

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. —Helen Knight

The Governess Question: Modes of social engagement in
Agnes Grey and *Jane Eyre*

by Helen Knight

I. Introduction

"A new servitude! There is something in that," Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre famously exclaims when contemplating a career in governessing, her escape route from Lowood School.¹ Jane's aspirations for a happy life are limited by her material situation of possessing neither wealth nor family. Similarly, Anne Brontë's Agnes Grey begins governessing because of a fall in her family's financial status due to her father's speculative investing. As Mr. Grey acknowledges, Agnes and her sister Mary have limited prospects for marriage and family: "'*Them* married—poor penniless things!' said he, 'who will take them, I wonder?'"² In the nineteenth century, governessing was an option for women without other options, and the undesirability of the occupation was largely the result of how governesses were treated by their employers. They received little pay, worked constantly, and often felt humiliated because of their low status.

Anne and Charlotte Brontë, both governesses themselves, consider in their novels how governesses' working conditions could be improved. Their modes for advocating for improvement, however, are very different. Anne, in *Agnes Grey*, extensively describes a governess's typical experiences in order to show employers the errors of their ways and therefore instigate reform. Charlotte, in the character of Jane, depicts how a governess could act as an

¹ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), p. 86. Subsequent citations of *Jane Eyre* are from the same edition. Citations of other texts are also from single editions.

² Anne Brontë, *Agnes Grey* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 110.

agent in charge of her own working conditions by breaking out of subservient behavior and standing up for herself. At a time when women workers, and female authors in particular, were becoming more involved in public discourse about their rights, Anne's and Charlotte's contrasting treatments of governing conditions represent two approaches for how change might be enacted.

II. The mid-nineteenth century governess as a modern phenomenon

Charlotte's and Anne's choice of occupation for their heroines, governing, is unsurprising. By the mid-nineteenth century, the governess was a familiar figure in British art and literature. Why had the governess—"disconnected, poor, plain" (J. Brontë, 161)—captured the Victorian imagination? This fascination was symptomatic of anxiety as well as sympathy. Conditions of the occupation and stereotypes about governesses indicate that these women were living symbols of a threatened social order. This social order was unable to guarantee the financial security of middle class young women. Writing about governesses, the Brontë sisters were participating in a debate about cultural values pertaining to wealth, class, and women.

Economic and cultural change in the first half of the nineteenth century fueled rapid growth in the demand for governesses and in the number of women seeking to become governesses.³ Rising prosperity produced a new class who could afford to hire governesses, including military officers and merchants like *Agnes Grey's* Bloomfields. This affluence also fostered a cultural shift whereby women of gentility were expected more than before to live at leisure. To create this leisure time, mothers transferred the care of their daughters to governesses. Simultaneously, the number of culturally approved occupations for unmarried, poor, genteel women grew more limited. Because of its domestic character, governing was one of the

³ These trends are discussed by Trev Broughton and Ruth Symes in the introduction to *The Governess: An Anthology* and by Bronwyn Rivers in Chapter 3 of *Women at Work in the Victorian Novel*.

occupations that such women could undertake. Additionally, the imbalanced proportion of females to males in the domestic population, largely a product of male emigration to the colonies, resulted in a large number of women who were unmarried. According to the 1851 census, there were almost 750,000 more women than men in England. This disproportion swelled the ranks of governesses, and it also increased the demand for them. As competition for husbands became stiffer, young women were expected to acquire more accomplishments to make a good match. Mothers found themselves lacking the skills that society demanded of their daughters, so they sought governesses who could teach them. From male emigration to the rise of a wealthy merchant group, the factors creating the nineteenth-century governessing industry demonstrate that the governess was more than a teacher for wealthy children. She was a product of contemporary economic and cultural conditions.

At the mid-nineteenth century, the life of the governess was difficult. Economic instability in the 1840s resulted in a greater number of governesses than positions for them.⁴ *Jane Eyre* alludes to the increasingly competitive job market for governesses in the parenthetical comment accompanying her advertisement for a position: "in those days, reader, this now narrow catalogue of accomplishments, would have been held tolerably comprehensive" (87). The limited number of available postings raised the minimum qualifications governesses needed in order to be hired. And where competition was fierce, exploitation ensued. In "Hints on the Modern Governess System," Lady Eastlake calculates the average salary of a governess to be thirty-five pounds per year, but mentions twelve pounds to be the minimum.⁵ *Agnes Grey* provides insight into the limited purchasing power of such a salary. The Murrays offer Agnes fifty pounds, but

⁴ Broughton and Symes discuss increasing competition for governessing positions in chapter 1 of *The Governess: An Anthology*.

⁵ Lady Elizabeth Eastlake, "Hints on the Modern Governess System," *The Governess: An Anthology*, ed. Trev Broughton and Ruth Symes (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Sutton Pub., 1997), p. 111.

living expenses quickly erode this wage. Agnes explains, "I must have decent clothes becoming my station, I must, it seemed, put out my washing, and also pay for my four annual journeys between Horton Lodge and home" (144). Agnes estimates she can save thirty pounds or less for her family, perhaps more than many governesses with less generous salaries could put away. For meager compensation, governesses were expected to spend long days with the children of the household, whom they did not have the authority to discipline.⁶ As Agnes's dressing of Mary Anne Bloomfield exemplifies, they might also be asked to assume the duties of nursery maids or lady's maids. An oversupply of job seekers led governesses to accept such working conditions. At the same time, these norms reflected poorly on the employers who took advantage of the surplus of governesses seeking employment. The working conditions of governesses revealed the Victorian middle and upper classes' willingness to exploit women from similar backgrounds to their own.

