

**Independence through Education:
The Governess in *Jane Eyre* and *Agnes Grey* and Her Relation to
Women's Identity in Nineteenth-Century England**

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Preface

I have always loved *Jane Eyre*. I first read the novel as a thirteen-year-old seventh-grader, and I knew I had struck gold. I felt for the first time, as Alan Bennett so fittingly wrote in *The History Boys*, as though a hand had reached out from the page and taken mine. My kinship with the character of Jane was immediate and complete. The only classic literature I had read before middle school was *Pride and Prejudice*, which I loved more because I knew from societal pressure that I *should* love it, and some Hemingway novels and short stories that I was certainly too young to understand. *Jane Eyre* was the first classic I loved for its own sake, and as an English major at the University of Vermont I have continued to chase that feeling.

I read *Jane Eyre* again at Hanover High School, in the best class I ever took, Mr. Galton's "Classic English Novels." That was the first time I studied the novel for a class, and while I remember initially resenting Mr. Galton for our difference in opinion regarding Jane's choice to leave Rochester (at the time I was sure that she should have picked her own happiness and stayed with him), Mr. Galton opened my eyes to new ways of looking at the novel. I brought this different perspective with me from high school to UVM in 2009, when I entered already declared as an English major, ready to devour more classics. Thanks to UVM's Integrated Humanities Program, I was able to accomplish this in a major way.

But it took a trip across the pond to cement my love for the Brontës in a more scholarly manner. In the spring of 2012 I read *Jane Eyre* once more, in Dr. Cathy Water's wonderful English course, "The Brontës in Context," at the University Kent in

Canterbury, UK. *Jane Eyre* was one of six novels included in the course, including Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, and Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*. This was my first collegiate reading of *Jane Eyre*, focusing on the connections between the novels and important events occurring in England during the middle of the nineteenth century. I like to think that reading the Brontë novels in England gave them a special quality. During Easter vacation in 2012 I was able to visit the Brontë Parsonage in Haworth, Yorkshire, to see where the sisters lived and worked during their brief lives, and where they are buried (all but Anne, who is buried in the seaside resort town of Scarborough, in North Yorkshire). To be able to gaze out at the same moors that greeted them was magical, and an experience I will never forget.

Objective

I hope to use this thesis to explore how the figure of the governess fits into the Brontë novels, and why she still matters today. To this effect I will employ a broad lens of New Historicism, popularized by the scholar Stephen Greenblatt, a school of literary theory that aspires to recognize the political and cultural movements that influence a work, in order to position that work in a historical context. New Historicism is a very broadly defined field, and my work will use these interactions between literary and historical texts and the era from which they emerge. Of H. Aram Veesser's famous five-point definition of New Historicism, tenets one and three seem to me the most important: firstly, "that every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices," and secondly, "that literary and non-literary 'texts' circulate inseparably"(Veesser 2).

Although Veenser himself notes that such a list “reduc[es] N[ew] H[istoricism]’s wondrous complexity,” it is an important starting point for my loose use of the theory (2). The borders between history and literature are permeable, and neither can claim absolute authority. By looking at historical circumstances of the governess as she is embodied through *Jane Eyre* and *Agnes Grey*, it is my hope to see how these texts inform the condition of women in nineteenth-century England.

I hope to prove that working as a governess is not simply a means to an end, but can actually be an end in itself with independent employment conferring meaning on young women. Jane and Agnes are changed by their work, and their character development culminates, I believe, in each of them choosing a very different path that would otherwise remain unavailable to them. This, I argue, is what makes both Jane and Agnes such appealing heroines—they are not wholly dependent on men for their happiness. While the eventual romantic conclusions of both novels are a major pull for Brontë fans (the phrase “Reader, I married him” still fills my heart with joy), the happy unions would be meaningless without the strength of character displayed by both protagonists, which itself derives from Jane and Agnes’s roles as working women.

Agnes Grey

I knew I wanted to focus my senior honors thesis on *Jane Eyre*, but I needed to broaden my field of study by picking another Brontë novel. I chose Anne Brontë’s *Agnes Grey*, published the same year as *Jane Eyre*, in 1847. Most people have read *Jane Eyre*, or at least are familiar with the love story between the plain yet strong governess and the

brooding Mr. Rochester, but few can say the same of *Agnes Grey*. It is a much quieter novel, which might help to explain its lower status on the literary totem pole. The story is simple enough: to ease the financial burden on her poor clergyman father, young Agnes seeks to earn her own living as a governess in first one, and then another upper-middle class families. But her experiences of unruly children and deep loneliness show the life of a governess is not always a happy one, and Agnes must labor to discover her own self-worth through her work. Anne Brontë is seen by critics to be a less passionate writer than her sisters, but I hope that some day she is accepted as holding equal footing with them, because I believe she deserves the same acclaim as Charlotte or Emily. The similarities and variations between *Agnes Grey* and *Jane Eyre* struck me as intriguing in terms of artistic achievement and also stimulated my curiosity for the role of the governess in the historical context of the nineteenth century.

My Previous Work

Since I have been either reading or thinking about *Jane Eyre* to some degree throughout the past decade, the work contained in this thesis is clearly born out of previous study. In some instances full paragraphs have been taken from my previous work, when I had already written about a specific important quotation and deemed parts of my past analysis important enough to repeat here.

Many of the ideas of this thesis come from my essay “Insufficient Servitude: The Role of the Governess in *Agnes Grey* and *Jane Eyre*,” which I wrote in February 2012 for “The Brontës in Context” English literature course at the University of Kent in

Canterbury, UK. In this work I took my first stab at exploring the role of the governess, and how she relates to gendered power dynamics in both novels. My conclusion, however, was very different from the one I hope to make in this thesis. I came to see the role of the governess in a primarily negative light, as little more than preparation for eventual marriage. The heartache and difficulty that both Jane and Agnes suffer as governesses convinced me that nothing good could come out of such an emotionally draining and inherently diminishing post. I conclude the essay by stating,

...working as a governess—although often the only option open to young middle-class English women in the nineteenth century—is not enough for Anne and Charlotte Brontë or their protagonists. In both *Agnes Grey* and *Jane Eyre*, marriage is the ultimate end. All women's work is either a preparation or a means for this end. As seen in the role of the governess, women's work cannot hold any intrinsic value in itself, because it curtails the possibility of freedom....Neither woman finds what she is looking for in her position, but it does lead both Jane and Agnes to a marriage with an equal whom they truly love. [Charlotte and Anne Brontë suggest that] [m]arriage is the only way a Victorian woman can rise above the degradation of working as a governess, and lead a meaningful life.

While I understand the thought process that led me to such a conclusion at the time, since then I have completely changed my mind, and hope that this thesis serves to explain why I have come to such a different opinion on the role of the governess. One reason I am so happy to write again on this topic, besides my intense love for the novels themselves, is to rectify what I see as a lack of depth in my previous thinking. I left little room for the possibility of personal growth and development that comes from women's work, and I

am pleased to now use my thesis to go back and remedy this. However, this work will not simply serve as a refutation of my older essay, instead it will cover much more ground and expand upon my original thinking.

In addition to my essay “Insufficient Servitude,” I also wrote a term paper for my Honors Enrichment Contract (HEC) project, which explores the role of women’s work in Charles Dickens’ novel *Hard Times*. This essay, “Punishing the Nontraditional Woman in *Hard Times*,” came out of work done for Professor Sarah Alexander’s course, “The Nineteenth-Century British Novel,” at UVM in the fall of 2012. While very different from *Jane Eyre* or *Agnes Grey*, *Hard Times* was published during the same decade span, and there are similarities between the portrayal of women’s roles and women’s work in all three novels. I thought that perhaps researching one would help with the other, especially in terms of explaining the importance of separate spheres and agency denied to women by Victorian society. Both of these topics are further examined in the first chapter of my thesis, “The Governess in Nineteenth-Century England.”

Chapter 1 The Governess in Nineteenth-Century England

Separate Spheres

During the Victorian Age, men and women inhabited “separate spheres” that controlled what actions each gender could perform. Men worked outside of the house, earning money to provide for their families. Women, valued primarily as wives and mothers, ran the household. This strict separation of roles was solidified in Coventry Patmore’s 1854 poem “The Angel in the House,” in which the figure of the ‘angel’ is thus described in Prelude I of Canto V: “love is [her] substance, truth [her] form”(Patmore V.I.33). New York University Professor Mary Poovey interprets this section of the poem to reveal that the angel is “‘Naturally’ self-sacrificing and self-regulating... radiate[ing] morality because her ‘substance’ [is] love, not self-interest or ambition”(Poovey 8). This idea of the Angel in the House is represented as an “opposite and necessary counterpart to man”(8), the perfect caring partner for her vigorous husband. According to historian Catherine Hall, this Victorian ideal “is familiar from novels, manuals and even government reports”(Hall 15). This dramatic division between the genders was assumed to follow middle- and upper-class women’s natural roles; as the perceived weaker sex, they were physically and mentally built to be wives and mothers, and nothing more (31). These are the preconceptions and biases with which we enter the discussion of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Anne Brontë’s *Agnes Grey* (1847).

The understandably precarious position of women in nineteenth-century England is also clearly seen in the legal concept of “coverture” in English law. In this tradition, married women were legally and financially represented by their husbands, and did not hold any rights as individual (Poovey 52). But coverture was at its heart a paradox, for “when a woman became what she was destined to be (a wife), she became “nonexistent” in the eyes of the law”(52). In marriage, a woman lost her legal personhood while simultaneously taking on the responsibilities of a married woman. She was therefore not liable for any illegal actions, but also not free to pursue any decision—financial or otherwise—which was not also the express wish of her husband. Upon marriage, whatever money or property a woman had previously owned immediately became the possession of her husband. It was not until the 1880s that this tradition was vanquished by the Married Women’s Property Act, giving married women legal rights to their own finances.

