

FOREWORD

Rage is the immediate, obvious reaction of any reader of *Agnes Grey*, helpless retrospective shock and fury at the behaviour of the main characters, their heartlessness and thoughtless cruelty. It is an autobiographical novel by the youngest of the Brontë sisters, an exact and what would now be called a photographic picture of the wretchedness of a governess's life, internal and external.

When 19-year-old Agnes Grey's family is suddenly plunged into poverty, she determines to help by taking the only job then thought respectable for a middle-class girl of some education – that of a governess. Her family objects that she cannot possibly manage such a thing, but she persists in her plan and, finally winning their approval, finds what was then called a position teaching, or trying to teach and care for, two appalling children who are quite outside her experience or her power of persuasion. The parents of these small, vicious fiends think them perfect and refuse to support her efforts to provide any sort of discipline or improvement in their behaviour. Seven-year-old Tom and his sister Mary Ann must be two of the most dislikeable children in fiction, but, as the offspring of their equally horrible parents, they are all too credible.

Agnes's second job turns out to be almost, though not quite, as wretched. Here her pupils are two teenage girls, the pretty, flirtatious and extremely conceited Rosalie, and the younger, Matilda, a hoyden addicted to horses, dogs, bad language and coarse company. Once again Agnes finds it impossible to teach her pupils anything or to establish any suitable or contented life for herself. Again the novel gives a depressing picture of Victorian family life. One longs for her fortunes to change, for her unappreciated goodness to get its reward; and one cannot fail to agree with a reader of the novel who thinks everyone with a governess in the family should read it and be reminded 'to be human.'

It is this basic lack of humanity that is the most striking – most shocking – thing about the quiet, unpretentious *Agnes Grey*: the sense of something much worse than unkindness, an ignorance of the most important qualities of life, of any possibility of tenderness or true affection. The mixture of hope and despair is conveyed with intense feeling, with a sure sense of the narrow boundaries of mid-19th-century life, the pitiful expectations and lowly ambitions of those not quite at the bottom of the social heap, but in middle-class terms not far off it.

For middle-class girls – or ‘ladies’, as they would have preferred to be known – there was little choice of employment outside the home. The professions were entirely closed to women, and even the lowlier levels of anything connected with business – or ‘trade’, as it would then have been known – were completely out of reach. A clergyman’s daughter could only teach, as all the Brontë sisters did. Agnes, like them, is treated by everyone, even the servants in the houses where she works, as an inferior to be chivvied, harassed, given no chance of a dignified or normally agreeable life, and all for pitifully low pay. Her employers set the tone: the governess is nobody, has no rights and certainly no privileges. Her pupils copy their parents, despising her socially and ignoring her intellectual qualities. Like Anne Brontë, Agnes suffers, but, a century and a half later, her sufferings, so modestly recorded, are remembered. Occasionally one longs for her to assert her rights, to fight back at the ugly world she is thrown into. She does not, but her revenge is retrospective. We are reminded, all too vividly, of the world she was born into, its limitations and, worse, its cruelties. Like the garden birds so horribly done to death by Tom, she takes it with patience and stoicism. The novel, Anne Brontë’s testament, is an eloquent plea for the humanity that society, in her day, made difficult if not impossible.

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