

WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

ANNE BRONTË

Agnes Grey



Complete and Unabridged

AGNES GREY

Anne Brontë



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INTRODUCTION

Agnes Grey provides a penetrating insight into the mid-nineteenth century world of the governess. A definition of the governess was provided by Lady Eastlake, whose withering criticism of *Jane Eyre* is notorious. She wrote, a governess is 'a being who who is our equal in birth, manners, and education, but our inferior in worldly wealth.' (*The Quarterly Review*, December 1848). Drawing on her own experiences as a teacher in the Ingham and Robinson families, Anne Brontë depicts with keen and ironic observation the social isolation, emotional starvation and frustrations of governess life. The novel's apparent simplicity of style veils a direct and cutting exposé of middle class values, morality and religion. The author reveals the repellant cruelty, materialism and chauvinism with which young, single women had to cope. *Agnes Grey* opened the eyes of society to the injustices of the governess's position. In her diary, Lady Amberley wrote, 'read *Agnes Grey* . . . and should like to give it to every family with a governess and shall read it through again when I have a governess to remind me to be human'.

First published by Thomas Cautley Newby in December 1847, *Agnes Grey* was the first novel of the youngest member of the Brontë family, Anne Brontë (1820–1849). It was published under her pseudonym of Acton Bell, her sisters Charlotte (1816–1855) and Emily (1818–1848) having adopted those of Currer and Ellis Bell. The actual events of *Agnes Grey* are straightforward: there are no complicated plot devices, and little mystery or great intrigue. This led some critics to dismiss the novel as dull and lacking in dramatic incident in comparison with the melodrama of Currer Bell's *Jane Eyre* and the rugged power of Ellis Bell's *Wuthering Heights*, both also published in 1847.

The narrator, Agnes Grey, is the youngest daughter of a poor, north country clergyman. At the age of eighteen, to help the family's finances, she becomes a governess, teaching children in a

private family at Wellwood House, some twenty miles from her home. Agnes has an optimistic enthusiasm for her task, and is determined that she will succeed. However, despite her best efforts, the Bloomfield family prove to be a great trial and Agnes' authority is compromised by the children's unruly behaviour and a lack of support in disciplinary matters from their parents. Tom, the eldest child at seven, is a violent little monster who displays appalling cruelty to animals. Agnes is dismissed by the indulgent parents after less than a year on the grounds that the children had failed to improve in either educational attainments or manners.

Agnes' family are reluctant for her to put herself through the experience again but she persuades them to let her take another situation, this time being more in control of the process by placing her own advertisement and specifying a higher salary. Her new position is as governess to Rosalie and Matilda Murray, aged sixteen and fourteen. They are older and more manageable than the Bloomfields, but the position presents problems of a different nature. Rosalie is a selfish, mercenary flirt and Matilda is a foul-mouthed tomboy. Agnes feels that such exposure to immorality and low standards threatens her own integrity of character.

We follow Agnes' increasing interest in the new curate, the philanthropic and kindly Edward Weston, who is contrasted with the superficial and cruel rector, Mr Hatfield. We observe Rosalie's flirtations in pursuit of a wealthy husband and Agnes is shocked by Rosalie's lack of moral standards, eventually culminating in her flirtation with Mr Weston, simply to prove that she can 'fix' his affections, and her financially advantageous marriage to Sir Thomas Ashby, whom she despises.

Not knowing how Mr Weston really feels about her, Agnes is called home when her father becomes ill. After his death, necessity compels Agnes and her mother to earn their own living and they set up a school together beside the sea. Agnes is surprised to receive a letter from Rosalie, the unhappy Lady Ashby, inviting her to stay as a guest at Ashby Park. Rosalie, now a mother, is anxious to treat her former governess as an equal and confides the misery of her marriage to her drunken husband.

Back with her mother beside the sea, it is here, while on an early morning walk on the beach, that Agnes is reunited with Mr Weston. Their friendship quickly deepens to love and the novel concludes with their happy marriage.