The adversity governesses faced was as much psychological as it was material. In order to gain employment, the governess needed to have the same level of education that wealthy parents wished for their children. As Lady Eastlake characterizes it, "the real definition of a governess in the English sense, is a being who is our equal in birth, manners, and education".⁷ At the same time, by virtue of working, the governess was an inferior to her employers. Earning money associated the middle class woman with the working class and even with the prostitute, the other type of woman who publicized herself and gained money.⁸ A salary's taint explains Agnes Grey's reluctance to explicitly link her desire to become a governess with her family's financial status. While she does mention that she wants "to earn my own maintenance," she then

⁶ Extended discussion of governesses' duties can be found in chapter 1 of *The Governess: An Anthology*.

⁷ Lady Elizabeth Eastlake, "Vanity Fair, Jane Eyre and the Governesses Benevolent Institution," *The Governess: An Anthology*, ed. Trev Broughton and Ruth Symes (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Sutton Pub., 1997), p. 120.

⁸ Rivers makes this argument regarding prostitution in the introduction to *Women at Work in the Victorian Novel*.

exclaims on the merits of raising children: "To train the tender plants, and watch their buds unfolding day by day!" (69). Agnes preserves her femininity by professing a philanthropic interest in the occupation.

As a result of her background, the governess was in the precarious position of being neither a friend with the servants nor with her employers. She was too educated for one group and too poor for the other. In a class-oriented society, this lack of belonging was a source of distress. Drawing on her experience as a governess, Emily Peart describes how "it is this very position—this anomalous half-way place, which has given rise so often to what is unpleasant, and has caused a kind of unacknowledged slur to rest on the name of 'governess.'"⁹ According to Peart, a lack of belonging is a defining characteristic of what it means to work in this occupation. Governesses' suffering arose from their exclusion from a normative social position. As Agnes Grey's interest in "the tender plants" demonstrates, Victorian society required duplicity of governesses in order for them to retain their dignity. They had to feign a lack of financial interest though a need for money forced them into the occupation.

For their physical and psychological hardship, governesses received their employers' pity in donations, fiction, and nonfiction. As scholars have observed, public interest in the governesses' plight was out of proportion with their numbers.¹⁰ There were thirty more times domestic servants than governesses according to the 1851 census, but governesses received far more sympathy. However, unlike servants, governesses were not from the working class. For the most part, their families had once had wealth. Upper and middle class interest in the plight of governesses was linked to their genteel origins. Responding to the financial difficulty associated with this occupation, wealthy patrons established the Governesses' Benevolent Institution in

⁹ Emily Peart, *A Book for Governesses, by One of Them*, in *The Governess: An Anthology*, ed. Trev Broughton and Ruth Symes, (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Sutton Pub., 1997), p. 104.

¹⁰ Broughton and Symes attribute this argument to Kathryn Hughes in *The Governess: An Anthology*.

1843, and in the early years, the organization primarily distributed payments to governesses in need.¹¹ There were 600 donors when the organization began and 6,000 by 1860. Philanthropic institutions to benefit governesses were established because social safeguards for the working classes, namely workhouses, were considered below the dignity of governesses. Lady Eastlake's sympathy for governesses is related to their social descent: "The case of the governess is so much harder than that of any other class of the community" (119). According to Lady Eastlake, being deprived of former wealth is a greater tragedy than being born into poverty. Undoubtedly, public sympathy for governesses among the wealthy was inconsistent with how some members of this class treated them within their homes. Philanthropic efforts to help governesses represented a likely point of hypocrisy between public and private action.

Paradoxically, at the same time that governesses received the public's pity, they also received their hate and scorn. As *Jane Eyre* describes it, they were considered "the anathematized race" (177). They gained the reputation of being seductresses of husbands and sons. A sub-genre of sensational novels arose in the mid-nineteenth century, featuring duplicitous, immoral governesses. In real life, too, they were perceived to be sexual threats: "How constantly you hear it said, 'Mrs. – has a great objection to having a governess in the house;' and no wonder she has, poor woman! When she is conscious that her husband regards her with serene indifference," remarks Peart about this state of affairs (182). Finally, governesses were charged with ineptitude. "I have suffered a martyrdom from their incompetency and caprice," exclaims *Jane Eyre's* Lady Ingram, espousing the conventional view of someone in her position (177). In short, to their employers, governesses represented a range of failings. Governesses, however, were not so degraded that the wealthy stopped hiring them to educate their children. This further reveals the

¹¹ Broughton and Symes discuss these facts in chapter 4 of *The Governess: An Anthology*.

duplicity of their employers, publicly criticizing them yet putting responsibility for their children's upbringing almost entirely on their shoulders.

The pity the governess received through initiatives like the Governesses' Benevolent Institution may seem incongruous with the scorn they simultaneously suffered. In fact, pity and hate were both manifestations of anxiety about the social mobility that the governess represented. The governess was an embodiment of downward class mobility to which the wealthy could also fall victim. "Many were the children of affluent parents...they moved in the best circles, and expected that their prosperity would last for ever; but a sudden loss of fortune, a failure in business, or death, has reversed the picture," writes Mary Maurice in an advice book.¹² Maurice's words sound a note of warning to those who also think their wealth will last forever. Philanthropic interest in the governess's plight might have stemmed from anxiety over how one's wives or daughters would fare if one's own circumstances changed. At the same time, claims of immorality were attempts to justify complaints against governesses who had experienced financial descent. Like Maurice, Eastlake reminds her audience that governesses resort to their profession because of a change in fortune: "We need the imprudencies, extravagancies, mistakes, or crimes of a certain number of fathers, to sow that seed from which we reap the harvest of governesses" (120).¹³ By attributing governesses' woe to fathers' vices, not chance, Lady Eastlake makes downward mobility explicable within a moral framework. Authors who questioned the morality of governesses themselves were similarly looking for an explanation. The governess's circumstances were a reminder that economic conditions did not guarantee the

¹² Mary Maurice, *Mothers and Governesses*, in *The Governess: An Anthology*. ed. Trev Broughton and Ruth Symes. (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Sutton Pub., 1997), p. 16.

