

**A Woman of Spirit: Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey*
as a Story of Spiritual Development**

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Tässä pro gradu -tutkielmassa tarkastellaan kristinuskon roolia Anne Brontë'n (1820-1849) esikoisromaanissa *Agnes Grey* (1847). Tutkielmani tarkastelee romaania kuvauksena sen päähenkilön hengellisestä kasvusta. Lähtökohtanani ovat romaanissa tarinan ja kerronnan tasoilla esiintyvät uskonnolliset elementit, jotka antavat romaanille hengellisen omaelämäkerran piirteitä. Tutkimustehtäväni jakautuu kahteen osaan: tarkastelen ensinnäkin sitä miten romaani rakentuu tarinan ja kerronnan tasolla kuvauksena hengellisestä kasvusta, ja toiseksi tarkastelen päähenkilön uskonnollisuuden luonnetta – sen opillisia piirteitä sekä naisnäkökulmaa – suhteessa viktoriaanisen ajan uskonnollisuuteen. Tutkielman alussa luon katsauksen varhaisen viktoriaanisen ajan Englannin uskonnolliseen kenttään, erityisesti evankelisen herätyskristillisyyden piirteisiin ja vaikutukseen.

Analyysissäni tarkastelen *Agnes Greytä* päähenkilön hengellisenä kehityskertomuksena, joka rakentuu klassisen pyhiinvaellustarinan pohjalle. Tämä tarinatyyppe on yleinen viktoriaanisen ajan kirjallisuudessa ja sen suurin innoittaja oli John Bunyanin suosittu kristillinen allegoria *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678). Pyhiinvaellustarinassa kertomus etenee kahdella tasolla: päähenkilön fyysinen matka paikasta toiseen luo kehyksen hengellisille kasvulle, ja matkan varrella kohdatut olosuhteet ja ihmiset edustavat vaeltajalle erilaisia hengellisiä kiusauksia, koettelemuksia tai siunauksia. Tämän lähestymistavan pohjalta olen jakanut tarinan viiteen osaan, joista jokainen edustaa tiettyä vaihetta Agnesin hengellisessä kasvussa. Analyysissäni hahmotan Agnesin hengellisiä kokemuksia kristillisen näkemyksen pohjalta ja kiinnitän erityistä huomiota romaanin raamatullisiin viittauksiin.

Agnes Grey kuvaa päähenkilön hengellistä kasvua prosessina, johon kuuluu olennaisena osana kärsimystä ja koettelemuksia mutta myös ilon hetkiä liittyen erityisesti uskon jakamiseen toisten kristittyjen kanssa. Agnesin usko sisältää useita evankelisen herätyskristillisyyden piirteitä, joiden puolesta Brontë vaikuttaa romaanissaan puhuvan. Vaikka Agnesin usko ei ole ongelmatonta, hänen hengelliselle kasvulleen on ominaista yhä vahvempi kiinnittyminen kristilliseen elämäntavotukseen. Brontë liittää Agnesin luonteeseen ja uskonelämään piirteitä, jotka kyseenalaistavat viktoriaanisen ajan tiukasti määriteltyä kristityn naisen roolimallia.

Agnes Grey kuvaa köyhästä pappisperheestä lähtöisin olevan nuoren naisen yrityksiä löytää paikkansa ja ansaita elantonsa viktoriaanisen ajan luokkayhteiskunnassa. Tarinan tarkastelu kuvauksena hengellisestä kasvusta tuo esiin uusia näkökulmia romaaniin. Agnesin persoona, asenteet ja motiivit avautuvat uudella tavalla kun niitä tarkastelee hänen uskonnollisuutensa pohjalta. Tarinan alussa Agnes painottaa lukijoille, että hänen kertomuksensa sisältää opetuksen. Hengellisen kasvun näkökulmasta katsottuna tarinan opetus on syvästi hengellinen: se kuvaa kristinuskon merkitystä ihmisten elämässä.

Avainsanat: Anne Brontë, 1800-luku, kristinuskko, naisnäkökulma

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1. Introduction

Religion occupied a significant role in the lives of the Brontë sisters: Anne, Charlotte and Emily were a clergyman's daughters and lived most of their lives in their father's parsonage, surrounded by matters of faith and well aware of the religious debates and disputes of their time. The early Victorian society in which the Brontës lived was on the whole very much concerned with religion: Christianity had a strong presence in Victorian public life in that it still provided answers to life's fundamental questions, church attendance was high, and the Bible and other Christian texts were widely read. Yet at the same time Christianity came to be challenged as never before by the growing popularity of moral humanism, the Bible criticism and new developments in natural sciences, such as Darwin's theory of evolution. Each of the three Brontë sisters responded to religion and the surrounding religious discourse in their own unique way that is reflected in their writing. There has been a tendency in the twentieth-century Brontë scholarship to neglect or discredit the religious elements and motifs in the Brontës' works – as Maynard (2002: 192) remarks, twentieth-century literary critics have wanted to forget about “the obvious but rather unwelcome evidence of the [Victorian] age's obsession with religion” and to turn to more secular areas of study. However, a new interest in the religious aspects of the Brontës' writing appears to have emerged during the last couple of decades. The first full-length study on the topic, *The Brontës and Religion* by Marianne Thormählen, was published in 1999. Thormählen (2002: 251) points out that while both critics and common readers have been happy to read the Brontës without paying much attention to the religious elements of the novels – and while “[this] practice has often been both fruitful and exciting” – having an understanding of the implications of these elements provides fascinating new perspectives into the Brontës' novels. Furthermore, Thormählen (1999: 6-7) notes that this understanding can add to our appreciation of the Brontës as it reveals “the breathtaking

freedom from prejudice and dogmatic restraint with which all three writers examined Christian doctrine and ethics”.

In this thesis I will trace the role of religion in Anne Brontë’s novel *Agnes Grey* (1847). Anne Brontë (1820-1849) has long been shadowed by her older sisters: representing her as the less talented and meek youngest sister who lacked the originality, passion and imaginative powers of Charlotte and Emily has been an inherent part of the Brontë myth. Yet at the time of their publication Anne’s two novels received a great deal of attention due to her realistic depiction of immoral behavior of Victorian upper-class people – especially her second novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) was deemed as scandalous, owing to its themes of alcohol abuse and adultery. Emily and Charlotte now have their well-established places in the English literary canon while Anne’s literary reputation is much more shaky: she is often only briefly mentioned in histories of English literature and sometimes she is ignored completely. However, a resurgence of interest in Anne Brontë since the 1970s, mainly in the area of feminist criticism, has resulted in a growing appreciation of her literary talents: there are now feminist critics who recognize her as an innovative pre-feminist writer who consciously adopted a different style of writing than her sisters and whose works are artistically much more complex than has previously been thought. For example, Berry (1994)¹ argues that Anne Brontë’s psychological and moral vision places her in the company of such great women writers as Fanny Burney and Jane Austen. The focus of the feminist criticism on Anne Brontë’s novels has been on the themes of women’s position in society, social injustice and psychological development. Yet it can be claimed that the defining characteristic of Anne Brontë’s writing is her emphasis on religion: her novels convey a tone of intransigent Christian morality that is absent from her sisters’ novels. Indeed, it has been suggested that it is Anne’s Christian faith and the way it is reflected in her works that explains why she never became as popular as Emily and Charlotte who had a more secular focus in their writing. The so-called second-wave feminism, that

¹ Only an HTML version of the article was available. Therefore, page numbers for this article will not be given.

started in the early 1960s and continued well into the 1990s, has typically been highly critical of Christianity, pointing out its patriarchal and sexist power structures, and many second-wave feminist literary critics have either ignored the religious elements in Anne Brontë's novels or regarded them as a hindrance to her otherwise progressive ideas. *Agnes Grey*, Anne Brontë's first novel, is generally considered to be a milder novel than *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. It has a reputation of being a simple governess story with a didactic tone that describes the hardships of a poor clergyman's daughter and that is largely based on Anne Brontë's own experiences. The more recent studies on *Agnes Grey* have pointed out new dimensions in it: for example, Langland (1989) has studied the novel as an innovative female version of the traditional male bildungsroman and Frawley's (1996)² analysis of *Agnes Grey* deals with the complex psychological themes of self-representation, identity and voice. There are some conspicuously religious elements in *Agnes Grey* – the protagonist does not hide her religious feelings and opinions – and while most critics pay some attention to them more systematic studies on the role of religion in *Agnes Grey* are few. I will discuss a selection of these studies briefly.

The present thesis sets out to analyse *Agnes Grey* as a story of the protagonist's spiritual development. The starting point of my analysis is that the religious attributes that Brontë has intertwined in *Agnes Grey* both at the level of the story and at the level of narration invoke the genre of fictional spiritual autobiography – as Agnes the protagonist depicts her experiences as a governess she at the same time charts her spiritual journey. I will look into how *Agnes Grey* is structured as a story of spiritual development: what narrative devices does Brontë use to create the theme of a spiritual development in *Agnes Grey* and what is Agnes's spiritual development like? Secondly, I will discuss the implications of Agnes's faith in the context of Victorian Christianity: how do the novel's female point of view and the doctrinal aspects of Agnes's faith relate to the Victorian religious experience? At the level of the story, I approach *Agnes Grey* as a pilgrimage

² Only an HTML version of the article was available. Therefore, page numbers for this article will not be given.

narrative where the protagonist's outward journey from one place to another symbolises an inward spiritual journey and where the places, people and circumstances along the journey typically present either challenges or opportunities for the protagonist's spiritual growth. This linear and episodic narrative pattern that involves the framework of spiritual reality is recognized as one of the main features of early Victorian fiction (e.g. Wheeler 1985: 59; Gilmour 1986: 64; Ermarth 1996: 28). Its main source and inspiration was John Bunyan's classic Christian allegory *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) that was widely read in early Victorian England. At the level of the narration, I concentrate on the ways in which Brontë's first-person narrator constructs the religious dimension of the story at different stages of her journey. Anne Brontë is known as a devout Christian who used a wealth of biblical quotations and allusions in her novels (Thormählen 1999: 157): my analysis of *Agnes Grey* will pay particular attention to these biblical aspects.

The theme of religion is touched upon in many critical discussions on *Agnes Grey* and there are some studies that concentrate solely on this aspect of the novel. Here I concentrate on providing a short overview of a selection of critical discussions on *Agnes Grey* that have been published during the last three decades and that deal with the religious elements of the novel. However, to begin with, I quote Tom Winnifrith's comment on the role of religion in *Agnes Grey* from his book *The Brontës and Their Background: Romance and Reality*, published in 1973: "*Agnes Grey* is...surprisingly free of religion in view of the fact that the narrator is the daughter of a clergyman who marries a clergyman" (p. 59). Winnifrith then refers to a couple of sections in the novel that deal with religion in an explicit way and criticizes Brontë for her religious ideas that he finds naïve and confused, without presenting any proper arguments. Winnifrith's comment represents an attitude to religion that is characteristic of much of the twentieth-century literary criticism: the approach to religion is superficial and conveys a dismissive attitude. Towards the end of the twentieth century the attitudes towards religion within the field of literary criticism appear to have grown more diversified. P.J.M. Scott's book *Anne Brontë: A New Critical Assessment* (1983) is

important for the purpose of the present thesis in that Scott recognizes Anne Brontë as “a specifically Christian writer” (p. 6) and appreciates the way how she deals with religion in her works, “freshly and honestly” (p. 6). Scott views *Agnes Grey* as a profound treatise on the darker side of human nature where the protagonist’s Christian faith helps her to cope under conditions that are psychologically and morally challenging. Scott’s analysis offers some valuable insights into the religious aspects of *Agnes Grey* but it does not analyse them in any systematic manner. In her book *Anne Brontë: The Other One* (1989) Elizabeth Langland concentrates on the feminist themes of *Agnes Grey* but she also makes some observations about the role of religion in the novel. Firstly, she points out the influence of Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* on *Agnes Grey*, both at the structural and thematic level. Secondly, Langland notes that *Agnes Grey* differs significantly from many other nineteenth-century female Bildungsromans in that the protagonist’s faith is presented as a source of empowerment for her: “Cultivation of the spiritual life, leading to mastery of the passions, seems to ensure a greater degree of self-determination for Agnes rather than an increase in self-abnegation typical of the protagonist of the female *Bildungsroman*” (1989: 106). While Langland sees religion as one of the main themes of the novel she does not analyse the nature of Agnes’s faith in any detail nor pay attention to the process of Agnes’s spiritual development. Larry H. Peer’s (2004) short essay “The Discourse of Religious *Bildung* in Anne Brontë’s *Agnes Grey*” argues that *Agnes Grey* should be read as a particular type of romantic bildungsroman, namely a religious bildungsroman. As Peer puts it, “the source of Agnes’s *Bildung* is not only experience, but her specific means of dealing with the experience, her religious *Bildung*” (2004: 146). However, Peer’s essay concentrates on discussing the relationship between the Romantic idea of bildung and the idea of religious bildung in *Agnes Grey* rather than analysing the novel as a story of religious development. Elizabeth Hollis Berry’s analysis of the use of poetic imagery in *Agnes Grey*, included in her monograph *Anne Brontës Radical Vision: Structures of Consciousness* (1994), is very useful as it perceives the religious dimension of the story as essential to understanding the

novel and highlights the religious images and metaphors in the novel. Berry identifies the motif of a spiritual journey as a defining feature of *Agnes Grey*, referring to the story as “a spiritual passage” and “[a] pilgrim’s progress”. She notes that Agnes’s movement from one house to another, involving the changing landscapes and the changing emotional atmospheres, mark the different stages of Agnes’s psychological and spiritual development. Based on certain image patterns in the narration of *Agnes Grey*, such as weather imagery and the metaphors of light and darkness, Berry outlines the key moments Agnes’s spiritual journey. Yet Berry does not analyse the nature of Agnes’s faith in detail nor place it in the context of Victorian Christianity. In her essay *Enacting the Art of Moral Influence: religion and social reform in the works of Anna Brontë* (2004), Christine Colón discusses the role of religion in Brontë’s ideas of moral reform. She points out Brontë’s emphasis on the moral value of religion: in her writing, Brontë advocates the Christian faith and continual spiritual growth as the keys to living good, moral lives and exerting positive moral influence in society at large. Colón argues that Brontë’s radical social ideas, including her feminism, are driven by her Christian values and not hindered by them as many feminist critics think. Colón’s analysis of *Agnes Grey* traces Agnes’s development as a moral educator, combining the religious and feminist motifs of the novel, but as it focuses on the moral side of religion it ignores the spiritual side of Agnes’s faith. Jennifer Stolpa (2000) is another feminist critic who seeks to explain the role of religion in *Agnes Grey* in positive terms. Stolpa approaches *Agnes Grey* from within the critical framework of Christian feminism: she analyses Agnes’s religious activities as a form of Christian ministry and argues that *Agnes Grey* seeks to challenge the Christian gender ideology of its time. She maintains that *Agnes Grey* “challenges readers to see Christianity’s core principles not as repressive tools for a patriarchal society, but as potentially liberating forces for women (and men)” (p. 4). Stolpa concentrates on those aspects of Agnes’s faith that she considers relevant from the feminist point of view, ignoring the more traditional elements of Agnes’s faith. Thormählen’s book *The Brontës and Religion* (1999) is a general overview of the role of religion in

the Brontës' novels. Thormählen aims at understanding the treatment of religion in the Brontë novels from within the religious context of their time and from within the framework of Christian understanding. She focuses on four perspectives that she considers to be relevant for Brontës' ideas of religion: the denomination aspect, the doctrinal questions, the ethical questions, and the role of clergymen.

The critical studies that I briefly discussed above show that the theme of religion in Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey* has been approached from different theoretical angles. The theme of spiritual development has been identified by some critics as a central theme in *Agnes Grey* but few studies pay more detailed attention to this particular theme. The present thesis differs from the studies discussed above in that it sets out to describe the progress of Agnes's spiritual development in detail, concentrating both on the narrative structure of the novel and the implications of Agnes's faith within the context of Victorian Christianity. Furthermore, in my analysis I will approach Agnes's faith and spiritual development from within the framework of Christian understanding: I will use Christian concepts and the Bible in identifying the spiritual meanings of Agnes's experiences.

The thesis proceeds as follows: in Chapter 2, I will provide an overview of the historical and intellectual background to *Agnes Grey* that is relevant for the purposes the present study. In Chapter 3, I will present my analysis of *Agnes Grey* as a story of spiritual development. In Chapter 4, I will summarise and discuss the central findings of my analysis.

2. Historical and Intellectual Background

This thesis sets out to analyse Anne Brontë's novel *Agnes Grey* as a story of a young woman's spiritual journey in Victorian society. To be able to analyse the novel as a Victorian story of female spiritual development it is necessary to have an understanding of the religious context of Anne Brontë's time. In this chapter I will present an overview of the religious scene in the early nineteenth-century England where Anne Brontë lived and wrote her works. Firstly, I will describe the role of religion in early Victorian England: the main Christian denominations and movements of the time and attitudes to religion in general. Secondly, I will discuss the characteristics of the Evangelical faith that had a great impact on Victorian society and that was the branch of Christianity that affected Anne Brontë most. Thirdly, I will discuss women's role within Victorian Evangelicalism.