The novel's deceptive simplicity conceals a sharply observant critique of society and deals with several themes. The main theme of *Agnes Grey* is the situation of the governess, and the novel also examines the education of boys and girls, morality, class structures, cruelty and love, subjects which are all developed further in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Anne's second novel.

In the north of England, the setting for *Agnes Grey*, a new middle class of wealthy manufacturers had arisen, anxious to educate its daughters to succeed in society. This task fell to educated women in reduced circumstances and to clergymen's daughters like the Brontë sisters. There were few options open to middle class women who were compelled to earn a living at this time. In the 1840s women could not enter the male-dominated professions such as medicine or the law, and university entry was not open to women.

The governess's position was one of social ostracism, neither family nor servant, and frequently submitting to a heavy workload for a very low salary. Charlotte Brontë resented the inequality bitterly and could not cope with her two positions as a governess. In her novel *Jane Eyre*, her heroine's true worth is recognised and she transcends the class barriers, which were firmly in place for Charlotte herself, by marrying her employer, Mr Rochester. Anne's novel attacks the system in a different way and finds happiness in strength of character and independence with love and marriage as a bonus rather than the driving force of the novel.

The Governesses' Benevolent Institution had been founded in 1841 to provide financial assistance for governesses who had been abandoned by their employers once their pupils were too old. In 1848 the Queen's College for Women was founded to provide further education for women so that their salaries might improve. In her correspondence with her publisher, William Smith Williams, whose daughters were contemplating becoming governesses, Charlotte expressed her concern that this would only result in greater numbers of highly qualified women who would resent their situations even more. Charlotte and Anne's experiences as governesses had a profound influence on their writing. Of the Brontës, only Anne had enough strength of character to maintain a position for any length of time. She remained with the Robinsons at Thorp Green for five years, gaining the friendship of the Robinson girls, who corresponded with and visited Anne long after she had left the family, just as Rosalie Murray keeps in touch with Agnes Grey. The governess's purpose was to instill qualities in her charges which would make her an attractive catch for potential suitors. Showy 'accomplishments'

were deemed more appropriate for a young woman than any serious study. Rosalie Murray is typical of this sort of girl.

One way out of the humiliations of governess life was to set up a school, thus gaining some measure of independence. Agnes Grey and her mother manage to achieve this, though the Brontës, who had hoped to set up a school at the parsonage, failed in their venture.

The theme of education continues in the novel as Anne illustrates the differences between education for boys and girls. Boys like Tom Bloomfield are encouraged in 'manly' pursuits such as pulling apart live birds and bullying his sisters, while girls like Rosalie Murray are groomed to make a financially beneficial marriage, regardless of whether love and mutual respect are involved. At the end of the novel, when Agnes witnesses poor Rosalie repenting of her marriage to the drunken Sir Thomas Ashby, we see a chilling picture of the sort of man young Tom Bloomfield will become. Ashby is described by Rosalie as a 'filthy beast'. Like Huntingdon in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, he is dissipated and curtails his wife's freedom, but he is also totally without attraction or redeeming characteristics.

Characters' morality in the novel is indicated by their treatment of animals. People with integrity such as Agnes, Nancy Brown and Edward Weston love animals and are kind to them. Those who ill treat animals, such as Tom Bloomfield and his family and Mr Hatfield, who kicks Nancy's cat and hits the little terrier, Snap, with his cane, are of dubious morality. Agnes finds herself frightened that continual association with 'unamiable children, and ignorant, wrong-headed girls' will deaden her own moral perceptions. Rosalie is presented as a heartless flirt, cruelly spurning Mr Hatfield's proposal because he does not meet the standards of wealth and position imposed by her mother. Agnes observes in Chapter 14: 'I was amazed, disgusted at her heartless vanity; I wondered why so much beauty should be given to those who make so bad a use of it, and denied to some who would make it a benefit to both themselves and others'. The class structure is further analyzed and criticized by the depiction of Agnes' own family. Agnes' mother's family disapproved of her marriage to a poor clergyman and cut off her fortune. At Richard Grey's death, they offer to reinstate her as a lady and to provide a legacy for her daughters, on the condition that she repents of her 'unfortunate marriage'. This Mrs Grey refuses to do, for she would, 'rather live in a cottage with Richard Grey, than in a palace with any other man in the world.'

