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The Female Bildungsroman in Anne Bronte's: *Agnes Grey*

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Abstract

This paper examines Anne Bronte's novel *Agnes Grey* as an autobiographical bildungsroman about the moral growth and development of the female protagonist in Victorian England. The heroine Agnes finds herself propelled into employment as a governess, after her family suffers financial loss, driven by her desire to explore the wider world. The evangelical upbringing of Agnes, as the daughter of a clergyman, plays significant role in developing her strong and selfless character and inspires her to sympathize with the poor. Agnes challenges the patriarchal norms and traditions that treat her as a domestic servant rather than intellectual woman and educator. She proves to be superior to her brutal and egoistic employers, who overlook her needs and feelings because of her social position as a governess, in terms of intellectuality and moral propriety. The end of the novel with Agnes starting a school with her mother and fulfilling marriage to the curate Weston could be read as a reward for her moral excellence and sincerity.

Keywords: Bildungsroman, Moral growth, Intellectuality, Female, Victorian.

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رواية التشكيل الأثوية في رواية آن بروننته: أغنيس غراي

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ملخص

يدرس هذا البحث رواية آن بروننته أغنيس غراي كسيرة ذاتية تشكيلية متعلقة بالنضوج الأخلاقي وتطور الشخصية الرئيسية الأثوية في العصر الفيكتوري الإنجليزي. تجد البطلة أغنيس نفسها مضطرة للعمل كمرية بعد أن تعاني عائلتها من خسارة مالية، مدفوعة برغبتها لإكتشاف العالم. تلعب التنشئة الإنجليزية لأغنيس كابنة رجل دين دور مهم في تطور شخصيتها القوية والغير أنانية وتلهمها للتعاطف مع الفقراء. تتحدى أغنيس العادات والتقاليد البطريركية والتي تعاملها كخادمة منزلية وليس كإمرأة مثقفة ومعلمة. تثبت أغنيس بإنها أرفع منزلة من أرباب العمل المتوحشين والأنايين، والذين يتجاهلوا حاجاتها ومشاعرها بسبب وضعها الاجتماعي كمرية، من ناحية العقلانية واللياقة الأخلاقية. يمكن قراءة نهاية الرواية والتي تتمثل بقيام أغنيس ووالدتها بإفتتاح مدرسة وزواج أغنيس السعيد من راعي الأبرشية ويستون كمكافأة لتمييزها الأخلاقي وإستقامتها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: رواية التشكيل، نمو أخلاقي، عقلانية، أنثى، فيكتوري.

Anne Bronte's debut novel *Agnes Grey* (1847), published under the masculine pen name of Acton Bell, recounts the frustrations of governesses and the maltreatment they had to cope at the homes of their employers in nineteenth century England. Anne uses the fictional Agnes to narrate her autobiographical experience, who was propelled into employment as a governess by her family's financial hardships. The background of Bronte, as the daughter of a poor clergyman, is reflected in her narrative as the religious principles of the female protagonist inspire her to sympathize with the poor and helpless. Jennifer Stolpa points out that the "novels [of Bronte] openly espouse Christian principles, [and] they are categorized as 'religious literature'"⁽¹⁾. Other critics like Susan Meyer argue that the novel "subtly criticizes and resists the unjust silencing of disempowerment of the poorer classes by an autocratic and immoral British ruling class"⁽²⁾. Maria Frawley reads the narrative of Agnes as a "significant statement of self-empowerment"⁽³⁾. This paper studies the female bildungsroman narrative of the main character, Agnes, who recounts her growth and personal

development as a Victorian woman through her experiences with the cruelty of the real world as a governess. Carol Lazzaro-Weis depicts the female bildungsroman as the “suppression and defeat of female autonomy, creativity, and maturity by patriarchal gender norms”⁽⁴⁾. Despite the marginal position that Agnes holds as a governess, she succeeds in overcoming the obstacles she encounters in two teaching situations, with the contemptuous Bloomfields and Murrays, till she becomes completely independent through opening a school with her mother and finds genuine happiness in marriage.

The novel opens with the heroine, Agnes, an educated daughter of a clergyman, who expresses her desire to become a governess to provide support to her family after suffering financial losses. The decision of Agnes distresses her family because of the precarious position that governesses occupied as servants in the nineteenth century. It would be important to note here that teaching, as a governess at that time, was “one of the few occupations open to the well-educated daughters of a clergyman”⁽⁵⁾. This could be the reason that the parents of Agnes reject her first request to become a governess because they seem very protective of their daughter and unwilling to make her face with the cruelty of the wider world. Dara Regaignon defines governess in nineteenth century England as “the primary educator of male and female children in a middle-class household”⁽⁶⁾. Despite the fact that governesses were thoughtful and educated, they occupied peripheral position within society because employers treated them more or less as domestic servants. Katherine Hallemeier states that a governess occupied “liminal position in terms of both gender and class”⁽⁷⁾ because of her inferior social status as a woman.