2.1 Religion in Early Victorian England: Devotion, Diversity, Disbelief

Anne Brontë lived during a time when religion mattered in a way that may be difficult to understand today. The modern popular thought that faith is a private matter did not appeal to early Victorians: religion shaped the beliefs, attitudes and behaviour of the individual Victorians but it also had a tremendous effect on the values and structures of Victorian society, and on the Victorian way of life in general. Moran (2006: 24) states that "Christianity was *the* most powerful cultural presence in the Victorian milieu". First of all, Christianity mattered to a great many Victorians as a holistic worldview that provided answers to questions of life and death as well as offered a moral code to be followed. According to Mitchell (1996: 246), at the beginning of the Victorian period in the 1830s the majority of the professing Christians believed the Bible to be literally true and

infallible. Winnifrith (1973: 32) argues that the relevance of the Christian faith to the Victorians arose from the ever-present awareness of death – the relatively high mortality rates for both children and adults were reality especially in early and mid-Victorian England. Questions related to salvation and to what happens after death troubled the Victorians greatly. Winnifrith (1973: 33) points out that it was as natural for Victorian people to discuss the notions of hell and damnation as it is for many people today to discuss sex. For many Victorians, pondering on religion and the hereafter was not about theoretical hair-splitting but about making decisions that had real and irreversible consequences. As Ingham (2006: 60) remarks, “religion and its implications for afterlife were living issues which coloured individual attitudes, decisions, and behaviour”. During the Victorian period dramatic changes and reforms took place in different spheres of life. The Christian faith, with its moral code of conduct and its focus on the next world, offered stability and hope in the midst of life’s unpredictability. The vitality of the Victorian spiritual life was manifested in denominational variety, reforms within the Established Church, the religious revivalism, hectic Christian social activism, and missionary enthusiasm. Secondly, the role of Christianity in Victorian England can be viewed from the point of view of its social and cultural relevance. Nixon (2004: 1) notes that religion contributed to the constructions of the national identity in Victorian England: “England’s sense of itself – England’s Englishness – involved the way religion, and especially Protestantism, factored into nationness”. Moran (2006: 24) describes Protestant Christianity in Victorian society as a “cultural adhesive” that had a social significance to all social classes: the Victorian upper class had strong connections to the established Anglican state church, controlled by the parliament and headed by the monarch; the Victorian middle class eagerly committed to Christianity and thus reinforced its moral influence in society; and finally, Christianity provided the working-class people with an opportunity to gain respectability and to get socially involved with members of the other classes. According to Parsons (1988: 85), the middle and upper class idea of Christian life formed “a social and religious consensus” the key elements of which were church attendance,

respectability, duty, and conservatism in doctrinal matters. It is generally recognized that the Victorian middle class had a remarkable role in the Victorian religious life. Parsons (1988: 85), for example, characterizes the Victorian middle class as the “backbone of Victorian Christianity”. The middle class was an energetic and effective advocate of Christian morality in various areas of life, most notably in the domestic sphere of home and family. Familiarity with the Bible and other Christian texts, such as the Anglican Book of Common Prayer and Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, formed the core of common cultural knowledge in the Victorian society (Ingham 2006: 70; Wheeler 2005: 183). *The Pilgrim’s Progress* was widely read by people of all social classes and its allegorical presentation of life as a pilgrimage towards heaven had a profound impact on the Victorian mind. Louis (2006) notes that *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, that “transformed the objects and happenings of everyday life into moral allegory” (p. 31), was a novel that “became embedded in the Victorian popular imagination” (p. 152). Wheeler (2005: 183) notes that the use of biblical quotations and allusions was a widely adopted literary convention among Victorian novelists who knew that most of their readers would recognize the biblical meanings. Many Victorian Christians observed Sunday strictly as the Lord’s Day when work and all other secular preoccupations were prohibited. Religion was inherently present also in the way that the Victorians marked the pass of time. Ingham (2006: 58) notes that the prayers and services that were used in the church to mark the change of natural seasons provided “hands on the clock of existence”. The official religious census carried out in 1851 is often quoted to illustrate the church-going habits among Victorians: the census revealed that approximately 50 per cent of the available adult population in England and Wales attended the Sunday service at a Christian church on census Sunday (Bebbington 1989: 107). It is revealing that while the figure seems fairly high, at least when compared with today’s churchgoing statistics, the Victorians were shocked to find out that church attendance was in fact so low (Bebbington 1989: 107).

The Christian faith shaped the Victorian mindset and Victorian society in many pervasive ways. Yet, there is more to Victorian religiousness than this: religion was also a great source of controversy and conflict among Victorians. Gilmour (1993: 63) remarks that “religion in Victorian Britain was...problematic in a way that it had not been before” and points out that the problems resulted both from internal and external factors. Firstly, the reverse side of the vitality and intensity of Victorian religious life were interdenominational conflicts, vehement disputes between different church parties within the Church of England, and sectarianism. Secondly, the validity of Christianity and religion in general came to be increasingly questioned in the course of the nineteenth century due to scientific discoveries and the spread of humanist and secularist thinking. The attitudes of doubt and disbelief grew in intensity towards the end of the nineteenth century but they were present already in the beginning of the Victorian period. Since these problematic elements of religion are an essential part of the early Victorian religious experience I will discuss them in more detail.

The main setting on the early Victorian ecclesiastical scene consists of the established Anglican Church of England, the Protestant Nonconformist denominations, and the Evangelical revival movement. The Nonconformist groups, which had separated from the Church of England during the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, typically disapproved of state interference in religious matters and opposed some of the Anglican doctrines. Gilmour (1993: 68-69) uses the notions of ‘Old Dissent’ and ‘New Dissent’ to distinguish among different types of Nonconformity: ‘Old Dissent’ comprises the Congregationalists, the Baptists, the Presbyterians, and the Quakers while ‘New Dissent’ is synonymous with Methodism, “the largest and most schismatic of Nonconformist groups”. The Evangelical movement, that had started in the 1730s as a small revival group within the Church of England, had in the course of the eighteenth century evolved into an interdenominational revival movement. It spread from one Christian denomination to another, casting its regenerating influence both on the established church and the Nonconformist

churches - and sometimes it gave birth to new Christian denominations, the most notable example being Methodism. I will discuss the doctrinal characteristics of the Evangelical faith in more detail in the next chapter. Suffice it to say here that Evangelical preachers declared, with fervour and devotion, the basic Christian message of salvation and emphasized the believer's personal, living experience of God's love. If Evangelicalism offered informality and religious fervour, the established church offered stability and authority. The Church of England was a powerful institution in Victorian society. In its role as the established church it enjoyed many privileges compared to the Nonconformist churches, such as the right to claim certain political positions for its members and the right to collect tithes from property owners. The negative side of the privileged position included the rigid hierarchical structure of the church organisation and the secular interference in spiritual matters. As Bebbington (1989: 17) puts it, "[t]he church played a salient role in everyday life, but at the expense of imbibing a strong dose of secularity". Gilmour (1993: 66-67) points out that the rationalist spirit of the eighteenth century had left the Anglican Church largely in a state of spiritual neglect where the only signs of living faith were the Evangelical members of the clergy. At the beginning of the Victorian era, during the 1830s and 1840s, the Church of England had many challenges to confront. The hegemony of the established church was a constant source of irritation to the Nonconformist groups and now the tense relations erupted in bitter politicised disputes. The Church of England was under constant pressure to carry out structural reforms to be able to respond to the needs of urbanisation and other social changes. The most fundamental problems, however, were of a theological nature and arose from within the clergy of the Church of England. The main conflict was between two Anglican revival movements that had differing opinions on the role and priorities of the church: Evangelical Anglicanism and the Oxford Movement. Anglican Evangelicalism, that had existed in the Church of England since the end of the eighteenth century and that represented the Low Church tradition, included all the basic elements of the revivalist Evangelical faith but in a more moderate form. Thormählen (1999: 42) describes the importance of

Evangelicalism as a revival movement within the Church of England as follows: “Evangelicalism in the Church of England was a movement of enduring importance in that it revived the spiritual and emotional dimensions of religious worship”. Gilmour (1993: 9) observes that the Evangelical mentality helped to restore the sense of Christian responsibility to the established church that had grown indifferent to people’s spiritual hunger. The heyday of Evangelical Anglicanism spans from 1780 to 1830: it became popular and respectable in the end of the eighteenth century when it started to gain converts among the middle and upper classes and gradually lost its spiritual fervour along the general decline of the Evangelical movement in the course of the nineteenth century. In spite of their remarkable contribution to the Church of England the Evangelical clergy were always in a minority: according to Mitchell (1996: 242), Evangelical clergymen constituted one third of the Anglican clergy in the mid-nineteenth century.

The Oxford Movement originated at the beginning of the 1830s as a clerical movement within the Church of England. Its supporters fiercely criticized the secularism of the Church of England that resulted from the state interference and advocated the autonomy of the Church and its historical traditions. The Oxford Movement, with its focus on ceremony, sacraments and clerical authority, represented the High Church tradition of the Anglican Church, or Anglo-Catholicism as this tradition is also called. Gilmour (1993: 76) characterizes the Oxford Movement as a religion of “a rediscovered sense of the meaning of Church authority and ritual”. Gilmour (1993: 79) also points out that the members of the movement were not ‘High Church’ in the negative sense of the word, meaning ‘high-and-dry’, but were genuinely concerned with restoring a neglected channel of Christian spirituality to the Anglican Church. Mitchell (1996: 243) provides a vivid description of the impact of Anglo-Catholicism on Anglican parish life:

In high church parishes, Sunday services grew more solemn, altars were decorated, vestments richly embroidered, buildings restored to their Gothic splendour. New parish organizations emphasized religious ritual and service to the church. For the first time since the Protestant Reformation, daily services of morning and evening prayer returned to some churches. (p. 243)

The Oxford Movement dominated the spiritual atmosphere of the Church of England until the beginning of the 1850s. The movement came to a dramatic end when some of its most well-known members and supporters converted to Roman Catholicism during the 1840s and 1850s, causing a nation-wide shock and deep disapproval. Anglican Evangelicalism and the Oxford Movement represented in many ways the opposite ends on the continuum of the Anglican faith and the co-existence of the two movements was full of tensions – Gilmour (1993: 63) refers to the situation aptly as “two decades of bad feeling between the Anglo-Catholic and the evangelical wings of the Church”.

The conflicts and disputes between and within the different groups of Victorian Christians caused division and brought negative publicity to Christianity. Yet the most serious challenge to Christianity was the growing sense of religious doubt and disbelief. There were several simultaneous developments in the first part of the nineteenth century that gave rise to the spread of religious doubt among Victorians - a phenomenon that is often called the Victorian crisis of faith, or even more dramatically, the Victorian loss of faith. Firstly, archaeology and discoveries in natural sciences offered indisputable and persuasive evidence against the credibility of the Bible. Secondly, the Higher Bible Criticism that analysed the authorship and composition of the Bible as if it were a secular work, further undermined the authority of the Bible by pointing to its historical inaccuracy and internal inconsistencies. The proponents of the Higher Bible Criticism claimed, among other things, that Jesus was just a historical figure and the doctrines of the Incarnation and Redemption were myths. The divine origin of the Bible and the supernatural foundation of Christianity were seriously questioned. Thirdly, Christianity came under attack on moral grounds: Victorian intellectuals in particular found it increasingly difficult to digest the basic Christian doctrines that they deemed immoral. Gilmour (1993: 87) summarises the spirit of the moral opposition to Christianity aptly: “The Atonement, chiefly, hell, everlasting punishment, original sin – a God who required the obedience of his creatures on those terms was a God who did not deserve worshipping,

a primitive, barbaric Deity...”. It was felt that Christianity no longer served as the basis for moral sensibility. Kucich (2001: 214) points out that Victorian humanitarianism and a firm belief in social reform offered an attractive alternative to the harshness of Christianity. Religious doubt and disbelief manifested themselves in different forms: secret doubts, casual neglect of religious practice, agnosticism, and atheism. Gilmour (1993: 64-65) argues that the term ‘reconstruction’ is much more descriptive of the Victorian crisis of faith than the term ‘loss of faith’: the crisis was not so much about losing faith but about formulating a new approach to faith.

Dennis (2000: 26) notes that “[p]robably no period in English history has been so religious - or at least thought as much about religion - as the Victorian”. Dennis’ observation encapsulates the two meanings of Victorian religiousness: religion provided both spiritual nourishment and food for thought. Religion is a popular topic in Victorian fiction – as Gilmour (1993: 63) expresses it, “its problematic presence can be felt wherever we look in nineteenth-century literature”. The way that religious topics and themes are treated in Victorian novels varies greatly. Wheeler (1985: 5) distinguishes between a relatively minor sub-genre of distinctly religious fiction, which deals with religious issues in an explicit way and often has a hortatory tone to it, and the body of Victorian novels that deal with religious themes in more implicit ways. For example, Charlotte Yonge, who had strong sympathies with the Oxford Movement, promotes Christian values and High Church teachings in her novels without directly addressing any doctrinal or dogmatic issues (Dennis 2001: 31). Many Victorian novels criticize the Church and the Christian faith by providing satirical portraits of the members of the clergy or lay Christians. Wheeler (1985: 5) notes that many famous Victorian novelists make use of the religious stereotypes of the time, such as “the portly rector, the thin, hypocritical dissenter, and the female philanthropist of High Church persuasions”. There is also a host of novels that describe the effects of religious doubt and the loss of faith in individuals’ lives. Kucich (2001: 214) notes that what many Victorian writers have in common is their “preoccupation with the loss of spiritual stability in a morally incoherent world”.

2.2 Early Victorian Evangelicalism: an Overview of the Main Characteristics

Evangelicalism, or more specifically Evangelical Anglicanism, was the branch of Christianity that affected Anne Brontë and her writing most. Her mother Maria was a Wesleyan Methodist before becoming a member of the Anglican Church and her father Patrick maintained his Evangelical inclinations throughout his long career as a clergyman of the Church of England. Barker (1995: 44) describes Patrick Brontë's firm belief in conversion, one of the main tenets of the Evangelical movement, as "the cornerstone of [his] own life". Here I will discuss some of the main characteristics of the Victorian Evangelicalism and their implications for Victorian society.

In his book *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from 1730s to 1980s* (1989), church historian D.W. Bebbington presents his often quoted definition of the distinguishing characteristics of Evangelical Christianity. According to Bebbington (1989: 2-3), the following four features have been characteristic of the Evangelical faith since the beginning of the Evangelical movement in the 1730s until the latter half of the twentieth century: "*conversionism*, the belief that lives need to be changed; *activism*, the expression of the gospel in effort; *biblicism*, a particular regard for the Bible; and what may be called *crucicentrism*, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross". Bebbington (1989: 2) points out that Evangelicals themselves have often explained their distinctiveness as Christians in terms of doctrinal emphases: in their view, the Evangelical faith did not offer a new interpretation of the Christian doctrine but rather a different understanding of which doctrinal issues constituted the essence of the Christian doctrine. Since the four elements of Bebbington's definition of Evangelicalism are typically included, in one way or another, in descriptions and discussions of Victorian Evangelicalism I will use them as the starting point for my discussion of the nature and implications of early Victorian Evangelicalism.

For Evangelicals, conversion – or 'the great change' as many Evangelical Christians called it – was the gate to a new life as a Christian and a redeemed sinner. Evangelicals firmly believed and

declared that salvation through Christ's Atonement and eternal life in heaven were available to all humankind but that Christ's atoning sacrifice had to be personally accepted and received – as Thormählen (1999: 15) puts it, “A personal response to the Atonement was required of every Christian”. Intrinsically present in the Evangelical teaching on the necessity of conversion were also the doctrines of the Fall of Mankind, the Original Sin, and God's merciful plan of salvation for the lost humankind. Evangelical narratives of conversion were often highly emotional and involved the elements of spiritual anxiety, guilt, repentance of sins, and finally a new-found peace and joy. Moran (2006: 27) notes that the Evangelical notion of conversion provided the foundation for the formulaic structure that was typical of Victorian fictional autobiography: “a crisis leads to self-loathing, contrition, and a turning to new values”. After having experienced conversion Evangelical Christians were expected to feel assurance that they were saved and lived under God's grace. Turner (2002: 30) remarks that “[f]or evangelicals, subjective, personal religious experience confirmed one's assurance or provided the grounds for inferring that one had actually placed faith in the atonement of Jesus and had received deliverance”. Evangelicals saw conversion as the boundary between the saved and the lost, and thus conversion became a question of life and death. Bebbington (1989: 5) describes the situation as follows: “The line between those who had undergone the experience and those who had not was the sharpest in the world. It marked the boundary between a Christian and a pagan”. The main means of reaching unsaved souls and leading them to conversion was preaching the gospel to as many people as possible, whenever and wherever possible. Evangelical clergymen were keenly aware that their preaching had to awaken hearers to question the state of their souls and thus they typically proclaimed the reality of hell and eternal punishment alongside the good news of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Since conversion involved strong emotional elements there was plenty of room for confusion and uncertainty. As Gilmour (1993: 73) notes, “[t]his [emphasis on conversion] could put a terrible strain on the individual conscience, especially for the young. How did one know the change had taken place?”

Some Evangelicals thought it was necessary to be able to pinpoint the exact moment of conversion while others believed that a gradual process of conversion was perfectly possible – the last-mentioned view was widely accepted among Anglican Evangelicals who tended to have more moderate views on doctrinal issues than their Evangelical brothers and sisters outside of the Established Church.