¹³ Lady Eastlake's life is a case in point for how anxiety about falling from wealth generated interest in the governess. Once belonging to the middle class, she turned to writing in order to earn money. Perhaps, her writing about the governess was motivated by identifying with her problems.

gentility sustained prosperity. Anxiety over this phenomenon produced both hard-hearted and charitable responses from those with wealth.

The governess also fostered anxiety by modeling an independent female lifestyle. Possessing her own money (however meager that fortune might be) and detached from the obligations of a wife or a daughter residing with her parents, she demonstrated that there was an alternative path to family and marriage.¹⁴ As the number of women becoming governesses increased, there was concern that more women would seek greater independence. Anxiety over potential demands for more freedoms for women may have fostered the middle and upper classes' interest in governesses' charities. Pacified with annuities, governesses would not see their occupation as entailing suffering; therefore, they would not demand reforms. In other words, initiatives like the Governesses' Benevolent Institution might have been stopgap measures attempting to prevent governesses from feeling disenfranchised or abused and thus protesting the conditions under which they worked. Negative depictions of the governess were also motivated by this sense of her as a threat to social order. Representations of lying or cheating governesses communicated that a flawed character motivated women's choice to live outside of the normative role of sister, wife, or mother. Images of governesses seducing husbands and sons had the same effect. Governesses were said to make up the largest portion of patients in lunatic asylums. Mental imbalance served as an explanation for their desire to make money or as a warning of the consequences of holding employment for the female psyche. Paradoxically, the governess was both represented as a tragic victim of adverse life events and as a renegade female. In either case, she was a daily reminder to her employers of potential social mobility, something threatening to them as beneficiaries of the established social order.

¹⁴ Mary Poovey discusses these arguments for how negative representations of governesses indicated their threatening nature in chapter 5 of *Uneven Developments*.

Intense public interest in the governess indicates that she was at the heart of concerns about the status of women in Victorian culture. As a victim of financial misfortune, she was a symbol of society's failure to maintain its middle class. As an independent profit-earning woman, she represented progress, undesirable to some. In the multiple paradoxes that she exposed in Victorian society, she revealed a social code that was flawed in that it fostered duplicity. The middle and upper classes were willing to entrust her with their children while claiming she was immoral. They demanded that she have a middle class background while treating her as an inferior. They asked her to feign disinterest in money while knowing she would accept a pitiful salary out of desperation. If social values produce such paradoxes, one has to wonder whether these are appropriate values or whether they are outmoded. Cultural context reveals that Charlotte and Anne were doing more than drawing from life experience by depicting governesses in their novels. They also were not merely taking advantage of a plausible situation where a young woman leaves her family for plot purposes, nor were they simply capitalizing on the governess's unique ability to observe the upper class as an outsider. The Brontës were engaging in a larger debate about Victorian cultural values and how they might be altered.

III. *Agnes Grey*: Social engagement through testimonial

"All true histories contain instruction," begins *Agnes Grey* (61). There is a simple explanation for why Anne begins her novel with a declaration of its factual basis: it was inspired by her experiences as a governess. At the same time, the opening sentence is a statement about the author's stylistic commitment. In the remainder of the first paragraph, the narrator Agnes portrays the account that follows as an impartial testimonial. Whether or not the quantity of instruction in the narrative is worth reading it, "I am hardly competent to judge," she says, "but the world may judge for itself" (61). Using the style and structure of testimonial, Anne advances

her objective of revealing to the public governesses' abuse by their employers and the prevalence of moral vice in the middle and upper classes. With this claim of disinterestedness, for example, Anne attempts to make her criticisms seem to the reader as simple truths about the circumstances of governesses. In a sophisticated way, Anne takes advantage of this and other characteristics of testimonial to decry the habits of the wealthy and defend the virtues of the governess. As *Agnes Grey*'s limited success reveals, however, this technique failed to engage an audience and thus advance the novel's agenda of social exposé.

In *Agnes Grey*, Anne documents her experiences as a governess in order to show the middle and upper class's poor treatment of their employees. Agnes works for two different families, roughly inspired by Anne's employers: the Bloomfields (Inghams) and the Murrays (Robinsons). At Wellwood, the Bloomfield children are impossibly naughty, but Agnes lacks the authority to discipline them. Despite her extreme efforts to instruct them, she is fired for "a want of diligent, persevering care" (107). At Horton Lodge, the Murray daughters are already young adults when she arrives at their home, so Agnes is constantly treated as a subordinate by women of her own age. For instance, the Murray daughters converse with her when in private, but when they are with their companions, they act "as if they either did not see me, or were very desirous to make it appear so" (162). Sometimes friend and sometimes servant, Agnes experiences at Horton Lodge the distress of what Peart describes as the governess's "anomalous half-way place." Based on real experiences, *Agnes Grey* is consistent with the typical governing conditions given in non-fiction accounts by nineteenth-century governesses.

Although the novel is roughly based on her autobiography, Anne modified characteristics of her story so the novel might more broadly depict a governess's experiences. Anne was never employed by a merchant family like the Bloomfields. Both of her employers belonged to the

landed upper class. Joshua Ingham was a justice of the peace, Mrs. Ingham was the daughter of a Member of Parliament, and their home, Blake Hall, was "far more aristocratic than anything the Brontës had ever come in contact with before."¹⁵ Edmund Robinson, a clergyman, was lord of the manor of the village of Little Ouseburn, and his family lived in even grander style at Thorp Green than the Inghams did at Blake Hall.¹⁶ Creating two different types of households, Anne departed from her own narrative in order to portray two types of employers, one nouveau riche (the Bloomfields) and one established wealth (the Murrays). As a result, *Agnes Grey* conveys that ill treatment of the governesses is pervasive regardless of the employer's class.