Agnes relies heavily upon the lessons that she received from her parents on her upbringing that influence her strong character and identity. She emphasizes the idea that she was educated along with her sister at home by their mother except for Latin that Reverend Grey taught them, “My mother, being at once highly accomplished, well informed, and fond of employment, took the whole charge of our education on herself, with the exception of Latin – which my father undertook to teach us”⁽⁸⁾. Agnes does not only treat her parents as educators, but also as a model to follow in her life to solve her problems. Kathryn Miele argues that “Agnes sees her mother as a model of Christian charity”⁽⁹⁾, and this could be the reason that she makes different references in her narrative to the way her mother treats others whenever she suffers abuse at the hands of her superiors. The upbringing of Agnes in a loving family influences the emotional development of her character that teaches her sacrifice and self-reliance. It seems that Agnes has learned sacrifice in the first place from her mother, Mrs. Grey, a member of the gentry, who marries the poor Richard Grey, against the wishes of her father, and gets punished by disinheriting her.

However, Agnes highlights the contentment and felicity of the couple, “you might search all England through, and fail to find a happier couple”⁽¹⁰⁾. The serenity and freedom that Agnes experiences with her parents reinforce the significant role of parents in influencing their children’s development through the amount of freedom they give the children at home to express their feelings and thoughts.

Anne Bronte’s novel *Agnes Grey* portrays the heroine as she matures outside the domestic sphere and learns to solve the complicated social and emotional problems. No doubt that Agnes has always been dependent on her family before deciding to seek a post as governess and leave home driven by financial necessity. In an attempt to convince her mother to accept her request to become a governess, Agnes reminds her mother of her prudence and intellectuality and that she would be able to handle problems based on the lessons that she received from her mother, “you do not know half the wisdom and prudence I possess, because I have never been tried”⁽¹¹⁾. Therefore, Agnes can be read as an interpretation of what Gayatri Spivak describes as nineteenth century “female individualist”⁽¹²⁾. However, it would be important to note here that Agnes does not only seem to be driven by the economic situation of her family to become a governess, but also by her desire to see the world and explore her abilities as she explains, “how delightful it would be to be a governess! To go out into the world; to enter upon a new life; to act for myself”⁽¹³⁾. Agnes thinks that she can explore her intellectual capacities to solve the problems she may encounter in the real world without receiving help from any of her family members. Furthermore, the fact that Agnes chooses governessing to provide financial support for her family proves that she can be independent and earn her living. Maggie Berg misinterprets the novel by claiming that “Agnes chooses governessing to escape from a repressive situation”⁽¹⁴⁾ at the hands of her family. However, Berg overlooks the fact that Agnes, like most Victorian women, views home as peaceful and relaxing place. Agnes never suffers from violence and domestic abuse as Berg suggests, but rather depicts her family as loving and supportive. Agnes describes the happy and peaceful times that she spends with her family after the arrogant Mrs. Bloomfield tells her that she is no longer welcome at Wellwood House because she can not see any improvement in the behavior of her kids, explaining that “for a few months I remained peaceably at home, in the quiet enjoyment of liberty and rest, and genuine friendship, from all of which I had fasted so long”⁽¹⁵⁾. Agnes regards home as a place of relaxation and refuge from the moral corruption of the working world. This implies that Agnes does not deviate from the Victorian ideal of femininity that expected women to be tied to the domestic sphere where they can express they feelings freely.

The first teaching experience of Agnes with the Bloomfields at Wellwood House puts her in direct contact with violence practiced against women and animals alike. This suggests that violence was a hallmark of Victorian England performed against the helpless and those of inferior status. Agnes feels shocked when the Bloomfields do not treat her as intellectual and virtuous woman, but rather as a domestic servant who assumes no powerful position in rearing the children. The portrayal of Tom Bloomfield as inhumane and brutal, despite his young age, shows how parents corrupt their boys through imbuing them with masculine privilege. The corruption of Tom can be viewed through presenting himself as a master and owner of the house, and attempting to have control over Agnes and his sisters alike. Tom recognizes that their governess is actually a servant, not an educator, and exerts masculine power to restrain her influence over him, as Agnes explains that he “claimed all my attention to himself; he stood bolt upright between me and the fire, with his hands behind his back, talking away like an orator”⁽¹⁶⁾. The tyranny of the young patriarch can be viewed in the fact that he does not hesitate to hit his sister to show his manly power, “I’m obliged to do it now and then to keep her in order”⁽¹⁷⁾. This suggests that the vicious behavior of Tom, who seems to be an epitome of patriarchy, defies the perceptions of a gentleman in Victorian England.

