An investigation into the influences of history, autobiography and literary contexts on the presentation of the governess heroine in *Jane Eyre* and *Agnes Grey*. 
Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. 3

Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 4

Literature Review ............................................................................................................... 7
  - Historical influences: The Victorian Governess ....................................................... 7
  - Agnes Grey .................................................................................................................. 7
  - Autobiographical influences: Anne Brontë ............................................................. 8
  - Jane Eyre ..................................................................................................................... 8
  - Autobiographical influences: Charlotte Brontë ....................................................... 8
  - Literary influences: Romanticism .............................................................................. 9
  - Literary influences: Realism ..................................................................................... 10

Discussion .......................................................................................................................... 12
  - An investigation of how the governess is presented with regard to historical context ................................................................................................................................ 12
  - An investigation of how the governess heroine is presented with regard to autobiographical factors ........................................................................................................................ 15
  - An investigation of how the governess is presented with regard to genre .............................................................................................................................. 18

Conclusion ......................................................................................................................... 21

Evaluation .......................................................................................................................... 22

Bibliography ....................................................................................................................... 23

Appendix ............................................................................................................................. 26
Abstract

This study is an investigation into the contrasting portrayals of the governess heroine in Agnes Grey and Jane Eyre. Whilst Anne Brontë’s Agnes Grey gives a predominantly negative presentation of the governess, Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre gives a predominantly positive presentation. As they were sisters I was thus intrigued to investigate why this was the case by considering three different influences and subsequently judging which had the most influential effect. First, I judged the historical fact of the novels by examining the extent to which the different trials of the isolated, struggling Victorian governess were emulated in the novels. I concluded that Agnes Grey was the more historically accurate of the two. Second, I judged the extent to which they were autobiographical and concluded that the autobiographical nature of Agnes Grey surpasses such parallels found between Jane Eyre’s experiences and Charlotte’s. Third, I concluded that for Jane Eyre the strongest influence was literary contexts because a number of different genres are integrated throughout in the construction of a rather complex novel, and so I argued that this accounts for the more simplistic, functional role of Jane as a governess. It means that, unlike a servant, Jane is able to interact with Rochester and thus prompt the romance.
Introduction

My intention being primarily to investigate the presentation of the governess heroine, a recurring character in much of the popular Victorian fiction, I decided to analyse Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. Having already read this popular novel, I felt it would be offset with Anne Brontë’s far lesser known *Agnes Grey*, to form a more original project. Placing the governess in the wider context of her times, Poovey (1989) states that according to the modern historian, the trials of the governess increasingly worsened after the 1830s. *Jane Eyre* and *Agnes Grey* were published in 1847 and thus it must be noted that the governess was certainly a suffering figure at that time. An exploration of the remarkable lives of the Brontës was a most captivating element of the dissertation, whilst the research into the differing genres of Romanticism and Realism encouraged me to step outside my academic studies.

‘The plight of the governess’ was a recurrent phrase in much of my early research which struck me as particularly poignant. Initially, I thought this to be somewhat overstated when considering the relatively extreme sufferings of those women in the workhouse and factories. Yet what made the sufferings of the governess such a source of fascination to her contemporaries was the fact that she was ‘a lady’ tossed into the ‘no man’s land’ between the metaphorical ‘upstairs’ and ‘downstairs’ of the Victorian household. Indeed, I soon discovered, to my intense interest, that invariably the governess was emotionally distanced from those of her own social standing as she effectively demeaned herself by becoming a working woman. Thus, by entering the issue on a sympathetic slant, I intended to uncover the numerous trials endured by the isolated, middle-class ‘lady’. And although the governess was actually a very public concern (Hughes (1993) records that the Victorians were ‘obsessed’ with the governess), her situation barely eased as the century progressed. Exactly why this was is due to a combination of factors.

First, a shift to an increasingly market-driven economy led to the bankruptcy of hundreds of middle-class men. This effectively forced their daughters into independence and left them with the unbearable prospect of governessing. As a result, the governess market was particularly over-supplied and so cheaper (worse) governesses forced wages down and made many ‘ladies’ poor and destitute (Brandon, 2009). Second, according to the census of
1851 there was a very unequal gender ratio, with over 365 000 more women than men (Goreau, 1988). Therefore marriage was often out of the question and increasingly women had to provide for themselves. Third, England watched, horrified, as the French Revolution dissolved into the nightmare of the Terror in which around 16 000 people went to the guillotine (Wilde, n.d.), and so for the next fifty years England ‘clung obstinately to hierarchy, religion and tradition’ (Brandon, 2009). As Hughes (1993) notes, the governess did potentially threaten such values as she ‘marked the point at which orthodoxies and the ‘natural’ order of things broke down to reveal their man-made origins...as the places where the prevailing cultural norms began to crack’. As a lady, the governess should have been treated with respect, but a growing middle-class meant that social boundaries were blurred and tended to terminate in a cold indifference between the governess and her employers.