Anne also used other details in the novel to convert her experience into a more generic one. Anne transforms the Reverend Edmund Robinson, "a chronic invalid" who rarely officiated,¹⁷ into Mr. Murray, "a blustering, roistering, country squire, a devoted fox hunter, a skilful horse-jockey and farrier, an active, practical farmer" (119). Mr. Murray barely figures into the plot, but the revision helps to create the impression that Agnes works for a typical landed country family. Mr. Murray more successfully fulfills the stereotype of a country landowner than Mr. Robinson. The generic quality resulting from this modification contributes to making Agnes's experience seem like a representative example of what governesses suffer. Description of universal experience is an aim that would be near impossible to attain with a faithful autobiography, as an individual's experiences always differ to some extent from the norm. A petition for large-scale social change may be more persuasive if it describes average conditions than exceptional experiences. Underlying Anne's claim of autobiographical truthfulness are

¹⁵ Juliet Barker, *The Brontës* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1994), p. 307.

¹⁶ Barker, p. 329.

¹⁷ Barker, p. 330.

factitious details intended to further the novel's social aims, like the Bloomfields' merchant status and Mr. Murray's personality.

Regardless of the extent to which *Agnes Grey* is based on Anne's experiences, she overtly draws attention to truth-telling in order to establish the credibility of her narrator. With "all true histories contain instruction" as Agnes's initial words, the first of the heroine's qualities that the reader sees is an appreciation for the truth (61). With this introduction, the narrator gains credibility and dissuades the reader from thinking she is trying to guide them to a certain impression. Anne wants the immorality of the employers to be perceived as a fact independent of her narrator's invested role. In a humorous way, this intention resurfaces when Agnes comments on Rosalie's relentless pursuit of Weston despite his lack of interest in her: "Had I seen it depicted in a novel I should have thought it unnatural...but when I saw it with my own eyes, and suffered from it too, I could only conclude that excessive vanity, like drunkenness, hardens the heart, enslaves the faculties, and perverts the feelings" (196). Agnes asserts that she is true to human nature by disaffiliating her narrative with the genre of novel. Anne uses the voice of a fictitious narrator to create the allusion of a factual account.

In addition to allowing her to establish Agnes's credibility, the narrative mode that Anne claims to take—objective documentation of fact—provides her with the flexibility to comment on the general immorality of the wealthy classes, non-specific to their treatment of governesses. As a scribe of past events, she is not obligated to adhere tightly to the narrative. In fact, she describes all of the members of the Bloomfield and Murray households, though some, like Mr. Murray and Master Charles Murray, rarely interact with her. The impression produced is highly critical of these families. Mr. Bloomfield drinks gin and water constantly through the day. Mr. Murray swears at his servants. Most damagingly, Agnes represents how the immoral behaviors

of her employers corrupt their children. Mr. Robson, Mrs. Bloomfield's brother, comes to visit and encourages Tom Bloomfield to hurt small animals, "undoing, in a few minutes, the little good it had taken me months of labour to achieve" (102). Describing Mrs. Murray's "chief enjoyments" to be "giving or frequenting parties, and in dressing at the very top of the fashion," Agnes implies that Rosalie is following her mother's example in her superficiality (119). When Rosalie marries and has a child, another generation is threatened with acquiring the same failings as a result of bad mothering. In the context of these general faults, the upper and middle classes' treatment of governesses is representative of a larger problem of corruption in these groups. Showing how parents' bad behaviors repeat themselves in their children, Agnes depicts the problems of the upper and middle classes as entrenched. In reality, Agnes's "slight sketch of the different members of the family" at each house contains more opinions than facts (119). However, the pretense of writing an encyclopedic account of experiences provides her with the opportunity to communicate these impressions. In *Agnes Grey*, Anne demonstrates how the perspective of a supposedly objective observer can be used as a tool for broader condemnation of the wealthier classes' moral failings.

An asserted commitment to depicting the whole truth also allows Anne to control how the governess is perceived. Anne is preoccupied with defending the governess's reputation against stereotypes of her immorality. Firstly, Agnes defies the stereotype of the governess obsessed with earning a profit. As mentioned previously, she initially seeks to become a governess as much to teach children—"train the tender plants"—as to earn a salary (69). After the Bloomfields fire her, it is her mother, not Agnes, who imposes the requirement that she only take a position that will pay her at least fifty pounds. Moreover, this requirement seems to be aimed at finding her a better family instead of a scheme to make more money, as higher ranking individuals might

treat her with more respect "than those purse-proud trades-people and arrogant upstarts" (112). When Agnes estimates how much of the fifty pound salary she will be able to save, her thoughts are only directed to her family's benefit and not her own; she is delighted at the concept of "the solid services I might render them" (114). With many details about Agnes's lack of interest in profit-making for herself, Anne ensures that *Agnes Grey*'s readers will not see Agnes as a money-hungry and thus low-class and unfeminine governess. Anne creates the illusion that because Agnes claims to state the full truth and an interest in money is not part of what she states, that interest does not exist. Testimonial defends the governess in addition to condemning the wealthy classes.