While the conversion experience was important for Evangelicals it still marked only the beginning of a new life as a Christian. The convert's change of heart had to manifest itself in changed attitudes and in a readiness to put one's faith into practice by doing deeds of love and living a life of integrity. Barker (1995: 5) summarises the Evangelical attitude to life as follows: "Habitual self-examination, a sense of one's own sinfulness and an awareness of the imminence of the Day of Judgement, all combined to ensure that a life once dedicated to God remained positively and actively employed in His service". Evangelical activism derived from the joy of salvation and the sense of moral obligation. Evangelical Christians channeled their fervour and activism into a disciplined devotional life, charity work, missionary work both at home and abroad, and social reform to transform the society according to the gospel. Dedication to God's work was expected from both laymen and clergymen. Bebbington (1989: 10-11) notes that the Evangelical focus of actively reaching out to people had a dramatic impact on the role of ministers in the Church of England: if the clerical work had previously concentrated around Sunday services and afforded plenty of leisure time, now Evangelical clergymen were expected to devote themselves wholeheartedly to winning new souls to the kingdom of God and to tending to the spiritual needs of their 'flock'. Pastoral work for Evangelical clergymen was arduous and full-time, as Bebbington's quote from a clerical manual, published in 1830, reveals:

To acquaint ourselves with the various wants of our people; to win their affections; to give a seasonable warning, encouragement, instruction, or consolidation; to identify ourselves with their spiritual interests, in the temper of Christian sympathy, and under a sense of Ministerial obligation; to do this with the constancy, seriousness, and fervid energy which the matter requires, is indeed a work of industry, patience, and self-denial. (1989: 11)

As Barker (1995: 5) aptly notes, “This was a faith that demanded a missionary zeal in its ministers; there was simply no place for the idle or the half-hearted”.

The nineteenth century saw a remarkable increase in overseas missionary enterprise as a growing number of Evangelicals felt a calling to the foreign mission field and several missionary societies were founded to support this work. Those at home were called to participate in a variety of charity works and philanthropic enterprises. Evangelical believers at different levels and spheres of society strove for social improvements both in their immediate environments and in society at large. At a local level, the charity work of individual Evangelicals and Evangelical groups often involved visiting the poor and the sick, organising charity events, and providing material help to the disadvantaged members of the community. A host of organised Christian charities and societies were established to promote various social causes and to advance Christian morality and good manners. Many well-known Victorian social reforms, such as the abolition of slavery and the legal acts limiting the use of child labour, were largely the result of Evangelical campaigns. Mitchell’s (1996: 252) compact summary of the humanitarian work of the Victorian Evangelicals is impressive:

Victorian humanitarian evangelicals abolished the slave trade, ended flogging in the army and navy, got rid of public hanging, strove to convert criminal justice from ‘punishment’ to ‘reform’, established schools, cleared slums, built decent housing for workers, abolished blood sports and protected animals from cruelty, worked steadily toward raising the age at which children could work full-time, founded refuges and orphanages, built schools for the mentally and physically disabled, and rethought the treatment of insanity.

All in all, the activism of the Victorian Evangelicals contributed remarkably to making the Victorian society, where cruelty and inequality often prevailed under a thin veneer of civility, a more agreeable and humane place to live.

The Evangelical Biblicism results from the solid belief in the Bible as the highest authority on Christian doctrine and Christian living. The Evangelical teaching on the individual Christian’s right and duty to study the Scriptures differed notably from the High Church Anglican teaching on the

authority of the church and the clergymen in biblical interpretation. Mitchell (1996: 242) points out that Evangelical Christians assigned more weight on private Bible study than on attending church services. Evangelical lay believers were encouraged to read the Holy Scripture both alone and in private Bible study groups, and to seek God's guidance in their lives through biblical study. The conviction that all Christians should have direct access to the Bible resulted in activities that helped to forward this cause. Barker (1995: 5) notes that Evangelical clergyman enthusiastically advocated literacy and education in general among their congregations by organising Sunday schools, holding informal meetings in the parishioners' homes, and writing didactic tracts and pamphlets.

Crucicentrism, the emphasis on the atoning death of Jesus Christ on the cross, is at the very core of the Evangelical faith. Bebbington (1989: 15) remarks that Christ's cross surpassed in significance all the other key events of the salvation history: "The atonement eclipsed even the incarnation among Evangelicals". The sinful humankind who deserved God's punishment was redeemed from sin and death, by God's mercy, through Christ's sacrificial death. Bebbington (1989: 15) points out the radicalness of the Evangelical belief in the substitutionary nature of Christ's death: first of all, it was the thing that originally distinguished Evangelicalism from many other schools of Christian thought, and secondly, it caused a growing sense of indignation among Victorians many of whom saw this doctrine as a ground for accusing God of cruelty and revenge, and for regarding Christianity as immoral. However, for Evangelical Christians Christ's ransom sacrifice was a source of joyful inspiration for good works and for daily living as a Christian – as Bebbington (1989: 16) expresses it, "The motive for spiritual growth was gratitude for Calvary".

From this overview of the doctrinal emphases of Evangelicalism certain implications emerge concerning the nature of the Evangelical faith and its impact on the Victorian society. Victorian Evangelicalism, first of all, placed a great emphasis on the individual believer's subjective, inner experience of faith and responsibility for maintaining a personal relationship with God. Victorian Evangelicalism has often been called 'the religion of the heart': feeling God's love in one's heart

and a whole-hearted devotion to God were at the very core of the Evangelical faith – as Thormählen (1999: 22) notes, “Evangelical divines kept exhorting their parishioners to remember that God required all their hearts”. The emphasis on private devotional lives expressed a firm belief in individual Christians’ right and ability to study the Bible, to search for God’s will in their lives, and to make judgements in matters of faith. The focus of the Evangelical spiritual activity was outside of formal worship, on everyday devotional life and on informal Christian fellowship. The second major characteristic of the Evangelical faith is its emphasis on active service for God both in the private and the public spheres of life. Evangelical Christians were expected to live a life of practical piety, exercise constant self-examination, and to have a zeal for good works. The public activities included both the vigorous spreading of the gospel at home and abroad, and improving the society by promoting social justice, charity and Christian morality. These two qualities of Evangelicalism, the emphasis on the emotional side of faith and active service of God both in the spiritual and secular spheres of life, affected the early Victorian society in a variety of ways. In Gilmour’s (1993: 74) view, the Evangelical contribution to the nineteenth-century Victorian society was mainly moral and emotional, and manifested itself most clearly in the large-scale public campaigns for social reforms. While the Evangelical emotionalism and the emphasis on good works can be viewed as the strengths of Evangelicalism, they had their drawbacks too: they created an auspicious atmosphere for hypocrisy, spiritual bullying, and spiritual melancholy in case one lacked the assurance of salvation or felt inadequate as a Christian. Moran (2006: 27) observes the effects of Evangelical thinking as follows: “The emphasis on the fallen nature of humanity etched introspection and guilt on the Victorian personality. Self-awareness meant knowing one’s wickedness and being constantly attuned to the dangers of temptations that lurked everywhere”. The Evangelical faith made itself seen and heard, and it stirred strong emotions among the Victorians. Mitchell (1996: 242) notes that “[b]y the mid-Victorian period, middle-class evangelicals had a reputation as anti-intellectual and emotionally restrained”. According to Gilmour (1993: 71-72), Victorian literature associates

Evangelicalism most often with joylessness, “with sabbath observance, temperance, and the disapproval of pleasure”, and Gilmour concludes that Victorian novelists present in their novels “[a] largely hostile picture of evangelical religion”. Evangelical clergymen in particular were portrayed in a negative light - the sadistic Mr. Brocklehurst in *Jane Eyre* provides a memorable example. Even though the Evangelical seriousness and the bold Evangelical enthusiasm for promoting their causes stirred irritation and resentment in those who had more moderate Christian views, Evangelicalism had qualities that appealed to early Victorians. Evangelicalism, with its emphasis on assurance of salvation, offered spiritual security in a world full of uncertainty. The Evangelical way of life, which was based on integrity, self-discipline, temperance, and diligence, represented respectability and advocated order and balance in a society where dramatic and rapid changes were taking place in different spheres of life. It is often pointed out that Evangelicalism responded specifically to the needs and aspirations of the emerging Victorian middle classes. Dennis (2000: 27) notes that the self-made businessmen of the middle classes saw a link between the bourgeois ideal of economic self-sufficiency and the individualism of the Evangelical faith. Yet, it is the sphere of the middle-class home where Evangelicalism probably had its most enduring effect: the middle classes in particular embraced the Evangelical idea of the Christian nuclear family as the basic unit of Christianity in society. Since the middle-class values came to have a remarkable influence on Victorian society the middle-class Evangelical family life became to represent the Victorian ideal of domesticity. I will discuss the notion of ‘Evangelical home’ in more detail since it has an important role in *Agnes Grey*.

Turner (2002) describes the role of the home in the Victorian Evangelicalism as follows:

Evangelicals looked to the home rather than to the services of the church or the chapel as the fundamental arena for Christian education, inculcation of self-discipline, family devotion, prayer, and Bible reading. The home prepared children to experience faith in Christ and nurtured a life of Christian sanctification thereafter. (p. 33)

The home was the place where the Evangelical values and virtues were put into use in everyday life.

One of the main functions of the Evangelical home was to provide children with spiritual and moral

education that would prepare them for a life as a Christian outside home. This task involved huge responsibility on the part of the parents as the early lessons given at home could determine the child's salvation. Lamonica (2003: 15) notes that the ultimate purpose of the Evangelical upbringing was to prepare individuals for heaven: "Every individual had a dual destination: the world beyond the "walled garden" of the original home, and the world beyond the mortal world - in other words, society and eternity. Family directed one's entrance into both worlds". The husband and the wife had distinct roles. Victorian Evangelicals eagerly advocated the idea that men and women, while equal in God's eyes, had different physical and mental qualities and were thus created with different but complementary purposes. According to this doctrine of 'separate spheres', men were the breadwinners and leaders of their families who participated in the public life and decision-making while women occupied the domestic sphere of home and family where they performed or directed household duties and took care of children. The idea of men's and women's separate roles and spheres comprised a moral and spiritual dimension: the home was regarded as the sanctuary of Christian morality against the harmful influences and immorality of the outside world. Consequently, women acquired the role of a moral guardian – a role that elevated women's alleged moral superiority. Turner (2002: 33) notes that even though the father was seen as the spiritual head of the Evangelical family the mother had a prominent spiritual role in guiding the religious and moral education of children in everyday life. The Evangelical home is often presented as a warm and loving growing environment. For example, Thormählen (1989: 20) concludes, after having studied several testimonies of evangelical upbringing, that "Evangelical families were particularly loyal and devoted, and bonds between parents and children were close and powerful". Gilmour (1993: 74) remarks that the Evangelical home often had a life-long impact on the child even if he or she became estranged from the Evangelical faith later in life: "In the severe but affectionate piety of...evangelical homes the moral sense was rinsed clear, as it were, imparting a scrupulousness to

the individual's temperament which lasted through life and survived changing opinions and diverging allegiances”.

2.3 Women and the Evangelical Faith

Women's life in early Victorian society was restricted in many ways. Early Victorian women appear as second-class citizens who lacked many political and social rights and opportunities that women of today take for granted. Among the most egregious examples of women's subordination in Victorian society are often mentioned the fact that women did not have the right to vote, their insecure position in marriage – the husband had a legal and financial control of the wife – and the lack of educational possibilities. Women's role in society seemed to be biologically and psychologically determined: it was thought that women's physical weakness, including their hormonal changes, and their intuitive, emotional and maternal qualities made them natural nurturers and homemakers who were best suited for living at home, managing the household duties, rearing children, and supporting their husbands. Femininity was associated with special and elevated qualities such as gentleness, innocence, purity, passivity and unselfish devotion, and it was thought that women had a special role as the preservers of the nation's moral values. Langland (1989: 24) describes the connection between women's subordinated position and their idealization as follows: “The Victorian preoccupation with woman's special nature developed into an ideology that legitimised unequal power relations in the economical and political sphere even as it glorified women's role in the domestic and ‘moral’ sphere”. In Moran's words (2006: 35), “[Victorian] women were idolized, protected, and oppressed”. This ideology of the separate spheres, the religious and moral aspects of which I briefly discussed in the previous chapter, concerned the middle-class women in particular. Since marriage was considered to be the principal aim and purpose in women's life, other options and opportunities were few. Middle-class single women

were expected to live with their parents until they got married. The possibilities for middle-class women to work outside home were very limited, consisting mainly of governessing and other low-paid teaching positions. Furthermore, the general attitudes towards the idea of middle-class women working outside the confines of the home and being paid for their work were utterly negative – Mitchell (1996: 143) notes that it was deemed “socially unacceptable” and adds that in some middle-class circles women’s participation even in unpaid charity work was called into question. The doctrine of separate spheres, that included the cult of domesticity and idealization of female morality, was a multifaceted phenomenon. It was supported by an ever-growing reserve of prescriptive literature that consisted of conduct books, domestic manuals, magazine articles and etiquette books written especially for women – and by women. Indeed, many middle-class women were actively engaged in maintaining and promoting the prevailing ideological system. For example, Gilmour (1993: 191) notes that there were many women who fiercely opposed women’s right to vote as they were afraid it would “threaten domestic and national stability”. On the other hand, there were a growing number of Victorian women who were dissatisfied with women’s role in society and sought to expand women’s opportunities in life. The Victorian ‘Woman Question’ involves the growing questioning of women’s role in Victorian society and the ensuing activities for improving their opportunities and rights, including suffrage movements. Religion was one the areas where women expressed the urge to expand their roles and responsibilities.

Christianity in the early Victorian period stressed women’s role as moral guardians of home and family life. This association of women and Christian morality was a fairly recent phenomenon and by no means self-evident. Brown (2009: 58-59) uses the notion of “the feminisation of piety” to refer to the dramatic change that took place in the discourse on women’s role in Christianity in the turn of the nineteenth century: Brown points out that women and femininity had traditionally been seen as somewhat problematic in the Christian context but that around 1800 women occupied a central role in Christianity as the guardians of Christian morality – as Brown puts it, “women’s

religiosity became privileged". This change of emphasis was of Evangelical origin: Brown (2009: 59) points out that the mobilization of women's faith played an essential role in the Evangelical campaign for moral revolution. While women had gained a new and elevated role that asserted their moral superiority their religious activities were still limited in many ways. Even though women formed the majority of the church-goers both in the Established Church and in the Nonconformist denominations (Morgan 2002: 2) their influence was confined mainly to the domestic sphere of home where their main spiritual duty was to provide moral and religious education to children. Women were not expected nor encouraged to engage in theological or doctrinal discussions, nor were they allowed to preach or teach the Bible publicly. They were expected to submit to men's spiritual authority both at home and in the church. Stolpa (2000: 3) points out that in spite of men's alleged moral inferiority it was maintained that their divinely-ordained authority and leadership abilities made them natural spiritual leaders as well as authorities in scriptural, doctrinal and theological matters. Yet, it can be claimed that Christianity, and the Evangelical faith in particular, offered early Victorian women widening opportunities of experiencing their Christian faith and participating in religious activities. The Evangelical faith both responded to and fostered Victorian women's urge to advance the Christian cause outside the confines of their homes. Bebbington (1989: 129) points out that "[i]t has been persuasively argued that Evangelical religion, despite its emphasis on the domestic role of women, was more important than feminism in enlarging their sphere during the nineteenth century". There were, first of all, certain qualities in the Evangelical faith that encouraged women to practicing an active spiritual life. Evangelicalism emphasized that all Christians were meant to have a personal relationship with Jesus and that Christ was the ultimate authority for a Christian. For women who were frustrated with their limited roles as servants of God and wanted to expand their scope of action, the idea of being able to seek God's will in their lives and being responsible first and foremost to God in all matters of faith provided new confidence. Griesinger (2008: 37) notes that "[t]he assurance of being saved and the experience of being

intimately in touch with God became an important source of independence and power for Victorian women willing to challenge traditional religious authority and eventually social and political authority as well". Evangelicalism stressed the importance of Bible study as part of the Christian's devotional life. Stolpa (2000: 12) remarks that the Evangelical tradition of personal Bible study encouraged women "to carefully read, interpret, and apply Scripture to their daily lives". According to Griesinger (2008: 36), the Evangelical focus on and valuation of the emotional aspects of faith appealed to women and served to diminish the gender stereotypes that prevailed both in the church and in society at large. Furthermore, Griesinger (2008: 36-37) points out that the Evangelical faith allowed more space for the work of the Holy Spirit than the Anglican faith of the established church where services proceeded according to formal liturgical patterns: laymen, both men and women, could exercise spiritual gifts and there was no need for the official members of the clergy to act as mediators in the work of the Holy Spirit. Secondly, Evangelicalism offered women concrete opportunities of serving God. Evangelical women were active writers of religious tracts and novels, devotional poetry and hymns. The Evangelical enthusiasm for philanthropy and charity work, both in the Anglican Church and in Nonconformist circles, provided women with many opportunities of working for the common good: visiting the poor and the sick, teaching in Sunday schools, and participating in the work of voluntary organisations were among the activities that were available for women. Bebbington (1989: 128-129), notes that "[p]hilanthropy was a major channel for women's energies". Yet, women were expected to always remember their primary duties as wives and mothers - as Stolpa (2000: 68) puts it, "[a]ny charitable activities were to be secondary to the domestic duties of women". Women's energetic engagement in charity and philanthropy caused mixed reactions among the general public. Rickard (2001: 140) notes that "[w]omen who dared to step beyond accepted Victorian domestic familial roles of daughters, mother or wives, or those who acted independently and connected philosophically and practically their feminist concerns with philanthropy, engendered feelings of ambivalence". As an example of the criticism directed towards

women involved in religious and philanthropic endeavours, Rickard (2001: 139-140) mentions the treatment of these women in Victorian fiction: “A woman with a cause was often regarded as a volatile or, worse still, a subversive creature”.

