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THE WOMEN OF *AGNES GREY*

PORTO ALEGRE

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***“I wish to tell the truth,
for truth always conveys its own moral
to those who are able to receive it.”***

Anne Brontë, Author's Preface for the Second Edition of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

RESUMO

Anne Brontë é uma destacada autora vitoriana, parte integrante do ícone cultural inglês conhecido como "As Irmãs Brontë". Mesmo assim, seu estilo se diferencia dos de Emily e Charlotte no sentido de que ela escreve um tipo de ficção que é menos romântico e mais realista. Assim sendo, apresento o romance *Agnes Grey* como corpus desta pesquisa que examina as formas como as mulheres são representadas naquele universo ficcional. Tanto Agnes Grey, protagonista do romance epônimo, quanto sua criadora Anne Brontë são mulheres vitorianas do norte da Inglaterra que trabalharam como governantas em mansões senhoriais. Além disso, como a maioria das personagens de *Agnes Grey* são mulheres, a análise de suas circunstâncias e comportamentos pode revelar como eram limitadas suas movimentações nesse contexto. Elas ficavam conscritas à esfera doméstica, do lar, com funções que consistem quase exclusivamente em cuidar da casa, dos maridos e dos filhos, nos casos em que conseguem casar e constituir suas próprias famílias. Nos outros casos, seus espaços se tornam ainda mais restritos. Para realizar a investigação, centro a análise nas principais personagens femininas do romance, para determinar de modo elas se aproximam, ou se distanciam, dos padrões de comportamentos esperados. Como um suporte histórico e crítico, me baseio em textos escritos por Juliet Barker, Elizabeth Langland e Patricia Ingham. Ao final da pesquisa, espero que esta monografia sirva como uma contribuição aos estudos sobre a obra de Anne Brontë e também para contrastar as regras de comportamento feminino no século XIX e nos dias de hoje.

Palavras-chave: Anne Brontë. Representações do feminino. Vitorianismo. Romance inglês.

ABSTRACT

Anne Brontë is a major Victorian writer, part of the English cultural icon known as “The Brontë Sisters”. In spite of that, her style differs from Emily’s and Charlotte’s in the sense that Anne’s fiction is less Romantic and more Realistic. With this fact in mind, I choose her novel *Agnes Grey* as the corpus of the present research, which examines the ways in which women are represented in that fictional world. Agnes Grey, the protagonist of the eponymous novel, and Anne Brontë, her creator, are both Victorian women from the North of England who have worked as governesses in affluent manor houses. Moreover, as most of the characters in *Agnes Grey* are female, an analysis of their circumstances and behavior may expose how restricted women’s movements are in that context. They belong in the domestic sphere, at home, with their roles consisting almost exclusively in taking care of their houses, husbands and children, when they manage to marry and get a family of their own. Otherwise, their possibilities grow even scander. In order to carry out this investigation, I center the analysis on the main female characters in the novel, so as to determine in what ways they adapt to the expected pattern of behavior, or deviate from it. As a historical and critical support, I rely on texts written by Juliet Barker, Elizabeth Langland and Patricia Ingham. As a result, I hope that this monograph may contribute to the study of the works of Anne Brontë, and also bring some further light on the contrast involving the rules of female behavior in the 19th Century and nowadays.

Keywords: Anne Brontë. Female representation. Victorianism. English novel.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Three of the greatest female authors in English literature come from the same family – Anne, Charlotte and Emily Brontë. It is improbable that there will ever be another family as the one that lived in this small parsonage at Haworth, in the North of England, during the reign of Queen Victoria. The entire family was devoted to letters (their brother Branwell was also a talented author, and even the father and mother produced some literary productions).

The popularity they reached in life continues to grow. Numerous movies, documentaries, television adaptations and derivative literary production have been made, based on their lives and works. Movie adaptations of the Brontë novels go back to the times of silent, and then to black and white movies. The seven complete novels written by the Brontë sisters never ceased to be published, in an incalculable number of editions and translations all over the world. The Brontë Parsonage museum, held by the Brontë society, is now a place of literary pilgrimage. It holds a priceless collection of valuable texts and objects, and receives thousands of visitors each year.¹

“The Brontës Sisters” are usually considered as a unity; but, in fact, they are different in personality. Charlotte, the oldest, was practical, she was the one who encouraged her sisters to publish their work (if it were not for her, Emily and Anne would never have agreed to disclose their writings). Charlotte is the one who lived longer and produced more. Out of her four novels, the most famous is *Jane Eyre*. Emily, the middle sister, is remembered as the most antisocial, and as the genius in the family, having published only one novel, *Wuthering Heights*—which stands as one of the best works of fiction ever written. Finally, Anne, the youngest, author to *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*—is the one I choose to study in the present monograph.

After so much has been written about the work of Charlotte and Emily, in the last few decades the critics have been turning their eyes to Anne, realizing that this proximity with the two other dazzling writers may have unfocused the interest in her, who is also an

¹In 2017 circa 88,000 thousand persons visited the Parsonage. (Source of the information: <https://www.bronte.org.uk>. Access: 06/04/2018)

excellent writer. Anne's works follow a more realistic turn than her sisters', and are daring in their representation of the situation of women in the Victorian period, a time that was very rigid in relation to people, especially women. According to Langland, "Women had no legal status; they were non-persons under the law". (LANGLAND, 1989, p.24) Ingham declares that "During the Brontë sisters' lifetimes, women were second-class people, hardly to be called citizens since none of them was able to vote, a privation shared with lunatics and peers". (INGHAM, 2006, p.50) Both Langland and Ingham call attention to the amount of control husbands exerted over the wives. They could take total legal control over their future, over their children, and over their money. In this context, marrying the wrong man would mean a life of suffering or, as Brontë explores in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, falling into social contempt if one dared to break the bond.

Besides the marriage issue, women had very restricted opportunities in life, as to earning their living. The two possible options were teaching (either in a school or as a governess) or writing. (LANGLAND, 1989, p.26) It is in this period that the almost mythical figure of the governess gains strength. Those were well-educated women who fell from their social position because their families could not properly support them. They needed to work, which resulted in an ambiguous position: on the one hand, they were more refined (and usually belonged into more traditional lineages) than the people they worked for; on the other hand, no one would be interested in marrying them, because they could not afford offering a dowry, or even respect them, because they did not have any money. I intend to explore this in the research.

Anne Brontë, as well as her sisters, took position as a governess; the experiences were negative, but served them as material for inspiration when they wrote her novels. *Agnes Grey*, which is the corpus of the present monograph, has several autobiographical elements. As Langland remarks, "Anne not only took her subjects and techniques from her world, but, like all creative artists, she transformed them". (LANGLAND, 1898, p. 148) Brontë's first novel has a simple plot – it is the story of the personal development of a young governess. In this book, Brontë exposes the forlorn reality of the daily life of these women.

In the next section I will contextualize the author – her life and her writings. And in the following section I will examine the variety of female characters we find in *Agnes Grey*. I intend to present my reading of their circumstances, looking closely at the

attitudes and at the strategies they use to move in their restricted, and many times suffocating, space. I will analyze them with the help of Langland (1989), Barker (1994), and Ingham (2006), for the historiographical aspects, and Leaver (2013) as a secondary source.

Along with Jane Austen, The Brontë Sisters were my introduction to English literature. Therefore, I will always have a special affection for their books, and I have an interest in working with them. I also like to consider the condition of the women in the past, to have better understanding of our situation now. Considering that *Agnes Grey* has autobiographical elements and that Brontë's writing style is realistic, I chose to work with this novel in my undergraduate monograph.

2 CONTEXTUALIZATION

2.1 ANNE BRONTË AS A PERSON

It is impossible to discuss to Anne Brontë and her work without referring to her famous family as well. For that reason, I start this monograph with some information about the life of the author I study, which is interconnected with that of other authors. Except when directly referred otherwise, all factual information provided in this section comes from Juliet Barker's biography *The Brontës* (1984). Complementary data are informed by Campana (2017), Langland (1989) or Ingham (2006).