As the daughters of a poor clergyman, working as a governess was the inevitable fate of both Charlotte and Anne, despite the lack of monetary gain in an oversupplied market. Charlotte was the only one who married and both she and her sister took up situations as governesses in which their (class conscious) employers treated them with cold deference, despite their fairly equal social standing (Barker, 1994). Thus they embody all three of the factors which drove governesses to destitution and despair, intimating that the presentation of the governess heroines in their two novels is very closely linked to historical fact and autobiographical experience.

With regard to my objectives, I found it most comprehensive to split my dissertation into three parts and analyse each separately. My first subheading is ‘An investigation of how the governess is presented with regard to historical context’. For this I examined which sister conveyed the more realistic portrayal of a typical Victorian governess. The second section I subtitled: ‘An investigation of how the governess heroine is presented with regard to autobiographical factors’. This involved an analytic comparison of exactly how much the sisters own experiences as governesses influenced the presentation of their governess heroines. I concluded that the shaping of the governess heroine was more influenced by both history and autobiography in *Agnes Grey* than *Jane Eyre*. And my third section is subtitled: ‘An investigation of how the governess is presented with regard to genre’. Here I compared the respective genres of the two novels, with *Agnes Grey* a Realist novel and *Jane Eyre* typically considered Romantic, and to what extent the features of these genres compel
a certain presentation of the governess. I concluded that Jane Eyre was more influenced by genre, as a variety of literary contexts actually combine to construct this complex novel; hence accounting for the more simplistic, functional role of Jane as a governess.
Literature Review

**Historical influences: The Victorian Governess**

In order to measure the extent to which the two novels were based on historical fact, it was necessary to research the position of the Victorian governess in society, and my first source was a book entitled *The Victorian Governess* (Hughes, 1993). In an article (*The Independent*, 1993) promoting her book, she writes that she appealed to Woman’s Hour listeners for letters, diaries and memoirs written by real-life governesses. This certainly validates her dedication to thoroughly researching her subject, and gives me confidence that her conclusions are well-informed. Another relevant book, which presents the situation of the governess in a more negative light, is Brandon’s (2009) *Other People’s Daughters*. Brandon is a historian, biographer and novelist, and the book is really a collection of short biographies on famous women and their experiences as governesses. Despite being less scholarly than Hughes’s book, it was nevertheless described as an ‘effortlessly thoughtful study’ by Frances Wilson in the Sunday Telegraph and gives numerous examples of real-life governesses. This was imperative in giving me a firmer grasp of realistic situations, and I was able to draw comparisons and assess the typicality of certain episodes detailed in the novels.

**Agnes Grey**

There are various publications of *Agnes Grey*, with the first edition published by T. C. Newby in London in 1847. After Anne’s death in 1849, Charlotte then edited the text extensively, by changing punctuation, re-ordering paragraphs, correcting misprints and occasionally adding or altering words. This second edition was then published in 1850 by Smith, Elder and Co. Because I wanted to analyse *Jane Eyre* and *Agnes Grey* as two texts by different novelists in their own right, I decided to bypass Charlotte’s edited version and instead choose a 1988 version edited by Angeline Goreau. Goreau used a copy of Anne’s original Newby edition, found in the Parrish Collection of the Princeton University Library, to re-establish the novel to as close as possible to what Anne originally intended. As a result, I can gain a more grounded distinction between these two very different novelists and embark on a more effective investigation into exactly how history, autobiography and genre affected their work.
Autobiographical influences: Anne Brontë

The most recent biography of Anne is *A Life of Anne Brontë* (Chitham, 1991) and it thus draws together much of the present evidence. Furthermore, Chitham’s wide knowledge of the Brontës is confirmed by the fact that his doctoral thesis was on Emily Brontë’s poems, and his previously published works include *Brontë Facts and Brontë Problems* and *The Poems of Anne Brontë*. Another source for information on Anne Brontë as well as criticism on *Agnes Grey* was part of the *Writers and Their Work* series (Jay, 2003). This introduced me to the feminist criticism of *Agnes Grey* which emerged in the 1970s, notably Susan Meyer. Thus I was inspired to read *Words on ‘Great Vulgar Sheets’: Writing and Social Resistance in Anne Brontë’s Agnes Grey* (Meyer, 1996). This article focuses on areas of the text which have been treated as marginal and perceives it as a passionate protest against the subordination of women and the working class, hence allowing me to gain a greater literary appreciation of the novel and compare more effectively with the great classic, *Jane Eyre*.

*Jane Eyre*

One insightful and very relevant source was *The Anathematised Race: Jane Eyre and the governess* by Poovey (1989) included in Glen’s *Jane Eyre: Contemporary Critical Essays* (1997). This was a particularly reliable source, as the editor, Glen, is a Fellow in English, New Hall, Cambridge, and a Lecturer in English at the University of Cambridge. In her introduction it is evident that Glen selected the essays by examining many critically and comparatively. Thus, the essays themselves can be regarded as valid for my purpose and certainly Poovey gives astute, literary conclusions.