The sadism of Tom, expressed through torturing animals and birds, develops the character of the heroine into more sympathetic and sensitive. Agnes describes the incivility and brutality of Tom when he compels her to watch “how manfully he used his whip and spurs”⁽¹⁸⁾ against his rocking horse imitating what he will do when riding a real pony. Furthermore, Tom displays indifference in his lack of empathy for the suffering of innocent birds. Agnes attempts to reform Tom when she realizes that he sets traps for birds in the garden to torment them by reminding him with the importance of empathy in the life of humans, “Remember, the birds can feel as well as you; and think, how would you like it yourself”⁽¹⁹⁾. However, Tom exhibits a lack of understanding when he boasts, “Oh, that’s nothing! I’m not a bird, and I can’t feel what I do to them”⁽²⁰⁾. The evangelical upbringing of Agnes enlightens her that religion has the power to change the hearts, so she appeals to Tom’s religious principles and fears, “But you will have to feel it sometime, Tom: you have heard where wicked people go when they die; and if you don’t leave off torturing innocent birds, remember, you will have to go there and suffer just what you have made them to suffer”⁽²¹⁾. The fact that the religious values of Tom seem to be not very developed makes him resist reform and find pleasure in tormenting helpless creatures to enforce supremacy. Therefore, one of the focal problems that Agnes encounters through her personal development is to make her pupils feel for those who are inferior to them. Berg links between the suffering of the heroine and the torment of animals in patriarchal society, “the representation of animals in *Agnes Grey* – as

exploited and abused – is indistinguishable from its analysis of the objectification and exploitation of women”⁽²²⁾. No doubt that both animals and women are similarly oppressed and maltreated in the novel and presented as victims of the patriarchal norms of society that overlook them as inferior.

Anne Bronte suggests throughout her novel that the influence of fathers on children might be harmful. The pupils of Agnes learn brutality and malice from their fathers and male relatives, which seems to be established male behavior. Tom shocks Agnes by telling her that his father celebrates violence against birds, “Papa knows how I treat them, and he never blames me for it: he says it is just what he used to do when he was a boy”⁽²³⁾. Even his uncle, Mr. Robson, “encouraged Tom’s propensity to persecute the lower creation”⁽²⁴⁾. Agnes criticizes Robson’s lack of gentlemanliness and courtesy, stating clearly “he was no gentleman”⁽²⁵⁾. Therefore, violence seems to be a means of enforcing male dominance within a hierarchical society where women and animals are placed in the lower tiers. The many references to the brutality of male characters in the novel can be read as a scathing “critique of how fathers in the upper and middle classes are instilling in their young sons corrupted models of manliness”⁽²⁶⁾. The indecency and uncouthness of Bloomfield, who is expected to be a good model for his sons, can be viewed when he uses imprecations and insults against his wife and servants in front of his children. Therefore, Tom’s treatment of others in a contemptuous way mirrors his father’s disrespect to his wife during dinner when he rebukes her for the poor quality of fish on the menu, and his contempt for female servants by calling them “savages”⁽²⁷⁾. The treatment of his wife and servants with equal contempt could not only be read as an attempt to express Bloomfield’s masculinity and control over the domestic space, but also his ownership of the household property.

The governess in nineteenth century England was a surrogate mother who had the responsibility of teaching children in the middle and upper classes. This suggests that the presence of a governess indicates that “the mother of the household was exempted from even the least degrading domestic labor”⁽²⁸⁾. The employers of Agnes in the novel treat her as a paid servant and overlook her educational role in reforming children. It would be important to note here that one of the main goals of education is social reform; however, Agnes seems to have no authority over her pupils to do her job because of her class position. Mrs. Bloomfield relieves Agnes of her work, as she does not notice any moral growth or improvement in the behavior of her children, while at the same time oversees the overly lenient treatment of her and their father and the harmful influence over their sons. Mrs. Bloomfield blames Agnes for the misdeeds of her children, “I thought when we got them a governess they’d improve; but, instead of that, they get worse and worse: I don’t know how it is with their learning, but