2.1.1 The Brontës

Anne Brontë is the youngest member of the literary Brontë family. Her mother, Maria Branwell Brontë, is the author of an essay called “The Advantages of Poverty, in Religious Concerns” (c. 1813). Her father, Rev. Patrick Brontë (whose original family name was Brunty), was born in Ireland in 1777 and lived to be eighty-four years old. He published the book *Cottage Poems* in 1811, and contributed religious articles to British periodicals throughout his life. Patrick and Maria were the parents of six children. The first child, Maria, was born in January 1814. Elizabeth was born in May 1815; Charlotte, in April 1816; Patrick Branwell, in June 1817; Emily Jane, in July of 1818; and finally Anne, in January, 17 1820, born some months before her mother died in consequence of ovarian cancer. (Cf. BARKER, 1994)² When Anne was still a baby, the family moved to Haworth Parsonage, in Yorkshire, where Patrick Brontë had been appointed as curate.

The cobbled main street of the village curved steeply uphill to the Parsonage at the top, with the moor behind it. The façade of the house looked over to the church and the graveyard which, contrary to the popular view, is not the burial place of the Brontë family—they are buried in the church itself. (INGHAM, 2006, p. 17)

²Except when directly referred otherwise, all factual information provided in this work derives from Juliet Barker's biography *The Brontës*.

There, Anne would write her poems and novels, along with her sisters and brother. After the death of their mother, the widowed father never remarried. Mrs. Brontë's sister, Miss Elizabeth Branwell, came into the Parsonage to live with them and help raise the children. Aunt Elizabeth was a cultured woman (like her sister), and very religious. She was very important to development of the children. Raised by an attentive father and aunt, the children were always encouraged to read and to value all sorts of artistic representation.

Maria and Elizabeth, the eldest daughters, at the ages of 9 and 8, were sent to Cowan Bridge, a school for the daughters of the clergy, in 1824. Charlotte and Emily followed them soon. Branwell received private education at home, and Anne was still a baby. Mr. Brontë was personally involved in Branwell's education because, being the only male amid the siblings, all the family's expectations were directed to the boy. The father hoped that Branwell would have a great career and provide for the family when they reached adulthood.

In 1825, the family suffered two other blows, the sudden deaths of Maria and Elizabeth. Maria fell ill and returned to the parsonage in February, dying in May, of tuberculosis, at the age of eleven. The second sister was brought back home only to die after two weeks, in June of 1825, at the age of ten. About the sisters' deaths, Barker (1994) wrote: "Maria, and to a lesser extent Elizabeth, had helped to fill the void caused by their mother's death so early in their lives. Once again they have been deprived of the maternal figure in the family. (BARKER, 1994, p. 138) By that time (June), Charlotte and Emily had already been brought back to Haworth, for fear of the epidemics that were killing many children at Cowen Bridge. The four remaining siblings from then on received their education from Patrick Brontë and Miss Branwell.

In 1826, Rev. Brontë, brought home a number of little soldier toys as a gift for Branwell, who distributed them among the siblings. Each child adopted some soldiers, who would become the protagonists of the stories they invented.

Charlotte chose as her hero the Duke of Wellington; Branwell decided on Napoleon; Emily at first chose 'Gravey' for her serious-looking soldier; and Anne named hers 'Waiting Boy'. On reflection the two younger girls, now aged 8 and 7, renamed their characters after Parry and Ross, two notable explorers whom they had read about in *Blackwood's Magazine*. (INGHAM, 2006, p. 18)

That is how the imaginary worlds of the Angrian Tales were created. Their childhood stories soon developed into more complex narratives, registered in tiny books produced by the children out of small pieces of paper stitched together, less than 13 centimeters square. With time, two distinct kingdoms were created –first Branwell and Charlotte’s Angria, a place of wilderness and adventure; then later Emily and Anne’s Gondal, more sentimental and prone to poetry. Anne and Emily were said to be frequently in each other’s company, their ages being closer and with their shared mythical place to share.

In 1831, Charlotte was sent to Roe Head School. She was imbued with the necessity of furthering her education, so she would eventually be able to maintain herself. There, she met Ellen Nussey, who became a lifetime friend and correspondent. Much of what is known about the Brontë family comes from the letters Charlotte sent to Ellen, and to another friend called Mary Taylor. In 1832, Charlotte left Roe Head after completing her studies. When she went back to teach there in 1835, Emily (at the time 17) went along. She went there to study. But the four siblings had extreme difficulty to stay away from home. Emily’s suffering affected her health; so, after a few weeks, Anne took Emily’s place as a student in Roe Head. Again, in 1837, the pining for home had a bad affect over Annes’s health, which forced her to leave the school as well. This period of sickness served to increase Anne’s religious devotion (LANGLAND, 1989). Charlotte, also longing for home, but more in control of her emotions than her sisters, remained teaching there until December 1838.

From 1840 to 1845 Anne worked as a governess for the Robinson family, in a place called Thorp Green, near York. There, in 1843, Anne successfully indicated Branwell to work as a tutor to the Robinson’s elder son. When Branwell got emotionally involved with Mrs. Robinson, they had an affair. Anne’s anguish about what was happening was so deep that she asked for dismissal and returned home. The following month Branwell was dismissed, accused of improper behavior.

While Anne was in Thorp Green, Charlotte and Emily went to Brussels, to simultaneously study and work at M. and Mme. Héger’s *Pensionnat*, a school that formed fine ladies. The plan was that, at the end, Charlotte and Emily would get a diploma that would allow them to open a school of the same kind in England. That resulted in a life changing experience, as both sisters fell intensely in love with M. Héger. As he was a

respectable family man, nothing happened expressly. Nevertheless, it is today acknowledged that he has a strong part in inspiring the characters of Mr. Rochester and Heathcliff, the male protagonists in Charlotte's *Jane Eyre* and Emily's *Wuthering Heights*.

If being intellectually bright, but socially invisible, was difficult for the Brontë sisters, this tension fell even harder upon Branwell. He was the only male sibling, the one expected to provide for the whole family in case anything happened to their father. As a consequence, he grew to become a very sensitive young man, unable to stay in the same position for long. He gradually took to drinking and gambling. Instead of providing for the family, he accumulated debts. His hopes of marrying Mrs. Robinson after the decease of her old and sickly husband were frustrated when, as soon as she became a widow, Mrs. Robinson agreed to marry a wealthy neighbor. Branwell fell deeper into drinking, gambling and smoking opium, and isolated himself from the sisters, who eventually excluded him from their conversations and literary discussions.

The idea of making money from writing was not new to Charlotte, but it was only after she found Emily's poems, in 1845, that the notion turned into a plan of publishing a book with poems written by the three sisters. By that time, Branwell was too far gone for them to consider bringing him into the project. In May 1846 the sisters used the money they inherited from their Aunt (who died in 1842, at the age of sixty-six) and paid for the publication of *Poems by Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell*, a volume of poetry written under pseudonyms that reproduced their initials (C.B., E. B. and A.B.), which might be taken either as masculine or feminine names. The book was well accepted by critics, but only sold two copies. Charlotte did not give up, and the sisters sent their novels *The Professor* (by Charlotte), *Wuthering Heights* (by Emily), and *Agnes Grey* (by Anne) to five different publishers, but the five rejected them.

Finally, in July 1847, the publisher Thomas C. Newby, from Smith, Elder & Co., agreed to publish *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey*. *The Professor* was rejected, so Charlotte started to work in *Jane Eyre* while she accompanied her father to his eye's cataract surgery. She finished the novel in four months, and sent it to be published along with her sister's works. *Jane Eyre* came out in October 1847 and was extremely well received. Emily's and Anne's novels were published in December. *Wuthering Heights* also sold very well, but *Agnes Grey* did not reach the same success.