Anne further showcases the governess's respectability through her adherence to convention. Fictional autobiography was a common category of the Victorian novel and had formal conventions, including the progress of an individual over a period of time. Anne strictly maintains a chronological account of events, and shows Agnes's development from a naïve teenager to a mature woman. Quite conventionally, the marriage plots in *Agnes Grey* reward virtue and punish vice. By Agnes's own estimation, Mr. Weston is the ideal mate: "I defy anybody to blame him as a pastor, a husband, or a father" (251). In contrast, for her manipulative behavior toward men, Rosalie receives just desserts in a husband with little interest in her, Sir Thomas. As in Jane Austen's novels, justice is served in marriage pairings. Anne's choice of narrative technique had implications for how her audience would perceive governesses in response to the novel. As *Agnes Grey* was written under a pseudonym, readers would speculate that it truly represented the experiences of a governess. If Anne's depictions of employers were too extreme, she would risk the novel being considered a work of hyperbole and governesses being considered prone to exaggeration of their problems. If she was too stylistically

experimental, the novel could feed into conceptions of the governess as unstable. By committing to what was conventional for narrative style, Anne closes off the possibility of critics claiming that the novel reveals governesses' abnormalities.

Where Anne departs from realism, she continues to advance her purpose of social commentary. The wish-fulfillment component of *Agnes Grey*—Agnes's courtship by Mr. Weston—also advances Anne's purpose of showcasing the governess's virtue. Agnes is the model of propriety in her interactions with Mr. Weston, a far cry from the promiscuous governess depicted in contemporary art and literature. Indeed, Agnes is so modest that she will not explicitly tell the reader that she fantasizes about marrying Mr. Weston: "And how delightful it would be to—"But no matter what I thought...we have *some* thoughts that all the angels in heaven are welcome to behold—but not our brother-men" (166). In her romantic exploits, Rosalie Murray is a counterpoint to Agnes. Rosalie flirts with many men: Mr. Hatfield, Mr. Weston, Harry Meltham, Mr. Green, and Sir Thomas Ashby, her eventual husband. Where Agnes is modest about her romantic thoughts, Rosalie freely expresses her designs regarding various men. Speaking of Mr. Weston, she remarks to Agnes, "if I am to be married so soon, I must make the best of the present time: I am determined Hatfield shall not be the only man who shall lay his heart at my feet" (190). Anne invites comparison between Rosalie and Agnes through the intersection of their romantic plots in Mr. Weston. In doing so, she contradicts the stereotype of the licentious governess. Through Rosalie, she shows that it is the class who accuses the governess of profligacy who is hypocritically immoral. When it comes to the romance plot, Anne is not faithful to realism, both in respect to her autobiography and in her contrivance that Agnes and Mr. Weston relocate to the same town and meet by chance. However,

this shift in narrative technique serves the same objective as does her use of realism: defaming the middle and upper classes and defending the governess's virtue.

Although the narrator claims that readers should judge the story as they see fit, there is an implicit argument that there is a right way and a wrong way to read *Agnes Grey*: "I sometimes think [my history] might prove useful to some, and entertaining to others, but the world may judge for itself," Agnes writes in the beginning of the first chapter (61). She expresses a related sentiment after two chapters of detailed description of the Bloomfield children's behavior: "my design, in writing the last few pages, was not to amuse, but to benefit those whom it might concern: he that has no interest will doubtless have skipped them over" (93). In each of these passages, Anne juxtaposes two purposes of a novel: instruction and entertainment. Her intention in writing is instruction. Although Anne explicitly recognizes the readers' right to use the text for entertainment, the reader who does so is callous. The two chapters that the uninterested reader skipped over depict a young woman, away from home for the first time, who is constantly victim to the tricks of the Bloomfield children and criticized by her employers for the children's behavior though she has no authority over them. Implicitly, the reader who skips over these chapters has no heart. Indeed, he aligns himself with the Bloomfield parents who are deliberately oblivious to Agnes's trials. Underneath a façade of objective testimonial, Anne guides the reader to taking her view of the governess question.

How effective was Anne's use of testimonial in advancing social reform? In evaluating *Agnes Grey*'s influence, one question that is worth speculating about is the scope of Anne's ambition for the novel. Based on her writings, Anne's goals may have been limited; her writing may have been simply motivated by a desire to improve the situation for governesses in any way possible. Agnes professes intention in detailing the Bloomfield children's terrible behavior: "if a

parent has, therefrom, gathered any useful hint, or an unfortunate governess received thereby the slightest benefit, I am well rewarded for my pains" (93). Similarly, in the preface to the second edition of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Anne writes, "Let it not be imagined, however, that I consider myself competent to reform the errors and abuses of society, but only that I would fain contribute my humble quota towards so good an aim."¹⁸ If Anne's ambitions were as narrow as these statements claim, then Anne had her desired impact. In her diary, Lady Amberly recorded the kind of response to the novel that Anne says she desires: "[I] 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."¹⁹ The credible portrayal of the governess's plight, advanced by claims of faithful documentation, could motivate employers to treat their governesses better.

One wonders whether Anne's claims of humble ambitions were false modesty, however, and whether instead she hoped to shock Great Britain with an exposé of the private lives of the wealthy. Her second preface to *Wildfell Hall* contains this suggestion. She claims that "the story of 'Agnes Grey' was accused of extravagant over-colouring in those very parts that were carefully copied from the life" (4). No surviving reviews of *Agnes Grey* find the novel to be outrageous, thus implying that Anne hoped for an extravagant response.²⁰ At least in retrospect, Anne sought to be perceived as an outspoken writer.

In *Agnes Grey*, objective testimonial compromised Anne's ability to shock. *Agnes Grey* is "the tale of a governess that undergoes much that is the real bond of a governess's endurance;— but the new victim's trials are of a more ignoble quality than those which awaited *Jane Eyre*,"

¹⁸ Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 4.

¹⁹ Introduction to *Agnes Grey*, p. 47.