Coverture aside, it is understandable that not all women could hope to fit this wifely ideal of the Angel in the House. There was one type of women whose role confused these tightly held middle-class gender ideals, and her struggle to support herself unearthed the unsustainable nature of the long-clung-to divided gender roles. This woman was the governess, a figure that to this day mystifies and intrigues. We cannot help but wonder what life was really like for these women. What purpose and dignity did their position hold? What would have to happen to a woman’s familial and financial situation for her to become a governess? Since women’s work, as performed by the governess, showcased women’s independence and ability to act outside of their designated sphere, the role of the governess “ultimately undermined the hegemony of the

domestic ideal and questioned this particular definition of the meaning of sexual differences”(Poovey 163). A governess could not be made to fit nicely into the Angel in the House role, and was therefore “a problem of—and for—all members of the middle-class”(126). These young women could not be categorized in a way that made sense to the general populace, and their liminal existence unintentionally thwarted Victorian society’s deep love of classification.

The Life of a Governess

What made a woman choose the path of a governess? In nineteenth-century England, if a young lady was abruptly left destitute—by the death of her father, for example—she did not have many options open to her besides governessing. In fact, a sudden swell of young ladies looking for work in mid nineteenth-century England crowded the governess job market. Beginning in the 1830s, social and economic hardships made finding work as a governess even more difficult, as many English banks failed and families lost their savings. In addition, England contained many more women than men of a marriageable age; this drove more women to seek work outside of the home (Poovey 126).

Women had once been able to perform half a dozen jobs outside of the house, including butcher, farmer, jailor, and plumber, but were now relegated to milliner, dressmaker, or teacher (126-127). Because of changing social norms and the desire to appear as upper-class as possible, it was no longer feasible for a young unmarried middle-class woman to earn money for herself and her family by going out into the labor market; she was now restricted to helping with the education of someone else’s children.

Additionally, governesses did not have the same protection as other employees during the Victorian period. Lady Eastlake, a contributor for the *Quarterly Review*, commented on the plight of the governess as she saw it at the time: “Workmen may rebel...and tradesmen may combine, not to let you have their labour or their wares under a certain rate; but the governess has no refuge...[her] services are of too precious a kind to have any stated market value”(132-133). In this way, governesses were at the mercy of the families they served. While individual accounts vary, around the middle of the century the annual salary for a governess could be as low as £10 plus room and board, and sometimes up to £20 or £30 (Holloway 39). For comparison, a household servant also made about £10 a year (Landow). In 1850 there were approximately 21,000 women working as governesses in England.

Simultaneously ostracized from her employer’s family and the company of the household servants, the governess “was isolated...and was almost universally despised”(Perkin 164). Unable to fit into the tight gender roles of a typical Victorian family, the governess had no set place, and made both her employers and the servants uncomfortable with her unwieldy position. And of course, there remained the underlying sexual threat of the governess, as depicted in William Makepeace Thackeray’s 1847 novel *Vanity Fair*, in the character of Becky Sharp. Anne and Charlotte Brontë, themselves governesses for a number of years, bring aspects of this complicated reality into their novels *Agnes Grey* and *Jane Eyre*.

As governessing was virtually the only option open to middle-class women, it is understandable that not all women who sought such employment were suited to a life of teaching. In fact, some women who hoped to fill governess positions disliked children,

and had only little interest in teaching (164). Many women, competent or not, who found themselves working as governesses were forced to face the stark reality of their position. The governess held a complicated liminal space in a middle-class household. While generally no longer the social equal of the family she worked for, she was certainly of a much higher class than the servants, yet she too worked for the family for annual wages. Her position was tenuous at best. While working to promulgate traditional Victorian values and gender roles in the children she educated, the governess, as a working woman, also contradicted those same ideals (Peterson 8-9).

But working as a governess did not *always* mean dropping down the social ladder. A governess could teach in a household of a higher class than her own, thereby raising her personal status by association (Broughton 14). While this meant that most would-be governesses—daughters of military and navy officers, merchants, and clergymen—still experienced a decrease to their social status when they sought work as a governess, the daughters of tradesmen and farmers had the opportunity to raise theirs (14). Because of this unique prospect, working as a governess could represent “a means of living among and mingling with those traditionally of higher status”(14). So many women were looking for work as governesses in the nineteenth century that the profession, encompassing women from all levels of the middle-class, “actually elided distinctions of rank between women”(18). Certain women now had the chance, through the mental and physical labor of governessing, to improve their own social standing.

However, not all would-be governesses were educated sufficiently for the position they sought. In their anthology *The Governess*, University of York professors Trev Broughton and Ruth Symes note, “few of those women who became governesses in the

early part of the century had enjoyed any formal education in the art of teaching”(19). Many were desperate for the money, and educated *enough*—as daughters of the clergy, military men, or tradesmen—to pass themselves off as potential teachers. On the whole, governesses were unhappy and underpaid, with no prospect of job security. There were far too many applicants for available positions, which led employers to drop salaries while raising the level of required accomplishments. All in all, it was an unstable and unpleasant situation.

The “governess problem” became a common rallying cry of Victorian England. Reformers sought ways to help this seemingly unfortunate population of women, while governesses themselves struggled to find work in a job market flooded with newly destitute women. According to Broughton and Symes, social reformers presented the governess as a woman who was independent, reliant only on herself, and a hard worker. (124). The plight of the governess, coupled with the mass of under-educated women seeking work throughout England, led to the creation of the Governesses’ Benevolent Institution in London, a shining example of nineteenth century social reform and a key contributor to the rise of women’s public education.

The Governesses’ Benevolent Institution and Queen’s College

The Governesses’ Benevolent Institution, founded in London in 1844, took the following as its mission:

[to] raise the character of Governesses as a class, and thus improve the tone of Female Education; to assist Governesses in making provision for their old age; and to assist in distress and age those Governesses whose

exertions for their parents, or families have prevented such a provision.
(Broughton 124)

The vast support that the GBI received from “Royal and noble” patrons suggests that it was something dear to Victorian society’s heart, with both men and women in high places hoping to help the plight of the governess (125). In the year 1850, the GBI counted the number of women it had helped that year at 2,460 (out of 21,000 total governesses in England). This included setting up governesses with annuities if they could not work, taking care of ill governesses, providing living quarters for out-of-work women, and helping them to find work (Hughes 183). This new and important safety net for governesses meant that normally destitute middle-class women no longer had to rely solely on their own luck in finding a position—there was now an organization dealing with the social aspect of the governess problem. By being willing to help others—the GBI charged its members a small fee—a working woman could also help herself.

Soon after its creation, the GBI was called to address the lack of training which plagued many governesses in their search for honest work (Broughton 138). In response to this need for educated governesses, in 1848 the GBI opened Queen’s College, an all-women’s school and the first of its kind, in Harley Street in London. With the support of its founder, Kings College London professor Frederick Denison Maurice, Queen’s College sought to “reinforce the credentials and training of governesses,” but soon it became apparent that the only way to accomplish this was through a wide-ranging curriculum, much broader than the one originally planned. The paradox soon arose: “a scheme aimed at consolidating the system of private, domestic education actually accelerated the growth of public provision for middle-class girls”(143). Originally

Queen's College was supposed to teach young women only how to teach in a governess setting, but it ended up being the means by which many middle-class women were publicly educated. This unexpected distribution of education was certainly a boon for Victorian women and the burgeoning women's rights movement. From the very first day of the academic calendar at Queen's, a student had control over her own education. Each woman chose specific lectures to attend, from a range of traditional subjects as well as the more unusual (masculine) choices of mechanics, theology, math, and Latin (Hughes 184). The lectures were given by nine of Maurice's fellow professors at King's College. Mary Maurice, Frederick's sister and herself a social reformer, writes how important it was to be able to choose one's courses: "Each pupil is allowed to select the studies to which she desires to attend, and to join only in such as she thinks desirable"(Broughton 147). Giving women control of their studies developed female autonomy and helped spread the model of a working woman (or soon-to-be working woman) in charge of her own life and future.

The broad goal of both the GBI and Queen's College was to "promote self-reliance among governesses"(150). If a woman could depend on her own skills and work ethic, it was more likely that she would be able to support herself, and less likely that she would become a nuisance for Victorian society. Broughton and Symes suggest that this new attitude towards governess education, "cultivated a sense of self-worth among the new generation"(150). Reformers like Frederick Maurice sought to help the governess class reach its full potential as workers and thinkers. In this way, educated middle-class women could realistically make a future for themselves and contribute to their own independence both in work and in life as a whole.

In an introductory lecture given at the opening of Queen's College in 1848, Frederick Maurice explained his hope for the education given at the new institution: "[students] are not to draw or play, or to study arithmetic, or language, or literature, or history, in order to shine or be admired; that if these are their ends, they will not be sincere in their work or do it well"(Hughes 185). Maurice correctly points out that the goal of learning is not to show off, it is to *learn for learning's sake*; in this case to embody that knowledge by successfully imparting it unto the children under a governesses' care. This type of approach to teaching was "in self-conscious contradiction to the ornamental education of which governesses were held to be both the victims and the perpetrators"(185).

Just one year after its establishment, Queen's College had changed the history of the governess forever. The GBI maintained that the Queen's certificate, bestowed upon governesses who completed one year of coursework at the college, "was fast becoming recognized as the basic qualification for governesses"(185). No longer could any young woman venture out into the world to become a governess—she must have some solid education behind her, and a certificate in her hands to prove her worth. But the GBI and Queen's College walked a fine line between making sure all governesses had a fair chance at employment, and making the category of governesses a trained profession that women would aspire to. The former was seen as honorable, the latter unappealing because it was assumed that as more would-be governesses roamed England searching for work, more of these women would end up unemployed. The committee in charge of overseeing the running of Queen's "disclaim[ed] any idea of training governesses as a separate profession"(186). Actively preparing women for a working role was seen as

negative and inappropriate, completely against the gender spheres in Victorian society. The only women who could possibly become governesses were destitute middle-class women who had run out of other options. The public would not cleave to the idea of any young lady trying to “train” herself as a governess without destitution first wracking her family. In the rare instances in which a governess came from the lower classes and tried to work herself up the social ladder, she was looked down upon, like Becky Sharpe in Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*. Society saw the plight of the governess with intense sympathy, but for that sympathy to be maintained the role of the governess would need to be filled only when all other options (living with relatives, and marriage) were off the table.