There are differing opinions on the overall impact of the Evangelical faith on women’s role in early nineteenth-century England. Griesinger (2008: 39) concludes that Evangelicalism was “a mixed bag for Victorian women”, noting that it offered Christian women new opportunities but also maintained ideologies that legitimised their traditional role. In Lamonaca’s (2002: 247) view, the Evangelical faith presented Victorian women of faith with “a virtual theological impasse”: “Evangelicals championed the liberty of discernment and conscience for *all* believers, but also prized a model of marriage in which wives were spiritually subordinate to their husbands”. Morgan (2002: 3) observes that views on the influence of Evangelicalism on Victorian women have undergone a change during the last decades: the first analyses on this topic presented the Evangelical idealization of women as conservative and limiting but that more recent analyses have emphasized the variety of the religious orientations among Victorian female activists.

3. Analysis of *Agnes Grey* as a Story of Spiritual Development

In my analysis of *Agnes Grey* I will trace the protagonist's spiritual development both in the sequence of events that the novel describes and in the way that these events are recounted. I will analyse the novel as a narrative that progresses on two levels: on one level, Agnes moves physically from one house to another as she struggles to find her place in the world as a poor clergyman's daughter and, on the other level, each of the houses represents a different stage in Agnes's spiritual journey. Each of the five houses described in the story presents Agnes with different spiritual atmospheres, challenges, and insights. At each house Agnes encounters people and circumstances that either advance or threaten her spiritual growth, and some of them do both. The result is a story of spiritual development with five stages: in her childhood home, her father's parsonage, Agnes grows up to be a highly principled but somewhat naïve young Christian woman who wants to be tested, then she moves on to work as a governess and a teacher in three different houses where her Christian faith is tested in many ways, and finally she marries a clergyman and lives as a happy clergyman's wife in their parsonage. I have named Agnes's five stages of spiritual development according to what seemed to be her spiritual key challenge or insight at each stage. While most of the five stages of Agnes's spiritual development cover a remarkably long period of time and encompass a variety of feelings and experiences, it was fairly straightforward to identify the dominant theme of each stage.

3.1 “I have never been tried”: The child of a Christian home

The first chapter of the novel, titled “The parsonage”, describes Agnes’s years of growing up and the circumstances that lead to her leaving home and becoming a governess. It opens with Agnes’s comment on the nature of her story:

All true histories contain instruction; though, in some, the treasure may be hard to find, and when found, so trivial in quantity that the dry, shrivelled kernel scarcely compensates for the trouble of cracking the nut. Whether this be the case with my story or not, I’m hardly competent to judge; I sometimes think it might prove useful to some, and entertaining to others, but the world may judge for itself: shielded by my own obscurity, and by the lapse of years, and a few fictitious names, I do not fear to venture, and will candidly lay before the public what I would not disclose to the most intimate friend. (p. 61)

The somewhat mysterious opening paragraph contains several implications for the story to follow. Firstly, Agnes’s story is true and she tells it because she hopes that the reader will learn something through it. However, the instruction of the story may not be obvious and may not please the reader – but in any case, the reader may still find the story entertaining. Secondly, Agnes emphasizes the delicate nature of her story and her own shy character. With this short prologue, Brontë sets the tone for a narrative with instruction and guides the reader to search for a deeper meaning in it. In fact, Brontë’s use of metaphors to describe the nature of her narrative serves to illustrate her very point: the true meaning of the story is not presented in a straightforward style but is embedded in the story.

Agnes grows up in a warm and loving but somewhat problematic atmosphere of her Christian home. Her father is “a clergyman of the north of England, who was deservedly respected by all who knew him” (p. 61) and her mother is a noblewoman, a daughter of a wealthy landowner and “a woman of spirit” (p. 61), who was rejected and disinherited by her family when she became “the poor parson’s wife” (p. 61). Agnes describes her parents’ marriage as one based on true love, respect, and shared values, and assures the reader that the unlikely marriage was happy despite social pressures and certain flaws in the spouses’ characters: “in spite of my mother’s high spirit, and my father’s whims, I believe that you might search all England through, and fail to find a

happier couple” (p. 61). Agnes and her older sister Mary, the only two surviving children, are educated at home, mainly by their accomplished mother, and the Grey family is very close, keeping mostly to themselves. Indeed, the social isolation is one of the defining characters of Agnes’s childhood: Agnes and her sister Mary were brought up “in the strictest seclusion” (p. 61) and the family met their neighbours only “to avoid being stigmatized as too proud” (p. 61). Ingham’s (2006: 106) explanation that the family’s social isolation was caused by the mother’s class awareness sounds convincing: “Deprived of her own proper environment, she tries to recreate it for her daughters by secluding them from the lower-class neighbours who surround her”. Agnes describes her childhood home, the modest parsonage, as a haven of affection where Christian virtues and piety are a natural part of everyday life. According to Peer (2001: 15), one of the main points that the first chapter of *Agnes Grey* makes is that “[Agnes] thinks of herself as happy”. Gardner (2001: 46) notes that Brontë represents the Grey parsonage as “a sacred location” and “a tranquil Eden”: the proximity of the village church, Richard Grey’s profession as a clergyman and the “peaceful domestic activities” of the family all serve to create these impressions. Brontë subtly portrays the Greys as a family where Evangelical values prevail: the father is described as “charitably disposed” (p. 63) and the mother is an active housewife and a gentle but rigorous educator who guides the children’s moral education.

There are, however, tensions behind the peaceful façade of the parsonage that escalate and change the Grey family’s life for good – and lead to Agnes’s process of spiritual development. Richard Grey, constantly troubled by the sacrifices he feels his wife made in marrying him, makes an ill-judged decision to speculate his “snug little property” (p. 61) to increase his family’s material wealth. While the Greys end up in severe financial problems and struggle to be able to clear their debts, it is the spiritual implications of the speculation scheme that do most damage to the family: Richard Grey fell prey to the temptation of yearning for earthly treasures and thus showed where his priorities really lay. Agnes’s account of the years that follow the misfortunate implies that the

family's spiritual balance is destroyed. Richard Grey, being "completely overwhelmed by the calamity – health, strength, and spirits sank beneath the blow" (p. 65), falls into a state of depression. Gardner (2001) describes his act as a "transgression against the sanctity of his home" (p. 48) that results in "his moral bankruptcy" (p. 47). Frawley (1996) takes the idea of the moral consequences further when she notes that the whole Grey family is forced to make moral sacrifices: for example, selling the family's old pony means a moral compromise for Agnes as the family had decided that the pony "should end its days in peace, and never pass from [their] hands" (p. 66). Agnes describes how their clothes were "mended, turned, and darned to the utmost verge of decency" (p. 66). Alice Grey is left with the practical and moral responsibilities of leading the household. She faces the situation bravely, turning into "an active managing housewife, with hands and head continually occupied with household labours and household economy" (p. 65). Brontë presents Agnes's mother as a resourceful woman who has many qualities of the virtuous woman described in the Bible in Proverbs 31:10-31: for example, verse 17 "She girdeth her loins with strength, and strengtheneth her arms" and verse 27 "She looketh well to the ways of her household, and eateth not the bread of idleness" bear a strong resemblance to Agnes's description of her mother. Furthermore, Alice Grey lovingly tends to her depressed husband and refrains from blaming him for what happened. Brontë's portrayal of Agnes's mother as a woman of great moral strength who saves her family from material and moral decline invokes the Evangelical ideal of Christian womanhood – yet, her role as the virtual head of the family, both in practical and moral matters, remarkably stretches the ideal. She offers Agnes a role model of a Christian woman who puts her faith into action and positively affects other people's lives.

Another problem in the family is Agnes's frustration with her role as "the *child*, and the pet of the family" (p. 62). Agnes's discontent is intensified after the family's misfortune when her offers to help and participate in the household duties are repeatedly turned down by her mother and her dexterous sister. Agnes, now a young woman of eighteen, feels herself "not many degrees more

useful than the kitten” (p. 67). It is under these circumstances that she reveals her plan of becoming a governess. The outward circumstances – the family’s financial distress and Agnes’s urge to help – would seem to constitute a typical setting for a governess novel. Lecaros (2001: 32) describes a typical heroine of the mid-Victorian governess novel as “a victim of circumstances”: a young middle-class woman who is forced to become a wage-earning working woman as a result of her family’s sudden impoverishment. Agnes’s situation, however, is different as her enthusiastic account of her “darling scheme” (p. 69) reveals:

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; to exercise my unused faculties; to try my unknown powers; to earn my own maintenance, and something to comfort and help my father, mother, and sister, besides exonerating them from the provision of my food and clothing; to show papa what his little Agnes could do; to convince mamma and Mary that I was not quite the helpless, thoughtless being they supposed. And then, how charming to be entrusted with the care and education of children! (p. 69)

Uppermost on Agnes’s agenda are her desire to experience the world outside home and her deeply-felt need to prove herself and to be recognised as a person with abilities. Feeling that she is being prevented from developing and employing her abilities at home, she pours out her heart to her mother and sister: “You do not know half the wisdom and prudence that I possess, because I have never been tried” (p. 68) and “only try me – that is all I ask - and you shall see what I can do” (p. 68). Since childhood, Agnes has cherished “a vague and secret wish to see a little more of the world” (p. 62) that had been aroused by her mother’s stories of her life before she married Richard Grey. The financial aspect is naturally part of Agnes’s scheme but it appears secondary to her wishes. Agnes manages to persuade her parents to approve her plan and finds a governess’ position: “to my great joy, it was decreed that I should take charge of the young family of a certain Mrs Bloomfield...asserted to be a very nice woman” (p. 70). Agnes starts her preparations “full of bright hopes and ardent expectations” (p. 70). Thus, Agnes is not a typical Victorian governess protagonist who ends up working as a governess out of sheer necessity. This important detail has been omitted by many critics who view *Agnes Grey* within the framework of a social problem novel (for

example, Costello 1987; Eagleton 1988; Simmons 2001). Goreau (2004: 43) remarks that “[t]he fact that Agnes Grey looks forward to her first post as governess with eagerness and enthusiasm is crucial to the structure of the book”. Agnes suffers from her lack of experience and recognizes her vulnerable position as a poor clergyman’s daughter, and actively starts a process to improve her situation. The family’s misfortune offers an opportunity for Agnes. Agnes’s sister Mary, on the other hand, epitomizes the traditional role of a submissive daughter who stays at home and passively waits for a suitable husband candidate to appear some day.

Agnes’s religious beliefs are not described in very explicit terms. The fact that Agnes’s father is a clergyman of the Church of England in itself evokes a framework for Agnes’s life where the Christian faith plays a central role. It appears that Agnes has gradually grown into Christian faith in the Evangelical atmosphere of her home without any dramatic conversion experience. When Agnes thinks about her future tasks as a governess, her words no doubt echo the principles of her own upbringing: “I had but to turn from my little pupils to myself at their own age, and I should know, at once...how to make Virtue practicable, Instruction desirable, and Religion lovely and comprehensible” (p. 69). Agnes does not explicitly mention any spiritual motivation for her plan of becoming a governess but a spiritual dimension can be traced to two points in her narration: what she perceives to be the consequences of her family’s spoiling attitude towards her and how she reacts to and makes sense of her family’s misfortune. In Agnes’s view, her role as the spoilt child of the family was a serious matter as it made her “too helpless and dependent, too unfit for buffeting with the cares and turmoils of life” (p. 62). Agnes’s mode of thought here reveals ideas that can be traced back to Evangelical modes of thought: firstly, trials of different kind are an inevitable part of a Christian’s earthly pilgrimage and, secondly, the foundations for dealing with life’s trials are laid in childhood. In Evangelical thinking, living as a Christian in the world meant being continually prone to worldly temptations and thus being able to confront them strongly in the faith was of

fundamental importance. As regards Agnes's reaction to the family's misfortune, it differs notably from the reactions of the other family members:

Indeed, to say the truth, there was something exhilarating in the idea of being driven to straits, and thrown upon our own resources. I only wished papa, mamma, and Mary were all of the same mind as myself; and then, instead of lamenting past calamities, we might all cheerfully set to work to remedy them; and the greater the difficulties, the harder our present privations, the greater should be our cheerfulness to endure the latter, and our vigour to contend against the former. (p. 64)

For Agnes, life's trials are not only to be expected and to be prepared for but also to be faced as challenges that have the potential of enabling personal growth resulting in perseverance. Agnes's thoughts on the purifying effects of life's trials have their basis in the Bible's teachings. There are several places in the Bible where Christians are advised to face trials and suffering as an opportunity for spiritual growth, for example, 1 Peter 1: 6-7: "Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations: That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ". Agnes admits that her thoughts are those of "an inexperienced girl" (p. 64) and keeps them to herself, afraid that others would regard them as "childish frivolity, or stupid insensibility" (p. 65).

The intensity of Agnes's spiritual feeling grows stronger as the day of her departure approaches, and she feels selfish and guilty for leaving her family. The night before her departure she turns to prayer to find consolation: "I prayed for a blessing on [Mary] and on my parents more fervently than ever I had done before" (p. 71). The following morning when Agnes is waving goodbyes to her family she "prayed God to bless them from [her] heart" (p. 71) and when she turns to have one final look at the parsonage, she "fervently implored a blessing on its inhabitants" (p. 72). Indeed, it is no wonder that Agnes feels so strongly about her leaving: it is quite extraordinary for a daughter of an Evangelical family to voluntarily leave her loving family and her spiritual safe haven to go out into the world. In terms of the Evangelical thinking of that time, physical separation from the family and living in a foreign environment posed a spiritual risk that was to be taken

seriously. This is an aspect Agnes does not seem to worry about in her eager enthusiasm: she is much more worried about her family's coping than about her own coping. Langland (1989: 96) observes that the starting point of Agnes's story bears a resemblance to the classic setting of the male Bildungsroman where the protagonist's dissatisfaction with home leads to his need to gain experience in the larger world. In Agnes's case, her eagerness to enter upon a new life outside home involves an element of spiritual disappointment: in spite of all its good qualities, Agnes's home has its weaknesses, and staying at home is a spiritual risk too. So, from a spiritual point of view, Agnes has received a good Christian upbringing in her home, but she needs to leave her home to be able to grow as a Christian. Peer (2001: 20) describes Agnes as the epitome of her home: "Agnes, like a country parsonage, is more-or-less self-contained and respected, but also limited in view, provincial". It can be argued that Agnes's self-inflected process of spiritual development reflects the Evangelical emphasis on individuals' responsibility for their spiritual lives and spiritual growth. Peer (2006: 146) comments on Agnes's motivation to leave her home as follows:

...at the start of the novel, Agnes is not aware of why she must leave her parental home; she only realizes that she has not yet been sufficiently exposed to "life"...she does not seem to be aware of exactly how her character will be shaped, or why she needs to be tried.

The points that I have made in my analysis above aim to show that Agnes does have an understanding – even at the spiritual level – of why she must leave home and be tried. But she does have a distorted idea of what life outside home will be like and what the process of testing will involve.

Sitting in the gig and heading towards her new life, Agnes turns to have a one final look of her home and describes how she sees "the village spire, and the old grey parsonage beyond it, basking in a slanting beam of sunshine...the village and the surrounding hills were all in sombre shade" (p. 72). Agnes interprets the beam of sunshine to be "a propitious omen to [her] home" (p. 72) and in prayer asks for a blessing for her family. But when she notices that "the sunshine was departing" (p. 72) she quickly turns herself to the direction of travel for she does not want to see her

home “in gloomy shadow, like the rest of the landscape” (p. 72). The weather imagery and the symbolism of light and darkness play an important role in Brontë’s narration throughout the novel (Berry 1994). Here the beam of sunshine pointing at the parsonage can be interpreted as a symbol of the Christian faith of those who live in the parsonage – they are “children of light” (Ephesians 5: 8). Agnes wants to keep in her mind the image of the parsonage as a spiritual safe haven. From this point of view, she seems curiously carefree about her own spiritual future outside home - the fact that she is moving away from the light. Berry (1994) connects the image of “earthly structures linked to heaven by a beam of light” to Agnes’s own future rather than to her childhood home: in her view, it symbolises Agnes’s own spiritual pathway that lies ahead. In Peer’s (2001: 22) view, the parsonage and the beam of sunshine symbolise Agnes herself: she is “the colorless village child and the bright beam who will light the lives of those with whom she comes in contact”. Peer (2001: 22) further points out that the symbolism serves as a source of suspense since Agnes is at the beginning of her journey and that it also encourages the reader to sympathize with Agnes and hope “that the light of her integrity and humanity will illuminate the darkened landscape of mortal existence”. In any case, the symbolism of light and darkness here serves to emphasize the spiritual dimension of Agnes’s journey. It marks Agnes’s transition from her childhood faith to a more complex world of adult faith.