Autobiographical influences: Charlotte Brontë

Cody (1987), on the internet website, *The Victorian Web*, in an essay entitled *Charlotte Brontë: An Appreciation*, writes that all Charlotte’s novels are autobiographical in a psychological sense, whilst Brownell (1993) notes in her essay, *Passion, Dreams, and the Supernatural in Jane Eyre*, that ‘the turbulent exploration of Jane's emotions so characteristic of the text reveals some of Brontë's most prevalent ideas’, for instance that judgment must always ‘warn passion’. The extent to which these sources can be deemed reliable is determined by their authors, about whom it is rather difficult to obtain
information. Cody is more credible as a university professor with a Ph. D in literature, whilst Brownell could actually be a student, it is difficult to tell. Thus, in order to retain validity to my judgements and conclusions, it was necessary to analyse further the psychological elements regarding Charlotte’s turbulent life (four of her siblings and her mother died within her lifetime) and to what extent these shape her protagonist Jane, who, as a governess, is unhappy (before Mr Rochester arrives), for instance, she exclaims how her ‘restlessness…agitated (her) to pain sometimes’ (Brontë, p. 95). I did this by gaining a deeper appreciation of her life by reading Gaskell’s biography (1997) and Barker’s (1994) extensive work on the Brontë family.

Charlotte’s sympathy for governesses, which can certainly be considered as a factor in her presentation of Jane as a governess, is reiterated in the Brontë Parsonage Blog, a website linked to the main Brontë society and museum webpage and brought to my attention by one of the staff when I visited Haworth (the Brontë’s home, now a museum). This blog was posted by Richard Wilcocks (2012) and thus its very nature entails supposition, as a blog of people’s opinions. However, the blog is centred on a newly discovered letter, purchased from an auction at Bonham’s in London on 12 June 2012, in which Charlotte discusses her stance with regard to governesses to an aspiring writer asking for advice. Thus, as primary evidence of Charlotte’s feelings, it is particularly useful for my purpose in understanding more of her view and how this affected her presentation of the governess.

**Literary influences: Romanticism**

Baker (1936) in *From the Brontës to Meredith: Romanticism in the English Novel* declares *Jane Eyre* to be an ‘autobiography of the introspective and self-revealing kind’. He argues that the novel is both of the Realist and Romantic genres, which is particularly useful as a comparative element to *Agnes Grey*. The book is part of a series on the English novel and this alone certainly points towards the author’s dedication to his subject. In addition, this gives him a breadth of knowledge on the literary styles prior to the Romantic Movement, and also others which relate to it. Acclaimed in both the USA and Britain, Baker’s work is certainly a credible and valid source. Baker’s statement that *Jane Eyre* is not purely a Romantic novel is supported by Minogue (1999, p. xv) who writes in her introduction to my edition of *Jane Eyre*: ‘Brontë [indulges] in romance, the Gothic, the supernatural, but within
a realist frame’. Dr Sally Minogue has written several introductions to Wordsworth classics, notably Charlotte’s *Vilette*, and is a university professor at Canterbury Christ Church University College. Thus, I consider her introduction to my edition of *Jane Eyre* as a reliable source too.

Inevitably, Baker examines in great depth the novels which have defined Romanticism, but does not wholly define the genre itself. As such, in order to establish the defining characteristics of the Romantic novel I used two websites, the first by Jones (2008) and the second by Melani (2009). The reliability of the websites can, however, be called into question, since little can be discovered about the authors and they could be inaccurately stating information. As such, it was necessary to consolidate the features of Romanticism mentioned by reading *Romantic Literature* (Gilroy, 2010). This is part of the *York Notes Companions* series, which I had previously used for my ‘AS’ level studies, recommended by my English teachers for extra reading on the texts within the curriculum. In addition, it was a knowledgeable source, partly due to its very recent publication allowing it to draw on a wider range of historical evidence.

**Literary influences: Realism**

In order to establish exactly what the term ‘Realism’ actually meant, I used the *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* written by Cuddon (1992). As a dictionary, it is unlikely to be biased or inaccurate; and written just ten years ago indicates its informed position. Although already mentioned, Baker’s book entitled *From the Brontës to Meredith: Romanticism in the English Novel* (1936) gives invaluable comparisons between both Romanticism and Realism as it seeks to disprove the myth that the two are wholly unrelated. Another source, which relates directly to *Agnes Grey*, is Palomo’s (1993) critical journal article entitled *Anne Brontë: The Triumph of Realism over Subjectivity*. Part of a dissertation written by a university professor, it gives an invaluable insight into the roots of both Anne and Charlotte’s differing genres. As a journal article, written to be approved by scholars in order to be published, such a source is extremely useful as it allowed me to reach substantiated conclusions based on valid, reliable source material.