Everyone was curious about the identity of the Bells brothers, which was known to no one, not even the publishers. It was only in 1848 that three Brontë sisters had to reveal themselves. T. Newby declared by mistake that the second of Anne's novels (published in June of the same year), *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, had been written by the author of *Jane Eyre*. Anne and Charlotte were disturbed by the fact and that their authorship was being mistaken. To solve the problem, they travelled to London to talk to their publishers. About the travel:

The tone of Charlotte's letter to Mary suggests a mischievous delight at the 'queer perplexity' of the two men at their sudden arrival and at the contrast between their literary reputation and their demure, old-fashioned appearance. From this point onwards the perplexity must have been transferred to the two sisters who found themselves living out their lives as celebrities in the metropolis. (INGHAM, 2006, p. 27)

They asked, however, that the publishers kept their identities in secret. Emily preferred to stay at home. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, in contrast with *Agnes Grey*, was a success and sold very well.

While the three sisters were flourishing in the literary world – and they well deserved that – Branwell was getting worse; his expectations having long vanished. After a period of suffering and degradation, Patrick Branwell Brontë died at the age of 31, in September 1848, probably from tuberculosis. His death triggered the heartbreaking fate of the four siblings. Emily, and then Anne, were affected by Branwell's illness. Emily passed away three months after Branwell's decease, in December 1848, at the age of 30. By that time, it was apparent that Anne was also infected. She died on May 28, 1849.

Charlotte, the remaining sibling, remained alive for six years still. During that period she got to spend some time in London society. There she would befriend her first biographer, the writer Elizabeth Gaskell. Charlotte published two more novels – *Shirley* and *Villette*. She also married Rev. Arthur Bell Nicholls, her father's curate, in July 1854, if only to die eight months later, in March 1855. She was almost 39 years old, and supposedly pregnant.

Their father, Rev. Patrick Brontë, died in June 1861, having outlived all his six children. Arthur Nicholls, Charlotte's widower, stayed with Rev. Brontë until the old man died, and then returned to Ireland, his homeland.

2.1.2 Anne in the Brontës

Being the last Brontë child to be born, Anne was always considered the baby in the family, especially by her father. As she was still a baby when her mother died, she was closest to Aunt Branwell and to her elder sisters, Maria and Elizabeth. Then, after the death of the two sisters, she clung to Charlotte and Emily to make up for this further loss. According to the letters left by Ellen Nussey, there rises the image of a “dear, gentle Anne” (BARKER, 1994, p. 139), an image that Nussey gets from Charlotte. According to Barker, “Charlotte always regarded Anne as a baby sister and was continually surprised when she showed any sign of adult behavior or feelings (...)” (BARKER, 1994, p. 285). This condescending tone towards Anne may have contaminated the critical readings of her work, provoking the fact that, out of the three sisters, she is the least read and studied. Another reason may be the fact that Anne’s style is less Gothic, less Romantic, more Realistic – and as a consequence less popular than that of her sisters.

Anne had as much difficulty as Charlotte, Branwell and Emily had to adapt in places that were far away from their home. Still, she was well aware of her circumstances, and determined to find the means to support herself. That is how she decided to find a position as a governess. At the age of 18, she stayed from April to December 1839 with the Ingham family at Black Hall. The experience was disastrous, as she was expected to teach and control the two older Ingham children, whose lack of discipline and respect made Anne very unhappy. She ended up being dismissed by the Inghams. Then she worked for the Robinsons between 1840 and 1845, a relationship that was terminated because of Branwell’s affair with the mistress of the house.

Although there is no evidence to the truthfulness of this statement, it is speculated that Anne may have been romantically interested in William Weightman, one of her father’s curates. (Cf. LANGLAND, 1989). Weightman is mentioned several times in Charlotte’s letters, a fact that reveals that in fact he was a favorite with all the ladies in the family. This curate was indeed much cherished by the Brontës, and they were very sorry when he died unexpectedly in 1842.

To her father and her aunt, Anne has always remained a child. Within the circle of the siblings, Anne was closer to Emily, and Charlotte was closer to Branwell. Although Branwell never gave much thought to his youngest sister, Anne's feelings of guilt and shame connected with her brother's actions would deeply influence her writing. She found in Branwell a source of inspiration to some of the most central themes in her mature writing. Their cohabitation made a profound impact in her sensitive mind. She was forced to witness the decay of her brother. Charlotte, perhaps because she had always been the one more closely connected with Branwell, was now the one who showed more difficulty in dealing with the situation. Therefore, she shunned Branwell. His degradation affected all the members of the family, to the point of changing their routine. Anne and Emily became "responsible for getting him to bed after his drinking bouts, for rescuing him from fire when he ignited his sheets by smoking in bed". (LANGLAND, 1989, p. 18)

Emily was the sibling that shared a deeper bond with Anne Brontë. While Charlotte and Branwell belonged into the world of Angria, Emily and Anne shared the visions of their own dream place, Gondal. Charlotte's friend Nussey describes them as practically twins, always in the company of one another. About their relationship, Langland states:

The four children had, essentially, paired up. Charlotte had become Branwell's boon companion, and Emily and Anne had forged a relationship so close that Charlotte's school friend, Ellen Nussey, would shortly describe them as 'twins'.

The major influence in Anne's childhood and adolescence was her sister Emily. When Emily returned from Cowan Bridge, the proximity in ages made the two sisters natural companions. To this nearness in ages was added a shared delight in roaming over the neighbouring countryside. With Emily, Anne discovered a joyous natural world, and her keen delight in that world is recorded in her earliest poems."(LANGLAND, 1989, p. 9)

Branwell and Charlotte grew apart; the youngest sisters, however, were able to maintain their bond throughout their lives.

One difference between Anne Brontë and her siblings – and this is something that accounts for her strong will – is her attitude in regards her income. Anne found herself more capable of working for money. She is the only sibling who managed to remain in a position for five years. We can say that she was successful in her endeavor of working as a

governess, as she “for the rest of her life remained the valued friend of the Robinson girls” (LANGLAND, 1989, p. 16). Barker declares that: “it was Anne who, in her customary quiet, efficient way, set about making her contribution to the family coffers”. (BARKER, 1994, p. 307) When she found her first position with the Ingham family, she decided to travel alone to where she would reside, so she could convene more courage. Such mature and determined attitudes contrast significantly with the aura of fragility the Brontë family cast on her. Even if she had not turned in a successful author, it is probable she would be able to keep herself working as a governess. By considering her attitudes and the themes approached in her novels, it is clear that Anne Brontë was a very capable and independent person, with a mind of her own; not just the minor talent in the Brontë family.

When the second editions of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* were published, their authors were already dead. In the preface, Charlotte writes the famous “Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell”, where she contrasts Anne and Emily as thus:

Anne's character was milder and more subdued; she wanted the power, the fire, the originality of her sister, but was well endowed with quiet virtues of her own. Long-suffering, self-denying, reflective, and intelligent, a constitutional reserve and taciturnity 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. (BRONTË, 1986)

In the manner Charlotte felt compelled to portray her young sister, the patronizing tone is clear. Charlotte and Anne were different, they saw life in different ways. During their time at Roe Head, the sisters – despite what was to be expected, since the two were isolated and homesick – did not get any closer. There was a distance between them that they never managed to cross. Anne was forever a little kid in her sister’s eyes. However, one must not forget that when the quotation above was written *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* had received strong attacks from the critics, and the will to protect her sister’s reputation could also have weighted in Charlotte’s choice of words.

It is likely that Emily and Anne have contracted tuberculosis while they were tending on Branwell. When the first symptoms appeared, Emily – possibly aware of what was to follow – refused to see a doctor. Anne – differently from Emily’s case – agreed to search for medical help, and consulted a specialist. She even went to Scarborough, a town on the Yorkshire coast where the weather is milder, accompanied by Charlotte and by Ellen Nussey. But there was not much to be done. They arrived there on May 25, 1849 and

Anne Brontë died three days later. She was 29 years old. Transporting a corpse was a complex and very expensive procedure, so Anne was buried in Scarborough. She is the only Brontë whose remains are not deposited at St. Michael and all Angels Church, in Haworth.