3.2 “Weighed in the balance and found wanting”: The First Experience of the World Outside Home

The following four chapters describe a period of approximately ten months during which Agnes works as a governess for the Bloomfield family, teaching their three young children. Life outside home turns out to be dramatically different than Agnes had expected and her character and abilities are tested in ways she could not have imagined.

When Agnes passes through the gates of the “stately mansion of Wellwood” (p. 73) on a cold and windy autumn day the reality of her new life starts to sink in. Agnes’s pleasant excitement changes to nervous insecurity: “for the first time in my life, I must stand alone – there was no retreating now – I must enter that house, and introduce myself among its strange inhabitants – but how was it to be done?” (p. 73) Agnes clings to the hope that if Mrs Bloomfield is a friendly, motherly woman things might still go well. But Agnes receives a chilly welcome and after spending the first evening at Wellwood House, she acknowledges her disappointment: “...though I wished to be pleased with her...I could not help feeling that she was cold, grave, and forbidding – the very opposite of the kind, warm-hearted matron my hopes had depicted her to be” (p. 80). This is just the prelude to Agnes’s realisation that everything in her new life is different to that which she had anticipated.

Mr Bloomfield’s behaviour to Agnes is arrogant and disrespectful from the start. Agnes finds out quickly that her three young pupils are not the “tender plants” (p. 69) she had imagined but “a set of mischievous, turbulent rebels” (p. 93). Mrs Bloomfield informs Agnes that she has not had time to attend properly to the children’s education herself and that they are not advanced in their skills. The children’s level of attainment is, however, a minor challenge compared to their general behaviour and manners. The seven-year-old Tom is introduced to Agnes as “the flower of the flock – a generous, noble-spirited boy” (p. 75) but Agnes soon finds him to be a selfish and cruel little tyrant whose favourite hobby is torturing animals: “I looked in vain for that generous, noble spirit his mother talked of” (p. 79). Mrs Bloomfield warns Agnes that Mary-Ann, soon to turn six, “will require watching” (p. 75) and indeed she, in her extreme stubbornness, turns out to be the most troublesome of Agnes’s pupils. When the four-year-old Fanny, described to Agnes as “a remarkably gentle child” (pp. 75-76), joins the classroom Agnes’s positive expectations fade to another disappointment: “a few days, if not a few hours, sufficed to destroy the illusion: I found her a mischievous, intractable little creature, given up to falsehood and deception” (p. 90). Agnes quickly

realizes that the children's unruly behaviour and bad manners are the result of their unprincipled upbringing. The children lack respect for any authority and the parents control them mainly with fear of physical punishments and by offering them rewards. Langland (1989: 98-99) points out an interesting juxtaposition between the pampered Bloomfield children and the 'pampered' Agnes:

Basically, Agnes has been indulged only in being overly protected. In contrast, the Bloomfield children are fairly sophisticated in the ways of the world and have even learned to manipulate their world quite cleverly. The indulgence they have been allowed in the unbridled exercise of their passions, has resulted in an early corruption of their principles.

The governess's work turns out to be much more complicated than Agnes had thought. Her idea of teaching children had been based on her own childhood experiences in the secluded atmosphere of her Evangelical home:

I had but to turn from my little pupils to myself at their age, and I should know, at once, how to win their confidence and affections; how to waken the contrition of the erring; how to embolden the timid, and console the afflicted; how to make Virtue practicable, Instruction desirable, and Religion lovely and comprehensible. (p. 69)

But the Bloomfield children live in a very different atmosphere and Agnes's simple, idealistic teaching method does not apply in the new environment. Agnes has to face the unpleasant state of affairs also at this front: "The name of governess, I soon found, was a mere mockery as applied to me; my pupils had no more notion of obedience than a wild, unbroken colt" (p. 84). Agnes's work is strenuous both physically and mentally. She needs to use physical force to keep the children in the classroom and to prevent total chaos there: "I had to run after my pupils to catch them, to carry, or drag them to the table, and often forcibly to hold them there, till the lesson was done" (p. 86). Tom in particular, with his "violent manual and pedal applications" (p. 84), poses Agnes a physical challenge which she tries to solve to the best of her ability: "in his most violent moods, my only resource was to throw him on his back, and hold his hands and feet till the frenzy was somewhat abated" (p. 85). Mary-Ann, on the other hand, pushes Agnes's patience to its limits with her defiant obstinacy. Agnes realises that while her means of controlling the children's behaviour are very restricted, she can try and control her own behavior – and that actually this is her only way of

coping with the situation and achieving success in the long run. She states that “Patience, Firmness, and Perseverance were my only weapons; and these I resolved to use to the utmost” (p. 85). Central to Agnes’s teaching strategy is the determination to be consistent in everything she says and does, and to suppress her own feelings of frustration and irritability. Agnes also tries to make the spiritual dimension of the children’s behaviour tangible to them:

...when they said their prayers at night, and asked pardon for their offences, I would remind them of the sins of the past day, solemnly, but in perfect kindness, to avoid raising a spirit of opposition; penitential hymns should be said by the naughty, cheerful ones by the comparatively good...(p. 85)

Agnes is confident that these carefully considered methods will work in time “to benefit the children, and to gain the approbation of their parents; and, also, to convince [her] friends at home that [she] was not so wanting in skill and prudence as they supposed” (p. 86). Knapp (2001: 66) points out that there is a clear connection between Agnes’s own upbringing and her teaching method at Wellwood House: “Because her Christian evangelical upbringing had taught her to dedicate her life to doing good works, discipline, self-control, and a highly developed sense of morality are her governing principles”. Agnes has known in theory that her stated principles – “Patience, Firmness, and Perseverance” – are essential qualities for a Christian. Patience and perseverance are referred to as Christian virtues in several places in the Bible, for example, in James 1:2-4: “My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing”. Agnes has learned at home from her mother that standing firm and persevering under difficult circumstances produces patience and hope. Now she needs to put her knowledge into practice herself. She has also learned to turn to God for help: “...night and morning I implored Divine assistance” (p. 86). But, despite her determination, hard work, and spiritual weapons, Agnes’s efforts seem all in vain: “...my best intentions and most strenuous efforts seemed productive of no better result than sport to the children, dissatisfaction to their parents, and torment to [herself]” (p. 86). Furthermore, Agnes finds that there are limits to her own ability to practise her

principles and to control her feelings. While Tom makes her “inwardly tremble with impatience and irritation” (p. 86), it is Mary-Ann who manages to provoke her into physical punishment: “Sometimes, exasperated to the utmost pitch, I would shake her violently by the shoulders, or pull her long hair, or put her in the corner...” (p. 88). Simmons (2001: 37) remarks that Agnes’s behaviour here is not about discipline but about retribution: “Agnes is simply physically reacting to Mary-Ann’s actions, and not attempting to teach the child anything”. Later when Agnes has returned to home, she reveals to her mother that she found the Bloomfield children to be “unimpressible, incomprehensible creatures” (p. 111) and that she could not love them. The trial also puts a physical strain on Agnes: later when at home her mother and sister note that she looks “a good deal paler and thinner” (p. 111) than before she left home and Agnes explains her changed appearance to be the result of her “constant state of agitation and anxiety all day long” (p. 111). Agnes describes how she sometimes pitied herself – especially when she thought how her family would pity her if they could see her in the classroom, desperately trying to keep “the rebellious gang” (p. 93) in order – and when alone in her room, she sometimes indulged herself with “the luxury of an unrestricted burst of weeping” (p. 94). It is justifiable to ask what makes Agnes stay in her ungrateful position and suffer the humiliating atmosphere. After all, Agnes does make her frustration manifest:

I can conceive few situations more harassing than wherein, however you may long for success, however you may labour to fulfil your duty, your efforts are baffled and set at naught by those beneath you, and unjustly censored and misjudged by those above. (p. 93)

Agnes’s reasons for staying can be traced back to her motivations to leave home. Agnes reminds herself that the trial is self-inflicted: “I had brought all this tribulation on myself, and I was determined to bear it” (p. 91). And the fact that she inflicted the experience upon herself in order to put herself to the test makes her downright defiant: “nay...I did not even regret the step I had taken, and I longed to show my friends that...I was competent to undertake the charge, and able to acquit myself honourably to the end” (p. 91). Indeed, Agnes persists in her position until she is dismissed

by Mrs Bloomfield, “sooner than [she] had expected or desired” (p. 107). She is informed that the parents are not satisfied with the children’s progress, especially as concerns their general conduct and manners, and this they attribute to Agnes’s “want of sufficient firmness, and diligent, persevering care” (p. 107). The accusation is particularly humiliating in that Agnes has regarded those very qualities as her leading principles.

Agnes sums up her experience in Biblical terms by quoting a phrase from Daniel 5:27, referring to herself as one who has been “weighed in the balance and found wanting”. Agnes’s faith in her abilities has been measured against her success in the world outside her home and the test ended up in what seems like a degrading failure. Worried about what her family will think of her, Agnes now admits that her naïve self-confidence was “boasting” (p. 107), confesses that her experiences as a governess had made her feel “vexed, harassed, disappointed” (p. 108), and notes that she had learned to love and value her childhood home. Still, Agnes makes it clear that she has in no way lost confidence in herself or other people, and already plans to get a new post as a governess:

...I was not yet weary of adventure, nor willing to relax my efforts. I knew all parents were not like Mr and Mrs Bloomfield, and I was certain all children were not like theirs. The next family must be different, and any change must be for the better. (p. 108)

It seems that Agnes attributes her failure to the unrealistic expectations of the Bloomfield parents and the children’s mischievousness rather than to her own principles and conduct. Agnes’s main motivation now is to “redeem [her] lost honour in the eyes of those whose opinion was more than that of all the world to [her]” (p. 108).

Agnes may not have succeeded very well in teaching her pupils new skills and improving their behaviour, but she notes that she has gone through a learning experience herself: “I had been seasoned by adversity, and tutored by experience...” (p. 108). Agnes’s learning experience involves essentially the aspect of spiritual development. Central to Agnes’s learning at Wellwood House is experiencing an environment that is morally and spiritually different from her home. The

assumptions and principles that were based on Agnes's Evangelical upbringing in a secluded Christian home and that Agnes naively believed to be universally applicable, did not apply in the Bloomfield household. Most of what the Bloomfields consider to be normal behaviour is in Agnes's eyes the very opposite of it. Mrs Bloomfield praises her children to their new governess but Agnes perceives serious flaws in their characters. Mr Bloomfield calls his home "a Christian house" (p. 99) but everything that Agnes witnesses in that house is contradictory to her own experience of a Christian house. No doubt Agnes is familiar with the biblical principle of evaluating people's behaviour: "a tree is known by its fruit" (Matthew 12:33). At Agnes's home Christianity manifested itself in the family members' warm relationships to each other: the parents showed feelings of love and respect to each other, they sacrificed time and effort to bring up their children in a loving but principled manner, and the children respected their parents. The Greys appreciated their servants and took good care of their animals. That Richard Grey led his family to the temptation of earthly wealth and to the ensuing hardships shows that the parsonage was not a perfect refuge of Christian life. Still, the atmosphere of forgiveness and genuine love and care in the midst of adversity echoes the words in 1 Peter 4:8: "And above all things have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins". The names 'Wellwood' and 'Bloomfield' promise luscious growth and abundant bloom but Agnes's depiction of life in the Wellwood House reveals an emotionally and spiritually barren atmosphere where Christian virtues do not bloom and the fruit of the Spirit are nowhere to be seen. The Bloomfields' spiritual emptiness in the midst of all their nouveau riche material abundance is shown in their selfishness and lack of genuine love and care for each other. In fact, the Bloomfields serve as a frightening example to Agnes of what her own family might have become had her father's speculation succeeded. Agnes observes that Mr and Mrs Bloomfield's relationship appears cold and distant, even contemptuous. Their neglect of the children's moral education results in the children's distorted moral understanding and the lack of respect for their parents and any other authorities. The Bloomfields' behaviour to Agnes is

condescending and disrespectful. The children amuse themselves by torturing birds and the parents regard this as a harmless pastime, advising them only not to dirty their clothes. Agnes is not deceived by the Bloomfields' words but has a strong faith in her own moral and spiritual judgement. As Langland (1989: 98) puts it, "Agnes is naïve only in experience; in principles and understanding she is mature". The only instance when Agnes questions her ability to judge correctly is when she expresses her frustration at her lack of progress with the children's education: "But either the children were so incorrigible, the parents so unreasonable, or myself so mistaken in my views, or so unable to carry them out..." (p. 86). Even here Agnes mentions the possibility of her own failure as the last item on her list.

Through her experiences at Wellwood House Agnes has learned that living as a Christian in a non-Christian environment is about being different, seeing things differently, and paddling constantly upstream. She has realised that there are different degrees of Christianity and that not all who call themselves Christians are true Christians. One of the hardest things for Agnes at Wellwood House is the absence of friends and people to whom she could talk about her problems. The case of the old Mrs Bloomfield teaches Agnes that her craving for sympathy and kindness may lead her to look for them in the wrong places. Agnes regards this chatty old lady, Mr Bloomfield's mother, as her friend and a fellow Christian as she talks about her faith and appears to be friendly and sympathetic to Agnes's plight. Because of these qualities, Agnes chooses to ignore the old lady's apparent self-conceit and proneness to vanity. It turns out that the old lady is an unreliable pretender who criticizes Agnes behind her back and does her much harm. Bitterly disappointed, Agnes comments on her own behaviour: "Kindness, which had been the food of my life through so many years, had lately been so entirely denied from me, that I welcomed with grateful joy the slightest semblance of it" (p. 96).

As Agnes's sister Mary had suspected, Agnes's communicative skills in a strange environment prove to be lacking. The formal and unfriendly attitude of Mr and Mrs Bloomfield

affects Agnes so that she fails to articulate her point of view or to defend herself even in situations where that would be perfectly justifiable. Agnes keeps her thoughts to herself, perseveringly continues practising her own principles, and silently resists the Bloomfields' unjust behaviour to her. However, it is noteworthy that Agnes does not hesitate to speak, act, or criticize when matters that she feels strongly about are concerned. This is particularly the case with cruelty to animals and religious hypocrisy. When Tom describes to Agnes, during her first evening at Wellwood House, the various ways with which he tortures the birds he manages to catch, Agnes threatens the little fellow with hell: "...you have heard where wicked people go to 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 suffer" (p. 78). Months later, when Tom's uncle has given him a brood of nestlings to play with and Tom tells Agnes that he is going to torture them, Agnes, "urged by a sense of duty - at the risk of both making myself sick, and incurring the wrath of my employers" (p. 104), kills the birds herself by dropping a stone upon them, thus saving them from unnecessary suffering. When Mrs Bloomfield, "doubly dark and chill" (p. 105), scolds Agnes for upsetting her son, Agnes calmly defends herself and refers to what the Bible says about mercy and responsible treatment of animals. Another example of Agnes's readiness to practise her religious judgement in more bold terms is her reaction when she finds out that the old Mrs Bloomfield is a two-faced pretender: Agnes criticizes and ridicules the old lady's religious hypocrisy and her misinterpretations of the Bible, concluding that she hoped the old lady to "[be] rather weak than wicked" (p. 97). Agnes communicates her criticism to her readers only but her style of expression here is exceptionally condemning – a clear contrast to her otherwise fairly neutral tone of narration.

It would seem that Agnes has grown a stronger Christian during her trial at Wellwood House. Firstly, she has learned to appreciate more her Christian home and her upbringing now that she has witnessed the results of the lack of moral education. She has seen how important the early years are in a child's moral development and character formation. Secondly, Agnes has worked hard to

pursue the Christian virtues of firmness, perseverance, and patience, and she did not lose hope nor give up under circumstances that were demanding in many ways. Thirdly, while Agnes's worldview has enlarged and she has grown more aware of the ways of the world she has managed to stick to her Christian identity. Nevertheless, the phrase "weighed in the balance and found wanting" seems a proper evaluation for Agnes's spiritual experience at Wellwood. When Agnes's original teaching methods fail she ends up using methods that she could not even dream of at the beginning. As Simmons (2001: 37) points out, "Rather than the love and care that she received from her mother, [Agnes] resorts to the almost purely physical modes of force that she deems necessary to control the children". In Gardner's view, Agnes's use of physical force for controlling the children and the way that she refers to them, for example, as "violent rebels" (p. 93) and "tiger's cubs" (p. 98), shows that Agnes in fact "gradually draws...closer into the violence that permeates Wellwood" (2001: 57). Gardner sees Agnes's mercy-killing of the nestlings as the culmination of her adjustment to her environment: "the blood Agnes spills marks her inclusion into the eat-or-be-eaten secular world" (2001: 59). From this point of view, Agnes's spiritual life at Wellwood certainly appears compromised. It is noteworthy that Agnes does not voice any clear concern for her spiritual integrity while she stays with the Bloomfields but instead stresses her physical hardships. It appears fair to say that Agnes has now experienced both success and failure as a Christian. There is now an interesting conflict between, on the one hand, Agnes's deepened understanding of the world and her enthusiasm to continue her journey, and, on the other hand, her failure as an educator and vulnerability as a Christian pilgrim.

3.3 "The gross vapours of earth were gathering round me": A Lonely Christian in Danger

After her trials at Wellwood Place, Agnes describes how she stays at home for a few months, enjoying "liberty and rest, and genuine friendship, from all of which [she] had fasted so long" (p.