My two other sources which helped shape my understanding of Realism were *Realism and popular cinema* (Hallam and Marshment, 2000) and *Aesthetics and Politics* (Adorno and co.)
The former engages with the theoretical aspects of the genre and hence can be considered a valid source, despite the fact it focuses on film. The latter, described as an ‘intellectual epic’ by the political and philosophical journal, Telos, gave insightful, substantiated arguments. I read a chapter entitled ‘Realism in the Balance’ written by Georg Lukács, a Hungarian philosopher, aesthetician, literary historian, critic, and Marxist. Although not wholly focussed on Realism as a literary genre and inevitably not directed at the development of it in England, it nevertheless makes some valid points which were useful in my analysis of the extent to which Anne Brontë can be considered a ‘true realist’.
**Discussion**

*An investigation of how the governess heroine is presented with regard to historical context*

In 1844, Fraser’s magazine stated: ‘The statistics touching lunatic asylums gives a frightful proportion of governesses in the list of the insane’. When considering the numerous difficulties a governess had to negotiate, such a statement is unsurprising: isolation, verbal repression, social suffocation, restrictions on teaching and belittlement were just a few of the worries of a typical Victorian governess.

The isolation of the governess was arguably a key factor with regard to her suffering and this is presented explicitly in both novels. In *Jane Eyre*, the fact that Jane is an orphan is a powerful metaphor incorporated to epitomise her social and emotional estrangement which does remain apparent throughout the bildungsroman until the very end (Brandon, 2009). In addition, Jane painfully recollects the ‘three months of stillness, monotony, and solitude’ she spent at Thornfield before Mr Rochester appeared (Brontë, 1847, p.159). Employers tended to distance themselves from a person who not only represented a painful reminder of what they prayed their own daughters would never become, but also, with her ambiguous social position, was rather difficult to interact with (Brandon, 2009). For the governess, the former problem may have curtailed any potential friendships with elder daughters, as feelings of jealousy and bitterness sprung from thoughts of ‘what could have been’ and this may quite possibly be the case in *Agnes Grey* when Agnes teaches Rosalie and Matilda, both just a few years younger than herself. A keen sense of isolation is effectually conveyed in *Agnes Grey*, literally in the words of the curate with ‘You are alone again, Miss Grey’ (Brontë, 1847, p.184) and also metaphorically, when Agnes stays with her former pupil as her guest, yet is still obliged to take her meals alone rather than with her friend and ‘superiors’. Thus, arguably both authors are very similar in that they strongly convey the insufferable isolation, a key factual issue associated with governesses.

Verbal repression, which essentially derives from the isolation, is another issue explored extensively in *Agnes Grey*. Meyer (1996) explains how the heroine is, at crucial moments in the novel, utterly silent. Moreover, in the form of the novel itself Agnes ‘talks back’ by subtly criticising the morals, attitudes and actions of her ‘superiors’ (Meyer, 1996). Furthermore, this links closely to an underlying disquiet evident in the author epitomised in
a partially autobiographical novel. By contrast, Jane embarks on a remarkable relationship with her employer, Mr Rochester, as the two converse deep into the evenings and obviously such a situation was scarcely common. Alternatively, this cannot be dismissed as wholly unrealistic. According to Hughes (1993), in her autobiography Elizabeth Ham records that ‘Mr. E spent the greater part of his evenings with ‘the governess’ [and] often sat so long as to bring Mrs E. down’. Mrs E. refers to the wife of Mr E and therefore employer to Elizabeth Ham who was ultimately depriving her of her own husband’s company. Yet Ham had found in Mr E the cultured conversational partner she had often dreamt of. Nonetheless, it is obvious that the more realistic issue faced by the majority of Victorian governesses was verbal repression and this is presented effectively by Anne in Agnes Grey, thus indicating how much her novel is based on historical fact. Whereas Jane Eyre, by contrast, has far less room for the issue highlights how Charlotte’s handling of a rather mundane, everyday issue of governesses is less thorough and insinuates how she perhaps chose to be radical in alternative ways.

