loves helping the poor and doing good, and Alice Grey, who gave up her family for love even though her own family was wealthy and upper class (Brontë 2020). Agnes, who was brought up in a disciplined way by her family, received all her education at home. While her father gave Latin education, all other education was given by her mother Alice to Agnes and Mary. Although little is known about her physical characteristics, Agnes, who was raised as the youngest in the family, was not very strong. Therefore, while Agnes's life was mostly spent at home, her experiences were the life stories of her mother. Agnes, who usually spends all her time at home because of the region they live in, thinks that she is an adult and can stand on her own feet. Her family, on the other hand, does not think that Agnes, whom they have carefully raised from a young age, can cope with difficulties. The Grey family, who lost all their money in the investment made by Richard Grey, fell into financial difficulties, and all family members started to work for support. It was here that Agnes' idea of becoming a governess emerged, both to help her family and to begin a new life.

The Grey family gives the image of a middle-class family with a strict discipline and education understanding, leading an orderly life. In terms of its characteristics, it can be seen as typical as a Victorian middle-class family. The desire of middle-class families to be accepted in the society, to live in respect and order describes the period. Richard Grey, Agnes' father, is a pastor. He is a family member who is devoted to his family and always takes care of his family's needs. The male perception of the society he lives in actually supports this point of view.

When Agnes' family got into trouble, her mother and sister worked to contribute to the family. But Agnes was uncomfortable being treated like a child. To prove herself and support her family, she decided to become a governess. Being a governess was seen as an opportunity for women to begin a new life. Agnes, who insisted on her dreams even though her family did not give permission, took the first step towards her dreams by accepting the Bloomfield family's offer to be a governess. Agnes was an idealist but inexperienced governess. She had hopes for education and being governess. It was her dream to touch the lives of young individuals and prepare them for the future.

The Bloomfield family was more brutal and colder than Agnes had expected. The family represented the upper class in the society. Agnes, who had no experience of working for an upper-class family whose attitudes and actions were distant to middle-class or lower-class workers, was suddenly confronted with reality. After being hired, the young woman took on the tutoring task with some trepidation, but was convinced that she will take good care of her future students and earn their trust and love which will encourage timid children and

console the afflicted. Agnes, right after a cold lunch with Bloomfield, was introduced to her ward: seven-year-old Tom, six-year-old Mary Ann, and nearly four-year-old Fanny. There was also little Harriet; however, the boy would not be Agnes's disciple because of his young age, as he was only two years old. His family thinks that Tom is a generous, noble-spirited lad who needs to be led without being pushed around and is known for always telling the truth. His sister Mary Ann needs some supervision, but overall she is a very nice girl.

This type of presentation fosters in the young governess an expectation of a friendly relationship with the students, this expectation is frustrated by later events. Confronted with the contrast between what she heard from Tom and the kind description offered by the boy's mother, Agnes is deeply disappointed as she realizes that not everyone is trying to raise their children under the same values that the Grey family upholds. As the young woman was trained to do well, to temper her desires, to control her anger, and to sacrifice her own pleasure for the sake of others, the Bloomfield children, especially the eldest son, faced parental indulgence and nurses' submission.

Despite her disappointment when Agnes realized she was mistaken in believing that her students would receive the same education she received, even in the face of adversity while at Welwood, Agnes demonstrates that she is determined to change the stance of the little Bloomfields by acting with patience and determination to establish the greatest possible distinction between good and bad behavior. Agnes' thought reveals that the young woman aimed more to build their moral character by teaching them to control their will and whims, to cultivate humility, benevolence and respect for others rather than to contribute to the intellectual formation of her students. Finally, she aims to raise them under the same values instilled in them by their parents.

The assumed behavior is that students should respect and follow the governess. In contrast, Agnes doesn't take long to realize that, in keeping with her idea of the teacher figure, she will never get the respect and attention she expects from students, no matter how hard she tries. The reality she encounters is the fact that the little Bloomfields do not see her as an admirable person who symbolizes any superiority or authority. On the contrary, children who follow the example of their parents despise her, treating her as a servant hired to provide them with a service, just like the other servants of Welwood. In this respect, the Agnes Grey character, in the figure of the teacher with which she is associated, does not differ from the more general image represented by the governesses of the 19th century.

The disrespectful treatment that has become a constant in her governess life makes her a mockery of her students. With slightly more experience at the Bloomfields, Agnes discovers that her inability to have authority over her students is due not only to the servant status imposed on her, but also to the fact that her students do not recognize an authority. She is not based on prestige or the function of the person who practices it, but based solely on rewards and punishments. Agnes fails as Tom, Mary Ann and Fanny are interested in what they can get in exchange for subjugation. She soon discovered that the title of governess was nothing more than a failed attempt. Her disciples had no sense of obedience. The usual fear of Tom's father's vicious disposition, and the fear of punishments he was accustomed to inflict when angry, often kept them within bounds in his immediate presence. The girls, too, had some fear of their mother's anger, and the boy could be bribed occasionally to do what he wanted, in hopes of a reward: but Agnes had nothing to offer.

III: Experiences in Teaching and Love

Although quite disappointed with the outcome of her first professional experience at Welwood House, Agnes, persistent and yet willing to prove her talent, reveals her desire to pursue a teaching career, a decision viewed with concern by Alice Grey. Despite her mother's attempt to show her daughter that her difficulties are not just about the Bloomfield family, Agnes strives to have her next experience in a more educated family than before. The mother's wish for Agnes to have patrons of aristocratic origin, or at least aristocratic demeanor, reflects the common desire of many governesses to serve members of the aristocracy, with the expectation that, unlike bourgeois families, they will be treated with respect.