109). Agnes perceives genuine care for each other as a distinctly Christian characteristic and suggests that when she stayed with the unfriendly Bloomfields she was deprived of spiritual nourishment. While staying in the loving atmosphere of her home, Agnes recovers from “the sufferings [she] had undergone” (p. 109) not only physically and emotionally but also spiritually. Using her anxiety about the future – Richard Grey feels that he does not have much time left – as the motivation, Agnes accepts a new situation with the Murrays who appear to be “a somewhat higher family” (p.112) than the upstart Bloomfields. She is thrilled at the prospect of moving to an unknown place as far as 70 miles from the parsonage: “there was a pleasing excitement in the idea of entering these unknown regions, and making my way alone among its strange inhabitants; I now flattered myself I was going to see something of the world” (p. 113). Again, Agnes stresses that she is not to be regarded as “a martyr of filial piety” (p. 114) and expresses her motives for leaving in a rather mysterious way: “bright visions mingled with my hopes, with which the care of children or the mere duties of a governess had little or nothing to do” (p. 114). Hoping for the best but prepared to meet with difficulties and determined to overcome them, Agnes sets off for Horton Lodge: “Oh! I must struggle to keep this situation, whatever it might be! both for my own honour among my friends, and for the solid services I might render them by my continuation there” (p. 114).

Agnes’s journey in a snowstorm ends in an equally wintry welcome at Horton Lodge, an imposing house surrounded by an extensive estate. The Murrays turn out to be a “higher” family but not in the sense that Agnes had hoped for: instead of noble upper-class qualities, such as generosity and integrity, Agnes finds a highly arrogant family that cultivates materialism, egotism, vanity, even coarseness. In the chapter titled ‘Horton Lodge’, Agnes provides a concise but perceptive account of the members of the Murray family and her first two years at Horton Lodge. The way Agnes lashes out at the Murrays reflects her increased experience as a moral agent. The Murrays enjoy their privileged life to the full: Mr Murray is “a blustering, roystering, country squire...a hearty bon-vivant” (p. 119) who barely notices his children’s governess and Mrs Murray, “a

handsome, dashing lady of forty”, is mainly interested in parties, fashion, and rendering her two daughters as showy as possible. The four Murray children, two teenage girls and two pre-teenage boys, make a challenging group of pupils for Agnes. The lack of proper moral education manifests itself individually in each of her pupils: the beautiful Rosalie is driven by her frivolous vanity and volatile desires while Matilda is “a veritable hoyden” (p. 123) with coarse manners, stubbornness, and total indifference to learning. Agnes finds the boys to be particularly troublesome pupils: John is “as rough as a young bear, boisterous, unruly, unprincipled, untaught, unteachable” (p. 124) and Charles is a “selfish little fellow, only active in doing mischief, and only clever in inventing falsehoods” (p. 125). Agnes had hoped that “genuine, thorough-bred gentry” (p. 113) such as the Murrays would show “proper respect and consideration” (p. 112) for their governess but instead she is made to feel her social inferiority in a variety of ways: the Murray family and their servants openly show their disrespect for Agnes and their disregard for her comfort. In social contexts Agnes is often totally ignored and made to feel invisible – “like one deaf and dumb, who could neither speak nor be spoken to” (p. 184) – by the Murrays, their friends and even the vicar of the local church. As concerns her duties as a governess, Agnes is not authorised to schedule the teaching times or places but is dependent on her pupils’ arbitrary whims. She is told to “keep [her] temper, and be mild and patient throughout” (p. 120) and to refrain from giving her pupils any negative feedback on their conduct. The Murray children are older and outwardly better-behaved but their mischief takes more sophisticated forms than that of the Bloomfield children. Langland (1989: 103) argues that “at the Murrays, [Agnes] finds herself grappling with a more insidious because more subtle and pervasive evil stemming from a confusion of right and wrong”, concluding that “[w]ork at the Bloomfields was physically strenuous; work at the Murrays is morally strenuous”. Langland’s distinction encapsulates well the difference between the two sets of pupils. It is the teenage Murray girls in particular that are the cause of Agnes’s moral anguish: their distorted morality – impudence, disregard for others’ feelings and sometimes pure malice – is more overwhelming to Agnes as she

cannot ascribe it to childish thoughtlessness, nor does she have authority to interfere with their behaviour in any way. All in all, Agnes's narrative of her circumstances at Horton Lodge depicts an emotionally cold atmosphere where she is almost denied her human dignity and treated as a mere household object. Agnes's depiction of the Murrays' haughty pride and the spectrum of their other moral vices echoes the description of godless people in 2 Timothy 3:2-4:

For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy; Without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good; Traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God.

Agnes explicitly voices her emotional anguish at her oppressed state: "I sometimes felt myself degraded by the life I led, and ashamed of submitting to so many indignities" (p. 128). Agnes's spiritual reactions to Horton Lodge are more implicit: her description of the Murrays' shallow materialism and lack of human warmth is symptomatic of the spiritual vacuum there. In its outward show and splendour but inward emptiness Horton Lodge represents the town of Vanity Fair to Agnes. Agnes observes how the family's religious activities have more to do with social visibility and entertainment than with any spiritual needs: "Mr and Mrs Murray generally thought it sufficient to show themselves at church once in the course of the day; but frequently the children preferred going a second time to wondering about the grounds all the day with nothing to do" (p. 126).

Soon after her arrival at Horton Lodge, Agnes expresses her first impressions in the form of two metaphors: she felt like "one whirled away by enchantment, and suddenly dropped from the clouds into a remote and unknown land, widely and completely isolated from all he had ever seen or known before" (p. 117) or like "a thistle-seed borne on the wind to some strange nook of uncongenial soil, where it must lie long enough before it can take root and germinate, extracting nourishment from what appears so alien to its nature, if indeed it ever can" (pp. 117-118). Having quickly sensed the moral atmosphere of Horton Lodge, Agnes uses the two metaphors to describe her spiritual existence in the new environment: Horton Lodge is far away from her home both geographically and spiritually and its emotional coldness is an "uncongenial soil" that offers her no

proper spiritual nourishment. After staying with the Murrays for a while, Agnes refers to herself as “an alien among strangers” (p. 121). The metaphor evokes strong biblical associations. The Old Testament describes how God’s people, including the patriarchs of Israel, experienced loneliness and alienation in their lives because of their faith and called themselves “strangers and pilgrims on the earth” (Hebrews 11:13): for example, Abraham, whom God led to wander in foreign lands at the mercy of foreign people nearly his entire life, calls himself “a stranger and a sojourner” (Genesis 23:4) and Moses, who experienced separation from his own people twice, first in Egypt and then in the land of Midian, calls himself in “an alien in a strange land” (Exodus 18:3). The Jewish people spent hundreds of years in exile in Egypt suffering oppression. In the New Testament, Christians are repeatedly reminded that they are not “of this world” (John 15:19) but are journeying through this earthly life as “strangers and in exile” (Peter 2:11), and that they should not be “conformed to this world” (Romans 12:2). Brontë’s use of biblical metaphors and allusions subtly create a spiritual framework for Agnes’s experiences and serves as a reminder that Agnes’s stay with the Murrays is ultimately a spiritual experience. The spiritual dimension is further intensified when Agnes reproaches herself for feeling negatively about her employers, quoting parts from 1 Corinthians 13:4-7:

...sometimes, I thought myself a precious fool for caring so much about them, and feared I must be sadly wanting in Christian humility, or that charity which suffereth long and is kind, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, beareth all things, endureth all things. (pp. 128-129)

Agnes tries to evaluate her life at Horton Lodge not in terms of her emotional reactions but in terms of her ability to practice Christian virtues. After living at Horton Lodge for a couple of years, Agnes indirectly compares her life to that of a “civilized man...doomed to pass a dozen years amid a race of intractable savages” (p. 155). The comparison serves to illustrate the huge spiritual gap that Agnes perceives between herself and the Murrays but it also suggests that her life at Horton Lodge involves an element of missionary work. Peer (2001: 19) notes that “[Agnes] is spiritually mature enough to know that...to quietly make something dignified out of the human idiocy around us is the

ultimate civilizing act". In her demanding missionary field, Agnes gains endurance and inspiration from her firm belief in the validity of her cause. To maintain her feeling of self-worth and to survive in the spiritually dry environment, Agnes turns to her sense of moral superiority:

I was the only person in the household who steadily professed good principles, habitually spoke the truth, and generally endeavoured to make inclination bow to duty; and this I say, not of course in commendation of myself, but to show the unfortunate state of family to which my services were, for the present, devoted. (p. 121)

Here Agnes consciously tries to avoid her moral observations coming across as self-righteous. Eagleton (1988: 124) remarks aptly that Agnes manages to avoid smugness because she "can humbly commend her own moral excellence with the judicious impersonality she shows in evaluating the qualities of others". Agnes evaluates her success as a moral agent by viewing her behaviour and principles from the point of view of the Murray girls:

Miss Grey was a queer creature; she never flattered, and did not praise them half enough, but whenever she did speak favourably of them, or anything belonging to them, they could be quite sure her approbation was sincere. She was very obliging, quiet, and peaceable in the main, but there were some things that put her out of temper; they did not much care for that, to be sure, but still, it was better to keep her in tune, as when she was in a good humour, she would talk to them, and be very agreeable and amusing sometimes, in her way, which was quite different from mamma's, but still very well for a change. She had her own opinions on every subject, and kept steadily to them - very tiresome opinions they often were, as she was always thinking of what was right and what was wrong, and had a strange reverence for matters connected with religion, and an unaccountable liking to good people. (p. 129)

For Agnes, the measure of her success as a moral agent – and as a Christian – is that her pupils acknowledge her difference, even if they consider her "queer" and "tiresome", and learn to appreciate it at least to some extent. Agnes's hope that through her honesty and integrity she would eventually gain more appreciation among her pupils and initiate a change in themselves reflects the way that the Bible advises Christians to live blamelessly among nonbelievers so that "they may by [your] good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation" (1 Peter 2:12).

After the first two years of Agnes's stay at Horton Lodge, the two Murrays boys are sent to school and Rosalie enters the social life at the age of eighteen. Brontë's narration now proceeds based on episodes that depict, on the surface level, two love stories of very different kinds:

Rosalie's courtship with and lavish wedding to the vicious Sir Thomas Ashby and Agnes's growing admiration and love for Edward Weston, the curate of Horton, who offers her hope and spiritual guidance. On a deeper level, Brontë narrates the tension between the two young women's attitudes to life – which Berry (1994) aptly characterizes as “mindless superficiality” and “a spiritually profound, intelligent consciousness”. It is revealing that while Rosalie, whose ruling passion is her “all-absorbing ambition to attract and dazzle the other sex” (p. 123), concentrates on her coming-out ball and speculation on her husband candidates, Agnes's attention is drawn to the sermon style of the new curate of Horton, Mr Weston. She likes the way Mr Weston prays, “earnestly and sincerely from his own heart” (p. 138), and is pleased with “the evangelical truth of his doctrine, as well as the earnest simplicity of his manner, and the clearness and force of his style” (p. 139) – all in all, Agnes finds the new curate “truly refreshing” (p. 139). Furthermore, she criticizes Mr Hatfield, the rector, for his “studied grace” (p. 140) and dry doctrinal sermons that she finds “hard to listen quietly throughout, without some slight demonstrations of disapproval or impatience” (p. 140). Winnifrith (1973: 59) refers to Agnes's assessment of the rector and curate's teachings as a “confused account of Mr Hatfield's religious proclivities”. Winnifrith's view is surprising, even dismissive, since Agnes is quite consistent in her juxtaposition of, on the one hand, the rector's hypocrisy and emphasis on ritual and church discipline to the detriment of the gospel, and on the other hand, the curate's heart-felt faith and clear preaching of the gospel. In ecclesiastical terms, the two clergymen of the Church of England represent the two main currents of the Anglican faith that existed in the early Victorian period: High Church Anglicanism and Evangelical Anglicanism. Hatfield seems to represent a type of High Church Anglicanism that was known for its ‘high-and-dry’ attitudes and a lack of living spirituality. Goreau (1988: 258) calls it “High Church Toryism”. Weston's sermon style, in turn, evokes a clear association with the Evangelical faith, with his sincerity in preaching the message of the gospel. Since this is one of the few passages where Brontë explicitly describes the nature of her protagonist's faith, it is worth taking a closer look at it. By

evaluating the teaching of Mr Hatfield and Mr Wesley, Agnes, first of all, manifests a firm belief in an individual Christian's ability to evaluate Christian teaching and doctrinal issues. Evangelical clergymen urged Christians to study the Bible and Evangelical Christians regarded the Bible as the highest spiritual authority. In fact, Agnes follows the Bible's exhortation in 1 Thessalonians 5: 21 to "[t]est all things; hold fast what is good". Secondly, Agnes reveals what she sees as true and desirable Christianity: emphasis on God's love that manifests itself in the gospel, practical Christian charity, and personal devotional life. These qualities, the central characteristics of the Evangelical 'religion of the heart', she recognizes in Mr Weston and immediately feels a spiritual connection with him. Thirdly, Agnes's account addresses the issue of men's spiritual authority in relation to women: Agnes does not automatically submit to the spiritual authority of men, as was expected of women, but chooses her spiritual authorities according to her own spiritual understanding. At her childhood home, Agnes learned to evaluate different forms of the Christian faith as she noticed the difference between her father's faith and mother's faith, and looked up to her mother as her role model. Now she chooses Mr Weston as her spiritual authority, based on her evaluation of Mr Weston's teaching and behaviour.

The appearance of Edward Weston on the scene starts a new phase in Agnes's spiritual life. Her interest in and respect for the curate increases when she finds out that he habitually visits the poor cottagers living on Mr Murray's estate and offers them both spiritual and practical help. In the chapter titled 'The Cottagers', Agnes describes an important visit to Nancy Brown, a poor and sickly old widow. Visits to Nancy Brown's humble cottage have become for Agnes a spiritual refuge where she can enjoy "real social intercourse" (p. 154) while helping Nancy and reading the Bible to her. Nancy, who has been "afflicted with religious melancholy" (p. 145) and struggling with her inability to love God and her troublesome neighbours, tells Agnes about Weston's visit to her. Nancy's ensuing account of Weston's teaching on God's merciful love depicted in the Bible in 1 John 4:7-13 means to Agnes at least as much as it meant to the poor widow: it strengthens her in

her own struggles with the same issues and assures her of the validity of Weston's Christian doctrine. According to Thormählen (2002: 259), the detailed treatment of "God's love and the love of God" presented in this chapter forms "a kind of centerpiece" in *Agnes Grey*. By discussing this theological issue in such detail in her novel Brontë takes a stance on the current theological debate on the nature of God and the essence of the Christian faith. Brontë's emphasis here on God's love for humankind and its transformational effect on the attitudes of the believer is clearly Evangelical. Furthermore, Nancy's reference to Weston's excellent sermon on Matthew 11:28 serves an important purpose. Agnes has described earlier how she finds particularly reprehensible in Mr Hatfield's sermon style the way he represents God as "a terrible task-master, rather than a benevolent father" (p. 140) and thus "bind[s] heavy burdens...upon men's shoulders" (p. 141). At the beginning of the chapter under discussion, Agnes refers to her hardships as a "governess's yoke" (p. 143). Jesus's words in Matthew 11:28, "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest", has both a spiritual and a more practical message to Agnes: they urge her to find solace in her Christian faith in the midst of all her trials and to seek spiritual guidance from Mr Weston. Agnes leaves the cottage "feeling nearly as happy as [Nancy]" (p. 153). Further examples of Weston's unselfish help and care for the cottagers convince Agnes about Weston's genuine faith: "I felt very happy, and thanked God that I had something to think about, something to dwell on as a relief from the weary monotony, the lonely drudgery of my life..." (p. 154). It is at this point that she reveals the full extent of her lonely misery at Horton Lodge: "for I was lonely - 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" (p. 154). Not only does Agnes experience emotional loneliness but spiritual despair: being exposed to the company of the "wrong-headed girls" (p. 155) is not just tiresome but "a serious evil" (p. 155) in that it threatens Agnes's own spiritual integrity: "Those whose actions are for ever before our eyes, whose words are ever in our

ears, will naturally lead us, albeit against our will - slowly - gradually - imperceptibly, perhaps, to act and speak as they do” (p. 155). Agnes’s words echo the Bible’s teaching on the effects of ungodly company, for example: “He that walketh with wise [men] shall be wise; but a companion of fool shall be destroyed” (Proverbs 13:20) and “Be not deceived: evil communications corrupt good manners” (1 Corinthians 15:33). Agnes fears that since she has not managed to transform her pupils, they will corrupt her:

Already, I seemed to feel my intellect deteriorating, my heart petrifying, my soul contracting, and I trembled lest my very moral perceptions should become deadened, my distinctions of right and wrong confounded, and all my better faculties be sunk, at last, beneath the baleful influence of such a mode of life. (p. 155)

Agnes’s anguish touches the very roots of her spiritual core: for her, the ability to discern what is good and bad in God’s eyes is of fundamental importance to Christian living. The Bible repeatedly urges Christians not to adapt to the ways of the world: for example, Paul teaches in Romans 12:2: “And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what [is] that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God”. Berry (1994) describes Agnes’s feelings as “the internal anguish of a soul in torment” and sees Agnes’s experience as “an inner death”. Berry’s last-mentioned expression would seem somewhat exaggerated in the sense that Agnes is still able to practice her moral and spiritual perception. Agnes’s account culminates in a metaphorical conclusion: “The gross vapours of earth were gathering round me, and closing in upon my inward heaven; and thus it was that Mr Weston rose at length above me, appearing like a morning star in my horizon, to save me from the fear of utter darkness...” (p. 155). Agnes is not battling just the “fatiguing folly” (p. 155) of her pupils but is ultimately involved in spiritual warfare where two modes of life are in conflict and where defeats have spiritual consequences. Agnes, a lonely Christian, is in danger of losing her spiritual vision of life. Brontë’s narrative strategy of juxtaposing the metaphor of Agnes amidst the encircling spiritual gloom at Horton Lodge and the metaphor of Mr Weston appearing as a shining and guiding light in the sky above Agnes is highly dramatic. The metaphor of “morning star” (p. 155) that Agnes uses to refer to Mr

Weston is used in several places in the Bible, for example, 2 Peter 1:19; Revelation 2:28; Revelation 22:16, to refer to Jesus Christ as the hope and saviour of mankind. The metaphor emphasizes the importance that Agnes attaches to Mr Weston as her saviour: he saves her from becoming so preoccupied with her everyday trials and the moral decay around her that she loses her Christian hope of heaven and her sight of God's omnipotence in the middle of all human suffering and injustice. Davies (2002: 88) notes that the appearance of Mr Weston in Agnes's life "bears witness to God's indwelling presence in believers". Indeed, the mere existence of a person such as Edward Weston provides Agnes with joy and hope: "I was glad to see that all the world was not made up of Bloomfields, Murrays, Hatfields, Ashbys, etc.; and that human excellence was not a mere dream of the imagination" (pp. 155-156). The outward circumstances of Agnes's life have not changed but her outlook on her situation has changed remarkably. On the other hand, it is noteworthy that Agnes's dramatic description of her situation reveals how she clings to Edward Weston like a drowning person clings to a rope. Mr Weston now becomes the focus of Agnes's life.