The insufferable verbal repression was invariably accompanied with very poor relations with employers and this is introduced in Agnes Grey when Agnes’s mother refers to her first employers as ‘purse-proud tradespeople and arrogant upstarts’ (Brontë, 1847, p. 112). On the contrary, Mr Rochester appears to be rather more economically and socially secure and could be referred to as ‘old money’. Previously, middle-class families such as the Murrays and Bloomfields in Agnes Grey would not have been able to afford a governess as they were really only a luxury of the ‘extremely well-to-do’ (Brandon, 2009, p.27). Yet industrialisation and a shift to a more market-driven economy propelled impoverished men up the social ladder (Hughes, 1993). The implications, on a practical level, meant that governesses were confined to rather small houses, often with the worst room in the house acting as the schoolroom. In Agnes Grey this ‘inconvenient nearness’ (Goreau, 1988) to other members of the household arguably makes it extremely difficult to teach effectively. For instance, the disobedient Mary-Ann ‘shriek[s] her utmost...with an air of vindictive satisfaction’ which brings her mother running, only to blame Agnes: ‘fixing her cold stony eyes on me with a look that could not be mistaken’ (Brontë, 1847, p.88). So not only does the governess’ relationship with her employers deteriorate, it also makes it potentially very difficult to form ties of affection with the children, as they are always in close proximity. Jane Eyre, by
contrast, is able to roam the sprawling, ‘stately and imposing’ Thornfield at her leisure and consequently dotes on her charge (Brontë, 1847, p.85). Her relations with her employer are naturally tempestuous, and Rochester does actually manipulate Jane, for instance when enraged, he withdraws her salary (Brontë, 1992, p. 197). However, Rochester undeniably cares for Jane’s welfare and on the whole Charlotte is, understandably, more preoccupied with developing their relationship. On the whole, a factual, historical presentation of the governess is far less apparent in *Jane Eyre* in this respect than it is in *Agnes Grey*.

The impossible social position of the governess was another very real issue faced by the typical Victorian governess and this is presented by both novelists. In *Agnes Grey*, the heroine agonises over whether she should walk with or behind her pupils on the way to Church. If with, then her charges may feel constrained by her presence and ignore her; but if behind then she would have to acknowledge her own inferiority. Brandon (2009) remarks on the tenuous nature of such social distinctions, and Goreau (1988) sees it as a painful contradiction. Contrastingly, Jane appears to have avoided that awkward suspension between ‘upstairs’ and ‘downstairs’. When she returns from visiting her dying aunt, she records with pleasure that ‘Little Adèle was half wild with delight...Mrs Fairfax received me with her usual plain friendliness. Leah smiled, and even Sophie bid me ‘bon soir’ with glee’ (Brontë, 1847, p.216). One subtle insinuation at this problem is apparent when Rochester’s friends come to stay and Mrs Fairfax advises Jane to ‘go into the drawing-room while it is empty’ to save her the ‘embarrassment of making a formal entrance, which is...most disagreeable’ (Brontë, 1847, p. 148). But overall Anne once again emphasises more strongly a common issue among governesses and perhaps does so more effectively because the courtship of her governess heroine (by the curate, Mr Weston) happens only after Agnes leaves her governess post. By contrast, Charlotte consciously infuses the governess episodes with the developing relationship between Jane and Rochester and thus the portrayal of the governess, and the sufferings she stood for (in this case the ambivalent social position), is far less pronounced.

Ultimately, historical fact plays a far greater part in *Agnes Grey* than *Jane Eyre*, and the difficulties faced by this unfortunate Victorian figure are extensively explored in the former. Indeed, Anne’s intention, according to Minogue (1999), was ‘to provide her contemporaries with a thorough view of the plight of the governess’. As such, Eagleton’s (1975) dismissal of
the novel as ‘simple’ and ‘moralistic’ seems a poor judgement, as arguably Anne skilfully highlights a contemporary issue. Charlotte Brontë, however, explores other aspects of Victorian society, and although this does include a feminist examination of the (unjust) repression of women, she is ultimately far less concerned with giving a factual portrayal of the suffocating Victorian governess.

An investigation of how the governess heroine is presented with regard to autobiographical factors

Anne had two posts as a governess, the first in 1839 with the Ingham family in Mirfield, where she was peremptorily dismissed after just two terms. The second was taken up in 1845, when she worked for the Robinson family at Thorp Green Hall and so remained for four years (Goreau, 1988). Certainly there is a distinct symmetry between Anne’s life and that of her protagonist’s, with a similar time-scale concerning Agnes’ two posts as governess. As Chitham (1991) points out, the ages of the four children at Wellwood (the house of Agnes’ first employer) correspond exactly with the ages of the Ingham children. Most biographers, including Gaskell (1997) and Gerin (1996), as well as Charlotte in her Autobiographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell, maintain that Anne essentially records her own true governessing experiences. Thus, one could suggest that Agnes Grey is undeniably influenced by autobiographical factors.

Conversely, Chitham (1991) argues that this supposition is ‘quite unsafe’ and goes on to cite Brooke, the granddaughter of a sister of one of Anne’s pupils, who recalls how Anne was once tied the children to a table leg in anguish, and was often driven to tears by the antics of the children. Neither occurrence is recorded in Agnes Grey and one could perhaps suppose that she therefore consciously aimed not to exaggerate. Indeed, Goreau (1988) notes that Anne never intended to use the novel as a source of vindication for the wrongs done her by previous employers. In an aside to the reader, Agnes declares ‘my design in writing...was not to amuse, but to benefit those whom it might concern’ (Brontë, 1847). Thus, Anne perhaps purposely retained a historical accuracy in recording the sufferings of the governess in order to enlighten her contemporaries to the problem, as opposed to simply writing an autobiography. Although this conclusion is supported only by Chitham, he is Anne’s most contemporary biographer, and this thoroughly strengthens his validity.
because new letters, relics, pictures are still being offered to the Brontë museum periodically.

