

***Agnes Grey As a Conduct Book***

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Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey* (1847) has been mainly evaluated as a bildungsroman that portrays the heroine Agnes's growth through overcoming various social hardships, or as a document that depicts vividly the condition of a real 19th-century English governess based on the author's experience. Only few studies have so far been made of the instructive aspects of this novel. Yet it is obvious that Brontë intends to give readers a lesson because at the beginning of this work she writes, "All true histories contain instruction. . . ." <sup>1</sup> Besides, the narrator states that the illustration of the heroine's conflict with her spoiled pupils and their unfeeling parents is meant to be useful for parents in general and unfortunate governesses. In this essay, I would like to focus on elements of conduct books found in *Agnes Grey* and make some observations mainly on female education in the broadest sense.

## I

Although belonging to the middle class, Agnes, the daughter of a poor Rector becomes a governess in the upper middle class families of landowners Bloomfield and later Murray to educate their children. She becomes a governess at the age of eighteen, so let us examine first what kind of values and education she had acquired by then.

Certainly Agnes has acquired "Music, Singing, Drawing, French, Latin, and German. . . ." (52), and refined manners needed to an excellent governess, but the real foundation of her education is absolute faith in God and high Christian morality. She makes much more of spirituality than

materiality. Rosalie, the older daughter of the Murrays describes Agnes appropriately as follows:

She had her own opinions on every subject, and kept steadily to them—very tiresome opinions they often were, as she was always thinking of what was right and what was wrong, and had a strange reverence for matters connected with Religion, and an unaccountable liking to good people. (70)

Agnes portrays herself:

I believe she [Rosalie] respected me more than herself was aware of, because I was the only person in the house who steadily professed good principles, habitually spoke the truth, and generally endeavoured to make inclination bow to duty. . . . (61-62)

Agnes's sense of value may be due to the influence of her parents. Her father was a priest. Her mother was a daughter of a wealthy landlord, but she was willing to marry a poor priest against her parents' will. She placed love before wealth, and as a result, she gave up all the luxury that she had enjoyed before. Agnes was brought up in an affectionate family consisting of her parents and an older sister. Her mother was in charge of the daughters' education, and they had no experience of public education. Her family also had little contact with neighbors and relatives. Therefore she was reared so secluded that she was free from the prejudices of Victorian society. When she settled on working as a governess, she thought: "Whatever others said, I felt I was fully competent to the task: the clear remembrance of my own thoughts and feelings in early childhood would be a surer guide than the instructions of the most mature adviser"(9). She was going to tutor children as she had been instructed. Yet her pupils were

already all badly spoiled by her parents and relatives. Treated as if she were a senior servant, and given no authority as a teacher, she still persists bravely with Christian virtue: "Patience, Firmness, and Perseverance were my only weapons; and these I resolved to use to the utmost"(25).

## II

Agnes's first employer, Bloomfield, is a landlord, but he was a merchant before that. As he climbs up the social scale by acquiring wealth, he desires his family to appear to be genuine ladies and gentlemen in order to hide his past. The parents are particular about their children's clothes and attitude: they force them to be decent. The cold-hearted mother and the ill-tempered father control their children through anger and intimidation, and the children change their attitude according to what kind of adult they come into contact with. In other words, in front of the parents they are extremely obedient, but they show their true selfish nature when they are with Agnes and behave as violently as they like. In spite of Agnes's restraint, the children make their clothes dirty by playing on the muddy ground and also go out when it is snowing without hats and gloves, which provokes their father's wrath.

Moreover, Mr. and Mrs. Bloomfield are eagerly trying to persuade their sons and daughters to display respectively the masculinity and the femininity that the age recommends.