their habits, I know, make no sort of improvement; they get rougher, and dirtier, and more unseemly every day"⁽²⁹⁾. No doubt that parents may play a role in corrupting their children as they allow their misbehavior to go unpunished and do not teach them to respect those who belong to the lower class. Regaignon comments, "the governess is blamed for her pupils' misbehavior, but is given no method to prevent it"⁽³⁰⁾. The plans of Agnes to reform the misconducts of her pupils as she works hard to employ the methods that she learned from her mother and take her childhood as a prototype are hindered by the stronger voice of corrupt parents. Therefore, it would be true to say that most of the difficulties that Agnes encounters throughout her career as a governess result of social barriers and the awareness of her employers that she is inferior to them that renders her invisible and silent.

The experience of Agnes with the aggression and ruthlessness of the Bloomfields develops her sense of morality and gives her the opportunity to better understand the wider world through asserting the importance of empathy for others in the life of humans. Agnes embraces social reform through her teaching experience and advocates understanding the feelings of the poor and helpless. The fact that Agnes fails to produce the Bloomfields in her image results from limiting her influence over the pupils and renders her unable to reform them. Agnes distinguishes herself from her employers as being like "one civilized [woman]... amid a race of intractable savages"⁽³¹⁾. This implies that Agnes is superior to her employers, who refuse to acknowledge her intellectuality because of her social position as a governess, in terms of moral propriety. Therefore, Agnes asserts throughout her narrative that she is more intellectual and humane than her employers and suggests that social reform has become necessary.

The second teaching experience of Agnes with the Murrays' elder daughters at Horton Lodge does not differ much from that with the Bloomfields in the sense that Agnes is silenced by the stronger voice of her employers. Agnes develops strong and moral character through working as a governess and enduring her abusive employers, who prove to be thoughtless and unfeeling. Despite the fact that Agnes continues to suffer at the hands of her ill-behaved employers, she never loses self-discipline and expresses her need "to be wiser"⁽³²⁾ as soon as she arrives at Horton Lodge. It would be important to note here that Agnes, as an educated woman, has been brought up to depend on herself and solve her problems based on what she learned from her parents, which could be read as a sign of thoughtfulness and independence. Both the Bloomfields and the Murrays treat Agnes in the same contemptuous manner as social inferior who has no human rights. Like the Bloomfields, Mrs. Murray fails to treat Agnes as an individual worthy of respect and consideration she gives to

her children. Agnes speaks of the insensitive Mrs. Murray who considers the needs of her children, while at the same time overlooks her needs as educator and foreigner, “I observed that while Mrs. Murray was so extremely solicitous for the comfort and happiness of her children, and continually talking about it, she never once mentioned mine; though they were at home, surrounded by friends, and I an alien among strangers”⁽³³⁾. This suggests that Mrs. Murray treats Agnes as a workingwoman rather than her “educating arm”⁽³⁴⁾, who plays significant role in teaching her children manners and morality.

Anne Bronte’s novel could be seen as a challenge to the strict hierarchical class structure that overlooks the needs and feelings of the poor. Agnes encounters at Horton Lodge with cruel and ignorant young women, Rosalie and Matilda, who are devoid of sympathy for their social inferiors. She explains that the Murrays’ disrespect of the poor was due their lack of education,

I generally had more satisfaction in going alone than with either of the young ladies; for they, chiefly owing to their defective education, comported themselves towards their inferiors in a manner that was highly disagreeable for me to witness. They never, in thought, exchanged places with them; and, consequently, had no consideration for their feelings, regarding them as an order of beings entirely different from themselves⁽³⁵⁾.

The fact that Agnes prefers to walk alone rather than with the uncouth and disrespectful Murrays suggests that she develops stronger character, who understands that she is more virtuous and morally superior to her employers. Elizabeth Langland asserts that the ability of Agnes to control herself in difficult situations represents a source of power. She argues that Agnes “may adopt a policy of compliance to her employers, but the fact that it is a policy suggests the measure of control she preserves”⁽³⁶⁾. Agnes seems to be aware that her employers treat her as less sensitive, and therefore do not care about her feelings. Mrs. Murray dismisses the news about the death of Agnes’s father as not important when Agnes asks for permission to attend the occasion, “I was not to suppose myself the only afflicted person in the world”⁽³⁷⁾. The cruelty of the Murrays that can be viewed clearly in not considering the feelings of the poor seems to be similar to the cruelty of Tom Bloomfield exemplified in torturing animals because he thinks they have no feelings. Miele claims that “the Murray children behave better than the young Bloomfields because they have aged sufficiently to recognize that it is not always in their best interest to defy their governess”⁽³⁸⁾. However, the novel depicts all the children as morally corrupt, who prove to be resistant to reform through being egoistic and lacking empathy.