When Agnes's acquaintance with Mr Weston develops, during their chance meetings at Nancy Brown's cottage and on walks in the neighbourhood of Horton, Mr Weston's impact on Agnes's life gets more practical forms. In poor Nancy's cottage, where Nancy urges her two visitors to gather round the warmth of the fireplace, Agnes can enjoy genuine kindness and Christian fellowship with Nancy and Weston. Berry (1994) notes that Nancy's fireside symbolises "a comforting respite" where "the happy trio [are] seated by Nancy's humble fire as nobler souls". Agnes's short but profound conversations with Weston offer her new perspectives into her life and into a Christian's life in general. In the chapter titled "The primroses", Agnes describes how her loneliness and invisibility in the company of the Murrays ladies and their friends make her bitterly defiant – "I considered myself pretty nearly as good as the best of them, and wished them to know that I did so, and not to imagine that I looked upon myself as a mere domestic..." (p. 162) – and lead to her pretending the same indifference to them that they show to her. According to Scott

(1983: 20) Agnes's attitudes here – her “backbiting cattiness” and “general misanthropy” – show that the “poisoning air” of Horton Lodge is taking its toll on her: “...she who was once like a saint from Olympus in comparison with the mentality of her pupils begins...to sound like a cantankerous gossip of no elevated mind at all”. When Mr Weston appears on the scene he challenges Agnes on her loneliness and her claim that she could not live without her home: “You might be miserable without a home, but even you could, and not so miserably as you suppose” (p. 164). Weston, who has lost his near relatives, offers encouragement to Agnes by telling her that in spite of his lack of family he is not “destitute of hope and comfort” (p. 165) and that his happiness lies in “the power and the will to be useful” (p. 165). Colón (2004: 403) notes that Mr Weston acts as a “moral guide” to Agnes. His guidance is particularly useful as he can both empathize with Agnes, based on his own experiences, and offer her new insights. As Colón (2004: 403) points out, “Mr Weston had already experienced the despair that Agnes is undergoing, and he was able to survive by turning to his moral duty”. Agnes, having witnessed the way Mr Weston puts his Christian faith into practice, admits that his attitude to life manifests itself in positive results: “he leads an active life; and a wide field for useful exertion lies before him, he can make friends” (p. 165). Later in the story Weston, who is surprised to hear that Agnes has never talked to the female friends of the Murray ladies, challenges Agnes on her social passivity - “Are you so unsociable that you cannot make friends?” (p. 185) – and offers her a neutral evaluation of the situation: “The fault is partly in society, and partly, I should think, in your immediate neighbours, and partly, too, in yourself; for many ladies, in your position, would make themselves be noticed and accounted of” (p. 185).

While Mr Weston's moral excellence initially soothes Agnes's spiritual anguish, he is also a source of emotional turmoil and a new spiritual crisis for Agnes as Agnes's respect for him quickly develops into romantic love. When the thought of becoming Mr Weston's wife first enters Agnes's mind she is overwhelmed with feeling – “my heart was filled to overflowing with one single earnest wish” (p. 167) – and she turns to fervent prayer, submitting her hopes of their future together to

God: “Thy will be done” (p. 167). That Agnes preserves the petals of one of the primroses that Mr Weston picked for her between the leaves of her Bible is a strong symbol of their relationship. While cherishing her own shy hopes in secrecy, Agnes observes Rosalie’s heartless coquetry, which culminates in her arrogant refusal to Mr Hatfield’s marriage proposal, feeling both disgusted at her and inadequate compared to her. She concludes: “I wondered why so much beauty should be given to those who made so bad a use of it, and denied to some who would make it a benefit to both themselves and others” (p. 180). Soon Agnes feels the impact of Rosalie’s endless vanity much more intensely as she informs Agnes of her plan to “fix that man” (p. 187), meaning that she, in the absence of better entertainment, intends to make Mr Weston fall in love with her and “feel [her] power” (p. 191). Langland’s (1989: 103) argument that “Agnes does not confront active and intentional evil at the Murrays” is somewhat misguided: Rosalie’s behaviour towards Agnes definitely fulfills the criteria of intentional maliciousness. Rosalie, who has noticed Mr Weston’s warm feelings towards Agnes, prevents them from seeing other by keeping Agnes busy with her governess’s duties. In the meantime, Rosalie persistently and mercilessly chases after Mr Weston. During the agonizing weeks that follow, Agnes falls into strong emotional turmoil that includes feelings of jealousy:

...I was more worthy of his love than Rosalie Murray, charming and engaging as she was; for I could appreciate [Mr Weston’s] excellence, which she could not; I would devote my life to the promotion of his happiness; she would destroy his happiness for the momentary gratification of her own vanity. (p. 199).

Brontë’s psychological realism in her presentation of Agnes’s disappointment and frustration is important as it shows that there is more in Agnes than her moral sense and piety: Agnes, too, is prone to jealousy, bitterness and other human feelings. Rosalie’s chase after Mr Weston continues even after her engagement to Sir Thomas Ahsby and is “beyond [Agnes’s] comprehension” (p. 196): “I could only conclude that excessive vanity, like drunkenness, hardens the heart, enslaves the faculties, and perverts the feelings“ (p. 196). After Rosalie’s wedding Agnes’s prospects seem to brighten again but then “her flickering flame of hope [is] dismally quenched” (p. 210) as she

receives news from home that her father is seriously ill. As Agnes resigns from her post to return to home and Mr Weston moves away from Horton, hopes of their future together seem to fade away.

Throughout her narration Agnes emphasizes the spiritual basis of her love for Mr Weston: her romantic feelings are inextricably intertwined to the spiritual connection that she feels to him. When her hopes for Mr Weston are at stake because of Rosalie's selfish vanity, Agnes ends up not only in emotional but also spiritual turmoil. Davies (2002: 89) notes that "[a]s the callow Rosalie waylays Mr Weston, Agnes is driven back upon her own spiritual resources". In her lonely isolation, Agnes is forced to ponder on some fundamental aspects of her faith. There is no doubt that Agnes perceives her situation in spiritual terms: on hearing Rosalie's plan of 'fixing' Mr Weston Agnes immediately refers to the biblical parable of "the poor man and his one lamb, and the rich man with his thousand flocks" (p. 187), presented in the Bible in 2 Samuel 12:2-4. In the chapter titled 'The confessions' Agnes reveals what is going on in her mind. The fact that Rosalie's external beauty seems to render her with life's enjoyments while Agnes's lack of external beauty seems to prevent her from loving and being loved leads Agnes to question the validity of the teaching she has received at home on the irrelevance of beauty compared to the cultivation of the mind: "All very judicious and proper no doubt; but are such assertions supported by actual experience?" (p. 192). Her ultimate concern, however, lies with the more profound question of why arrogant, ungodly people succeed and prosper in the world while truly pious, God-fearing people suffer: "Will He entirely deny to me those blessings which are so freely given to others, who neither ask them nor acknowledge them when received?" (p. 220). This condition is contrary to the basic belief that God rewards the good with good, and has troubled God's people throughout the ages. In Psalm 73: 13-14 the psalmist vividly voices his disappointment: "Behold, these [are] the ungodly, who prosper in the world; they increase [in] riches. Verily I have cleansed my heart [in] vain, and washed my hands in innocency". In the midst of her trial, Agnes can only turn to God: "My prayers, my tears, my wishes, fears, lamentations, were witnesses by myself and Heaven alone" (p. 200). The other cause

for Agnes's spiritual crisis is her own behaviour. At the focus of her suffering, which she describes as "almost a passion of grief" (p. 200), is her fear of losing Mr Weston – who, as Agnes is fully aware of, has not explicitly expressed any romantic feelings for her. Berry (1994) notes that "Agnes's preoccupation with her earthly love for Mr. Weston forces her to lean dangerously in the direction of an obsession". Mr Weston appeared in Agnes's life like "the morning star in [her] horizon" and now he has become a spiritual idol for Agnes:

...how dreary to turn my eyes from the contemplation of that bright object, and force them to dwell on the dull, grey, desolate prospect around, the joyless, hopeless, solitary path that lay before me. It was wrong to be so joyless, so desponding; I should have made God my friend, and to do His will the pleasure and the business of my life; but Faith was weak, and Passion was too strong. (p. 201)

Agnes's confession betrays her sense of a failure as a Christian. She does not try to hide her spiritual weakness but describes it in explicit terms. She acknowledges that while her thinking of Mr Weston gave her "deep delight" (p. 201) it was also "a painful, troubled pleasure, too near akin to anguish" (p. 201) and "an indulgence that a person of more wisdom or more experience would doubtless have denied herself" (p. 201). It is noteworthy that it is not her love for Mr Weston as such that Agnes considers to be her sin but her spiritual idolatry of him: Mr Weston, not God, is the centre of Agnes's spiritual life. Berry (1994) remarks aptly that Agnes's struggles at Horton Lodge result from her attempt to "reconcile her anguish at the lack of human love in her life with her spiritual beliefs" and that in this process Agnes becomes "earthbound". In a way, Agnes's fear that her moral understanding has weakened because of her exposure to the Murrays is realised in her desperate fixation on Mr Weston - Agnes has become a victim of the town of Vanity Fair.

During her years at Horton Lodge Agnes experiences both physical hardships and psychological oppression. She does not manage to instill a moral change in her pupils but fears that her own moral understanding starts to fail. She falls in love with a man and dreams of a marriage. Throughout, it is the spiritual dimension of her experiences that remains at the focus: Agnes's

struggle to find a spiritual balance in her life. When Agnes leaves Horton Lodge, she summarises her feelings as follows:

I have lived nearly three-and-twenty years, and I have suffered much, and tasted little pleasure yet: is it likely my life all through will be so clouded? Is it not possible that God may hear my prayers, disperse these gloomy shadows, and grant me some beams of heaven's sunshine yet?...May I not still hope and trust? (pp. 219-220)

Despite Agnes's bright visions, the clouds and the lack of sunshine to which she turned her back at the beginning of her narrative when she first left home are still the reality of her life. The excerpt reveals that Agnes firmly believes in God's omnipotence: God grants both life's blessings and trials. However, her hope is not so much in God's ability to provide for her under any circumstances of life but is still attached to her dream of life together with Mr Weston. Their roads have diverged but the hope of their meeting again is strong in Agnes. Thus, her spiritual trial continues.

3.4 “The work that God had set before me”: Finding Peace in God's Will

Agnes's life changes remarkably when she moves to live with her mother in a sea-side town. Together they run a small school for boarders and day-pupils, and fulfil Alice Grey's words to her late husband who worried about the future of his wife and daughters: “But it's no matter whether [Mary and Agnes] get married or not: we can devise a thousand honest ways of making a livelihood” (p. 110). Agnes focuses energetically on her new duties as a schoolteacher and is “by no means unhappy” (p. 222). Yet her mind is constantly occupied with her “secret solace and support” (p. 222): her love for Edward Weston and the hope of hearing from him soon. As months go by and there is no sign of him Agnes grows desperate and finally gives up hope of seeing Mr Weston ever again – “...even my heart acknowledged it was all in vain” (p. 225). Still, she cannot let go of him completely but allows herself to think of him: “I would cherish his image in my mind; and treasure every word, look, and gesture that my memory could retain; and brood over his excellences, and his

peculiarities, and, in fact, all I had seen, heard, or imagined respecting him” (p. 224). The heartache and strain eventually start to take their toll on Agnes physically, psychologically and spiritually:

I knew my strength was declining, my appetite had failed, and I was grown listless and desponding; - and if, indeed, he could never care for me, and I could never see him more – if I was forbidden to minister to his happiness, forbidden, for ever, to taste the joys of love, to bless and to be blessed, then, life must be a burden, and if my heavenly Father would call me away, I should be glad to rest...” (p. 225)

Langland (1989: 108) remarks that Agnes’s reaction is that of a typical heroine who pines for her lost love. While Agnes’s symptoms undeniably evoke the traditional image of love-sickness characteristic of the tradition of courtly love, the implications of the symptoms in Agnes’s case are different: Brontë’s protagonist is a rather exceptional heroine in that she always strives to subordinate her feelings to self-control and evaluate everything from the point of view of her Christian faith. That she is now losing her zest for life as the result of the heartbreak makes her case more serious and suggests that she is experiencing a deep spiritual crisis. Agnes’s despair at losing Mr Weston can be described as her Slough of Despond, the darkest point of her spiritual journey. However, unlike Christian in *Pilgrim’s Progress* Agnes does not sink under the weight of her sins but under the weight of her disappointment at God for not allowing her the desire of her heart. What first seemed like God’s guidance and blessing in her life has crashed and left her spiritually numb, feeling that unless she can share life with Mr Weston and feel happiness in life she is ready to die. Agnes’s spiritual anguish mirrors the feelings of Job, the Bible’s righteous sufferer, and his wish to die rather than continue his endless suffering that is expressed, for example, in Job 3:20-22: “Wherefore is light given to him that is in misery, and life unto the bitter (in) soul... Which rejoice exceedingly, [and] are glad, when they can find the grave?”. Agnes described before how she ignored her conscience that warned her against “mocking God with the service of a heart more bent upon the creature than the Creator” (p. 188). Now she openly lays before the reader the fruit of her spiritual neglect and her human weakness. Her disclosure reveals that she has not lost her faith in God but rather her trust in God’s benevolence towards her as God seems to forbid all happiness

from her. Earlier, during her trials at Horton Lodge, Agnes submitted to God's will even when some things did not make sense to her. In the middle of the sentence Agnes's tone suddenly changes as she continues:

...but it would not do to die and leave my mother – Selfish, unworthy daughter, to forget her for a moment! Was not her happiness committed in a great measure to my charge – and the welfare of my pupils too? Should I shrink from the work that God had set before me, because it was not fitted to my taste? Did not he know best what I should do, and where I ought to labour? and should I long to quit His service before I had finished my task, and to expect to enter into His rest without having laboured to earn it? 'No; by His help I will arise and address myself diligently to my appointed duty. If happiness in this word is not for me, I will endeavour to promote the welfare of those around me, and my reward shall be hereafter. (p. 225)

Agnes's crisis reaches a turning point when she reminds herself of her duties as a daughter, an educator and a Christian, and acknowledges God's omnipotence – as did Job, for example, in Job 12:12: "With him [is] wisdom and strength, he hath counsel and understanding". Scott (1982: 36) points out that what prevents Agnes from lapsing into self-pity and isolation are her Christian faith and the good education she received at her childhood home: "They save her from a collapse of the self, in giving an exterior standard – the Gospels' hopes and commands – by which to keep measuring her conduct and attitudes". While Agnes's suffering centres round her faith it is faith that also offers her the means of dealing with the suffering. Agnes's declaration "by His help I will arise and address myself diligently to my appointed duty" echoes Mr Weston's words on his driving motivation in life, "the power and the will to be useful" (p. 165). Agnes is now in a situation where she is able to better understand and make use of Mr Weston's guidance. Colón (2004: 403) points out that Mr Weston's role as Agnes's moral guide comes to its end here when Agnes reaches the same level of understanding than her guide. When Agnes states that she will content herself with the thought of happiness in heaven her tone may be resigned but it is not bitter. Agnes's monologue that begins as a desperate confession and ends as a determined Christian manifesto illustrates well the role of Christianity in her life. Brontë presents faith as a source of empowerment for Agnes: besides offering solace, it helps her make sense of her difficult experiences and gain control of her

life. This emphasis is of fundamental importance in the novel. According to Langland (1989: 37), “Agnes Grey is a remarkable female protagonist because the cultivation of spiritual life leads to self-command rather than to the self-suppression typical of many other nineteenth-century female characters like [Charlotte Brontë’s] Helen Burns and George Eliot’s Maggie Tulliver”.