When *Agnes Grey* first appeared it merited little critical attention. In her Preface to the second edition of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Anne said that 'the story of 'Agnes Grey' was accused of extravagant overcolouring in those very parts which were carefully copied from the life, with a most scrupulous avoidance of all exaggeration'. Comparing it with *Wuthering Heights*, the *Athenaeum* of 25 December 1847 wrote, 'Agnes Grey is more acceptable to us, though less powerful'.

Britannia for 15 January 1848 wrote, 'the third volume of the book is made up of a separate tale relating to the fortunes of a governess. Some characters and scenes are nicely sketched in it, but it has nothing to call for special notice. The volumes abound in provincialisms. In many respects they remind us of the recent novel *Jane Eyre*. We presume they proceed from one family, if not from one pen.' *The Spectator* for 18 December 1847 held similar views: 'Wuthering Heights occupies two volumes: the third is filled out by a tale called *Agnes Grey*; which is not of so varied or in its persons and incidents of so extreme a kind as the first story; but what it gains in measure is possibly lost in power'. *Douglas Jerrold's Weekly Newspaper* for 15 January 1848 wrote of all three novels, '... the style of composition is . . . simple, energetic, and apparently disdainful of prettiness and verbal display, ' and of *Agnes Grey* itself added, 'We do not actually assert that the author must have been a governess himself . . . but he must have bribed some governess very largely, either with love or money, to reveal to him the secrets of her prison-house . . . *Agnes Grey* is a sort of younger sister to *Jane Eyre*; but inferior to her in every way.' The *Atlas* of 22 January 1848 concluded, 'Agnes Grey is a story of a very different stamp [when compared with *Wuthering Heights*]. It is a tale of every day life, and though not wholly free from exaggeration (there are some detestable young ladies in it), does not offend by any startling improbabilities. It is more level and more sunny. Perhaps we shall best describe it as a somewhat coarse imitation of one of Miss Austen's charming stories . . . There is a want of distinctness in the character of Agnes, which prevents the reader from taking much interest in her fate – but the story, though lacking the power and originality of *Wuthering Heights*, is infinitely more agreeable. It leaves no painful impression on the mind – some may think it leaves no impression at all.'

Critics and literary scholars today are interested in Anne's work as a powerful, direct narrative. Anne will never find herself amongst the first ranks of authors in the canon of English literature. She will

always be the 'other one' amongst the talented Brontë sisters. However, what Anne Brontë does present is the best portrayal of what it was like to be a governess in the mid-nineteenth century anywhere in literature. Her quiet strength, frustration and indignation and the humiliations of displaced young women suffering at the hand of her employers is chillingly real. And it has to be remembered that although the common perception might be that *Jane Eyre* was the first novel to depict the situation of the governess, Anne's novel was written prior to her sister's. It was Charlotte who took the lead from Anne, not the other way around.

* * *

There are strong parallels between the events in *Agnes Grey* and Anne's own life as a governess, though it would be a mistake to read *Agnes Grey* as a literal account of Anne's experiences. In *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857). Elizabeth Gaskell quotes Charlotte as saying that *Agnes Grey* was, 'the novel in which her sister Anne literally describes her own experience as a governess... [Charlotte] said that none but those who had been in the position of a governess would ever realise the dark side of "respectable" human nature; under no great temptation to crime, but daily giving way to selfishness and ill-temper, till its conduct towards those dependent on it sometimes amounts to a tyranny of which one would rather be the victim than the inflicter'.