Holding his arms behind his back like a pompous public speaker, seven-year-old son Tom exhibits arrogant manners when he meets Agnes for the first time. Whenever he introduces things to Agnes, he says, "my study room," "my books," "my garden," which demonstrates that he has a strong desire of possess. Sitting astride the wooden horse, he whips and spurs blindly. He says he will do the same when riding on a pony eventually. He catches birds and small creatures in a trap and finds

pleasure in torturing them. These aspects of his behavior are mostly due to his father's influence. Uncle Robson also encourages Tom to torture animals by letting him see how cruelly he treats his own hounds. Matilda, the younger daughter of the Murrays is also cruel to animals. She often pinches and kicks the pet dog Snap and finds pleasure in letting hounds kill rabbits while hunting. She learns brutality as well from her country squire father.

Uncle Robson not only believes that such cruelty is manly, but also believes that drinking heavily is manly. He preaches to Tom superiority and domination of men over women. Following his instruction, Tom tries to dominate his sisters and even Agnes.

On the other hand, six-year-old daughter Mary Ann is to be raised up as a beautiful lady. Every morning, Agnes has the troublesome duty to blush Mary Ann's long hair, weave it into braids and tie it with ribbons. When both parents have dessert with Mary Ann, Agnes is expected to help her to change dresses. Agnes has extreme difficulty in helping Mary Ann put on the dress that her parents favor, instead of what Mary Ann likes to wear. The first time when Mary Ann meets Agnes, she brings dolls, and proudly shows their clothes and furniture, which is similar to the incident in which Rosalie as Lady Ashby leads Agnes through the magnificent mansion, proudly showing Italian antiques, and Swiss watches, and so on. Women were taught to satisfy their vanity in that way in childhood. Uncle Robson praises the beauty of Mary Ann's appearance to implant in her vanity and affectation. During the Victorian age, women were thus trained to value having an attractive appearance.

For Agnes, however, "cultivation of mind and manners" is more important than appearance. The phrase "cultivation of mind" is expressed best by Agnes when she says about Rosalie Murray: "her mind had never been cultivated: her intellect at best was somewhat shallow. . ." (62).

### III

“Cultivation of mind” holds almost the same meaning as “improvement of mind,” written in *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind* (1773) by Hester Chapone, one of the members of the Bluestocking Circle. Anne Brontë was educated in the Roe Head School run by Miss Margaret Wooler. Miss Wooler profoundly respected Chapone and she used *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind* as a foundation in teaching her pupils.<sup>2</sup> No doubt Anne was influenced by that book. Chapone’s book was written in the form of collected letters to her niece based on Christianity and on John Locke’s educational theory. It can be categorized as an educational book or conduct book.

*Letters on the Improvement of the Mind* sold well and was widely read soon after publication. Samuel Richardson, Jane Austen and also Mary Wollstonecraft were influenced by it. We are reminded of the conversation of Elizabeth, Darcy and the Bingley sisters in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* about the indispensable accomplishment of a true lady. Miss Bingley states:

“A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions, or the word will be but half deserved.”<sup>3</sup>

Darcy’s opinion is different:

“All this she must possess,” added Darcy, “and to all this she must yet add something more substantial, in *the improvement of her mind*

by extensive reading.”(Italics mine)<sup>4</sup>

It is clear that Darcy places special emphasis on ladies’ mind rather than their appearance because he eventually chooses as his wife Elizabeth who has not only an affectionate heart but also intelligence developed literally through “extensive reading.”

In Mary Wollstonecraft’s fictionalized conduct book, *Original Stories from Real Life* (1788), Mrs. Mason who is entrusted to tutor two girls, instructs them on the difference between animals and human beings as follows:

Other creatures only think of supporting themselves; but man is allowed to ennoble his nature, by *cultivation of his mind* and enlarging his heart. (Italics Mine)<sup>5</sup>

We can be fairly certain that Anne Brontë shared the same values as Austen and Mary Wollstonecraft.