Despite this inconsistency in the type of women who “should” be enrolled at Queen’s, raising the level and character of female education was instrumental in the rise of the educated middle-class in Victorian England. The goal of Queen’s College was to “exclude unqualified teachers from the profession; and gradually to raise the general tone of female education”(de Bellaigue 973). Through the forward thinking actions of the GBI, many middle-class women received an education that would have been previously unavailable to them. In response to this passion for female education, the school slowly moved away from its image of a governess training school, and remade itself as an “institution for the higher education of young ladies, not a training college for schoolmistresses and governesses”(974). Interestingly, from its very start Queen’s was open to *all* women over twelve years of age, not just destitute women looking for governess work. This availability to women of all classes stems from the desire for potential governesses “to be educated alongside financially-secure girls...regardless of whether they planned to teach” and hopefully make it easier for those governesses to find

work in the home of their school fellows (Hughes 186). This idea of women of all different backgrounds learning together is a powerful one. Presumably some of those women might attend Queen's because they wished to become more educated, not because circumstances forced them to look for employment as a governess.

Girl's Education in Nineteenth-Century England

During this time period the standard education for middle-class girls was changing. In the early part of the nineteenth century, an English girl only attended school as a means to find a husband—once she returned home from school, whatever education she received would be appreciated not for its own sake, but as a way to attract an appropriate mate. But priorities were shifting, and in the 1850s and 1860s many new girls' schools opened: "private day and boarding schools grew and flourished, in response to changing social and economic needs, offering a commitment to academic achievement and meritocratic values"(Perkin 35). Two different groups supported these new schools: men who "rejected the idea that it was desirably feminine to be ignorant and to waste time on trivial pursuits" and others who hoped to enable middle-class women to earn their own livings through education. As the 1850 Census showed, there were 500,000 more women than men in England, out of a total of about nineteen million people, so it was evident that at least some women would have to work to support themselves (35).

One such school was set up by Frances Mary Buss (1827-94), who had herself attended Queen's College. She took the helm of the North London Collegiate School, which she steered in an exceptionally progressive direction. When asked by a school commission whether or not she believed there should be a difference in the ways boys

and girls are taught, she replied, “I am sure that the girls can learn anything they are taught in an interesting manner, and for which they have some motive to work” (35-36). Buss believed in gender equality in education, and that spirit of equality extended to other aspects of her reign at North London Collegiate School. She was one of the first schoolmistresses to welcome Roman Catholic and Jewish students, and even started another school in Camden where tuition was less expensive and bright girls could win scholarships to North London Collegiate (35-36). Stories like Buss’s speak to the growing sense of women’s competence, and excellence, in an academic setting. The education that Buss gave her students opened opportunities to them that would have otherwise been closed.

Another London schoolmistress, Hannah Pipe, focused on, “training those powers of the mind and heart that fit a woman for the thoughtful and intelligent performance of her duties in life” (de Bellaigue 968). The fact that Pipe’s pupils were included in the first class of women students enrolled at the Cambridge colleges Newnham and Girton—the same colleges where in 1928 Virginia Woolf delivered the lectures on which her 1929 essay “A Room of One’s Own” is based—proves the high quality of the courses given at her school (968). These new schoolmistresses like Buss and Pipe had more independence than the figure of the governesses who came before them: “Within the walls of the new schools, strong and enduring friendships with other members of staff allowed many women to soften the emotional rigours of celibacy while side-stepping the demands of marriage and motherhood” (Hughes 193). Since most of these schools were women-only, strong friendships and mentor/mentee relationships were free to flourish. The position of the female teacher was finally allowing middle-class women to demonstrate their

independence and work ethic. The headmistress of the Manchester High School for Girls stated the following claim: “the teacher is an expert professional and is entitled therefore to the deference shown to the skilled professional opinion of the doctor, lawyer, or architect”(193). This shows how far women teachers had come since the early days of the resident governess, when a female teacher in another family’s house had little power over her charges, and commanded as much respect.

Issues with Governess Identity

The governess life was not an easy one. Cut off from former friends and acquaintances by their new location and generally unprepared for the difficult work of looking after and teaching children, governesses, “were usually expected to act as nurses and maids as well as teacher for the children, and to make themselves generally useful whenever needed”(Holcombe 12). Many women did not expect this myriad of duties coupled with intense feelings of loneliness when they signed up for the job. Feeling out of place was common, as a governess’s employers could be less educated than she. She derived no sympathy from any quarter: “Resented by the servants for her supposed pretensions, distrusted as a rival by the lady of the house, she must often have felt like a pariah”(Broughton 99). The positive aspects of governessing, specifically earning one’s own keep, were “outweighed in the popular imagination by the ‘plight’ of the lady ‘reduced’ to a position of precarious dependence and subservience in another woman’s home”(97). Deploying one’s identity in a house in which respect was hard to come by must have been unimaginably difficult.

Positive Aspects of Governess Identity

The benefits of the cultural shift in this era are seen in the images of women helping other women to succeed as governesses. In *A Word to a Young Governess by an Old One*, a pamphlet written by an anonymous governess in 1860, an older governess offers some advice to her young mentee:

go and buy Isaac Taylor's "Home Education" and Abbott's "Teacher."
Do not read them and put them away, but have them always at hand. Talk to successful teachers, ask them questions, no matter how simple, about their management You will always find the most successful ready to acknowledge that they themselves are always learning, and that, too, sometimes by their own mistakes. But do not copy the plans, or receive the counsel of any, whose pupils are not happy, as well as intelligent.
(Broughton 34)

By giving young women helpful advice, more experienced governesses created a network for new ones, a support system much like those that develop at contemporary all-women institutions like Smith or Wellesley. This provides a network for women to be successful in the workforce once they complete their education, and directly relates to the idea of women's awareness and identity in the nineteenth century.

The rare instances of freedom seen in the governess life stemmed mostly from the lesson plans that governesses created for their pupils. This "irregular system" of schooling gave passionate governesses "the freedom to devise wide-ranging and elaborate lessons in which subjects such as history could be taught in conjunction with science, literature and even music; and in which the teacher could experiment with a number of different methods, both inside the classroom and without"(43). As previously

stated, the pay for a governess position was low, but for a young woman to have complete power over how she chose to educate young minds is not to be taken lightly. By taking control of their employment, governesses could simultaneously acquire control of their own independence and exert their own agency.

Freedom also came in the form of the governess's schoolroom, a potent symbol for hope and advancement. The schoolroom was the governess's domain, the one place where she was in complete control. It was here that she might gain back some of the ground lost in the other aspects of her life, for instance in her relations to her employers and the servants in the house. Emily Peart wrote in her *Book for Governesses* (1896) about this special space, "where all that is most manly and most womanly in you is to be called into play; your battle-field, where toil is to be borne, effort to be made, difficulties overcome, and victory accomplished"(89). When looked at in this light, the governess role holds much responsibility, with celestial tones of a higher calling. There is also an interesting duality of male/female roles—when Peart writes "all that is most manly and most womanly in you is to be called into play," she presumably means that a governess must be an active participant in her role, not the helpmeet or sidekick to another (male) figure. Traditionally, the governess was seen as a quintessentially domestic and female figure, but it was this type of dichotomy that complicated her gender status.

The Governess in *Jane Eyre* and *Agnes Grey*

While the historical dimensions of the governess experience are vital to a full understanding, this thesis is not strictly a historical investigation of the governess. Instead, I seek to explore how our historical understanding of the governess is illuminated

by Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey*. It is my belief that the subtopics covered in this chapter—separate spheres for men and women, the daily life of the governess, girls' and women's education in nineteenth-century England, the Governesses' Benevolent Institution and Queen's College—are each important in gaining a full picture of the role of the governess, but cannot stand alone, and must be juxtaposed with depictions of the governess in popular literature of the time. Through research into the Census, newspaper articles, personal letters, and school reports we can see the life of the governess through a strictly historical perspective, but that avenue should not be pursued as if in a vacuum. What of the day-to-day life of the governess? This side of the history of the governess is brilliantly illuminated in Charlotte and Anne Brontë's work. The fictional characters of *Jane Eyre* and *Agnes Grey* can help us to see the realities of everyday governess life. *Jane Eyre* is without a doubt the more famous of the two novels, indeed one of the most famous works of English literature ever written, but it is perhaps *Agnes Grey* that more realistically—albeit quietly—showcases the emotional dimensions of governess life. These novels let us see how two important writers struggle with and ultimately resolve the role of the governess. In this way, the factual historical background illuminates the reading of the novels, and vice versa. Imagination and history intertwine as Anne and Charlotte Brontë draw on their own complicated experiences as governesses to give their readers a glimpse into the particularities of governess life. Neither novel is a strictly true-to-life account, but both, in different ways, bring in vital realities of the governess existence.

Chapter 2 The Governess in Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey*

Unlike Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey* is a quiet novel. Largely passed over by critics and the public upon its publication in 1847 (the same year as *Jane Eyre*), it charts the trials and triumphs of a country clergyman's daughter who leaves her quaint family home to earn her own maintenance as a governess. As Anne Brontë was herself a governess for over five years, the portrayal of the governess experience in her novel is strikingly realistic, much more so than in *Jane Eyre*. This chapter will examine how the role of the governess confers meaning upon Agnes; even though her labor proves incredibly trying, it greatly increases her independence and self-worth. This is most clearly seen when Agnes opens a school with her mother at the end of the novel, a feat that she would never have been able to accomplish without her governess experience and the money she earned from her own labor. Ultimately, Agnes is "rewarded" by a happy marriage to the kind curate Edward Weston, but this union occurs only after she achieves full agency in her own right.

Compared to *Jane Eyre*, the plot of *Agnes Grey* is relatively simple. After her loving but misguided father loses a large sum of money in an ill-timed investment, Agnes offers herself up as a governess to offset her family's financial hardship. This decision greatly confuses her parents and sister, who look upon Agnes as the baby of the family with no real capacity of her own. Agnes first takes a position at the Bloomfield residence, looking after the family's three disobedient children. After she is fired for her inability to control her charges, Agnes works for the genteel Murray family, teaching their two slightly older daughters Rosalie and Mathilda. It is here that she becomes

acquainted with Mr. Weston, a young curate. After her father's sudden death, Agnes and her mother open up their own school for girls, and Agnes is thrown once again into the path of Mr. Weston, who ultimately makes her an offer of marriage. Agnes's life as a governess is challenging and at times heartbreaking, but her position successfully contributes to her independence as she attempts to take control of her life through her choice to work as a governess. And while Agnes is "rewarded" with a happy marriage at the end of the novel, this occurs only *after* she achieves personal fulfillment through her own choices and actions.