Anne, like Agnes, was the youngest child of a poor clergyman. She took up a position as a governess in April 1839 with the Ingham family of Blake Hall, Mirfield, in Yorkshire, approximately twenty miles from Haworth. The Bloomfields of Wellwood House in *Agnes Grey* bear some resemblance to the Inghams of Blake Hall. Mary Ingham (d.1899) and Joshua Ingham (1802-1866) and their four children, Joshua (1832-1877), Mary (b.1834), Martha (b.1835), Emily (b.1837) and Harriette (b.1838) match the fictional Bloomfield clan: Tom, seven, Mary Ann, almost six, Fanny, almost four, and the baby Harriet, two. Anne was dismissed from Blake Hall in December 1839. Agnes leaves Wellwood House under similar circumstances after a comparable period of time.

Back at Haworth, Anne was dissuaded by her family from taking another situation, but she found a post at Thorp Green, Little Ouseburn, near York, around seventy miles away, just as Agnes' second position is further from home. At Thorp Green, Anne was employed by Edmund Robinson and his wife, Lydia, to teach an older set of children: their three daughters, Lydia, almost fifteen,

Elizabeth, thirteen and Mary, twelve. There was also a baby, Georgiana, and a son, Edmund, who was eight when Anne began working there in the spring of 1840. He later required a tutor and Anne's brother Branwell took the situation in January 1843. The fictional Murrays of Horton Lodge comprise Rosalie, sixteen, Matilda, fourteen, John, eleven and Charles, ten. Mrs Murray is described as 'a dashing lady of forty, who certainly required neither rouge nor padding to add to her charms.' This echoes the handsome Mrs Lydia Robinson, who was forty when Anne came to Thorp Green and with whom Branwell had a disastrous love affair.

There are other parallels with the author's life. The countryside in the Vale of York around Little Ouseburn is flat, a contrast to Haworth and also to the hills around Mirfield. The landscapes around Agnes' home, Wellwood House and Horton Lodge are similarly differentiated in *Agnes Grey*. A poem written while Anne was at Thorp Green, 'The Bluebell' (22 August 1840) recounts how the narrator is walking along a lane and a glimpse of a bluebell on the bank recalls her 'happy childhood's hours' when she 'dwelt with kindred hearts / That loved and cared for me.' Similarly Agnes associates particular wild flowers, primroses; bluebells and heath blossoms, with her home in Chapter 13.

Agnes Grey was probably completed in the Spring of 1846, around the same time that *Poems* by Currer Ellis and Acton Bell was published. On 6 April 1846, Charlotte wrote to the publishers of *Poems*, Aylott and Jones of London, and told them about 'a work of fiction, consisting of three distinct and unconnected tales, that C. E. & A. Bell are now preparing for the press.' She was referring to *The Professor*, *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey*, the manuscripts of which were submitted to several publishers. *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* were accepted by Thomas Cautley Newby, probably early in 1847. In December of that year Charlotte was writing to her own publisher, Smith, Elder & Co, of Newby's 'exhausting delay and procrastination'. On 14 December, Charlotte commented to William Smith Williams, 'The books are not well got up – they abound in errors of the press.' Newby's inconsistencies make it difficult to know the author's own intentions and preferences in the text, because the manuscript of *Agnes Grey* has not survived.

Agnes Grey is a short novel and publishing practice in the mid-nineteenth century favoured a length suitable for the three volume format popular with the circulating libraries. Thus it appeared as the third volume of a three volume set, the first two being occupied by *Wuthering Heights*. *Agnes Grey* tended to be ignored at the time

of its publication by reviewers, who concentrated on Emily's strange and powerful colossus and dismissed the subtle observations of *Agnes Grey*. The highly successful *Jane Eyre* had been published by Smith, Elder & Company a couple of months earlier, on 19 October, and the attention it received detracted from the interest which *Agnes Grey* might have attracted had it been the first of the Bells' novels to be published.