In *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind*, Chapone maintains the importance of improving temper, as well as having principles based on Christianity: one cannot change one’s disposition, which is innate, but one can control one’s temper because it is habitual. Her concept of education includes not only developing one’s intellect but also directing one’s temper in a better way. Concretely, Chapone argues the importance of evading “pride,” “vanity,” “envy,” “ambition,” and “covetousness”; controlling “feeling,” “compassion,” and “passion”; and also correcting “peevishness,” “sullenness,” “obstinacy,” and “melancholy.”<sup>6</sup> Adhering to Chapone’s teaching, Agnes tries to improve her pupils’ temper. She herself has tried to overcome the “sullenness” and “diffidence” that her mother pointed out as being her flaws.

The children of the Bloomfields seem to have been born with a bad

disposition and implanted with a bad temper. Surely, both parents give us the impression of being of a cold-hearted and selfish nature. It is natural that their children's disposition is also not good. Still, Agnes tries hard to improve their bad temper and foster a little goodness. Trying to correct Mary Ann's "obstinacy" and "perversity," Agnes threatens to punish her if she does not try to improve her flaws: Agnes will never give Mary Ann a kiss of goodnight before she goes to bed. Going to sleep without her mother's kiss was the severest punishment for Agnes when she was a child. But Mary Ann never minds, which shows that she has never been loved by anyone, even by her mother. The Bloomfield children are never aware of Agnes's real love for them, though love is the essential foundation of good education.

The relationship between disposition and temper is well reflected in the depiction of the children of the Murrays at home. Mrs. Murray, whose care is only directed toward making the children's life comfortable and keeping them in good humor, never encourages them to exert any effort. The result is manifested clearly in her younger son and favorite, Charles. Although he is ten years old, he frequently pesters the head servant for sweets, and wipes his sticky fingers and mouth with his mother's dress. Underdeveloped, cowardly, capricious and self-centered, he is cunning when working his evil. He cannot read even a simple line of a simple book. Whenever Agnes persuades him to make effort, he tells malicious lies to his mother about her. In addition to his innate bad disposition, he develops a habitually bad temper. In contrast, a good disposition was bestowed on the older son John, and on Rosalie and Matilda, but they have developed a bad temper through wrong education. Rosalie and Agnes are approximately of the same age. Rosalie is in particular portrayed as a girl who has been spoiled by being miseducated. Rosalie comes to have values which confront with those of Agnes.



## V

Rosalie was born with what Agnes was not received: wealth, pedigree and good looks. Her innate disposition is not bad, and she is also cheerful and full of vitality. Therefore she seems to be born to be happy until the end of her life. Yet her education has spoiled her: her mind was not cultivated nor was her intellect developed. “For the girls, she [Mrs. Bloomfield] seemed anxious only to render them as superficially attractive, and showily accomplished. . .” (60). The girls have not even been taught the distinction between right and wrong, so they totally lack of moral principles. Rosalie never gives up her desire for or enjoyment for the benefit of others. Constantly pampered, she is habitually contemptuous of reason and irascible on a whim. Because she is a beauty, she is obsessed with the pleasure of showing herself off. She is enthusiastic about learning such eye-catching accomplishments as dance and music. As she grows, she becomes captivated by her ambition to attract the opposite sex. She satisfies her own vanity by cheating men’s hearts, such as that of Rector Hatfield. Knowing that Curate Weston is kind to Agnes, she even interrupts Agnes to see Weston, in collusion with Matilda, in order to attract his attention toward her. Obsessed with vanity and desire, Rosalie’s behavior is conveyed through the metaphor of a wretched dog greedily coveting its food.