Before we know anything about Agnes's personality, we know that she comes from a genetic line of strong women. Agnes's mother married her husband, a poor clergyman, against the wishes of her wealthy family (A. Brontë 3-4). Even though this convinced her father to disinherit her, she never regretted her decision. She tells her daughters in the opening chapter of the novel, "A carriage and a lady's-maid were great conveniences; but, thank Heaven, she had feet to carry her, and hands to minister to her own necessities"(3-4). This seems a wonderful summation of the new attitude of independent women in mid nineteenth-century England: they must make their own decisions and not rely upon men to make those decisions for them. Agnes's mother is an unusual depiction of a female role model for the time period; she tells her daughters that money, while necessary in small amounts, should never dictate actions or sway decisions. Mrs. Grey married her husband solely for love, and in her conversation with her daughters she implies that this is the only appropriate way to make a happy match. This is in contrast to most other couples in the novel, specifically Rosalie Murray and Sir Thomas Ashby, who care only about wealth and immediately lose interest in each other

after their wedding. Agnes's parents are equals in terms of temperament and love (although not in familial wealth), and that is why their marriage succeeds; Agnes maintains, "you might search all England through, and fail to find a happier couple"(4). This specific marriage model, a union of two equals, is the background out of which the character of Agnes emerges, and we will see how it positively affects her choices and values throughout the novel.

Just as the novel's progressive model of marriage comes from Mrs. Grey's decision to give up her fortune for love, so too does Agnes's ideal education plan come from her mother's choice to teach both her daughters herself. As Agnes relates to her reader, "being at once highly accomplished, well informed, and fond of employment, [my mother] took the whole charge of our education on herself, with the exception of Latin—which my father undertook to teach us—so that we never even went to school..."(4). As a woman "fond of employment," Mrs. Grey raises her daughters not only to be educated, but also to appreciate the importance of hard work. This model is perfectly emulated in the epilogue of *Agnes Grey*, in which Agnes explains to her reader the educational plans for her own children, Edward, Agnes, and Mary: "Our children... promise well; their education, for the time being, is chiefly committed to me; and they shall want no good thing that a mother's care can give"(194). Although the tribulations of governessing fill up the bulk of the novel, the story initially and ultimately equates the best teaching with a "mother's care," not with governessing or teaching outside of the home (although we can assume that Agnes's experience as a governess must come in handy when teaching her own children). Neither *Agnes Grey* nor *Jane Eyre* end with an independent woman making her way in the world, but both do end with fulfilled and happy protagonists. I

propose that this happiness comes from Agnes's own discovery of herself, before her marriage. Agnes becomes an independent woman with her own income *before* agreeing to marry Mr. Weston, which mitigates the emphasis on the importance of a mother's care. True marital bliss can only come *after* a woman is fulfilled on her own terms; that is why Agnes is able to marry Mr. Weston only after she and her mother successfully set up their own school.

Even though young Agnes appreciates her education, she does not feel useful at home, and this dissatisfaction convinces her that given the chance, she could accomplish something as a governess. Her decision to pursue this line of work is unusual, because it is not strictly necessary for the financial happiness of her family. While her father had recently lost a large sum of money in a bad business investment, the Greys are not poor and do not ask Agnes to take on any financial responsibility. In fact, Agnes is the baby of the family, and little, if anything, is expected of her. When Agnes offers to help her older sister, Mary, with housework to lessen her load, Mary tells her "you cannot indeed dear child. Go and practice your music, or play with the kitten"(9). In attempting to bestow upon Agnes all the leisurely comforts of a middle-class home, the Greys treat Agnes in a way that, "however well meaning, deprives her of subjectivity"(Berg 179-180). She is unable to deploy her own agency because the adults around her refuse to treat her like a responsible individual. Agnes cannot even help her mother sew, one of the most basic and stereotypical female tasks, because she "had not been taught to cut out a single garment...there was little [she] could do...it was far easier to do the work themselves, than to prepare it for [her]"(A. Brontë 9). With no malicious intent, Agnes's family makes her a redundant child, "not many degrees more useful than the kitten"(9). While it

might seem that Agnes passes an idyllic childhood by any other standard, her frequent requests to help her mother and sister make it clear that she too desires to participate in the work available to her, to ease slightly her family's burden in any way she can. And because this seems impossible in her own home, she strikes out as a governess in order to make herself useful in someone else's, and earn her own keep in the process.

Agnes's family's reaction to her decision demonstrates the challenging attitudes towards women's work that existed during in mid nineteenth-century England. Her family does not initially respond as she might hope. They are taken aback by her choice: "My mother uttered an exclamation of surprise, and laughed. My sister dropped her work in astonishment, exclaiming, "You a governess, Agnes! What *can* you be dreaming of?"(10). Agnes's decision hinges on her desire to help her parents financially just as much as it depends on her wish to see more of the world and make her own way as an independent woman. She explains to her reader her thoughts about governessing:

How delightful it would be to be a governess! To go out into the world; to enter into 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...to show papa what his little Agnes could do... (11)

Agnes uses robust verbs—"act," "exercise," "try," "earn"—in describing her own ideal position, verbs that are not stereotypically used to describe women or women's work during the Victorian Age. To borrow a phrase from *David Copperfield*, Agnes strongly desires to be "the hero of [her] own life," instead of a prop—albeit a loved and nurtured prop—in the lives of others (Dickens 1). Agnes's ideas about governessing are naïve, but powerful. She yearns for something more, something besides remaining the baby of the

family. She wants to help her family financially by earning her own wages, but also to find her own independence as an individual, to “show papa what his little Agnes could do” and make her family proud of her ability to be productive and accomplish good in the world.

But, like many governesses, Agnes’s road to financial independence is not an easy one. Soon after her arrival at the home of her first employers, the Bloomfields of Wellwood, Agnes begins to recognize her own lack of power. As she follows the Bloomfield children out into the garden to better acquaint herself with her new charges, she muses, “...I found they had no notion of going with me: I must go with them wherever they chose to lead me. I must run, walk, or stand, exactly as it suited their fancy”(45). This powerful image of young upper-class children leading a lower-middle-class woman about stays with the reader long after the chapter ends, indeed it is an apt description for the way women are treated by patriarchal society in Victorian England. Agnes soon comes to realize that there exists a large gap between what she thought life as a governess would be like, and what it actually entails. This “new life” is not “delightful” as she originally believed it would be; instead, she is constantly prohibited from “act[ing] for [her]self” (her original wish) by the parents and children that she serves (11).

Agnes’s supposed control over her charges is put into question immediately, and she slowly realizes that her time as a governess will be much more challenging than she originally believe it to be. In her article “Instructive Sufficiency: Re-Reading the Governess through *Agnes Grey*,” Dara Rossman Regaignon writes that Agnes’s situation forces the reader to appreciate that “the incongruence most constitutive of the governess’s role was that of having to negotiate conflicts and often contradictions between the levels

of control her pedagogy was assumed to indicate and those it was actually permitted”(Regaignon 88). It is understandable that when Agnes first decides to become a governess, she believes that she will have full control over the young children in her care. However, the reality is less hopeful: Mrs. Bloomfield will not allow Agnes to use any disciplinary measures against the children, and she actually blames Agnes for the horrendous manners and actions of her own offspring. This is one of the most difficult aspects of the governess experience that Agnes encounters: while she holds “only symbolic influence,” she is also culpable for “very real blame”(96).

This complex attitude towards women’s work continues as Agnes confronts the lack of personal fulfillment she encounters in her daily life as a governess. She tells her reader: “I sometimes felt myself degraded by the life I led, and ashamed of submitting to so many indignities...”(A. Brontë 69). Agnes left home of her own volition, and wanted to become a success to help her parents and become an individual in her own right. But she is unable to pretend that everything is satisfactory at her new position. She thinks that perhaps she is less of a person for “submitting” to the countless humiliations that face her every day. Working as a governess certainly affords Agnes a certain amount of independence—after all, she does earn a salary—but the same job continues to challenge her personhood.

Agnes takes responsibility for her tenuous position at Wellwood, even for her inability to control the unruly Bloomfield children. She comforts herself by thinking of the small sum she can send home to her parents. More importantly, she understands that she has this job because *she* wanted it and sought it out, not because an outside power pressured her to take it:

Then it was by my own will that I had got the place: I had brought all this tribulation on myself, and I was determined to bear it; nay, more than that, I did not even regret the step I had taken. I longed to show my friends that, even now, I was competent to undertake the charge, and able to acquit myself honourably to the end... (33)

Agnes takes ownership of her situation instead of blaming others for the adversity she suffers. What is more, Agnes yearns not just to “bear” her hardships, but to accomplish “more than that,” to show her beloved family back home that she is capable of such a difficult task as governessing. Agnes’s perseverance with this positive attitude, even when daily she suffers frustrations and setbacks, seems to me the hallmark of a truly independent spirit and one that makes Agnes stand out as a strong example of a working woman in nineteenth-century English literature.

Agnes’s relocation to Horton Lodge after her dismissal from Wellwood does not at first portend a change for the better. As is so often the case, Agnes’s physical agency is taken away at Horton Lodge, just as it was by her experience with the Bloomfields. The difficulties Agnes faces with the Murrays are exemplified by the social humiliation she is forced to endure in her seemingly simple ride to and from church each Sunday. In traveling to church she is only physically comfortable if her pupils ask her to walk with them, but usually they forget her and she is “crushed into the corner farthest from the open window [of the coach], and with my back to the horses: a position which invariably made me sick...”(67). Agnes has no physical space to herself in the carriage, just as she has no privacy in her life as a governess. The Murrays physically manipulate Agnes’s

body, making it exceedingly difficult for her to deploy her identity as a governess and as an individual. Neither her employers nor her pupils regard Agnes as a distinct individual.

If traveling *to* church is physically painful, the journey *back* from church is pure mental anguish. The Murray daughters, whom Agnes is supposed to accompany on foot back to Horton Lodge, walk with a large assortment of upper class ladies and lords.