Ultimately, Anne disliked being a governess and grew increasingly depressed, highlighted in her 1841 diary paper, where she writes, ‘I dislike the situation and wish to change it’. Indeed, Chitham (1991) refers to several poems written by Anne at the time, which are ‘full of the sadness of disillusion as the bright expectations of youth fail to be realised’. Similarly, Charlotte thoroughly resented the role when she was employed as a temporary governess for the Sidgewick family at Lothersdale and later the White family at Rawdon (Barker, 1994). Charlotte believed that a governess had no existence, and was not considered a living or rational being except in connection with the wearisome duties she was forced to perform (Gilbert and Gubar, pp. 347-51). And in a letter to Miss Holmes, a young women seeking advice for a book, Charlotte replies to her question regarding governesses that she feels ‘a degree of interest in the details of a Governess-life. That life has on me the hold of actual experience; to all who live it – I cannot but incline with a certain sympathy’ (1852).

McCarthy (2012) commented that Charlotte, who was by this point an acclaimed writer, demonstrates just how much she values her success which allowed her to escape from life as a ‘struggling governess’ (2012). And as the Brontë Parsonage Museum Director, McCarthy is likely to be a valid source, with wide knowledge and expertise on the Brontë family and their lives.

Hence the autobiographical experiences of governessing for both sisters were predominantly negative, yet the extent to which it influenced the presentation of the governess heroine is irrefutably different. Indeed, with regard to Agnes Grey, Goreau (1988) notes that the emotional flatness of the novel may actually derive from Anne’s consistent efforts to control and suppress her anger and humiliation as she struggled through her own trials as a governess. Furthermore, Meyer perceives Agnes Grey as ‘the chronicle of a life of emotional and verbal repression’ (1996, p.134). Whereas Anne (although certainly not deliberately exaggerating issues as mentioned above) presents Agnes as a victim miserably fighting a one sided battle against her immoral, cruel employers and charges, Charlotte’s heroine lives a comparably content existence. Indeed, Poovey (1989) notes that Charlotte ultimately idealises Jane’s position as a governess, making her time at Thornfield a relative relief when considering her previous experiences: ‘less than a servant’ at Gateshead and a
victim of double-standards and insanitary conditions at the institution, Lowood. Thus, in comparison, autobiography could definitely be said to be far less of an influence in the portrayal of the governess heroine in Jane Eyre.

The two novelists certainly construct notable responses in each of their governess heroines to the confined life of the governess. And arguably such responses mirror their own responses. Chitham (1991) illuminates the depression and legarthy felt by Anne, highlighted in her poems, notably ‘Despondency’, where she calls her illness (depression) ‘legarthy’ and complains of a ‘drowsy’ spirit, ‘heavy and dull as lead’. Agnes too, lapses into despair: she describes ‘fruitless lamentations’ which occasionally give way to ‘an unrestricted burst of weeping’ and thus at one point, the presentation of the governess at the hands of Anne appears utterly unresolvable. However, records how her sister actually clearly did achieve some measure of success in controlling her charges and won their affection, because in a letter to her friend, Ellen Dean, on 28th July 1847, Charlotte writes ‘Anne continues to hear constantly, almost daily, form her old pupils, the Robinsons [one sister] seems to cling to her former governess as her only true friend’. In a similar way, Agnes achieves some measure of success with Rosalie who, by the end of the novel, ‘earnestly desires[s] the company of [Agnes] whose general tastes and ideas were so little congenial to her own’. Again, the parallel between the author and her heroine is clear. By contrast, Charlotte’s response to the repression felt by governessing is to leave as soon as possible, indeed both her posts were very short-lived and this is perhaps mirrored in Jane Eyre when Jane expresses her ‘restlessness’ and desire to ‘reach the busy world, towns, regions full of life’ and then launches into a feminist assault on ‘their more privileged fellow creatures’ (Brontë, 1992 pp. 94, 95). Hence autobiography is certainly a key influence when considering the presentation of the governess heroine in terms of her response to life as a governess.

Ultimately, the two sisters are similar in that they vent their resentment born through autobiographical experiences of governessing through a cycle of what Poovey (1989) posits as ‘displaced rage’. For example, when Mr Rochester deceives Jane by dressing up as gypsy, Jane clearly expresses her rage and subsequently (and significantly) remembers the visitor, Mr Mason, a rather strange thing to recall in a heated conversation. This has what could be deemed a vengeful effect on Rochester who ‘stagger[s]’ and exclaims, ‘Jane, I’ve got a blow’. Although Poovey only applies this to Jane Eyre, it may possibly be incorporated in Agnes
Grey too. Rosalie, a vain, pretentious pupil just two years younger than Agnes, immorally ensnares men with her charms and beauty for her own amusement, including Mr Weston, for whom Agnes holds a secret affection. The virtuous Agnes, however, later marries Weston, whereas Rosalie rushes into an unhappy marriage in order to secure a large fortune. Anne explicitly contrasts Rosalie’s situation with Agnes’s contented marriage at the end of the novel, effectively punishing vice and completing a cycle of displaced rage.