1.2. ANNE BRONTË AS AN AUTHOR

Anne, Charlotte and Emily Brontë lived their entire lives together, and share most sources of inspiration. Their three novels had been published together, under pseudonyms that bear the same family name (Bell). Therefore, it is understandable that some people might have assumed that the works have been written by the same author. When – maybe by mistake, maybe for commercial reasons – *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* was advertised as being written “by the same author of *Jane Eyre*”, Charlotte and Anne immediately travelled to London to clarify the blunder. After all, each of them were very zealous of their production, and respected the authorship of the other. Although they did that manly to clean up the misunderstanding, it is evident that they took great pride in their works. Anne demanded that there were no doubts about the fact that she was the author of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

From the moment Anne Brontë became aware of the world, she realized that she lived immersed in literature. When she was six, Branwell got the Waterloo toy soldiers and the siblings created Glass Town Confederacy and the imaginary world of Angria, in their sitting room. Later, when Anne was eleven, she and Emily left Angria and produced the imaginary island of Gondal. Part of that material is lost, but the poetry survives, along with some drawings and diaries. Angria and Gondal belong into a literary genre that is now referred to as fantasy fiction or speculative fiction, a narrative mode that is more open to magic and to the presence of supernatural elements, which comes closer to the notion of “romance” than to the “novel”, where verisimilitude and realism are preferred.

When they decided to write and publish novels, Anne, Charlotte and Emily knew that they were leaving the realm of romance. To write novels, they must control their imagination and keep within the limits of what was considered appropriate to the codes of this new genre. Anne’s and Emily’s stories were accepted for publication, but Charlotte’s *The Professor* was rejected, because Charlotte exaggerated in her commitment to stick to the

limits of commonplace reality. The editors considered that the plot was too dull and the story would fail to attract the interest of the readers. Charlotte reformulated the dosages of reality and imagination in her fiction and wrote *Jane Eyre*, so that the three books might be published together in 1847. On that occasion, *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre* sold extremely well, whereas *Agnes Grey* was somewhat eclipsed by the works of their sisters.

Agnes Grey and *Jane Eyre* share several elements. The two stories have young governesses as protagonists, although the act of teaching and the daily routine and challenges of a teacher hold a more predominant role in the narrative in *Agnes Grey* than in *Jane Eyre*, where the fact that Jane goes to work as a governess in Thornfield Hall is basically a pretext so that she may meet Mr. Rochester. Both protagonists lend their names to the title of the novel, and the two stories are told in the first person. But the tones are different. Jane Eyre's narrative is emotional and subjective, whereas Agnes Grey controls and filters her thoughts and her words in a rigorous way.

2.2.1 *Agnes Grey*

The simple plot of *Agnes Grey* carries a number of elements that remind us of the life of its author. Agnes is the youngest daughter of a curate. She decides to work as a governess when her family goes through financial difficulties. Agnes' family is not supportive of her idea. For one thing, they belong in a time when a woman working was taken as a sort of failure on the family, in their role of providing for the maintenance of unmarried daughters. Also, the family sees Agnes as a child, not believing in her ability to support herself. In spite of this lack of encouragement, the protagonist is confident about her own capacity, and finds a position as the governess of the Bloomfield children.

Although the Bloomfields are rich, they are not a traditional family. They are social emergents who lack social refinement, and they do not treat Agnes well. She is in charge of the education of two small children – a boy, Tom, and a girl, Mary Ann. The governess does not have permission to admonish the children, who do not take her seriously. Deprived of her authority as a governess, Agnes cannot do her work properly, fails to control and to teach the children. After a few months, she is dismissed and goes back home.

Instead of complying with the idea everybody has of her incapacity, Agnes decides to try again. This time, she is employed by a richer and socially more traditional family, the Murrays. She is in charge of two sisters, Rosalie and Matilda. The Murrays treat Agnes better than her former employers did. But still, there is no affection involved, and almost no real respect. Agnes spends most of her time with the Murray girls. Rosalie is a little “coquette” (a woman who likes to flirt and call attention of men) and Matilda seems more interested in masculine activities, such as hunting, than in the things a young woman should care for. Agnes also gets to know some people from the neighborhood, and becomes interested in a young curate, Mr. Weston.

When Agnes’ father dies, she leaves the Murrays and goes back to help her mother. Mrs. Grey is a very active and practical woman. She decides to open a small school, with Agnes’ help. Later on, Mr. Weston starts visiting the two women, ending up proposing to Agnes. The narration stops after their marriage.

Agnes Grey begins with the maxim “All true histories contain instruction (...)” (BRONTË, 1987, p. 1). In this sense the two lessons that we can learn from this book respect the hardships of a governess’ life and the difficulties the education of boys and girls at the time.

The position of the governesses in Victorian society is explored in detail in the novel, where the reader is confronted with the harsh reality of the daily lives of these women. According to Langland

Constrictions in educational opportunities were matched by the limited opportunities for employment afforded to women of the educated classes. Their options basically resolved themselves down to two: educate other young women and small children as a governess and schoolmistress or become a writer. Anne Brontë’s *Agnes Grey* presents the difficulties of a young woman pursuing the first option. Governessing usually entailed physical drudgery and emotional battery. Unless a governess was very fortunate in her family, she could expect to find that she would be given entire responsibility for the children without any significant power to exercise control. (LANGLAND, 1989, ps. 25-26)

The governess has to deal with the difficulties of educating and teaching people without being given the authority to do that. She occupies a confusing place in the context. On the one hand she is often more cultured and belongs to a more traditional family than those who employ her. On the other, she is socially invisible. Langland continues:

She stood in an ambiguous social relationship to the family, neither their equal nor clearly beneath them as were the other servants. She experienced great loneliness and the frequent humiliation of finding her often substantial talents ignored or despised. Because opening one's own school freed one from the social subjection of being a governess, many young women strove to amass the resources to start their own educational establishment. (LANGLAND, 1989, p. 26)

Agnes is treated as an inferior in both families she works for, more intensely with the Bloomsfields because of their own social insecurities (they are new money, and socially inferior to Agnes). The Murrays are more negligent than aggressive; they simply do not care for Agnes' feelings.

Agnes Grey shows the complex ways in which people become entangle in social conventions and practices that become very oppressive, to the point of forcing people to submit to things they do not believe and that make life difficult for everyone. In the case of the Bloomsfields, the whole family stimulates Tom to be "manly", which actually means to be selfish, to act superior to all females (including his governess), and even to be cruel: (his uncle encourages him to torture birds for fun. His little sister Mary Ann, consequently, has to be put aside as Tom does everything to be the center of Agnes' attention. Nevertheless, all those external influences disappear when they are simply playing together in the mud, confirming that without the negative influences they would show to be better people.

2.2.2 *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

In spite of the many similarities they share, each of the Brontës has her own peculiar style, and it is in Anne Brontë that this fact becomes more evident. While Charlotte and Emily are more romantic, inviting supernatural and Gothic traits into their works, Anne's style is more realistic. The plots are built from her observations of the people around her. As a consequence, Anne's style may have appeared less enticing to the taste of the Victorian readers. Still, Anne Brontë is a daring writer. According to Langland, "Anne was, of the sisters, perhaps the most rigorously logical, the most quietly observant, the most realistic, and, in certain spheres, the most tenacious, the most determined, and the most courageous" (LANGLAND, 1989, p. 4). Unlike Emily, whose *Wuthering Heights*

follows closely the spirit of her Gondal writings, Anne's first novel takes her away from their wild imaginary land, and takes inspiration in her real experience as a governess.