These men and women completely ignore Agnes, and she struggles with the best way to come to terms with this painful social dilemma:

...it was disagreeable to walk beside them, as if listening to what they said, or wishing to be thought one of them, while they talked over me or across; and if their eyes, in speaking, chanced to fall on me, it seemed as if they looked on vacancy—as if they either did not see me, or were very desirous to make it appear so...It was disagreeable, too, to walk behind, and thus appear to acknowledge my own inferiority; for, in truth, I considered myself pretty nearly as good as the best of them... (105)

Agnes is rendered invisible to these upper class men and women by her station as a governess; in their mind she ranks only slightly higher than a domestic servant. But Agnes's inner individualism burns at this treatment, because she knows herself to be their equal in all other aspects of life. She is proud of her work and does not wish to walk behind them (even though it might make the walk itself much more tolerable for her), because this would imply to the lords and ladies that she thinks herself of a lower status. This scene has certain similarities to one in *Jane Eyre*, during which Blanche and Lady Ingram speak about governesses in harsh and insulting tones when Jane herself is present in the corner of the room. Women like Agnes and Jane must fight for their independence, and that is not an easy task when they are outrightly or implicitly insulted at every turn.

It is during one of these angst-ridden walks back from church that Agnes meets Mr. Weston, the curate of Horton Lodge. Mr. Weston is the only person throughout *Agnes Grey*, save for Agnes's immediate family, who treats our protagonist as an individual and not as a subordinate to be ignored or taken advantage of. In his second meeting with Agnes, Mr. Weston proves himself to be a caring soul who can see his fellow parishioner's personhood shine through. Walking back from church, a solitary Agnes chances to see some primroses that she wishes to collect for herself, although they are up on a steep bank. These flowers hold sentimental value for Agnes because they remind her of her home. Before she can make a move to climb the bank, she hears a male voice offer to assist her:

Immediately the flowers were gathered, and in my hand. It was Mr. Weston of course—who else would trouble himself to do so much for *me?*... it seemed to me, at that moment, as if this were a remarkable instance of his good nature, an act of kindness which I could not repay, but never should forget: so utterly unaccustomed was I to receive such civilities, so little prepared to expect them—from any one within fifty miles of Horton Lodge. (106)

While a single instance of flower collection might not be the best way to judge true love, Mr. Weston's kind demeanor leaves a sizeable impression on Agnes, who, as she herself admits, is unused to such attention. Agnes keeps her developing feelings for Mr. Weston muted, but does admit to her reader that he represents all that is good in her eyes, a blueprint for how the world should be (and how she viewed it before leaving home and becoming a governess). He respects her and cares for her, which is a welcome relief after the social hell she is accustomed to at Wellwood.

Agnes's eventual triumph over her difficult situation as a governess is best demonstrated when, after her beloved father's death, she and her mother use Agnes's wages to open a small school for girls. The scheme is originally Mrs. Grey's, but Agnes supplies the capital from her wages earned while working as a governess, and teaches in the new school. Mrs. Grey tells Agnes the catalyst for opening a school was her own realization that she had something to offer other young women: "Thanks to my having had daughters to educate, I have not forgotten my accomplishments... I will exert myself, and look out for a small house, commodiously situated in some populous but healthy district, where we will take a few young ladies to board and educate"(156). Agnes's mother asks her daughter's opinion of the plan: "What say you to it, Agnes? Will you be willing to leave your present situation and try?"(156). Here resurfaces this vital idea of "trying," of going out into the unknown to support oneself. Agnes did this when she became a governess, and her mother did it when she gave up her fortune to marry Agnes's father. Agnes replies that she is "quite willing," and offers to "take[] from the bank directly" all of her savings to help with the school (156). Agnes is only in a position to help with her mother's plan to open a school because she has money independent of her family, and she can contribute to the well being of her mother with her newfound financial independence. Indeed, if Agnes had not earned her own salary it is uncertain where her mother would live once her husband died. Agnes has achieved personhood in her own right, and her role as an independent women opens up possibilities for both her and her mother that would be closed to them without that extra income.

But not everything about *Agnes Grey* contributes to a lens of feminist idealism. When Agnes becomes accustomed to working with her mother at their school, she reflects upon the unlikelihood of ever meeting Mr. Weston again: “I sat musing on...the small chance there was of ever seeing or hearing anything more of him throughout my quiet, drab-colour life: which, henceforth, seemed to offer no alternative between positive rainy days and days of dull grey clouds without downfall”(176). I argue that Agnes takes her worth from her job, but obviously she yearns for romantic love in addition to fulfillment through labor. Agnes despairs of ever seeing the curate again, and this despair shows that her life at the school does not bring her complete joy—in fact she sometimes feels quite distraught at her prospects. This would seem to muddy my argument that Agnes looks upon teaching, first as a governess than at her own school, as a goal in itself, because it implies that Agnes executes her job as a precursor to finding a husband.

Yet Agnes also has moments of elation at her new role as teacher in a girl’s school. Specifically, her epiphany at the end of the novel shows it is possible for her to be happy without male attention, with only her own work ethic and accomplishments. One morning she wakes up early and takes a walk along the shore. Her mental state is serene and positive: “Refreshed, delighted, invigorated, I walked along, forgetting all my cares, feeling as if I had wings to my feet, and could go at least forty miles without fatigue, and experiencing a sense of exhilaration to which I had been an entire stranger since the days of early youth”(184). What brings about this sudden joy in Agnes? Could it be her newly fulfilled life as a schoolteacher? This moment of fulfillment comes *before* Agnes realizes Mr. Weston is on that same beach, about to encounter her. Since the euphoria occurs before this meeting, it is fair to assume that her feelings of elation

come from the work that she and her mother are accomplishing at the school, and her delight at again being able to provide for herself in a more rewarding way than as a governess in another family's household.

Agnes searches for equality throughout her journey as a governess, but she finds it only at the end of the novel when she opens up her own school. While working as a governess did not afford her the luxury—dare I say the right—of equality, teaching does. As James Simmons writes in his article “Class, Matriarchy, and Power: Contextualizing the Governess in *Agnes Grey*,” “It is at home where Agnes also finds once again a position of equality”(Simmons 40). I content a more accurate explanation should read “it is at *school*, and not home” because Agnes now has complete control to teach her own way, and she and her mother need not bow to the unreasonable whims of a totalitarian employer. This equality, so elusive for many women, is Agnes's reward for her toil as a governess. Her marriage will only come after this individual achievement, which demonstrates that marriage is not always the only goal for young women.

More than many other governess novels published in the mid nineteenth century, *Agnes Grey* seems to be an accurate reflection of governess life. Presumably Anne Brontë—herself a governess—used her own experience to paint a truthful picture of a young woman trying to make her way in the world. In *A Life of Anne Brontë*, biographer Edward Chitham writes of Anne, “Our author is writing of areas of experience with which she is well acquainted, and this will enable her to give a powerful air of conviction to the narrative”(Chitham 9). For instance, Anne, like Agnes, was the youngest surviving child of her family, and therefore likely to feel “hapless and dependent” just as Agnes does when her family constantly babies her, albeit lovingly (9). Undoubtedly, *Jane Eyre*

is a much more famous novel than *Agnes Grey*, yet it is the latter that more closely resembles the day-to-day life of the governess. In Simmons's article, he writes, "In terms of class representations and historical accuracy, nowhere is the governess more realistically depicted than in Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey*" (Simmons 26). Agnes's story is not sensationalized, sexualized, or incredible in any way. It is simple and brief—not even two hundred pages in my version. Since *Agnes Grey* is a much quieter and realistic governess novel than *Jane Eyre*, it can be taken as a more truthful portrayal of the everyday experience of the young women who inhabited these roles.

Anne Brontë's tenure as a governess was, like Agnes's, initially very difficult. Anne first served as a governess to the Ingham household, headed by Joshua Ingham, a businessman and squire who followed a "Puritan and patriarchal tradition in which women were thought of as wholly subordinate" (Chitham 58). There are two occurrences of Anne's governess experience that survive as documented facts. In one, the Ingham children received red South American cloaks as gifts and took them into the grounds, "screaming... claiming to be devils and refusing to come back to do their lessons" (60). This is similar to Agnes's initial meeting with the Bloomfield children, in which she is unable to control them in the garden on her first day as a governess. Obviously the challenge of controlling unruly children was widespread in this line of work, and Anne wanted to portray that accurately in *Agnes Grey*. In the more famous anecdote of Anne's tenure as a governess, Anne tied the Ingham children to a table leg in order to control them and continue with her own writing (60). She was dismissed soon after this incident, just as Agnes is dismissed by Mrs. Bloomfield for her inability to control her charges.

Agnes Grey is not simply a fictional account of one woman's struggles as a governess in nineteenth-century England. Instead, this very true-to-life story embodies the governess experience in a real way, and serves as a call to arms for burgeoning feminist ideals. Anne Brontë uses her novel to take a stand on a multitude of issues associated with women's independence and women's work. Bettina L. Knapp, in her article "Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey*: The Feminist," lists these important social realities: "Brontë's voice was raised against paltry salaries, poor working conditions, and offensive treatment accorded to governesses; against society's denigration of working women....In *Agnes Grey*, Brontë pleaded for self-fulfillment for women and equality of the sexes"(Knapp 63). Like Lady Eastlake's fears for the welfare of governesses (which I discussed in the first chapter), these are the very concerns that the Governesses' Benevolent Institution (GBI) was formed to improve. These feminist views are what makes *Agnes Grey* such a unique story: it argues in favor of protecting the rights and dignity of working women, in a time when it was not popular to do so. Anne Brontë's novel is a realistic one that faithfully portrays the good and bad of the governess experience, and ultimately the life of a female teacher working in her own private school. For Agnes, work takes on more than a sustenance role; it becomes tied to her personal identity and self-worth. Her movement from working as a full-time governess to a teacher in her own classroom demonstrates nineteenth-century English society's shift from private, family-oriented education to public day-school. Governess novels like *Agnes Grey* are not incidental to the time period in which they are written; instead, they are part of a growing movement that seeks to examine a women's place in the working world.