²⁰ Editorial notes on *Wildfell Hall*, p. 492.

opined an 1847 review of Anne Brontë's first novel.²¹ In this observation, the reviewer indicates a critical problem with Anne's brand of testimonial. Although praiseworthy for its believability, in a counterintuitive way her approach is problematic for gaining the reader's support. It sacrifices showcasing a creativity in content and technique that will foster the reader's allegiance. Testimonial threatens to be uninteresting. And the novel did not interest many of her contemporary readers: it never went into a second edition in her lifetime.²² As discussed previously, however, unconventionality threatens to alienate the reader, producing the opposite reaction than that intended—rejection rather than inspiration for reform. Arguably, Anne "played it safe" in predicting the technique that would deliver the novel's maximum impact. Safe does not mean simple, however. Anne's use of testimonial reveals a sophisticated underlying strategy for engaging in social commentary, where claims of merely documenting rather than advancing opinion allows the author to covertly shape her reader's views.

IV. *Jane Eyre*: Using fiction to model a path to social reform

In contrast to Anne, who professes modest aims of contributing a "humble quota" to social reform, Charlotte Brontë expresses high ambitions for *Jane Eyre*'s social impact.²³ Responding to the book's critics in the preface to the second edition, she writes, "[The world] may hate him who dares to...rase the gilding, and show base metal under it—to penetrate the sepulcher, and reveal the charnel relics: but hate as it will, it is indebted to him" (4). This declaration references an epistle from the Book of Matthew. Comparing the importance of her oeuvre to the writings of one of the Evangelists, Charlotte confidently describes her novel as a righteousness work. Jane's sense of her novel's contribution far exceeds Anne's hope that *Agnes*

²¹ Introduction to *Agnes Grey*, p. 10.

²² Barker, p. 654.

²³ Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 4.

Grey will provide "an unfortunate governess" with "the slightest benefit" (93). According to this preface, Charlotte aims to profoundly disturb society by exposing its corruption.

Respecting the governess question, however, Charlotte's strident preface seems somewhat incongruent with the novel that follows. Jane's experiences as a governess are exceptionally positive. Unlike Agnes, tormented by the constant work of taking care of the three Bloomfield children, Jane has only one pupil, Adèle, who is "obedient and teachable" (108). Because Adèle is an orphan, Jane does not have to contend with any overbearing parents or relatives like the Bloomfield's Mr. Robson: "no injudicious interference from any quarter ever thwarted my plans for [Adèle's] improvement" (108). Jane receives a high salary, forty pounds per year. Most unusually, her employer falls in love with her, and they marry. Rather than exposing the abuses that governesses suffer, Charlotte seems to describe the ideal governing position.

If social commentary is important to Charlotte's writing, how does the role of governess, depicted so unusually, advance this purpose of the novel? Jane's atypical experience allows Charlotte to explore how governesses are stereotyped and how governesses defend their rights and dignity in the face of their employers' negative perceptions. Through Jane's behaviors, Charlotte communicates that reform in the treatment of governesses will not be spearheaded by the wealthier classes. Rather, it will only occur if governesses cease to behave as their employers' inferiors. Charlotte's brand of social commentary does not simply discuss injustice; instead, it models the action that those who are wronged should take if they seek improvements.

Charlotte's personal letters reveal her unfavorable opinion of the institution of governing. For less than a year, Charlotte worked as a governess for the Whites, a merchant family, with two young children in her care.²⁴ Her salary was meager, only twenty pounds per

²⁴ Barker, p. 350.

year, four of which went to laundry.²⁵ She was miserable, largely due to her sense of dependence and humiliation: "I find it so difficult to ask either servants or mistress for anything...It is less pain to me to endure the greatest inconvenience than to request its removal."²⁶ Like Anne, Charlotte experienced firsthand the lack of dignity in the work of a governess.

For the most part, Jane maintains her dignity as a governess, but in a short series of scenes during Rochester's house party, she experiences the humiliation of being in the "anomalous half-way place" described by Peart. Rochester is often absent, and even when he is in residence, she does not necessarily see him for several days at a time. Thus, she is infrequently placed in the position of a social subordinate. When Rochester invites his friends to Thornfield for a house party, however, she repeatedly is thrust in the company of social betters who disdain her simply for her occupation. The first evening that she sits with the house party, Jane's presence inspires them to discuss the faults of governesses. As Jane listens, Lady Ingram remarks on how she "'suffered a martyrdom'" from the "'incompetency and caprice'" of her children's past governesses (177). Blanche Ingram reminisces about the tricks that she and her brother would play on their governesses. Her comment to her brother demonstrates her lack of shame about her past behavior: "'Theodore, do you remember those merry days?'" (177). Jane leaves the room as soon as she deems it appropriate. As Rochester remarks, she is "'so much depressed that a few more words would bring tears to [her] eyes'" (181). After weeks of pleasant life at Thornfield, Jane experiences a governess's humiliation by witnessing the Ingrams' conversation.

The house party scene implicitly critiques Anne's mode of social commentary. Blanche Ingram's ability to pleasantly reminisce about past governesses demonstrates that the upper and middle classes have a firm understanding of how they treat them. They just do not care what

²⁵ Barker, p. 350.

²⁶ Charlotte Brontë, "CB to EN, 3 March 1841," quoted in Barker, p. 350.

governesses suffer, something that is demonstrated by their quick loss of interest in the topic. Soon after raising the subject, Blanche asks for the topic of conversation to be changed, exclaiming, "'Spare us the enumeration!'" when her mother starts talking (178). The wealthy understand that governesses suffer from their treatment, but they do not have enough empathy to change their ways. *Agnes Grey* assumes that a faithful account of wrongdoing will inspire reform; if injustice is revealed, it will be resolved. In this scene, Charlotte implies that injustice is known and is simply ignored. Charlotte's picture of the wealthy is even more condemnatory than Anne's. Charlotte depicts an upper class that is fully conscious of their wrongdoings but unwilling to change, thus more deplorable.