In *Agnes Grey*, Anne developed the governess story in ways which were to influence Charlotte significantly in the writing of both *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*. The younger sister first recognised narrative potential inherent in the story of an intelligent and discriminating, yet obscure, young woman who is placed in a scene of responsibility where she perceives her situation in a substantially different way than others do. (LANGLAND, 1989, p. 31)

This does not mean that one sister is a better writer than the other; on the contrary, it only shows how prolific the sisters are, since they can play on such different keys. Anne Brontë's second novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, was considered quite shocking when first published, "a book which was to be so profoundly disturbing to contemporary ideas of decency that it was to sink without trace for almost 150 years after its conception". (BARKER, 1994, p. 530) Anne saw herself obliged to defend her work in a preface to the second edition of the book, published in 1848:

My object in writing the following pages was not simply amuse the Reader; neither it was it to gratify my own taste, nor yet to ingratiate myself with the Press and the Public: I wished to tell the truth, for the truth always conveys its own moral to those who are able to receive it. (BRONTË, 1979, p. 29)

The "truth" which Anne Brontë wanted to tell with her novels is the one she had a first-hand experience of: the negative consequences of the way patriarchal society educates boys and girls. She and her sisters had the example of that inside their own house: they closely observed the downfall of their brother and childhood companion, Branwell. By describing that truth without removing its ugly aspects, Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* can be seen as a cautionary tale of the troubles such misleading education can bring:

The fact that Branwell had failed to fulfill his early talents was daily impressed on them as he drank himself insensible or wallowed in his self-pity and depression. It was no wonder, then, that Anne saw it as her duty to expose the fallacy of current education in a series of passionate arguments, attacking the idea that girls were hothouse plants to be guarded against every evil, and boys were hardy trees capable of withstanding every assault on their morals. (BARKER, 1994, p. 531)

Anne Brontë not only wrote about it, but, as mentioned before, she acted upon her ideals. Being herself treated as a “hothouse plant”, her reaction was to pursue education and work for a living, so as to become an independent person. She did that to the limit of what was possible for a poor respectable young woman to do.

3. AGNES GREY AND THE WOMEN AROUND HER

3.1 AGNES'S QUEST

Agnes Grey has been considered a *Bildungsroman* for some critics (LANGLAND, 1989, p.96), in the sense that the main goal of the novel is to present the journey of the protagonist from a more innocent and naïve period of life into adulthood and maturity: “Agnes Grey tells a story of female development”. (LANGLAND, 1989, p.96) Agnes starts the novel as an inexperienced, but intelligent young woman. She has been educated at home by her mother. However, for being the youngest daughter, she is seen as a child by her family – beloved, but fragile. Her mother and elder sister do not allow her to help in the chores at home. This causes a profound feeling in Agnes of having her potential being underrated and wasted. Nevertheless, when she tells her mother of her intentions of becoming a governess, her mother is unsupportive:

My mother uttered an exclamation of surprise, and laughed. My sister dropped her work in astonishment, exclaiming, 'YOU a governess, Agnes! What can you be dreaming of?'

'Well! I don't see anything so VERY extraordinary in it. I do not pretend to be able to instruct great girls; but surely I could each little ones: and I should like it so much: I am so fond of children. Do let me, mamma!'

'But, my love, you have not learned to take care of YOURSELF yet: and young children require more judgment and experience to manage than elder ones.' (BRONTË, 1987, p. 7)

Instead of accepting this position of vulnerability, Agnes is confident of her success, although she does not know much about the perils of a governess' life. What Agnes is after is more than economic independency. She is also in search of her personal independence, in other words, to leave her situation of being the baby in the family. She wants to show herself to her relatives: “and also to convince my friends at home that I was not so wanting in skill and prudence as they supposed”. (BRONTË, 1987, p. 8) Besides the wish to test her capacities, Agnes also desires to see the world: “Sometimes our mother would amuse us with stories and anecdotes of her younger days, which, while they entertained us amazingly, frequently awoke – in *me*, at least – a secret wish to see a

littlemore of the world". (BRONTË, 1987, p. 2) She is more afraid of never being able to do something with her own life than she is afraid of difficulties.

But when Agnes goes to work to the Bloomfield family, she and the reader are confronted with the reality of a governess' life. What follows is a series of episodes in which Agnes relates how she is disrespected by her students. She does not have the support of their parents, who blame her for the children's failures. Moreover, she feels lonely, mainly because neither her employers nor the other servants in the house address her. This fact is due to her ambiguous social place as a governess. She is too inferior to be taken seriously by the family, and too important to be included in the servants' routine. Still, Agnes insists in trying to do her job. It is important to highlight that it is not she who leaves. Agnes is tenacious in her effort to teach the children. This attests to her strong sense of duty, determination; and great patience.

Back at her parents' house, after she is dismissed by the Bloomfields, Agnes looks for another job as governess. She understands that her time with the Bloomfields has given her more experience to deal with her pupils in the next position. This is another proof of her personal strength. Soon, Agnes goes to work with the Murrays. There, her problems are more 'intellectually demanding' (LANGLAND, 1989, p. 101). She has basically two students – the sisters Matilda and Rosalie. Matilda is defined as having a masculine behavior, while Rosalie is a 'coquette'. Brontë focuses more closely on Rosalie. With her, Agnes is faced with tests involving the areas of morality and honesty. Agnes witnesses her pupils' improper actions and, moved by her sense of duty, tries to direct them, especially Rosalie. Although her situation is different from her time with the Bloomfields, Agnes, most of time, is still disrespected and feels lonely.

While she is with the Murrays, Agnes forms two other important bounds – with an old lady, Nancy, the only one who truly appreciates Agnes' friendship; and Mr. Weston, the new curate, for whom Agnes feels an interest. During the times of angst, Agnes frequently turns to God. As Anne Brontë also found comfort in religion, it is natural that her heroines do the same. One of Mr. Weston's attractive points (to Agnes, at least) is the way he views religion, and his conduct as a member of the Church.

Along with the lessons about patience, self-respect and confidence that Agnes learned from her family, she also thrives to practice economy and to take attention to her

finances. Brontë considers it essential for a young woman to achieve her objectives. It is so relevant that, at the end of the novel, Agnes's last words are:

Our modest income is amply sufficient for our requirements: and by practising the economy we learnt in harder times, and never attempting to imitate our richer neighbours, we manage not only to enjoy comfort and contentment ourselves, but to have every year something to lay by for our children, and something to give to those who need it. (BRONTË, 1987, p 164)

Agnes wraps up saying that she believes she has said enough. After going through years of adversities and personal growth, Agnes finally conquers her autonomy, "(...) she has achieved emotional and financial independence, and is a confident and successful single woman". (LEAVER, 2013, p.152) When her mother decides to open a school for girls, Agnes chooses to join her, and leaves her place as the Murrays' governess. She goes with the suggestion made by Mr. Weston that he will call upon her, and waits for him. However, as he does not come, Agnes settles her mind on not spending her days thinking about him, and focuses on her work at the school. She is invited to stay a few days with Rosalie and finds her former pupil unhappy in her marriage – as she had predicted.

Nevertheless, in the end Agnes meets Mr. Weston again and the two get married. But she does not idealize the marriage, she tells the reader that:

I became the wife of Edward Weston; and never have found cause to repent it, and am certain that I never shall. We have had trials, and we know that we must have them again; but we bear them well together, and endeavour to fortify ourselves and each other against the final separation - that greatest of all afflictions to the survivor. (BRONTË, 1987, p. 64)

Langland (1989) highlights: "Agnes ultimately marries. But she does so only after we have been made to feel she has the option of self-support and of a nurturing female community." (LANGLAND, 1989, ps. 113-114) Agnes' journey is one of self-education, and in narrating it she expects that the reader may have also learned something.

3.2 THE OTHER WOMEN

3.2.1 Agnes's Mother

According to Leaver, Brontë “offers a hostile portrayal of Agnes’s family, in particular of her mother, Mrs. Grey, for their failure to empower her to become independent and assertive”. (LEAVER, 2013, p. 109) Mrs. Grey does not teach Agnes to face the practical aspects of life. Nevertheless, Mrs. Grey always gave her daughters a strong female example. She took independent actions, which would now be called feminists; Agnes shows to have inherited the same strength in her decisions.

Mrs. Alice Grey comes from a higher social class than her husband, Richard Grey. She faced the opposition of her family when she married below her station. Besides descending socially, Mrs. Grey also would lose the financial support of her family, but she insisted on that, showing in her attitude about her marriage the same determination that Agnes possesses.