After mutual correspondence, Agnes Grey agrees to become the governess of the respected Murray family, but this is no great joy for her mother and sister. But to Agnes, the Murray family had a higher status than Bloomfield's and was one of those families that would show her governess due respect. She could be seen as a respected and well-bred lady who was not just a maid, but a tutor and guide to her children. Moreover, since her students were older, they would be more rational, more instructive and less problematic than their predecessors. The Murray family has four children: Charles, 10 years old; John, 11 years old; 13 and a half year old Matilda; and Rosalie, 15 years old.

There is a mismatch between the pedagogical principles of Agnes and the Murray family. The Murray family insists on smoothing the path of knowledge to their students without the slightest difficulty. Agnes, on the other hand, sees this as a seemingly impossible task, because nothing important, not even a small thing, can be taught without effort.

Overall, conditions at Horton Lodge are not significantly different from those encountered at Welwood House. Once again, Agnes witnesses and experiences scenes that make it clear to her how little the governess means to her students and employers. Once again, she tries to exert some authority, but this attempt is foiled by the imposition of students' wishes: She has no control over the routine of her lessons, and she eventually surrenders herself to the whims of young women. On the other hand, Agnes' attitude is quite different from before: she no longer insists on the painstaking task of passing on the rigorous training she received from Richard and Alice Grey to her students.

Rosalie, who is about to turn 18, is offered to show her to all the people living in the vicinity of the Murray residence—an event whose purpose is to show the young woman to the public and find her a wealthy husband. This activity, which is a normal behavior of the upper class, is welcomed by the eldest of the family, who at the time already thinks like his mother and has no intention of marrying for love. Rosalie marries a young man, Thomas Ashby, whom she considers the worst of potential candidates. However, he owns Ashby Park, where the young woman lives. It is a remarkable example of the value given to the preservation of status in the conditions of the period.

Agnes' duty to the Murrays always comes first. Although this gives her great pleasure, she may visit Nancy Brown only as often as the Murrays allow. The governess takes very little time to herself. She is at the constant service of Rosalie and Matilda and the girls are not in order, so Agnes must be ready to help them around the clock. Agnes isn't just concerned about being a burden to her employers. She is also worried about inconveniencing the maids. This is a good example of the governess' ambivalent role in the household. She is in

an ambiguity between servants and employers, this role isolating her in the domestic as well as outside the home where all women are neglected.

With her employers busy elsewhere, Agnes visits one of the Murrays' neighbors, ex-widow Nancy Brown. Agnes finds a rare friendship in Nancy. Two women find themselves in similar situations, both addicted in their own ways. Nancy is completely dependent on her superiors. She must rely on the Murrays for shelter and food and the clergy for her spiritual happiness. She also can't read herself anymore because of her poor eyesight, so Agnes and Mr. Weston visit her to read her a book. Agnes is also financially dependent on the Murrays. There is a mutual understanding between them and they can understand each other well. Conversations between the widow and the governess are calm and natural. It is clear that the two women take great pleasure in each other's company. Agnes claims the visits make her almost as happy as Nancy. However, it's clear that visits also benefit Agnes' friend request. Along with her occasional visits to her own family, visits to Nancy are Agnes' only opportunity for fun.

Agnes Grey constantly feels helpless and frustrated around her work place. Her savior at Horton Lodge was the curate Mr. Weston. He treats Agnes with kindness and courtesy every time he meets her. Agnes tells him how he looked like the morning star on her horizon. Agnes' positive influence in his life seems to offset the negative events to some extent. When she leaves Horton and starts working with her mother, she reveals that she is not yet at peace with her situation. Agnes was professionally satisfied. Her income through management made this possible. However, she doesn't seem satisfied. She does not tell the reader about her students or her teaching, but only about her desperate longing for Mr. Weston. After Agnes left the Murray residence due to the death of her father and opened a school dedicated to the education of girls with her mother, she married Pastor Edward Weston, whom she met in the parish close to Horton Lodge.

Conclusion

The novel describes a situation of a woman being marginalized in the society. Agnes Grey, as an individual, is motivated by her problems in her life. The readers can see the challenges of being a Victorian Governess. The novel depicts Agnes Grey's struggle to survive against the tyranny of the upper class, as well as her struggle to convince her family that she can succeed as a governess. Her decision to become a governess is first rejected by her family. They think that Agnes, the youngest child, cannot afford such a big responsibility. However, they finally let her do it, and that's how Agnes' journey begins.

This study shows that Anne Bronte's novel *Agnes Grey* is more complexly related to pedagogical debate than has been recognized until now. *Agnes Grey* should be seen as a conscious contribution to the debate in the 1840s, not only about the plight of governesses, but also about the education of women in general. Anne Brontë's novel is not just a story that reveals the hardships of a governess' life, although she certainly criticized her former employers for her story. His main concern is to create a thought-provoking story about self-actualization, independence, the importance of love and the need to live a fulfilling life. The mother depicted the maturation of women and emphasized individualism through a character that defies her and society's expectations of her.

It is possible to sense that throughout the novel, the narrator leaves gaps and eliminates the unsaid on the pretext of not boring the reader. Alongside *Agnes Grey*'s unfinished thoughts, the end of the book also seems to tell us something. About the true purpose of the story, she argues, the intended teaching requires much more than

patience, determination, and perseverance. But despite the young woman's failure, her efforts are rewarded with a happy ending. When Agnes finds herself in a complicated, seemingly unsolvable situation, here is the solution. Rescuing the protagonist is a solution given by chance, that is, when Agnes and Alice Grey are unexpectedly reunited with the priest, Edward Weston, who, after being a regular visitor to her home, declares his love for the young woman and marries. This conclusion paradoxically leaves the answer open by showing the unsaid as an invitation to discuss teaching purposes, especially regarding to moral education.

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