The evangelical upbringing of Anne Bronte influences her writing that can be viewed in the moral growth of her fictional heroine through forming Agnes’s

selfless and sincere character. Edward Chitham emphasizes the centrality of religion in the life of Brontë, as the daughter of a priest, explaining that “Anne began attending church and Sunday school before she was five, hearing hundreds of sermons during her childhood and adulthood”⁽³⁹⁾. It is not unusual then that Stopla reads *Agnes Grey* as a “good sermon”⁽⁴⁰⁾ because it carries didactic and religious messages. The novel suggests that evil characters like Rosalie get punished in the end for not conforming to the doctrines of religion and their maltreatment of the poor. The shameless attempts of Rosalie to seduce local clergymen because she enjoys rejecting their marriage proposals reflect her cruel character and disrespect to religious men. Rosalie notes that the clergyman feels “crushed to the earth by his disappointment”⁽⁴¹⁾ when she rejects him. The failed marriage of Rosalie to the dissolute Sir Thomas because she desires to marry “some high-born, rich, indulgent husband”⁽⁴²⁾ to discover that she becomes “a prisoner and a slave”⁽⁴³⁾ could be read as a punishment for toying with religious suitors defying the constant advices of the virtuous Agnes.

Anne Brontë criticizes the social ills of Victorian England by using the form of preaching to her audience and distinguishing between different kinds of ministers. The narrative contrasts two fictional Anglican priests, Mr. Hatfield and Edward Weston, in terms of moral propriety, highlighting the hypocrisy of the former and sincerity of the latter. The superiority of the curate Weston to the rector Hatfield is signified by the fact that he cares for the physical and spiritual needs of the parish poor. Unlike Hatfield, who treats the cottager Nancy Brown as sinner and describes her as “a canting old fool”⁽⁴⁴⁾, Weston embodies the religious values and principles of Agnes by showing humility to the poor widow and comforting her that she can receive the reward of a place in heaven. The hostility of Agnes toward Hatfield and his sermons results from her belief that his arrogance and secularity are not evangelical and that he neglects his religious duties. Stopla comments on Brontë stating her opinions on Christian institutions as a preacher, “Brontë figures herself as a theologian and as someone who is capable of and justified in publicly presenting her criticisms of the church”⁽⁴⁵⁾. The adherence of Brontë to the doctrines of the church is reflected in her narrative through the character of the heroine, who admires Weston as honest and true representative of the teachings of religion and despises Hatfield because of his hypocrisy.

Brontë suggests throughout the narrative that the heroine gets rewarded for her patience and sincerity by starting a school with her mother and happy marriage to the parson Weston, who now has his own church. Agnes gets saved from the hardships of a governess life and the struggles of teaching the brutal Bloomfields and Murrays, who do not recognize her intellectuality as an educator. Agnes describes her new life working in her own school, explaining

that there is “a considerable difference between working with my mother in a school of our own, and working as a hireling among strangers, despised and trampled upon by old and young”⁽⁴⁶⁾. This implies that Agnes develops stronger voice by freeing herself from the sinister employers and proves her visibility by opening her own school, where she has the authority to present her thoughts to a larger group of people without anyone hampering her plans. Furthermore, the end of the novel with the satisfying marriage that Agnes “never have found cause to repent it”⁽⁴⁷⁾ reminds us with the unhappy marriage of Rosalie, who decides to marry the rich Sir Thomas to live indulgent life.

In conclusion, the autobiographical novel of Anne Bronte recounts the moral growth and development of her fictional heroine, who suffers at the hands of her corrupt employers because of her class position as a governess. Agnes proves to be superior to her employers, in terms of intellectuality and moral propriety. The religious background of Agnes, as the daughter of a parson, influences her life greatly by helping her develop strong character and inspiring her to sympathize with others. Agnes succeeds in freeing herself from working for others by opening a school with her mother and fulfilling marriage to Edward Weston that can be viewed as a reward for her diligence and patience. The novel can be read as a challenge to the patriarchal norms of Victorian England that treated female intellectuals like Agnes as domestic servants rather than educators, who had the responsibility to reform the behavior of their children.

Endnotes

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