Charlotte may be directly responding to *Agnes Grey* in the house party scene. The Ingrams' treatment of their governesses is reminiscent of the Bloomfield children's behavior in *Agnes Grey*. There are three Ingram siblings, two sisters and one brother, just as Agnes takes care of two Bloomfield girls and one boy. The name "Ingram" is very similar to "Ingham," the actual family on which Anne's Bloomfield family is based. Charlotte perhaps imagines the public's response to *Agnes Grey* to be much like the house party's conversation, first characterized by amusement and quickly followed by boredom. "'I suppose, now...we shall have an abstract of the memoirs of all governesses extant,'" exclaims Blanche Ingram when she wants to talk about something new (178). *Agnes Grey* is a memoir of a governess, and such a topic does not appeal to those like Blanche. Blanche's nonplussed response to anecdotes from the lives of governesses may echo Charlotte's attitude toward her sister's writing. In the preface to a paperback edition of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* published after Emily's and Anne's deaths, Charlotte writes that Anne "wanted the power, the fire, the originality of her sister

[Emily]."²⁷ Charlotte, it seems, felt her youngest sister's writings were not innovative, and had no shame about letting the public know her opinion. While she explicitly critiques the conventionality of Anne's writings in this preface, she may covertly do so through Blanche Ingram's voice. Like Blanche and Theodore Ingram are adult versions of the Bloomfield children, perhaps Charlotte viewed her own commentary on governesses as a more mature, sophisticated version of her youngest sister's work.

In *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte consciously draws attention to the public conception of a miserable governess, further conveying the futility of exposé. Despite her limited experience in the world, Jane knows that governesses are not treated well. Jane expects to receive condescension. When she meets Mrs. Fairfax, Jane expresses surprise at the housekeeper's hospitality: "I anticipated only coldness and stiffness: this is not like what I have heard of the treatment of governesses" (96). This expectation is reiterated when she examines the meager offering of books in the schoolroom: "I suppose he had considered that these were all the governess would require for her private perusal" (103). As an inferior, a governess would not undertake heavy reading. By emphasizing Jane's expectation of demeaning treatment, Charlotte shows that such treatment is the status quo. Through such statements, Charlotte quietly conveys that content like that in *Agnes Grey* does not contribute anything original about governesses to the public discourse. In addition, these statements depict Jane's experiences as exceptional in contrast. They are Charlotte's indicators that in *Jane Eyre*, she means to provide new insight into the governing experience by depicting something innovative.

Appropriately, Jane receives humiliating treatment when she behaves most like a typical, subservient governess. When the house party disparages governesses in her presence, she sits

²⁷ Reprinted in *Agnes Grey*, p. 57.

quietly at a window seat, removed from the party. (Blanche's comment, "'there she is still behind the window-curtain,'" demonstrates that she is physically hidden from the group (176)). Jane's physical separation from the party suggests her subservience. Jane's detachedness at the window seat is reminiscent of Agnes Grey walking behind the Murray siblings, something Agnes describes as acknowledging her "own inferiority" (162). Jane tries to be invisible, and she is treated as such. Consequently, Jane hears degrading comments about her profession. When the house party plays charades, Jane once again sits apart at the window seat; as Lady Ingram comments, "'she looks too stupid for any game of the sort'" (182). The remark is not unjustified. Jane has never spoken in this lady's presence, so she has not proved herself to be anything but stupid. When Jane is not her outspoken self, Charlotte showcases the responsibility that governesses share in how they are treated.

In *Jane Eyre*, however, Charlotte offers an alternative to the stereotypical governess. By not behaving in a self-deprecating way, Jane is not treated as a lowly subordinate by her employer. Jane's assured manner influences Rochester's behavior toward her, as demonstrated in an early interaction. Based on her occupation and appearance, he assumes that she will play the expected subordinate role in their communications: "'You have the air of a little nonnette; quaint, quiet, grave and simple'" (131). In such a statement, he projects a stock character onto Jane, based on the little he knows of her. He tries using her to entertain himself: "'Do you think me handsome?'" (130). Rochester asks this question expecting Jane will respond to intimidation as a subordinate. This is the adult version of the Ingram children's tricks: both are displays of superiority, intended to goad. Jane does not respond with flattery, however, curtly replying, "'No, sir.'" At the end of the conversation, in which Jane persistently refuses to act like an inferior, Rochester remarks, "'Not three in three thousand raw school-girl governesses would have

answered me as you have just done" (134). Rochester's response explicitly points to the stereotype of the submissive governess and Jane's divergence from it. If she had behaved as a governess is expected to behave, she would have been treated as such. To be respected, governesses cannot act like inferiors, and thus acquiesce to their humiliation.

Charlotte further models the ideal behavior of governesses in Jane's attitude toward money. Jane rejects the assumption that Rochester can treat her as an inferior simply because he pays her. In fact, she tells Rochester that she will not obey him because he gives her a salary, but "on the ground that you did forget [the salary], and that you care whether or not a dependent is comfortable in his dependency" (134). In this statement, Jane offers a suggestion for how governesses can maintain their dignity, even while acting as employees. They should obey orders because they are treated well, not simply because they are financially dependent on their jobs. Unlike Agnes, who shies away from mentioning money, Jane refutes the belief that earning money makes someone inferior; indeed, she treats her wage as a source of pride. Rochester offers her fifty pounds when she leaves for Gateshead, but she refuses to take more than the fifteen she has earned. According to Lady Eastlake's calculations, fifty pounds is more than most governesses could expect to earn in a year, so the amount she refuses would be very significant to Jane. But Jane does not simply want money; she wants to earn her money. Charlotte expands on this sentiment when Rochester describes his intention to adorn Jane in jewels after their engagement. She exclaims in reply, "'No, no, sir!...I am your plain, Quakerish, governess'" (259). As a governess, she is not beholden to anyone. She earns what she receives, and asserts this independence with pride.