Chapter 3

The Governess in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*

In Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Jane's role as a working woman ultimately demonstrates her strength of character in the face of extreme odds. However, Jane is put through many tests before this manifests itself. At many points in the first half of the novel, Jane's experience seems to imply that governess work is nothing more than servitude, an occupation that, by itself, remains inadequate for leading a fulfilling life. Upon leaving Lowood School, Jane quickly acquires a situation at Thornfield Hall, the home of Mr. Rochester. Jane yearns for more meaning in her life than her present situation allows, and she is disillusioned with the role of teacher at Lowood, and later, governess at Thornfield. I argue that it is Jane's role as a working woman that gives her the self-worth to flee from Rochester at a critical point in the novel, just as Agnes's experience teaching the Bloomfield and Murray children gives her the strength and know-how to ultimately set up a private school with her mother, an endeavor that brings her much pleasure. Like Agnes, Jane ultimately leaves her life of labor to marry a man who can support her financially, but this only happens after Jane gains her own independence by experiencing the joys and frustrations of teaching at a village girls' school. The motifs of female empowerment and female education permeate every plot twist in both *Agnes Grey* and *Jane Eyre*, allowing an exploration of the difficulties of teaching, the joys of learning, and the balance that a female teacher must strike in order to succeed.

From the first page of *Jane Eyre*, the joy of reading—and consequently a love of education—proves to be a vital force. The reader is initially introduced to Jane in the

context of books: the very first action we see young Jane perform is to take a copy of Bewick's *History of British Birds* down from the bookshelf and devour it, withdrawing herself from the rest of the Reed family as they in turn ostracize her. After Jane's tumultuous experience in the Red Room, in which she believes she sees the ghost of her dead Uncle Reed, Bessie the nurse offers to bring Jane a book to calm her. Jane's response demonstrates her innate love for the written word: "the word *book* acted as a transient stimulus, and I begged her to fetch *Gulliver's Travels* from the library. This book I had again and again perused with delight"(C. Brontë 17). The reader is introduced to the earliest aspects of Jane's unique character through her fervent love of reading. The significance that books hold for Jane is a continuing theme throughout the novel.

The childhood that puts Jane into close proximity with these books is that of a stereotypical nineteenth century orphan. Despised by her aunt and cousins, Jane is sent away to the foreboding Lowood School to receive a strict religious education. Her first year at Lowood is filled with overcooked porridge and corporal punishment, in addition to the death of her best friend, the saintly Helen Burns. But when the school falls under new management, Jane is free to let her love of learning and her desire to work hard take her far. After six years at Lowood, Jane's unique abilities raise her to a teaching position at the school. She reflects on the educational opportunities presented to her, and their outcome:

I had the means of an excellent education placed within my reach. A fondness for some of my studies, and a desire to excel in all, together with a great delight in pleasing my teachers, especially such as I loved, urged me on: I availed myself fully of the advantages offered me. In time I rose

to be the first girl of the first class; then I was invested with the office of teacher; which I discharged with zeal for two years... (71)

From the very beginning of her schooling at Lowood, Jane finds joy in academic excellence. This is the benchmark that she uses to define herself and her worth. By working hard at her schoolwork, Jane sees the fruits of her labors multiply in the form of heartfelt praise from her teachers, and later a teaching position at Lowood. While this type of prospect would not have been open to every woman in nineteenth-century England, teaching opportunities were slowly becoming more available. Jane crafts her identity through education, both because that is the road that Lowood provides for her, but also because she naturally gravitates towards reading and books, a necessary affinity for a teacher. Our initial meeting with Jane, as she reads Bewick's *History of British Birds* in the opening scene of the novel, sets the stage for our protagonist's fondness for educational improvement, and the impact that will have on her working life.

And yet, Jane's role as teacher is not in itself enough for her continued happiness. Jane comes to feel that possessing an excellent education and working to teach the young women of Lowood is not all there is for her, and at the end of two years teaching at the school, "[she] altered"(71). Living and working in such a setting is not enough to fulfill her completely, even though it does bring her intense happiness for a short period of time. Jane's love of learning and reading in particular are part and parcel of her very being—they make her what she is. The day that her kind mentor, Miss Temple, marries and departs from Lowood, Jane begins to think of leaving the school herself. As she prays for guidance, she yearns for something more, and narrates her fevered hopes to the reader:

I desired liberty; for liberty I gasped; for liberty I uttered a prayer; it seemed scattered on the wind then faintly blowing. I abandoned it and framed a humbler supplication; for change, stimulus: that petition, too, seemed swept off into vague space: ‘Then,’ I cried, half desperate, ‘grant me at least a new servitude!’ (72)

From this logical step-by-step progression of Jane’s thoughts concerning women’s labor, the reader realizes that Jane, at this point in the novel, sees all of women’s work as some type of servitude, no matter what the work entails, because a woman by definition will always be working *beneath* someone else. Jane simply thinks of herself as finding a new type of servitude when she travels to Thornfield to take charge of little Adèle. She knows she wants something more than the life she is currently leading can provide for her, but there are few options open to her besides the relatively weak freedom to change to a new position. Even so, she feels she must keep moving forward in the world of work.

Jane’s early musings on the nature of women’s work sets the stage for her opinions and actions later in the novel. In brainstorming her possible employment options, Jane considers her desire for “a new servitude”: “it is not like such words as Liberty, Excitement, Enjoyment... But Servitude! That must be a matter of fact. Any one may serve: I have served here eight years; now all I want is to serve elsewhere. Can I not get so much of my own will?”(73). It is up to Jane to improve her situation by finding herself a new post. No one else will do it for her—it is her choice and her initiative that must serve her now. Passages like this one must have been on the lips of many contemporary women trying to carve out their own type of labor, albeit in a less dramatic fashion. Jane gives breath in this fictional moment to the idea that life must hold more than it currently seems to; it must allow women a chance to make a place for themselves

and be their own providers. In this way, *Jane Eyre* uses labor to craft identity. Although Charlotte Brontë is careful to articulate that one's work should not constitute the entirety of one's selfhood, it is nonetheless a starting point for building a life. This is very similar to Agnes's musings on what governess life will bring at the beginning of *Agnes Grey*; both Agnes and Jane regard the work as a hopeful move towards independence. Agnes romanticizes the position more than Jane, but both women strive to support themselves emotionally and financially through their choice.

Jane soon discovers that working as Adèle's governess is not the same type of servitude she initially thought it would be. Her role is very different from that which Agnes holds at either the Bloomfield or the Murray household. With no parents to challenge her—Mr. Rochester is absent for a number of months in the beginning of her tenure—Jane has full authority over her young French pupil. Because of this complete control, Jane is able to take pleasure in Adèle's educational progress in a way that Agnes cannot do with the Bloomfield or Murray children:

[Adèle] was a lively child, who had been spoilt and indulged, and therefore was sometimes wayward; but as she was committed entirely to my care, and no injudicious interference from any quarter ever thwarted my plans for her improvement, she soon forgot her little freaks, and became obedient and teachable. (92)

This is not a standard governess-pupil relationship; more typically Jane would have to deal with a meddling mother and unruly charges, as Agnes does. Jane is able to correct Adèle's educational and character deficiencies because she has complete authority over the child, and Adèle does not have the option to go running to her mother (who is dead) if

she does not want to complete her lessons. Jane assumes her role of governess in a vacuum, which was unlikely to occur naturally during the Victorian period. She is free to teach Adèle what she likes, to structure her own lessons, and exert complete authority over the young girl. This is the aspect of governess life which would be most appealing to the independent woman.

Even with the progress Jane makes with Adèle, after a few calm months at Thornfield Jane once more becomes restless for adventure. As she stands on the roof of the mansion, she craves something more than her present situation and rails against the position her gender forces upon her:

It is in vain to say human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquility: they must have action; and they will make it if they cannot find it... Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts, as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer... It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex. (93)

One of the most famous passages from *Jane Eyre*, this internal soliloquy blatantly calls for the equal treatment of women in life and work. Jane argues that women must be free to *do* just as men do, because their feelings are on equal standing. Women, like men, need a “field for their efforts”—that is, an arena in which they can apply themselves and derive self-worth and a salary from that labor. Through Jane’s musings on top of Thornfield, Charlotte Brontë exposes the absurdity inherent in treating women with anything less than equality. Jane clearly calls out the inequality forced upon women in

Victorian England. This fictional moment, like the famous proposal scene between Jane and Rochester, still strongly reverberates with women today. The work available to women during this time period is not sufficiently fulfilling; likewise, the work Jane undertakes at Thornfield does not alone set her free; true freedom only occurs at the very end of the novel through a change in her financial circumstances and her subsequent marriage to Mr. Rochester. Perhaps if Jane had more work options open to her, she would feel fulfilled with her labor. The fact remains that Jane is not completely happy with her job as Adèle's governess, which shows the complicated nature of women's work. With fewer options, there is less chance for fulfillment.

Jane's work as a governess might not be enough to fulfill her completely on its own, but it does give her something no individual can live without: a way to support herself financially. The importance of earning a salary is only briefly discussed in *Agnes Grey*; here it is given rather more attention. In Jane and Rochester's first tête-à-tête at Thornfield, Jane spells out the difference between informality and ignorance: "one I rather like, the other nothing free-born would submit to, even for a salary"(115). Mr. Rochester's response forces Jane to re-think the necessity of earning one's own keep: "Humbug! Most things free-born will submit to anything for a salary; therefore, keep to yourself, and don't venture on generalities of which you are intensely ignorant"(115). The importance of money is not to be downplayed; in fact it abounds in the novel. In this way Jane prefigures her later decision to refuse Mr. Rochester's offer to become his mistress, once she discovers he has a wife living. Jane exerts her independence as a working woman in this early conversation, as she has successfully done since she was an assertive child, and will continue to do throughout the novel.

Jane's salary provides her with independence, but it also enfolds her in a delicate power struggle with Mr. Rochester. As a subordinate, Jane is entitled to a pre-determined amount of money annually, but given the unique casual relationship she shares with Mr. Rochester, there is no guarantee that she will be paid at a certain time, or that she will be paid in full. Much can be gleaned from this short exchange between master and governess when Jane tells Rochester she has to depart Thornfield to visit her sick Aunt, Mrs. Reed:

‘Well, you must have some money; you can't travel without money, and I daresay you have not much: I have given you no salary yet. How much have you in the world, Jane?’ he asked, smiling.