About the Grey couple, Leaver (2013) says:

It is quite obvious that the husband and wife are mismatched and reverse the patriarchal stereotype of powerful husband and submissive, docile wife. Brontë is therefore describing an unusual marriage where traditional gender and spousal stereotypes are discarded. Both spouses seem to enjoy this unconventional arrangement whereby Mrs. Grey, whilst continuing to respect her husband as the alleged head of the house, is in fact the dominant partner. Brontë thus looks at an unorthodox marriage in which a new hierarchy of power operates very successfully. (LEAVER, 2013, p.163)

However, Mrs. Grey does not always have all the control. Richard Grey loses all their economies in an investment and contracts some debts. This is the reason for Agnes finally going to earn her living as a governess. Agnes comments, more than once, that if her mother had been the one taking care of their finances they would have avoided many of their problems. It is also to her mother that Agnes goes for advice about how to get a position as a governess. This shows that Mrs. Grey has a more clear judgment than her husband. It is good to notice that she helps Agnes to find her two jobs, in spite of not wishing for Agnes to become a governess.

Towards the end of the novel Mr. Grey dies, causing a great change in the Grey family. Mrs. Grey remains firm and practical, giving once more the example to her daughters.

Mrs. Grey is the one who supports and binds the family together through all its vicissitudes and misfortunes, such as poverty and the death of Mr Grey. She is a bold, industrious, resourceful woman with whom Agnes frequently associates the idea of 'management'(...) It is hardly surprising that Agnes, as Mrs. Grey's daughter, should also seek autonomy and a sense of independence. (LEAVER, 2013, p.164)

At this point Mary is already married, and invites her mother to go live with her and her husband. Mrs. Grey, however, decides to find to a place for herself and Agnes and to establish her own school. That was much better than being a governess. The Brontë sisters themselves once had a similar plan, but they failed. Mrs. Grey's school, however, is a success, and when Agnes leaves her position as a teacher, Mrs. Grey has no problems in contracting an assistant and continuing with her work.

According to Langland, "Mrs. Grey is resourceful, energetic, strong, and determined. She ultimately heads a little community of women that provides a much more positive image of relationship than that of heterosexual marriage." (LANGLAND, 1989, p.113) Mrs. Grey finds herself satisfied with her life after her husband dies. For a woman of action, to find her proper profession is the best destine. This novel attests that education may be an asset, even in a time when not many areas were available for a lady to work with.

The end of Mrs. Grey is the most radical in the novel and the most in line with Brontë's ideas of female independence: "As a single woman, Mrs. Grey achieves financial and emotional independence. She refuses to look backwards nostalgically to her time as a wife, but rather engages with the future in a bold and directmanner". (LEAVER, 2013, p.169) She again is educating her children through example.

3.2.2 Mrs. Bloomfield

The Bloomfields are the first family to employ Agnes. The young governess imagined that Mrs. Bloomfield would be a kind lady who would welcome her into her

family; but that was not what happened. The lady of the house instructs Agnes not to constraint the children, and this leaves Agnes with no real power over her pupils.

It is immediately clear to the reader that, in this contest between governess and pupils, the pupils will quickly gain the upper hand precisely because they have neither internal nor external bridles while Agnes knows both the self-restraint taught her by her principles and the external restraints imposed on her as the Bloomfields' 'servant'. (LANGLAND, 1989, p.99)

She receives no help from Mrs. Bloomfield to refrain the children. On the contrary, she is constantly reprimanded by her employer, who prefers to see her offspring as sweet and brilliant, rather than the pampered kids they are. Agnes is confronted with arrogant, vain and even cruel children. They only do what they want. The young girl, Mary Ann, has a habit of throwing herself on the floor, rolling, and giving powerful screams. As for this example, it is clear that the work of a governess can be not only mentally, but also physically exhausting.

Mrs. Bloomfield ignores her own faults as mother, and puts the blame for her children's misconduct on the governess. Langland defines the struggles of a governess: "Through *Agnes Grey*, Anne Brontë has pinpointed what makes the situation of the governess intolerable: entire responsibility for those she cannot bend to her will". (LANGLAND, 1989, p.100) Brontë possibly took inspiration for the Bloomfields from her own experience as a governess. According to Barker (1994):

The monstrous Bloomfield children she depicted in *Agnes Grey* may well have been drawn from life. If so, the little Inghams were spoilt, wild, and virtually uncontrollable, tormenting their governess by refusing to do as she bid them, defying her authority and continually running to their parents to complain if she made any attempt to discipline them. How far the picture was an accurate portrayal of Anne's experiences and how much is a fictional improvement is difficult to assess, but there are strong parallels. (BARKER, 1994, p. 308)

In addition, Mrs. Bloomfield is also representative of the wives who submit to the will of their husbands. Mr. Bloomfield is not only dismissive of Agnes and the servants but of her own wife as well.

Anne deserves recognition for the clarity with which she details men's contempt for women in Victorian society and for the corollary recognition that, given this contempt and in the power men hold marriage, women are likely to suffer in that relationship. In her first position, Agnes witnesses a scene in which Mr. Bloomfield berates his wife for her presumed negligence of duties. (LANGLAND, 1989, p.112)

Agnes then declares her embarrassment for witnessing the scene. Women in that context were often encouraged to be submissive, and live for their husbands. The husbands would take the control of the family, as Mrs. Bloomfield knows and Rosalie will learn.

3.2.3 Mrs. Murray

Mrs. Murray also represents the majoritarian group of mothers who, because of that patriarchal system, believe the best thing to secure the future of her daughters is to make an advantaged marriage. Unlike Mrs. Grey, Mrs. Murray believes that a good husband should be rich and hold a high position in society – even if that husband was not a good person. Rosalie comments with Anne that her mother knows about her intended bad conduct, but instead of advising Rosalie to do otherwise, Mrs. Murray prefers to keep silent. This does not mean that Mrs. Murray does not care for her children's happiness, but that she understands that this is the best way to proceed.

With that in mind, Mrs. Murray encourages her daughter Rosalie to marry a man she knows will not truly respect the girl. In spite of not agreeing with Mrs. Murray's conduct, Agnes states "It seems unnatural: but some people think rank and wealth the chief good; and, if they can secure that for their children, they think they have done their duty."(BRONTË, 1987, p. 128) Women in the Murrays' social class did not have many alternatives in life, and marrying well was considered the best thing to do.

Langland (1989) says:

The goal of women's education in Victorian England was to provide little more than a finishing polish to a girl's manners by encouraging the acquisition of 'showy accomplishments ... French, German, music, singing, dancing, fancy-work, and a little drawing'. One powerless governess could do little to counteract the influence of a society bent on producing women whose minds were wholly occupied with details of costume, coquetry, and conquest. (LANGLAND, 1989, p. 25)

Mrs. Murray is not only acting with the intention of protecting her daughters' future, she is also acting in the way she was taught to. The reader must not forget that Brontë is criticizing not one stereotype of motherhood, but the whole society that created it.

3.2.4 Nancy Brown

Although Nancy Brown is a widow, she is not referred to as "Mrs. Brown", but simply by her plain name, often preceded by the adjective "poor". That is because "Poor Nancy Brown" belongs into a lower social class than Agnes'. She lives in a small cottage near the Murray's residence. She is described by Agnes as a "woman of a serious, thoughtful turn of mind" (BRONTË, 1987, p. 72). Brontë uses Nancy Brown to represent more impoverished and elder women, who simply do not count socially. At that period it was still a practice that the richer families would offer help and visit the poor; that was considered their moral duty. However, Rosalie and Matilda do not care for Nancy Brown.

They are not the only ones who neglected the old lady. Mr. Hatfield (the rector of their congregation) ignores Nancy Brown's requests for advice and treats her without any compassion. The only ones who care for Nancy and appreciate her are Agnes and Mr. Weston, the curate. Agnes visits her whenever she has some spare time, to talk and read the Bible for the old woman:

Never, from month to month, from year to year, except during my brief intervals of rest at home, did I see one creature to whom I could open my heart, or freely speak my thoughts with any hope of sympathy, or even comprehension: never one, unless it were poor Nancy Brown, with whom I could enjoy a single moment of real social intercourse, or whose conversation was calculated to render me better, wiser, or happier than before; or who, as far as I could see, could be greatly benefited by mine. (BRONTË, 1987, p. 87)

Differently from Mr. Hatfield, Mr. Weston is open and willing to talk and pacify the old woman's doubts. Brontë gives to Nancy Brown the function of discussing religion in the book. Nancy's dialogues raise up questions and opinions that were most probably the author's. Among the Brontë sisters, Anne was the most openly religious, and both *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* explore the faith of their protagonists.