Thus, the presentation of the governess by the two novelists could certainly be said to be tempered by their real-life experiences and autobiography plays an influential part; but arguably more so in *Agnes Grey*.

*An investigation of how the governess heroine is presented with regard to genre*

Romanticism was essentially a revolutionary period (1770-1870) during which artists and writers alike emphasised the self, creativity and imagination (Jones, 2008). A revolutionary energy was at the core of Romanticism (Melani, 2009) and it promoted ‘art and the ideal [as] more important and valid than reality’ (Gilroy, 2010). Realism, by contrast, is the ‘portrayal of life with fidelity’ and, unlike Romanticism, is not concerned with idealisation (Cuddon, 1992). Charlotte Brontë was thus more concerned with symbols and myths, the development of the individual and true emotions (Jones, 2008), as opposed to attempting to tackle the seemingly mundane and impossible issue of the governess, which, contrastingly, is exactly what Anne does. In fact, *Jane Eyre* is a novel of many genres and, according to Minogue (1999) Brontë incorporates fantasy, the Gothic and the supernatural. However, Minogue also states that Brontë’s tendency to use bathos in conjunction with these elements, keeps the text ‘within a realist frame’.

As such, although *Jane Eyre* is considered by Lodge (1966) as a primarily Romantic text, one could argue that there are definite elements of Realism. This is supported by Palomo (1993), who cites Charlotte, in a letter to her editor: ‘The first duty of an author is, I conceive, a faithful allegiance to Truth and Nature’. That Charlotte is truthful and realistic is also supported by Baker (1936), who argues that both Charlotte and Anne were ‘surely, realists, in that their novels were faithful transcripts of what they had experienced’. He adds, ‘Charlotte gave this an imaginative interpretation’ (1936, pp.20-21). He actually compares Charlotte to Wordsworth, the great Romantic poet, in terms of the fact that both
concentrate upon outer experience (a Realist concept), whilst interpreting this in light of inner experience (a Romantic concept).

Thus, the overlapping of Romanticism with Realism in *Jane Eyre* insinuates Charlotte’s portrayal of Jane as a governess cannot be disregarded as simply a function for the narrative’s development and one can link genre to historical accuracy. Romantics actually sought to assert the importance of the individual (Melani, 2009), and as a bildungsroman, *Jane Eyre* certainly meets this obligation. And to some extent, so too does Anne’s heroine, because Anne maintains an acute focus on Agnes’s development as an individual, for instance chapters entitled ‘A Few More Lessons’ and ‘Confessions’ hint at a personal, individualistic progression in the governess heroine. Hence the Romantic genre could be said to be an influence in the presentation of the governess characters as it allows both authors to successfully individualise the problems encountered by governesses (for instance Jane feels restless and discontented prior to Rochester’s arrival, and Agnes feels ignored and snubbed) and therefore evoke empathy in the reader.

*Agnes Grey*, Baker (1936) believes, was ultimately written from the heart, and its simple truths do make it partially Romantic. As he says, the girls were ‘full of a rapturous sense of life’ and when considering the influences on the Brontë sisters, Palomo (1993) argues one must always consider their eventful and rather tragic lives. Brought up in the bleak Yorkshire Moors by their aunt and widowed father the children constructed vivid fantasy worlds called Angria and Gondal. Their lives were tempered with death and destruction: their mother, two elder sisters and finally their brother died (Chitham, 1991). So both Anne and Charlotte grew up writing in what could be categorised as a Romantic style but Anne contrastingly made a marked shift away from such sentiments, as is indicated in much of her work.

If the Romantic nature of the two novels influences the presentation of the governess heroine, so too does the Realist genre. Lukács (1977) argues that only a true realist explores ‘the real factors that relate to their experience in the hidden social forces that produce them’. This markedly links genre to autobiographical factors which, as explored in the previous section, distinctly colour both narratives. Lukács gives the example of Thomas Mann who refers to a character (Tonio Kröger) as a ‘bourgeois who has lost his way’ but
significantly, Lukács notes, Mann does not stop there and goes on to explore how and why Kröger is still bourgeois, his hostility to the bourgeoisie and his exclusion from the life of the bourgeois. Perhaps in a similar way, Anne explores not only the sufferings of the governess, but also explains the restrictive place of the ‘lady’ in Victorian society. For instance, Agnes’s mother can only suggest selling paintings as an alternative means of employment, yet this would hardly bring financial security, thus indicating a deep-set crack in Victorian societal norms. As Hughes (1993) suggests, the governess did indeed represent the place in society where prevailing cultural norms began to crack and the ‘lady’ became destitute at the hands of her contemporaries. Hence, Anne is far more concerned with cultivating a deeper understanding in her reader as to why governessing was such a problem, whereas Charlotte barely touches on this ‘true Realism’, as Lukács says, and instead is preoccupied with other genres. Therefore the presentation of the governess and the Realist elements in conjunction with this ambivalent figure is far more diluted in Jane Eyre, whereas it is subtly magnified in Agnes Grey.