Prompted to fulfill her mother’s wishes, Rosalie gets married to Baron Ashby who has a large estate and the owner of the magnificent mansion. When she met Sir Ashby for the first time at the ball, Rosalie had the impression that he was an “ugly beast.” Even afterwards, she let out that she disliked him because he was the “wickedest” man among her male friends. Nevertheless, blinded by wealth and the title of Lady, Rosalie marries him without any deep consideration. Her criteria for choosing a

mate spouse contrasts with Agnes's: Agnes's makes much of her marriage partner's personality. After marriage, Rosalie feels herself to be a slave or prisoner who has fallen in a trap because her husband confines her to the house. She becomes unable to pursue pleasure that she enjoyed before marriage. Not until she becomes unhappy, does she understand Agnes's advice. Half-jokingly, she asks Agnes to become the governess for her newborn daughter. Rosalie thinks that the child will have better judgment if a governess like Agnes tutors her from an early age. Rosalie's formative years have already passed when Agnes becomes her governess, and by then Rosalie has been spoiled through improper education. Agnes's influence is not effective enough. Rosalie is now aware that her childhood education was somehow wrong. Yet she can do nothing but grudge her mother, abhor her husband and hate her mother-in-law who lives with her. When cornered like this, Rosalie completely lacks active problem-solving skills. Conversely, Agnes thinks that she can use her hidden ability in confronting trouble. When her family falls into poverty, Agnes confesses thus:

Indeed, to say the truth, there was something exhilarating in the idea of being driven to straits, and thrown upon our own resources. . . . instead of lamenting past calamities, we might all cheerfully set to work to remedy them; and the greater the difficulties, the harder our present privations—the greater should be our cheerfulness to endure the latter, and our vigour to contend against the former.(4)

Rosalie is brought up just to lament in case of hardship. She can neither learn from experience and thereby grow mentally, nor change herself and people around her to actively establish better relationships.

Rosalie's mother should be responsible for her daughter's education and choice of marriage partner. But Rosalie's mother seems to have been

educated like Rosalie and to have married for wealth and status as well. Mrs. Murray, dressed in the latest fashion, likes parties and still thrives on the pursuit of pleasure. As, in the upper middle class, children are left to nannies soon after they are born, the parent-child relationship tends to be unfriendly. It is doubtful that Rosalie's mother has ever really loved Rosalie. Rosalie cannot love her daughter because she is envious of her daughter who is going to enjoy pleasure now forbidden to Rosalie. Rosalie tells Agnes that Sir Ashby is discontented with his daughter who cannot be his heir. In the upper classes, women are considered to be instruments of breeding, responsible for maintaining the authentic pedigree. Matilda, who likes riding on a matchless mare, refers to the good breed of "mares." The author implicitly suggests that women are to be compared to mares:<sup>7</sup> Murray is described ironically as "genuine thoroughbred gentry" (54).

## VI

Social class in England was not based on legal privilege and status, but on wealth, but by repeatedly marrying within their class, the nobility and gentry protected the bloodline.<sup>8</sup> As a result, they believed that they were special and superior to people in the working class. They also handed down the class value of setting wealth and status above everything else because these are the foundation of their comfortable lives. An upstart like Mr. Bloomfield who climbed up the social scale by increasing his wealth imitates the gentry. To the members of the rich upper middle class, the members of the working class who are hired as servants are not merely their employees but their subjects. Mrs. Bloomfield's and Mrs. Murray's cold distant attitude toward Agnes indicates their discriminatory feelings. These discriminatory feelings are particularly shown in Rosalie's attitude toward poor cottagers and a footman. Rosalie speaks evil of her mother-in-law loudly in the presence of the footman. Agnes advised

Rosalie not to speak so loud for fear that he would overhear, but Rosalie retorted, “I never care about the footmen; they’re mere automations. . . .”(180), never considering them even human. Rosalie’s ideas were formed by her environment and education. Agnes’s mother says, “there are good and bad people in all classes” (52), but no good person in the upper middle class seems to appear. Rather, the poor lower class people like Nancy are good and faithful. It is true that the author criticizes the lack of moral principle in the upper middle class, but she also criticizes the class system and the patriarchal system that support such people, though not so distinctly as in the case of Mary Wollstonecraft.