Agnes Grey and *Wuthering Heights* were actually accepted for publication prior to *Jane Eyre*, but Newby was not as quick off the mark as the more perceptive George Smith at Smith, Elder & Co. When Newby realised the stir which *Jane Eyre* was creating, he rushed *Agnes Grey* and *Wuthering Heights* through the presses in an attempt to cash in on the success of Currer Bell. He even gave the impression that his two novels were also the work of the famous Currer Bell, and this prompted George Smith to write to Currer Bell, demanding an explanation. Acting on the spur of the moment, Charlotte and Anne travelled to London overnight and in July 1848 presented themselves at the offices of Smith, Elder and Company. Emily had remained at Haworth, anxious to protect her own identity. In *The Cornhill Magazine* of December 1900, George Smith recalled: 'This is the only occasion on which I saw Anne Brontë. She was a gentle, quiet, rather subdued person, by no means pretty, yet of a pleasing appearance. Her manner was curiously expressive of a wish for protection and encouragement, a kind of constant appeal which invited sympathy'. Ellen Nussey in her 'Reminiscences' described the youngest Brontë as 'dear, gentle Anne'. She was, 'quite different in appearance from the others . . . Her hair was very pretty, light brown, and fell on her neck in graceful curls. She had lovely violet-blue eyes, fine pencilled eyebrows, and a clear, almost transparent complexion.'

It is Charlotte's picture of Anne which prevails, as few of Anne's personal papers or letters survives. In Charlotte's 1850 Biographical Notice of her sisters, she referred to both Anne and Emily as 'unobtrusive' and 'retiring'. Anne she describes as, 'milder and more subdued' than her sister; 'long-suffering, self-denying, reflective and intelligent'. Charlotte added that Anne had a 'constitutional reserve and taciturnity' which 'placed and kept her in the shade, and covered her mind, and especially her feelings, with a sort of nun-like veil, which was rarely lifted.' They wrote 'from the impulse of nature, the dictates of intuition.' Her comments on *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* are similarly damning. The novel had, 'an unfavourable reception,' wrote Charlotte. 'At this I cannot wonder. The

choice of subject was an entire mistake. Nothing less congruous with the writer's nature could be conceived.' Thus Charlotte effectively condemned Anne's work to oblivion until after Charlotte's own death in 1855.

The publication of Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* created the Brontë myth of Charlotte the suffering saint, quiet and gentle Anne and the strong and silent Emily. Emily did not merit a biography until Mary Robinson's *Emily Brontë* in 1883, and astonishingly Anne was not granted that privilege until Estelle Trust's 1954 biography, swiftly followed by Winifred Gerin's in 1959 and that by Ada Harrison and Derek Stanford in the same year. Similarly Anne's work has been neglected and pushed into the shadow of her sisters' achievements. *Jane Eyre* was dramatised for the stage in 1848, just five months after it was published. No-one attempted *Wuthering Heights* until a silent film production in 1920, while it was not until 1969 that BBC Television dramatized Anne's second novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. It was dramatized again in 1996. *Agnes Grey* was finally adapted for radio in 1997, the 150th anniversary of its first publication.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Anne Brontë was born on 19 January 1820 and was the sixth and youngest child of the Revd. Patrick Brontë (1777–1861) and his wife, Maria Branwell (1783–1821). Anne was born at Thornton, near Bradford in Yorkshire, like her sisters Charlotte (1816–1855) and Emily (1818–1848), and her brother Branwell (1817–1848). The family moved to Haworth, near Keighley in Yorkshire, in 1820, and the children's mother died when Anne was less than two years old. The young Brontës were brought up by their mother's sister, Elizabeth Branwell (1776–1842). Patrick Brontë was the eldest son of a poor Irish family who had managed to obtain a scholarship to St John's College, Cambridge and had no private income to supplement his small salary as a clergyman. Since Haworth parsonage belonged to the church, his daughters would have no inheritance and they were educated with a view to earning their own livings, should Mr Brontë die before them. The two eldest girls, Maria (1814–1825) and Elizabeth Brontë (1815–1825), and later Charlotte and Emily, were sent to the Clergy Daughters' School at Cowan Bridge, near Kirkby Lonsdale. The harsh conditions at the school, depicted by Charlotte as the grim Lowood School of *Jane Eyre*, contributed to Maria and Elizabeth's early deaths.