The Realism of Agnes Grey serves to make Anne’s presentation of the governess as far more historically accurate, whereas the Romanticism of Jane Eyre somewhat undermines Charlotte’s ability to do the same. Whereas Jane’s time at Thornfield as a governess is the happiest time of her life so far, Agnes’s is clearly the unhappiest time of her life. Hence the presentation of the governess with regard to literary contexts is rather complex when considering Jane Eyre. Arguably the vast mix of genres which make up the novel highly influence the presentation of the governess heroine, as she becomes a diluted, idealised version of the historical reality, whilst the stress on the individual strongly calls for the emancipation of women in general, not specifically, like in Agnes Grey, the governess.
Conclusion

Although *Jane Eyre* was fundamentally ahead of its time, in terms of addressing the issues of the governess, *Agnes Grey* could be deemed as rather more radical. And although Hughes (1993) describes it as ‘conservative’ and Eagleton (1975) supposes it have little purchase on the social, arguably *Agnes Grey* was one of the first novels to skilfully illuminate the struggles of the governess and, in this way, retains a sharp, historically accurate focus. That it is highly autobiographical makes it all the more poignant. Furthermore, as Hallam and Marshment (2000) observe, realists had a preference for dealing with unpleasant and taboo aspects of life and society in order to ‘tell the whole truth’; this shaped part of their reforming impulse. As such, the three influences investigated do combine to make *Agnes Grey* a fundamental critique of a significant societal issue at the time. *Jane Eyre* is just as feminist in many other respects and it is important to note that the confines of governess life stimulate that famous passage beginning 'Women feel just as men feel…' Ultimately, *Jane Eyre* is the more complex novel and tackling the specific issue of the governess barely constitutes a third of the novel, whereas *Agnes Grey* is indisputably focussed on the governess’s life. As a suggestion for further research, it would be intriguing to discover whether Anne’s repressive life as a governess was the reason she abstained from the Romantic style adopted by her two sisters and to explore her other novel, as well as her poems with this in mind.
Evaluation

Perhaps the most challenging part of the dissertation was choosing a suitable title. Indeed, I constructed several, but embarking on preliminary research tended to lead to alteration or rejection. The Project has been invaluable in teaching me several skills obligatory to the writing of dissertations. These include a thorough synthesis of the information collected, which can be more effectively achieved by constructing coherent notes on different sources and linking certain points mentioned together. I also learnt the necessity of reading widely, even beyond the scope of the question, in order to draw informed, substantiated conclusions and to put certain arguments in context. Another skill I gained was time management, especially important when considering the development of the literature review, which took slightly more time than I had previously anticipated.

Researching for the relevant materials was often difficult, but I was soon able to make quick, effective searches on the internet for innumerable resources on various websites. Bibliographies were especially useful and in many cases led on to the search of another resource. Having the read several scholarly sources, I developed the ability to properly comprehend the arguments proposed, and then coherently summarise these in my notes. It was also very useful to gain the necessary skill of referencing appropriately and accurately, which will be instrumental to any future work of a similar standard.

With hindsight, I would have perhaps done more preliminary research into my chosen title, as I soon realised that exploring just Romanticism as the second part, did not constitute a particularly balanced and appropriate focus. I also would have weighted more of my time management plan to the reading and literature review, which actually required far more effort than the discussion. Writing up notes on my resources was sometimes rather tedious, and I was perhaps sometimes a little careless or not very selective when summarising certain points. Thus, with hindsight, I realise that it would have been imperative to always ensure these notes were clear and well-focused on the task at hand.

Total word count: 6855
Bibliography

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


Redgrave’s (1844) famous painting, ‘The Governess’, depicts a plain lady dressed in black, her face downcast, explicitly contrasted with the daintily dressed, vibrant young girls in the background, who appear full of youthful exuberance. Redgrave not only illustrates the detachment of the governess visually, but also had his work exhibited with the quotation: 'She sees no kind domestic visage here'. According to Elizabeth Missing Sewell in her Principles of Education, ‘Society has thought fit to assert that the woman who works...loses her social position’ (Sewell, 1865, p.238). And according to Hughes (1993) the transition from one domestic household (her home) to another, similar household was really the only means by which a woman could maintain her status as ‘a lady’. Yet as Redgrave implies in his caption, such a transition was fraught with difficulties, most notably the inevitable estrangement of the governess from her employers and society.