I drew out my purse; a meager thing it was. Five shillings, sir.’ He took the purse, poured the hoard into his palm and chuckled over it as if its scantiness pleased him. Soon he produced his pocket book: ‘Here,’ said he, offering me a note: it was fifty pounds, and he owed me but fifteen. I told him I had no change.

‘I don't want change: you know that. Take your wages.’

I declined accepting more than was my due. He scowled at first; then, as if recollecting something, he said: —‘Right, right. Better not give you all now: you would, perhaps, stay away three months if you had fifty pounds.

There are ten: is it not plenty?’ (191)

Salary is a fickle creature, especially discussed in such contradictory and flirtatious tones as it is here. Because Rochester pays Jane's wages, he has direct power over her, but she also knows her stated worth, and refuses to take more or less than she is owed. He is her master and she his employee, but in this conversation she has the final say over how much money she receives. She neither takes advantage of him nor accepts less than she

is owed. While it is unlikely that such a close master-governess relationship was common, it demonstrates the emerging power of women in labor situations. Financial independence means social independence, as Jane realizes when she is only able to leave Thornfield after receiving her wages. Something as simple as traveling to Gateshead, Mrs. Reed's house, necessitates money, and this money must come from somewhere. Jane pays for her own journey, because she has the ability to support herself as a working woman.

The power dynamics between Rochester and Jane are initially explored when Rochester returns to Thornfield and begins to exert full control over his house, after his first tumultuous meeting with Jane in the lane. Most significantly for our heroine, Rochester reclaims the library—which had been used as Adèle's classroom—as a “reception-room for callers”(100). Jane and Adèle are forced to move their classroom to a more remote upstairs apartment. Little is made of this moment in the text, yet it would strike an important note in the life of a governess. Jane may be luckier than the typical Victorian governess in that Adèle's mother is not present to contend with her own plans for the little girl's education, but Jane is still at the whim of her master, Mr. Rochester. At the moment of his arrival, Jane loses what she had previously thought of as her private workspace. As noted previously, Emily Peart wrote in her 1896 *Book for Governesses* about the importance of the schoolroom as the governess's “battle-field, where toil is to be borne, effort to be made, difficulties overcome, and victory accomplished”(Broughton 89). Jane's removal from the library reminds us that the governess was not truly in control, and still must obey her employer without fail. And yet, Jane acquiesces to this change of plan quite easily. Without much fuss she tells the reader she “carried our

books [to the new room], and arranged it for the future schoolroom”(100). Jane is ever practical: we assume that she knows she can teach Adèle from any room in the house with no loss in quality of learning. The library may have been her first choice, but a good governess learns to adapt to different situations.

Mr. Rochester and his guests do not simply impact Jane’s physical circumstances; their presence also shakes her emotional reality. The precarious nature of the role of the governess in nineteenth-century English society is clearly seen when Rochester hosts his party of neighboring lords and ladies at Thornfield. After catching sight of Jane in the corner of the drawing room, Blanche Ingram and her mother and sister begin pontificating on what they see as the distasteful subject of governesses. This discussion shows how governesses were commonly regarded by middle and upper class society. Blanche instigates the conversation, telling Rochester, “You should hear mamma on the chapter of governesses. Mary and I have had, I should think, a dozen at least in our day; half of them detestable and the rest ridiculous, and all incubi...”(150-151). Although *Jane Eyre* is a fictional work, it does seem to truly reflect common stereotypes about the life of a governess. Charlotte Brontë was herself a governess for a time, and she must have known how her society looked at these women. As Blanche says, governesses are seen as “ridiculous” and even called “incubi”—a term for an evil spirit. When Blanche boasts that she has had at least a dozen governesses, she lumps the women into one large group, forbidding them the opportunity, moreover the right, to be individuals. Lady Ingram chimes in, “My dearest, don’t mention governesses; the word makes me nervous. If have suffered a martyrdom from their incompetence and caprice; I thank Heaven I have now done with them!”(150-151). Blanche’s mother looks upon the governess as

something to be born, like a disease, until one can be rid of her. It is important that this conversation occurs while Jane is present, standing at a small distance from the lords and ladies behind the window-curtain. Blanche and her mother know she is there, and speak as they do despite her presence, or more likely because of it. Jane is forced to listen as her own “anathemized race”(151) is charged with all kinds of faults. While neither Blanche nor her mother ever come out and say it directly, their tone shows how they look down on governesses not just because they cause childhood frustration to young women like Blanche herself, but because they are working for their living. Neither Blanche nor her mother nor sister would ever be allowed to work to support themselves, and because women like Jane must earn their own keep, they are ostracized and disliked. Luckily for our heroine, it is this very trait that allows Jane to become her own woman and find independence and happiness at the end of the novel.

Jane’s ultimate fulfillment stems from two sources: her eventual financial independence, and her romantic relationship with Mr. Rochester. It is this romantic relationship I will turn to now. Jane’s romance with Mr. Rochester illustrates the complicated nature of the working woman. Perhaps the most famous passage in the novel, and in nineteenth-century English literature in general, the proposal scene between Jane and Rochester demonstrates a great deal about the type of person Jane truly is. Under the erroneous impression that Rochester will soon marry Blanche Ingram, and that she herself will be forced to leave Thornfield, Jane is overcome with despair. Standing in the orchard at Thornfield, Jane’s internal emotions, “assert[] a right to predominate: to overcome, to live, rise, and reign at last; yes, —and to speak”:

I grieve to leave Thornfield: I love Thornfield—I love it because I have lived in it a full and delightful life, —momentarily at least. I have not been trampled on. I have not been petrified. I have not been buried with inferior minds, and excluded from every glimpse of communication with what is bright and energetic, and high. (215)

Jane's description of her time at Thornfield is beautiful and touching. Unlike the years she spent at Lowood, she has been truly happy here. Her frustration at the idea of returning to a world where she is "petrified," "buried," and "excluded" describes what many women faced in nineteenth-century England: an inability to control their own destiny. Through Jane, Charlotte Brontë contends that this "full and delightful life" is one to which every woman should be entitled.

Charlotte Brontë draws upon a common metaphor in the proposal scene, when she compares Jane to a bird. As Rochester tries to convince Jane he loves her, he physically surrounds her, "enclosing [her] in his arms, gathering [her] to his breast, pressing his lips on [her] lips"(216). But Jane is not going to be distracted from her own purposes so easily. In my favorite line from the entire novel, she tells him the truth: "I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will; which I now exert to leave you"(216). After uttering these words, Jane frees herself from Rochester's embrace and "st[ands] erect before him"(216). In this touching passage, Jane narrates her own independence from Rochester, and from the world at large. She is a free individual, and nothing Rochester or anyone else does can change this. Perhaps that is the best way to describe Jane—not as poor, plain, obscure and little, but as a "free human being" who makes her own choices. And these choices are only possible because of her role as a working woman who can support herself and knows her own worth.

Jane is right to be concerned that Rochester does not see her as a free human being. After their engagement is made known, Rochester treats Jane like a pet, not a person; he reminds her repeatedly that he owns her. The morning after Rochester proposes to Jane, he details the jewelry in which he will attire her for their wedding: “I will put the diamond chain round your neck, and the circlet on your forehead... and I will clasp the bracelets on these fine wrists, and load these fairy-like fingers with rings...”(228). Just as Jane realizes she was looking for another form of servitude when she came to Thornfield, so is she now trading in one type of servitude for another: that of a prized wife. Charlotte Brontë fixes this problem by having Jane leave Rochester upon discovery of his dishonesty, and return to him only when she is a financially independent woman, and he is physically and emotionally emasculated. Since she returns to Rochester only “in economic independence and by her free choice, Jane can become a wife without sacrificing a grain of her Jane Eyre-ity...”(Rich 482). Jane can now both experience her independence and love her husband, because she no longer feels like his ornamental doll. Like Agnes and Weston, Jane and Rochester become true equals. And this equality only comes about after Jane has experienced a working life, and earned reward for her labor.

As a working woman, Jane seeks employment immediately after fleeing Thornfield. In giving up Rochester’s offer to support her as his mistress, she has no one to rely on but herself. That means finding work, and fast. Jane first inquires for work at a bakery, asking the women behind the counter what people do in the village. Is there a dressmaker in town who could use an assistant? A home where a servant is needed? There is not. Perhaps Mr. Oliver’s needle factory employs women? It does not—how

typical (278). If a man had wandered into this town he would have been looked at as an outsider, and probably distrusted, but he would have had the opportunity that Jane is not given: to apply for employment where the majority of the town earns its living. Without this chance, Jane is drawn deeper and deeper into destitution. Jane understands that she is at the point where she *must* ask for help—she cannot continue on her own if she wishes to survive.

Jane's preoccupation, almost obsession, with acquiring a job continues after she is taken in by St. John, Diana, and Mary Rivers. Her request of them is modest, and true: "Show me how to work, or how to seek work: that is all I now ask; then let me go, if it be but to the meanest cottage"(297). She appeals to her new friends before she is fully recovered from her bout of fever brought on by her homeless wanderings on the moors. Jane knows she must accept the help of others in order to survive. She does not ask of the Rivers siblings anything impossible, only that they tell or show her the way that she can support herself in this new village. She is prepared to work hard and devote herself to her task—as we've seen throughout the novel, Jane simply wants to work and earn her own keep. She would gladly retire to "the meanest cottage," if she were able to work and support herself. Mary and Diana Rivers wish her to stay with them and recuperate, which she does, but only after she makes clear that she will trespass on their hospitality no longer than is strictly necessary. Jane is at all times her own mistress, and must support herself if she is to live in a way that makes sense to her as a working woman.