3.2.5 Matilda Murray

The youngest of the two Murray sisters, Matilda, is the most divergent among the female character presented in the novel. Agnes describes Matilda as “reckless, headstrong, violent, and unamenable to reason. One proof of the deplorable state of her mind was, that from her father's example she had learned to swear like a trooper”. (BRONTË, 1987, p. 55) In contrast with her sister Rosalie, Matilda does not identify with the role expected from young females. Matilda identifies with masculine activities, such as hunting and riding. She spends most of her time in stables with her father and the male servants. Because of her preferences, Matilda is in the path to become a pariah in a society that excludes and punishes those who do not follow the established pattern.

Brontë does not solve Matilda's outcome in the story. When the novel ends, Mrs. Murray has managed to get her eldest daughter Rosalie married, and now must do the same with the youngest. She will try to bend Matilda into social conventions. However, as Leaver (2013) states:

Brontë suggests that a strong character such as Matilda will not bow easily or cheerfully to social pressures. Despite Agnes's and Mrs. Murray's best efforts, Matilda continues to love the outdoor life of hunting, dogs, and the chase. (...) While her callous attitude towards the cruel treatment of the hare is most unattractive, Brontë suggests that Matilda is unlikely ever to become the refined lady who will dazzle the drawing room and ballroom. (LEAVER, 2013. p. 141)

As Agnes does not maintain contact with Matilda, the reader is left to wonder what will happen to the girl. There are different possible futures for Matilda. In one of them, Mrs. Murray's efforts are fulfilled, and Matilda subdues to do what is expected from her. There is no indication that this is likely to happen, but if she does change her behavior, it would not be a spontaneous transformation. She would have to reject that which makes her happy, and surround herself with objects and ideas she despises, to marry someone her family approves of. The second possibility for Matilda is to continue as she is and face the consequences, one of them being that she must remain single. Economically, she would need to be kept by her brothers or brother-in-law. She has not been educated to have a

profession, as Agnes was. Therefore, if she does not inherit some money, she will have to depend on others.

There is still a hint of a third possible future for Matilda. According to Leaver, Matilda is not against the idea of marriage, but seems to see it differently from the way her mother does. Agnes relates a conversation between Matilda and her sister about the subject:

'You shan't have him all to yourself, Rosalie,' said Miss Matilda at the close of this discussion; 'I like him: I know he'd make a nice, jolly companion for me.'

(...)

'My *dear* Matilda! Nobody will ever admire you till you get rid of your rough, awkward manners.'

'Oh, stuff! Harry Meltham likes such manners; and so do papa's friends.'

'Well, you *may* captivate old men, and younger sons; but nobody else, I am sure, will ever take a fancy to you.'

'I don't care: I'm not always grabbing after money, like you and mamma. If my husband is able to keep a few good horses and dogs, I shall be quite satisfied; and all the rest may go to the devil!' (BRONTË, 1987, p. 70)

This dialogue shows that Matilda is not interested in a high social position or a rich husband, but in someone who accepts her as she is and shares the same interests – which is what Agnes accomplishes with Mr. Weston in the end. This also shows that Matilda is quite confident about herself and does not shun the idea of having a husband. Moreover, this opens a possibility that even Matilda may have a chance of finding a way. If she does, she will probably have a more successful marriage than that of her sister Rosalie.

3.2.6 Rosalie Murray

Rosalie Murray is an important character in *Agnes Grey*, as she represents what is expected from a Victorian woman at a marriageable age. Still, she is full of contradictions. With Rosalie, Brontë has the opportunity to illustrate the negative effects of the female education of the time. Rosalie is a beautiful girl, whose mother is trying to marry her to an important man. Rosalie identifies with the world of balls, gossip, and flirting.

Rosalie's preference for all things showy, her intense wish to display herself and her social accomplishments to a world of men, a world of potential husbands, is a powerful indictment of the way in which patriarchy compels many young middle class women to prioritise the shallow and the artificial over the pursuit of true knowledge and learning.

Young women such as Rosalie quickly learn to define themselves in terms of the male gaze, and to assess their intrinsic worth in the context of their success in attracting men. (LEAVER, 2013, p. 138)

Rosalie is intent on following the rules that are imposed to women at that time. She takes that as a game, and is proud of mastering the rules of that game. Although Rosalie is mean to Agnes on some occasions, she gives indications of having affection for her governess.

Agnes' feelings for her pupil are contradictory. On one hand she considers Rosalie vain and selfish, a coquette, and rebukes her. On the other hand, she considers Rosalie's loveliness and feels affection for her. More than anything, Agnes criticizes her conceit and disregard for other people's feelings. Agnes is also appalled by Rosalie's flirts, and tries to guide her pupil into finding a decent husband, without success.

Rosalie persists on her childish games of seduction. She even tries to seduce Mr. Weston, the man she knows Agnes loves. Leaver comments that Miss Murray's only weapon in life is her sexuality, and her choice is between accepting a marriage proposal or not: "Her disempowered status, as a woman in Victorian patriarchy, makes her long for power, even of a negative sort." (LEAVER, 2013, p.151) This is, perhaps, more than her vanity, the reason behind her flirting ways.

Rosalie chooses a wealthy gentleman as a husband, although she knows he is a dreadful man. However, she is so naïve as to believe that after the wedding he will improve and abide by her desires. She counts on her charms and beauty to keep him under control.

Rosalie's little speech about marriage demonstrates that she is more aware of her limited situation as a woman than the reader may realize at first:

'Oh, I don't mind his being wicked: he's all the better for that; and as for disliking him - I shouldn't greatly object to being Lady Ashby of Ashby Park, if I must marry. But if I could be always young, I would be always single. I should like to enjoy myself thoroughly, and coquet with all the world, till I am on the verge of being called an old maid; and then, to escape the infamy of that, after having made ten thousand conquests, to break all their hearts save one, by marrying some high-born, rich, indulgent husband, whom, on the other hand, fifty ladies were dying to have.' (BRONTË, 1987, p. 66)

Rosalie understands that life is harsh for women who do not marry, and the only option presented by her family is to marry well. Therefore, she decides to choose the one who can give her more money and status. In another passage, Agnes describes her as a married woman: “She came flying into the schoolroom, flushed with excitement, and laughing, half in mirth, and half in reckless desperation, as it seemed to me.” (BRONTË, 1987, p 123) Rosalie, if not consciously, unconsciously knows that her future will not be a happy one.

After Rosalie’s wedding, Agnes visits her in her new house. There she meets an incredible changed Rosalie. Twelve months of marriage succeeded in “reducing the plumpness of her form, the freshness of her complexion, the vivacity of her movements, and the exuberance of her spirits.” (BRONTË, 1987, p. 144) Rosalie abhors her husband and is profoundly unhappy. It is her husband who controls her, and not the contrary, as she expected. She cannot find harmony with her husband and mother-in-law, and it is not probable that she ever will. Agnes, having made the choice of marrying a man of good nature, is far better at the end than Rosalie.

3.2.7 Mary Grey

Finally, a word about Agnes’ sister Mary, who – as Agnes informs us – imitated her mother in treating Agnes as a child. Although the Grey couple originally had six children, only Mary and Agnes survived into adulthood. Mary is five or six years older than Agnes, and probably remembers more about the other siblings. Both facts must reinforce her desire to protect her youngest sister. However, Agnes feels that his infantilization that is made of her is something negative. Mary is not able to rely on Agnes, or to help her sister to develop further.