The four remaining children, Charlotte, Branwell, Emily and Anne, spent the next few years at home together. Anne did not attend school until she was fifteen, having being taught at home by her father, aunt and Charlotte. The Brontës' childhood during this period was happy and immensely creative. Charlotte and Branwell created the imaginary land of Angria and Emily and Anne wrote prose and poetry about the land of Gondal. This was the beginning of the Brontës' long literary apprenticeship, developing their writing skills and exploring themes which were to be re-interpreted in their mature writings. Anne and Emily were still writing about Gondal into their twenties, though Emily appears to have been more enthusiastic about it than Anne.

Late in 1835, Anne replaced Emily as a free pupil at Roe Head School, Mirfield, where Charlotte was a teacher. While there, Anne underwent a crisis of health and religious uncertainty. She left in December 1837. In April 1839, Anne took up a position as governess to the Inghams of Blake Hall, Mirfield. Evidence suggests that the Bloomfield family in *Agnes Grey* were to some extent based on the Inghams. Anne left in December 1839 and in May 1840 became governess to the Robinson family of Thorp Green, Little Ouseburn, near York, a position she held until June 1845. The following month Branwell, who had been tutor to the Robinson's son, Edmund, was dismissed from his post and returned home in disgrace, obsessed with his employer's wife, Lydia Robinson. In his despair, Branwell became increasingly dependent on alcohol and though he continued to write never he recovered from the affair. Anne incorporated some elements of her brother's condition in her portrayal of drunkenness in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, wishing to prevent anyone else from following a similar path.

In May 1846 Anne's poetry was included in the sisters' volume of *Poems* by Currer, Ellis And Acton Bell, published at their own expense and selling just two copies. Seeing their work in print spurred the sisters on to complete their novels, and Anne's *Agnes Grey* appeared with Emily's *Wuthering Heights* in December 1847. Branwell died in September 1848 and Emily in December of the same year. In January 1849 Anne was diagnosed as suffering from consumption, or tuberculosis, a disease of the lungs, and in May 1849 she travelled to Scarborough on the Yorkshire coast with Charlotte and their old friend, Ellen Nussey, in the hopes that the sea air would cure her. Anne had come to terms with her probable death but her fear on first realising that she was likely to die is apparent in her final poem, 'Last Lines', written between 7 and 28

January 1849, soon after the doctor had delivered his verdict. The poem opens with the lines, 'A dreadful darkness closes in / On my bewildered mind' and goes on to express some anger that she will not be able to achieve her aims in life: 'I hoped amid the brave and strong / My portioned task might lie, / To toil amid the labouring throng / With purpose pure and high. / But Thou hast fixed another part, / And Thou hast fixed it well; / I said so with my breaking heart / When first the anguish fell.' This feeling is echoed in a letter to Ellen Nussey in which Anne expressed her frustration at the prospect of not being able to carry out her plans for the future: 'I have no horror of death . . . but I wish it would please God to spare me not only for Papa's and Charlotte's sakes; but because I long to do some good in the world before I leave it. I have many schemes in my head for future practise, humble and limited indeed, but still I should not like them all to come to nothing, and myself to have lived to so little purpose.' (5 April 1849). Anne Brontë died at the age of twenty-nine on 28 May 1849 and is buried in the graveyard of St Mary's Church, Scarborough, on the cliffs overlooking the sea.

Anne's short life, together with those of her remarkable family, is established as one of the legends of literary history. The Brontës' novels are read and studied worldwide and their former home, now the Brontë Parsonage Museum, administered by the Brontë Society, has been visited by millions of people since it first opened to the public in 1928.

KATHRYN WHITE

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