Ultimately, the novel overwhelmingly rewards Jane's assuredness in her role as a governess through Jane and Rochester's marriage. In the garden at Thornfield, Rochester

proposes to Jane: "'My bride is here...because my equal is here, and my likeness. Jane, will you marry me?'" (254). Rochester's romantic interest in Jane results from his perception of her as his equal. Repeatedly, Jane's outspokenness despite her socially subordinate position works to cultivate this impression in him. Jane's reward for outspokenness is an exaggeration of what a governess can realistically expect, but the exceptionality of her experience conveys that governesses, by being assertive, can raise their aspirations. In contrast to Jane, Agnes perseveres through the trials of governessing, never overstepping the bounds of social propriety. She is rewarded through a respectable marriage to Mr. Weston. *Jane Eyre* incorporates a similar narrative. Miss Temple, Jane's virtuous and kind instructor at Lowood, is also rewarded through a respectable marriage to a clergyman, Mr. Nasmyth. Agnes and Miss Temple both succeed in securing the most ideal future life that the likes of a young governess or schoolteacher realistically can hope for. Jane, asserting her own worth, secures a wealthier and more charismatic husband than Mr. Weston or the barely-mentioned Mr. Nasmyth. Jane's sense of self-worth is rewarded in a husband more worthy of her remarkable traits than a nondescript clergyman.

In *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte engages in social discourse, but not by simply illustrating injustice. Through Jane, she demonstrates how a governess should behave as an equal if she expects to be treated as one. Charlotte's is an active form of critique. Writing with a social purpose requires modeling change, not illustrating the status quo. For Charlotte, creating exceptional circumstances for Jane Eyre is a more productive form of participating in social discourse than rehashing typical circumstances that have not prompted any resolution of injustice. Charlotte encourages self-empowerment. Jane, as a governess, demonstrates that

governesses should conduct themselves in a way more fitting to the literal meaning of the word "governess": female governors. Governesses should act as governors of their own fates.

V. Conclusion

Both Agnes Grey and Jane Eyre are "model governesses" of different sorts. Agnes is the model governess according to societal values: passionate about instilling children with virtues, discrete about financial matters, and appropriate in her choice of husband. Jane models what a governess ideally would be according to Charlotte's estimation: still concerned about the moral character of her charges but possessing a sense of her own self-worth. Agnes looks to create a space for herself inside accepted social values. Jane defies social values that she finds objectionable. The points of contrast between the two are representative of their authors' distinct ideas of how governing conditions might be improved. Anne advocates for employers' reform; she expects society will initiate the necessary changes if she reveals the problems. Charlotte implies that governesses should initiate the reform process by refusing to act as subservient creatures who can be bullied and disrespected because of their occupation.

Readers' responses to these two novels indicate that Charlotte Brontë's approach to social commentary was more successful than Anne's. When it was first published, *Agnes Grey* received little attention from critics and had poor sales.²⁸ Though *Agnes Grey* accurately depicts the hardship a governess could expect to encounter, accuracy was not enough to maintain the interest of contemporary readers. In contrast, the first edition of *Jane Eyre* sold out within three months of its release.²⁹ Contemporary reviews, like that in *Fraser's Magazine*, praised its thought-provoking nature: "It *is* an autobiography—not perhaps, in the naked facts and circumstances, but in the actual suffering and experience. This gives the book its charm: it is soul speaking to

²⁸ Barker, p. 539.

²⁹ Barker, p. 537.

soul."³⁰ The *Fraser's Magazine* review describes *Jane Eyre's* power to captivate readers, provoking consideration of Jane's suffering and the tenacity and assertiveness that served her well in her lowly social position. According to readers' reactions, innovative description is more powerful than realistic testimonial. Both Brontë sisters demonstrate a commitment to addressing the governess question, a pressing social issue and one relevant to their personal lives. Ultimately, Charlotte's approach was the more compelling one.

Works Referenced

- Barker, Juliet. *The Brontës*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1994.
- Brontë, Anne. *Agnes Grey*. London: Penguin, 2004.
- Brontë, Anne. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. London: Penguin, 1996.
- Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. Ed. Margaret Smith. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000.
- Broughton, Trev, and Ruth Symes. *The Governess: An Anthology*. Stroud, Gloucestershire: Sutton Pub., 1997.
- Lady Eastlake, Elizabeth. "Hints on the Modern Governess System." *The Governess: An Anthology*. Ed. Trev Broughton and Ruth Symes. Stroud, Gloucestershire: Sutton Pub., 1997. 111-112.
- Lady Eastlake, Elizabeth. "*Vanity Fair*, *Jane Eyre* and the Governesses Benevolent Institution." *The Governess: An Anthology*. Ed. Trev Broughton and Ruth Symes. Stroud, Gloucestershire: Sutton Pub., 1997. 119-120.
- Maurice, Mary. *Mothers and Governesses*. *The Governess: An Anthology*. Ed. Trev Broughton and Ruth Symes. Stroud, Gloucestershire: Sutton Pub., 1997. 16-17.
- Peart, Emily. *A Book for Governesses, by One of Them*. *The Governess: An Anthology*. Ed. Trev Broughton and Ruth Symes. Stroud, Gloucestershire: Sutton Pub., 1997. 103-104, 181-184.
- Poovey, Mary. *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1988.
- Rivers, Bronwyn. *Women at Work in the Victorian Novel: The Question of Middle Class Women's Employment*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2005.

³⁰ Quoted in the appendix to *Jane Eyre*, p. 455.