In spite of not receiving as much attention as the other female characters in the story (as her mother or Rosalie, for example), Mary plays an important part in the family. In the first times after her father lost their investments, Mary was more pessimist than her sister: “Mary did not lament, but she brooded continually over the misfortune, and sank into a state of dejection from which no effort of mine could rouse her”. (BRONTË, 1987, p. 4) Nevertheless, that does not stop her from helping her mother in the house chores or

from patronizing Agnes. To help increase the family income, Mrs. Grey proposes that Mary sell her drawings and other paintings.

It is interesting to note that Helen, in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, achieves some financial independence by selling her own pictures. Brontë again suggests that women should be able to find a profession and independence; painting is one of the few options a woman had at that period. Her characters are able to find that through education (such as Agnes), or through art (such as Mary and Helen).

Mary's character also helps to show how Rosalie and Agnes see marriage. When Agnes announces that her sister will marry, Rosalie proceeds to ask about the appearance of the groom, if he is rich, and details about the ceremony. Rosalie disapproves of Mary's fiancé because he is not very handsome, or rich enough. Agnes replies: "You did not ask me if Mr. Richardson were a good, wise, or amiable man; I could have answered Yes, to all these questions – at least so Mary thinks, and I hope she will not find herself mistaken." (BRONTË, 1987, p. 62) This shows that Mary, like her sister, follows her mother's example in being more interested in the nature of a husband, than in marrying for money.

Both Mary and Agnes, each one in her way, work to help their family in their financial circumstances, Mary with her paintings and Agnes as a governess. However, in the end of the novel they end up as married women, and in consequence do not have a profession anymore. According to Zlonitck,

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, middle-class women who had been active in their families' enterprises as well as working-class women who had engaged in craft and agricultural production were gradually excluded from paid labor as it was increasingly conceptualized as male. Women were shuffled off to the sphere of home and family, with the expectation that they would live as dependents on their male relations. (ZLOTNICK, 2014, p. 36)

Therefore, although Anne Brontë and her female characters from the Grey family believe in women's ability to earn a living when that proves necessary, neither of them consider the possibility that women might work because they want to become professionals in some area. This is a notion that we have now, and that did not exist then. When Brontë's women are happily married (a traditional ending), they abandon their career, as it would not be socially acceptable for an English lady to be married *and* work, unless that proved a necessary thing to be done. Nowadays, working is considered so important as an essential

part of a person's sense of identity. But at that time working was a degrading activity for a genteel woman. Agnes and her sister only take action and work when the Greys are facing a financial crisis. Mr. Grey fails as the male relative who should provide for them, he is unable to sustain his family, and this forces the women to take control. But as soon as they are married, Anne and Mary pass the responsibility to their husbands, as the ones who will provide for the family. Brontë defends the idea that females should be prepared to provide for their own income, if that turned out to be necessary. This echoes what happened with the Brontës, who lived under the constant threat of losing their house at the Haworth Parsonage, in case their father died, or retired. And Anne, Charlotte and Emily knew they could not count on their brother to provide for them. They did not have any other alternative than try to teach, or to make money out of their writing, or both.

4 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The starting point of this research was my intention to understand who Anne Brontë is, and the ways she relates to the time in which she lived. The very fact that the Brontë sisters and Branwell grew up stimulating their mutual creativity attests to how difficult it was, then, for children to open their way intellectually. In this sense, the Brontës were very privileged, if we consider the way families treated their children, especially the girls. When they grew up, Anne, Charlotte and Emily had to find a way of maintaining themselves. This can also be seen as a blessing in disguise, because without that predicament, their works would not have been written, or published, and I would not be studying *Agnes Grey* now. Anne, like her protagonist Agnes, had to find work as a governess; and from these memories she got the inspiration to write their first novel.

By going over Juliet Barker's biography *The Brontës*, and with the help of other excellent critics, I could see the resemblances and the differences among the Brontë writers. It became clear that each sister was a unique person and writer, even if being under the same influences and environment. Anne Brontë's writing is less Gothic and, in a way, more realistic than the writing of her sisters, providing valuable information about the lives of simple women from her time.

This work analyzes eight female characters from *Agnes Grey*. Three of them are mothers who influence directly their children's perception of life. Mrs. Grey patronizes Agnes, but she also teaches how to manage under difficult situations. She chooses her own husband, even if she has to go against her family; she is the real head of the family; and, in the end, she is the only woman with a profession. Mrs. Grey is the capable woman who manages to find her own way through life, and she serves as a model for her daughters.

Mrs. Bloomfield and Mrs. Murray are the married women who act accordingly to the social expectations. The former teaches the children in the house to mistreat their inferiors; while demanding from the governess that she educates them. Mrs. Bloomfield also represents the married women that were expected to live for their husbands and their

home. Mrs. Murray, mother of Rosalie and Matilda, embodies the concern that mothers had in marrying their daughters. Being a wife of was the best position a woman could get; working was something that lowered a person's rank, and should be avoided.

Mary Grey demonstrates that a woman could be able to sustain herself (this theme will be treated in depth in Anne Brontë's following novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*). But only marriage would make her truly respected. The women in the Grey family only work when they are single: Mary and Agnes before they marry; and their mother after she loses her husband.

Brontë presents different kinds of young women at the marriageable age, such as Matilda and Rosalie. Matilda does not fit into the ideal of womanhood for the Victorians – her tomboy way casts her near to the male members of the propriety, her father, his friends, and his male servants. In the future, this could be a source of great pain for her, who would probably be forced to incorporate ideals contrary to her own. Brontë does not tell the reader about the future of Matilda; it is possible that she does not have a solution for Matilda's problem. Rosalie, the opposite of her sister, does everything that is expected from her. She cares about the subjects considered adequate for women – subjects that lead her into looking for a suitable marriage. Socially stimulated to be vain and self-centered, she finds it is her duty to break men's hearts. Acting according to this role does not grant her happiness, though: Rosalie actually is a very sad figure. Instinctively, she knows that marriage may be a trap for her, but she submits anyway. She marries the wrong person, as Agnes attests in the end of the book. Acting according to the rules all her life does not lead her safely into a successful outcome.

Nancy Brown is a counterpart to the young Murrays, who represents what happens to old women without husbands or money. She is dependent on members of the higher social spheres in the community, a burden to them. That makes her vulnerable, as the people who should be there for her, like Mr. Haworth, really do not care, and make her feel humiliated.

The novel *Agnes Grey* provides a particular insight of the life of a governess. The emotional and physical struggles of the profession are exposed to the reader without any embellishment. Agnes's journey in the course of the novel is one of search for independency. Autonomy, together with confidence and morality, allows Agnes to make

the right decisions in her life, to act honorably, and conquer her social space. According to Leaver:

Therefore, one of the principal issues about which *Agnes Grey* seeks to 'instruct' its readers is that single women can achieve autonomy and independence and can lead lives characterised by personal freedom and happiness. Mrs Grey and Agnes are fine examples of this, whilst Rosalie Ashby proves that marriage is not always the best option for a woman. A woman need not marry to succeed. (LEAVER, 2013, p.170)

The women of *Agnes Grey* address life in different ways. Some are more connected with the Victorian values, some manage to follow their own desires (even if just for a while). The most important thing to consider is the fact that they all are under the pressure of the patriarchal society of Brontë's time, regardless of their social class or temperament.

Although Anne Brontë seems to have been largely oblivious of any feminist or ideological agenda, her commitment to women's activity and influence in the world and her suspicion of men as providers led her promulgate a feminist thesis: that women must to look to their self-provision. (LANGLAD, 1989, p. 98)

The Victorian Era is a time when many relevant discussions about women's social roles take place. Brontë's exposition of this difficult situation may be shocking, but it is also in agreement with the top discussions held at that historical moment.

After doing this research, I consider that *Agnes Grey's* greatest contribution is the proposition that women should be prepared to achieve independence in all areas of their lives, but in special financially and emotionally. A woman can never be sure that their male relatives will be always there, or that they will be able to support them. Once more, Langland captures the ideas behind the text—"The goals of an Anne Brontë's protagonist are to cultivate the spirit and to learn self-command or control as ways of lessening one's vulnerability to the vicissitudes of life".(LANGLAND, 1989, p. 37). The Brontë sisters are themselves the utmost example of these self-sufficient women.

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