The world of *Jane Eyre* is populated not only with the solitary governess figure teaching her young French charge in a vacuum-like state. Diana and Mary Rivers are also both employed as governesses, in a far-away city in Southern England, and theirs

represents the more realistic plight of the governess. Neither Diane nor Mary enjoys working as a governess, because unlike Jane's experience at Thornfield, the two women are "regarded only as humble dependents," and the families they work for "neither knew nor sought one of their innate excellences, and appreciated only their acquired accomplishments as they appreciated the skill of their cook or the taste of their waiting-woman"(300). The Rivers sisters' experience is an example of how a governess can augment the reputation of the family she serves, her accomplishments becoming nothing more than a status symbol for another family. Mary and Diana are looked at for *what* they are—governesses—and not for *who* they are. As unmarried women, Diana and Mary are "dependents" and must commit their wellbeing to others. But at the same time both women work for themselves, and thus they are anything but dependent. They look upon this work as a necessary evil, something they must do solely to support themselves.

Jane's personal view of governessing and teaching goes past this "work to live" mentality of Diane and Mary Rivers—while it is by no means easy, teaching is something in which Jane takes pride. It is this know-how that convinces Jane to accept St. John Rivers's offer to be a schoolteacher of the local village girls' school in Morton. Jane's choice reveals a great deal about Charlotte Brontë's own attitude towards women's work, and the shifting role of women from governess to public teacher. As Jane thinks over the employment her cousin St. John Rivers has offered her, she muses:

In truth it was humble—but then it was sheltered, and I wanted a safe asylum: it was plodding—but then, compared with that of a governess in a rich house, it was independent; and the fear of servitude with strangers

entered my soul like iron: it was not ignoble—not unworthy—not mentally degrading. I made my decision. (303)

Work is part of Jane's identity, but it is not *all* of her identity. She takes on the role of schoolteacher because she prefers being her own mistress to being dependent on someone else. Her discontentment at the idea of "servitude with strangers" convinces her that would not be an appealing position, but this role of a schoolteacher, one that is "not ignoble" and "not unworthy," fills her with hope. In this way, work can be reconstructive and even therapeutic. Jane hopes to use the constant activity engendered by this job as a type of therapy to overcome her romantic feelings for Rochester.

Jane honestly describes the experience of running her own school. Her initial perception of her young scholars, that they are "wholly untaught, with faculties quite torpid...seem[ingly] hopelessly dull," turns out to be quite unfounded (312). She soon admits her mistake: "I discovered amongst them not a few examples of natural politeness and innate self-respect, as well as of excellent capacity, that won both my goodwill and admiration"(312). While the day-to-day experience of running the school are left to the reader's imagination, Jane's feelings of satisfaction with her work is paid much attention. Her perception of these young girls is changed to such an extent that they acquire both her "goodwill and admiration." The only reason she was able to see this change was because of the labor she put into her new job. While she might have originally taken the position simply for the sake of keeping herself out of poverty and not dependent on the Riverses, Jane is able to take pleasure in the progress she makes with these young rural women.

Jane's new position as schoolmistress, while in one way lowering herself socially, helps her to become a "favorite in the neighborhood." The men and women of Morton treat her and her work with respect, because their daughters depend upon her for their education. Jane explains the peace that she finds in this new position: "To live amidst general regard, though it be but the regard of working-people, is like 'sitting in sunshine, calm and sweet'... At this period of my life my heart far oftener swelled with thankfulness than sank with dejection..."(312). Jane's work as a schoolmistress has given her something that many women do not achieve: the respect of others in regards to one's work. As a governess at Thornfield, Jane was loved by Adèle, and presumably also cared for by the girls she taught at Lowood School. But it is only in this public sphere that she is revered for her labor. Jane found joy in her love for Rochester, but this is a different type of feeling that she experiences, one that she likens to "sitting in sunshine, calm and sweet" (a quote taken from Thomas Moore's narrative poem *Lalla Rookh*). This pleasure is pure, untainted by the adultery that came to characterize her relationship with Rochester. It seems the work-as-therapy system has succeeded, since now Jane feels not just less despondent, but actually cheerful. Her new position has taken her from the solitude of a governess to the bustling life of a schoolmistress, which mirrors the real changes taking place in nineteenth-century English education.

There are manifest differences between *Jane Eyre* and *Agnes Grey*. Charlotte Brontë's seminal novel is more overtly romantic and fervently emotive than Anne's. Certain aspects of Jane's life—her orphan origins, her despicable relations, the abuse she suffers at Lowood—belong to the realm of the Dickensian potboiler. Jane's experience as a governess is much less by-the-book than Agnes's, in that she is given free reign in

little Adèle's education, when most governesses had to contend with domineering and interfering parents and servants. But if this perhaps makes *Jane Eyre* a less realistic work, it does not diminish its most important strength: the poetic appeal for true gender equality. Jane's soulful outpouring on the roof of Thornfield encapsulates the essence of the novel, and bears repeating:

Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts, as much as their brothers... It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex. (93)

Both Jane and Agnes find strength and purpose in their work, just as a nineteenth-century man might, even though the outside world does not always grant the women the independent identity they seek. While both women can at times view labor as a burden, they want and choose to work to support themselves. Neither goes out looking for a husband, as so many other nineteenth-century heroines do, and Jane and Agnes happily marry only *after* becoming true individuals in their own right through working as governesses and teachers. By propagating the simple message that each individual, man or woman, is equally important, *Jane Eyre* gives voice to the burgeoning feminist movement in nineteenth-century England.

Conclusion

By scrutinizing the role of the governess in *Jane Eyre* and *Agnes Grey*, we can examine how historical realities of women's work and identity are reflected through creative channels. A novel is not simply an invented story, it is in a fuller sense written through the lens of a particular historical background. In this way, imagination and history intertwine to form a more complete hybrid of reality. While the historical background of the plight of the governess in nineteenth-century England lets us investigate the particularities of the governess situation, Anne and Charlotte Brontë further emboss this reality by drawing on their own experiences as governesses to inform their reinterpretations of the governess story. *Jane Eyre* and *Agnes Grey* were not created in a vacuum—although the Brontë sisters were legendarily isolated for most of their lives at Haworth Parsonage on the Yorkshire moors—and each sister draws on the historical dimensions that they themselves have experienced. Both novels take a well-known disenfranchised figure, the English governess, and move her into the spotlight. By finding common ground between the novels, and examining where they significantly differ, we are able to see how two very different writers, and their two very different protagonists, approach and grapple with the difficult role of the governess. While *Jane Eyre* and *Agnes Grey* were both written with the ultimate aim of being sold to a publisher, and therefore need to appeal to their readers in commercial ways, they also encapsulate the varied personal experiences of their authors. This leads to a far-reaching assessment of the centrality of the governess, and ultimately the significance of women's work and women's identity. Together, *Jane Eyre* and *Agnes Grey* help to illuminate the

study of governess life in nineteenth-century England. Historical details serve to reinforce the imaginative importance of the governess, and the full significance can only be uncovered when both are looked at together.

When the Governesses' Benevolent Institution was founded in 1844, its mission, as we have already examined, was revolutionary: "[to] raise the character of Governesses as a class, and thus improve the tone of Female Education"(Broughton 124). Not only was the goal of the GBI to aid the working woman, but to work to improve "Female Education" at large. This desire seems a simple thing at first glance, but by founding Queen's College in Harley Street in London the GBI forever changed the way women were publicly educated. With the support of King's College Professor Frederick Maurice, Queen's College provided a broad curriculum for women looking to better themselves through education. The students could choose which subjects they wished to study and which lectures to attend, giving them full agency in their own education. The early autonomy granted to these women worked to develop female independence in relation to education, something we might easily take for granted in the twenty-first century, but which was not common at the time. The GBI and Queen's College helped promulgate the image of the working woman in full control of her education and future.

Queen's College helped shift the social aspect of the governess from isolated to communal, by creating a collective of women with shared experiences and challenges. No longer was the solitary governess figure the only available image of the working woman—now hundreds of young ladies went to school and discussed their experiences with each other. In this way, Queen's College contributed to an awakening of women's consciousness. These women were simultaneously individuals *and* part of a new network

of publicly educated women. It is my opinion that governess novels like *Jane Eyre* and *Agnes Grey* lead to this social awakening by opening up a dialogue by women for women regarding the status of women's work and identity. The Suffragette movement, both in England and America, is nothing without this initial dialogue. The governess, and later the female teacher, is the prototype of the modern self-sufficient woman. The GBI and Queen's College forever changed the way that society looked at female education. Women's intelligence, before this only relegated to the drawing room, was now on its way to Oxbridge: Girton and Newnham, Cambridge University's first all-women's colleges, opened in 1869 and 1870, respectively.

The awkwardness of the governess's role was replaced by the more empowering position of the female teacher, an important addition to nineteenth-century schooling. In this way the single dependent woman finally found a place for herself, but not in the family home where she had previously served. It was in a public school, or at an institution of higher education that she herself attended. Maybe she chose to continue teaching after her education ended, and maybe she did not. But these new options were open to her in a way that they would not have been open to her predecessors. Jane and Agnes represent the thousands of women who were finally able to make these decisions for themselves.

The narrative shift in both novels mirrors the transformation of women's roles that would develop in the following years. After about 1850, the female teacher was no longer confined to the private home, to the "female sphere"—instead she was able to work outside of the home in a girls' school, where she could teach with more freedom, and feel supported by other working women in her position. This young woman's

education, very likely from Queen's College, allowed her to be more independent in the wider world. Such a push into the public sphere was an important rung on the ladder to gender equality. Jane leaves Thornfield to eventually try her hand at a public school, just as Agnes leaves the Murray family to work at a private school run with her mother. This physical movement from the claustrophobia of the governess position to the relative freedom of a school is culturally rich with meaning. The work that Agnes and Jane perform as governesses serves as the catalyst for great change in their lives.

This transference of emphasis from the role of the governess to that of the public or private schoolmistress directly contradicts the idea of the angel in the house, first widely disseminated by the poet Coventry Patmore in 1854. The traditional feminine ideal—that a woman should be a caretaker who stays in the home and desires nothing more than to support her husband and raise her children—was no longer a realistic model for the Victorian woman. While many women did continue to fit this mold, the options were greatly widening. A woman's place was no longer necessarily in the home. Instead, her choices enlarged with possibility—she could now make a life for herself in a public setting. Jane and Agnes's shift from working as private governesses to working as public and private schoolteachers lends credence to such a model. Each age needs its heroes, and Jane and Agnes are powerful examples of women struggling to find their own fulfilled and authentic lives.

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