It is evident that Brontë puts the highest value on equal human relationships based upon personality. She regards that sort of relationship as friendship. Friendship gets over class, status, age, gender and so on. Agnes calls her family members “our dear friends.” Agnes’s mother looks back at her married life and says, “I have passed [time] in the company of my best and dearest friend. . . .” (161). Rosalie appeals to Agnes to come and stay at Ashby Park as a friend in a letter. Agnes’s relationship with Curate Weston begins as friendship rather than love. Chapone refer to friendship as: “the noblest and happiest affections”<sup>9</sup>, and to marriage as “the highest state of friendship.”<sup>10</sup>

As we have seen, education had a major influence on the way of thinking and life of the characters in this novel. The author’s values are best shown in Agnes’s education and behavior. British novels gained social status not just as mere entertainment but as valuable reading by including the elements of conduct books. *Agnes Grey* inherited that tradition.

### Notes

- 1 Anne Brontë, *Agnes Grey* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988), 1. All quotations from *Agnes Grey* are taken from this edition. Page numbers will be given in the text.
- 2 Seiko Aoyama, *Buronte Shimai [Brontë Sisters]* (Tokyo: Asahi-shimbunshya, 1995), 107.
- 3 Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003), 29.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 29.
- 5 Mary Wollstonecraft, “Original Stories from Real Life,” *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*. eds. Janet Todd & Marilyn Butler (London: William Pickering, 1989), Vol. 4, 370.
- 6 Hester Chapone, “Letters on the Improvement of the Mind,” *Bluestocking Feminism: Writing of the Bluestocking Circle, 1738-1785*, Vol. 3. Ed. Rhoda Zuk (London: Pickering, 1999), 285-315.
- 7 Elizabeth H. Berry, *Anne Brontë’s Radical Vision: Structure of Consciousness* (Victoria, Canada: U of Victoria, 1994), 54.
- 8 Minoru Kawakita, *Kogyoka no Rekishitekizentei [The Historical Premise of Industrialization]* (Tokyo: Iwanami-shoten, 1983), 283-91.
- 9 Hester Chapone, 292.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 303.

Agnes Grey was an 1847 novel based on her experience as a governess. Bronte depicts the precarious position of a governess and how that can affect a young woman. Agnes was the daughter of a minister whose family was in financial difficulty. She has only a few choices for employment. Agnes experiences the difficulty of reining in spoiled children and how wealth can corrupt morals. She later opens a school and finds happiness. Afraid that their work would be judged differently if they revealed their identity as women, the book appeared under their three chosen pseudonyms—or pen-names, the initials of which were the same as their own. Barker, "The Brontës", p. 480] Charlotte became Currer Bell, Emily became Ellis Bell and Anne became Acton Bell. Title: Agnes Grey. Author: Anne Brontë. Release Date: December, 1996 [eBook #767] [Most recently updated: December 4, 2020]. An elegant house and spacious grounds were not to be despised; but she would rather live in a cottage with Richard Grey than in a palace with any other man in the world. Finding arguments of no avail, her father, at length, told the lovers they might marry if they pleased; but, in so doing, his daughter would forfeit every fraction of her fortune. Agnes Grey, A Novel is the debut novel of English author Anne Brontë (writing under the pen name of "Acton Bell"), first published in December 1847, and republished in a second edition in 1850. The novel follows Agnes Grey, a governess, as she works within families of the English gentry. Scholarship and comments by Anne's sister Charlotte Brontë suggest the novel is largely based on Anne Brontë's own experiences as a governess for five years. Like her sister Charlotte's 1847 novel Jane Eyre, it Agnes Grey. Anne Bronte. Available in PDF, epub, and Kindle ebook. This book has 180 pages in the PDF version, and was originally published in 1847. Description. Tells the story of Agnes Grey, a governess, as she works within families of the English gentry. Scholarship and comments by Anne's sister Charlotte Brontë suggest the novel is largely based on Anne Brontë's own experiences as a governess for five years. Like her sister Charlotte's novel Jane Eyre, it addresses what the precarious position of governess entailed and how it affected a young woman. Free ebook downloads (below donate butto