After gaining a new spiritual clarity and resolution in her life, Agnes starts to feel better in body and soul: “...tranquillity of mind was soon restored, and bodily health and vigour began likewise, slowly, but surely, to return” (p. 225). Agnes is like a Christian soldier who in the heat of the fight, in realising the scope of the battle, becomes overwhelmed but then regains her spirits and strength, and continues to fight in her assigned post, concentrating on her immediate duties. She soon gets an opportunity to put her new mission into practice when the unhappy and bored Lady Rosalie Ashby invites her for a visit to Ashby Park. Agnes describes her acceptance of the invitation as “a great sacrifice for [Rosalie]” (p. 227) that does “violence to her feelings in many ways” (p. 227), but subordinates her feelings to her willingness “to do anything [she can] to benefit [Rosalie] by consolation or advice” (p. 227). Renewed in spirit and no longer limited by her role of a governess and a hireling, Agnes can encounter her old pupil from a new basis.

During her visit to Rosalie’s grand residence, Agnes appears more self-assertive and outspoken in her relationship to Rosalie than before. She finds Rosalie faded both in appearance and spirits, and feels sorry for her. Knapp (1991: 70) notes that in Agnes’s view Rosalie’s unhappy marriage must appear “an example of Divine intervention”. But even if Agnes thinks that Rosalie has received her punishment she does not express any delight in Rosalie’s misfortune. While irritated at Rosalie’s constant efforts to make her feel impressed and overwhelmed at the magnificence of Ashby Park, Agnes, focusing on her new-found tranquillity, is ready to make a concession: “I determined to preserve an aspect of stony indifference...but this was only for a moment: immediately conscience whispered, ’Why should I disappoint her to save my pride? No - rather let me sacrifice my pride to give her a little innocent gratification’” (p. 230). Agnes offers

Rosalie practical advice regarding her hateful relationship with her husband and mother-in-law, and her indifference to their little baby daughter. In addition, she provides Rosalie with spiritual guidance: “I exhorted her to seek consolation in doing her duty to God and man, to put her trust in Heaven...” (p. 238). When Rosalie in her stubbornness repeatedly contradicts Agnes’s words of wisdom, Agnes addresses her in more bold terms:

The best way to enjoy yourself is to do what is right, and hate nobody. The end of Religion is not to teach us how to die, but how to live; and the earlier you become wise and good, the more happiness you secure. And now, Lady Ashby, I have one more piece of advice to offer you...(p. 238)

According to Frawley (1996), Agnes’s new autonomy manifests itself in her ability to try and bring about a change in others. Indeed, Agnes addresses Rosalie with new authority and spiritual frankness that must spring from her strengthened conviction that only faith in God can offer real peace of mind in life’s tribulations and from her new mission of helping others where she can. While Agnes does feel melancholic about her future, referring to it as a “quiet, drab-colour life, which, henceforth, seemed to offer no alternative between positive rainy days, and days of dull, grey clouds without downfall” (p. 234) she also recognises the emptiness of Rosalie’s life in the midst of her material wealth. Rosalie’s situation must remind Agnes of the words in Matthew 16:26: “For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” Berry (1994) notes that when Agnes narrates a scene where she sits in front of a wide window in the Ashbys’ drawing-room and enjoys “the still, pure air and the delightful prospect of the park that lay before [her], rich in verdure and foliage and basking in yellow sunshine...” (p. 231) she in fact illustrates her “liberty to enjoy the spiritually rich prospects of an enlightened existence” (1994). Berry (1994) further points out the spiritual implications of another window scene at Ashby Park: there Agnes sits in idleness for a long time in a small sitting-room, waiting for Rosalie, and observes through the window how the shadow of a wall gradually takes possession of her view from the window. Berry (1994) states that the image of the lengthening shadows suggests that “[Agnes] must move away from earthly entrapments and the danger of being ‘possessed’ by the shadows of

earth, towards a higher, more enlightened spiritual plane". Throughout the novel Brontë uses the imagery of light and darkness to denote spiritual states. Here the subtle use of that imagery would seem to reflect Agnes's deepened spiritual understanding.

Back at home Agnes experiences new feelings of vigour and joy. Soon after her arrival she takes an early morning walk to the beach to enjoy "a solitary ramble on the sands while half the world was in bed" (p. 240). When she reaches the beach she is entranced by the beauty of the scenery ahead of her: "...no language can describe the effect of the deep, clear azure of the sky and ocean, the bright morning sunshine...And then, the unspeakable purity and freshness of the air!" (pp. 240-241). Agnes appears almost intoxicated by her existence on the quiet beach:

Refreshed, delighted, invigorated, I walked along, forgetting all my cares, feeling as if I had wings to my feet, and could go at least forty miles without fatigue, and experiencing a sense of exhilaration to which I had been an entire stranger since the days of my early youth. (p. 241)

These feelings are in stark contrast to Agnes's reaction to nature's delights while she stayed at Horton Lodge: they brought to her mind "sad thoughts of early childhood, and yearnings for departed joys, or for a brighter future lot" (p. 163). Now she is able to enjoy the beauty of nature: "the sea was my delight" (p. 240). The happiness described here is connected to Agnes's spiritual renewal but also to her recent visit to Ashby Park: having just witnessed Rosalie's plight, Agnes can appreciate certain aspects of her own life more. Agnes walks further away to "the low rocks" (p. 241), manages to pass safely the slippery sea-weed, and finds "a little mossy promontory with the sea splashing round it" (p. 241) where she turns to look back at the people that have started to appear on the beach. She can only take one glance there because "the sun and the sea so dazzled [her] eyes in that direction" (p. 241) and then she turns again "to delight [herself] with the sight and sound of the sea dashing against [her] promontory - with no prodigious force, for the swell was broken by the tangled sea-weed and the unseen rocks beneath; otherwise [she] should soon have been deluged with spray" (pp. 241-242). Here Agnes's carefully depicted nature experience conveys a spiritual metaphor of her current place in life: standing in her appointed place of duty,

delighting in her freedom, and confronting the joys and sorrows of life shielded by her faith so that her feelings will not take control of her. Brontë uses nature imagery throughout the novel to indicate spiritual atmospheres and Agnes's moods, and to support the theme of Agnes's spiritual journey. As Peer (2006: 146) puts it, "[Agnes'] religious Bildung is inseparable from, and often manifested in, nature outside her". The use of nature imagery to reflect human feelings and experiences is one of the most predominant features of Romantic literature. But whereas for many Romantic writers the connection to and reverence for the nature offer truths and inspiration as such Brontë harnesses her nature imagery to illustrate a specifically Christian way of responding to nature. Agnes's beach experience is important because it shows that her spiritual renewal involves not just melancholic acceptance of her "solitary path" (p. 201) and headstrong confidence in God but also rejoicing in life and finding contentment in her independence: God can bless her under any circumstances. Indeed, this experience can be said to complete Agnes's spiritual recovery. The way that Brontë here describes nature as Agnes's spiritual healer is worth pondering in the larger context of Victorian Christianity. Thormählen (1999: 66), who has analysed the role of religion in the works of the three Brontë sisters, observes that those Brontë characters who in their trials turn to God for help do receive answers to their prayers but they typically receive the help and solace they need through nature rather than the person of Jesus Christ. Thormählen (1999: 64) points out that the fact that the Brontës seem to be more concerned with God than his son Jesus Christ separates them from many other religious writers of their time. It is revealing that the word 'Jesus' does not occur in *Agnes Grey*. Thormählen (1999: 64) notes that the Brontës' orientation may be related to the problems in the nineteenth-century Anglican theology to place the person of Christ to Christianity as a whole: "In the time of the Brontës, the Anglican Church did not possess a clearly defined and consistent Christology".

The tide is coming back and Agnes turns to "seek some safer footing" (p. 242) – moments of divine peace and understanding in life usually only last for a moment. Right then she meets Mr

Weston who has been walking his dog on the sands. It is revealed that he is the rector of a nearby village and has tried in vain to find out Agnes's new location. After their first meeting, Agnes is "full of gratitude to Heaven for so much bliss, and praying that [her] hopes might not again be crushed" (p. 245). Mr Weston's frequent visits to the Grey women's home result in his simple but romantic proposal to Agnes as they watch the beautiful sunset upon the sea on a summer evening. His revelation that he was romantically interested in Agnes already in Horton - "You must have known that...a single word or glance of mine meant more than the honeyed phrases and fervent protestations of most other men" (p. 251) - completes Agnes's happiness as she accepts the proposal. It is noteworthy that Mr Weston reappears in Agnes's life at this stage and not any time earlier. The exhausted Agnes who in Horton desperately clung to Mr Weston as her only hope of a happy life differs in many respects from the serene Agnes whom he finds walking alone on the beach early in the morning. Langland (1989: 109) remarks that Mr Weston arrives only at the point when Agnes has achieved "physical health, mental equanimity, and the personal fulfilment of financial and emotional independence". All this is true, but as concerns her spiritual life, Agnes has given up her idolatry of Mr Weston and, as a result, her yearning for making God her friend and God's will "the pleasure and the business of [her] life" (p. 201) has been fulfilled. The spiritual maturity that Agnes has gained means that she can more fully appreciate the potential of Christian marriage as partnership of equals. Scott (1983: 37) refers to the biblical metaphor in John 12:24 - "Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit" - to point out the deep spiritual significance of the reunion of Agnes and Mr Weston:

Only when the heart has resigned its earthly hopes...in favour of its supreme marriage-bond, its role as Bride of the Lamb, can God afford to make this-worldly happiness available to those He loves as children who can be saved...After plenty of happy upbringing, followed by oppression and suppression, Agnes has to lose her last great hope this side of the grave - beyond that of doing her duty as a Christian - and she has to live on quite a while with that lost hope rendered seemingly permanent as lost; before its realization arrives after all. (p. 37)

The reunion has several spiritual implications to Agnes's spiritual development. Firstly, it offers her a deeper insight into God's guidance in her life and makes her past sufferings appear in a different light. She suffered as the result of taking upon herself "the governess's yoke" (p. 143) and thought she would find rest in Mr Weston. This led her to more suffering. She was able to find rest only after putting her trust in God – by accepting the offer Jesus makes in Matthew 11:29: "Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls". Secondly, it proves to her that God can bless her, too: happiness in this world is not denied her as she feared during the darkest moments of her spiritual crisis. Brontë does not reveal Agnes's inner thoughts on these matters but lets the story speak for itself.

Agnes's life after her governessing experiences, her "new mode of life" (p. 222) as she describes it, has taken her, during a period of approximately one year, from extreme spiritual anguish at losing Mr Weston, through finding peace and joy in God's will, to a happy reunion with Mr Weston. Agnes emerges from the process as a woman whose faith has been tried and proved genuine. A story with instruction starts to take shape.

3.5 "To live to the glory of Him": A Christian Home of Her Own

Agnes's story ends in a short description of her married life. The narration returns to the present moment: "Here I pause. My diary, from which I have compiled these pages, goes but little further" (p. 250). Noting that while she could "go on for years" (p. 250), she contents herself to recalling the memory of the evening when Edward Weston proposed to her:

...I shall never forget that glorious summer evening, and always remember with delight the steep, rugged hill, and the edge of the precipice where we stood together watching the splendid sun-set mirrored on the restless world of waters at our feet – with hearts filled with gratitude to Heaven, and happiness, and love – almost too full for speech. (p. 250)

Again, Brontë uses a romantic scenery for manifesting Agnes's religious feelings. Berry (1994) remarks that the dramatic scene of the proposal – the edge of the precipice, the sunset, the sea – evokes spiritual symbolism: “Their union...is demonstrably blessed when it is defined by all these profoundly resonant images of power and creation”. It is noteworthy that the potentially threatening elements of the scenery do not invoke in Agnes fear but mere elation and awe. The topmost feeling in the lovers' minds is “gratitude to Heaven” and indeed, their reunion and the upcoming marriage are presented first and foremost as a spiritual fulfilment. Davies (2000: 88-89) argues that “[t]he marriage of Agnes to Mr Weston is a modest human equivalent of the mystical Marriage of the Lamb”. To compare Agnes and Mr Weston's marriage to the final encounter of Jesus Christ with his Church is not as extravagant as it may first appear: the Bible compares the Christian marriage to the relationship between Jesus and his Church, for example, in Ephesians 5:24-25: “Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so [let] the wives [be] to their own husbands in every thing. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it”. Agnes and Edward have been spiritually committed to each other from early on in their relationship but they have had to endure many trials and difficulties before their union finally takes place – but when it does take place their joy of spiritual fulfilment is indescribable. Agnes moves on to state that in a few weeks' time after the proposal she became the wife of Edward Weston and that “[she] never found cause to repent it, and [is] certain that [she] never shall” (p. 250). Why such a defensive position? Here Brontë probably makes a point on how different Agnes's marriage is compared to the marriage of Rosalie Ashby: Rosalie married “the greatest scamp in Christendom” (p. 172) because of her material interests and regretted in bitterly before her first wedding anniversary, while Agnes and Edward's marriage is a true love marriage that has a solid basis in the couple's shared Christian values and mutual respect. Knapp's (2001: 71) summary of Agnes's married life, “They had three children and lived in bliss thereafter”, sounds somewhat simplified, regarding the profound and realist tone in which Agnes herself describes their marriage:

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; but, if we keep in mind the glorious heaven beyond, where both may meet again, and sin and sorrow are unknown, surely that too may be borne; and meantime, we endeavour to live to the glory of Him who has scattered so many blessings in our direction. (pp. 250-251)

Instead of details of their wedding or rosy newly-wed happiness, Agnes focuses on the spiritual dimension of the marriage. The frankness and easiness of the expression reflect Agnes's spiritual maturity. Again, she voices the view that trials are a natural part of human life, a reality that not even a happy marriage can dissolve. For Agnes, a marriage is above all a spiritual companionship where spouses carry life's burdens together. Furthermore, she notes that the spiritual companionship extends beyond the grave and that the Christian hope of reunion in heaven helps her bear the thought of separation through death. The ultimate purpose of the Westons' marriage is not to live happily ever after but to serve God together in a way that glorifies him. Agnes makes it clear that while she has a great appreciation for Edward as a pastor, a husband, and a father to their three children she does not put him on a pedestal for "no one is entirely without [faults]" (p. 251). Agnes's false idolatry of Edward is a thing of the past.

Only after describing the spiritual dimension of her married life does Agnes proceed to depict the more practical side her family life. Edward's hard work for his parish has resulted in "surprising reforms" (p. 251) and he is "esteemed and loved by its inhabitants" (p. 251). Agnes is a devoted home-schooling mother to their three children - Edward, Agnes, and Mary - who "promise well" (p. 251): "...they shall want no good thing that a mother's care can give" (p. 251). Not only Edward but also Agnes is involved in transforming other people's lives: she can finally enjoy her role as an educator after all the disappointments she suffered as a governess. The Westons are happy to live on their modest income among richer neighbours. They have learnt to make ends meet and in addition to "enjoy[ing] comfort and contentment [themselves]" (p. 251) they manage to save some money for their children and even help the poor. Agnes, a clergyman's daughter, has become a clergyman's wife. A comparison between Agnes's childhood family and her own family is inevitable. On the

surface, the two families look similar: a happy and loving marriage of a clergyman husband and a devoted wife who homeschools their children, and the family live modestly in a small village. There are, however, substantive differences between the families. Agnes's parents came from different social backgrounds and this created a tension in their marriage that Richard Grey found difficult to handle. According to Agnes, her mother did not care about material riches but this did not prevent her father from occupying himself with a risky speculation scheme that resulted in great distress for the whole family. Alice Grey was more devoted in her faith than her husband and after the family's financial disaster she became, albeit against her will, the spiritual head of the family. Edward Weston, on the contrary, is a stable and determined man dedicated to his work as a clergyman and respected by his wife. He has internalized what the Bible teaches about money in 1 Timothy 6:10: "For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows". In the Westons' case, both the husband and the wife's indifference to material riches and commitment to Christian duty make them spiritually equal companions. Agnes's mother educated her daughters at home in strict seclusion while Agnes educates her children at home "for the time being" (p. 251). Colón 2004: 404) argues that Agnes is open for the possibility of sending her children into the world to complete their education because she has come to realise how insufficient her own home education was. Through her own experiences of living as a Christian among people who had very different values Agnes has learnt that exposure to the outside world can be both useful and dangerous: she needed it in order to grow to spiritual maturity but it almost destroyed her. All in all, Brontë's account of Agnes's family life and the implicit comparison between the Westons and the Greys serve to point out Agnes's awareness of the problems at her childhood home. Eagleton's (1988: 128) remark that in marrying Mr Weston Agnes "re-enacts her parents' settlement" is not entirely correct: in both marriages the spouses' Christian faith plays an essential role but Agnes's marriage is equal and balanced in a way that her parents' marriage was not.

Agnes's words on the ultimate purpose of her marriage – “to live to the glory of Him” - can be taken to describe the last stage of her spiritual development. Rather than completing Agnes's growth as a Christian the marriage broadens her potential to practise her faith. Brontë presents Agnes not only as a clergyman's wife and a mother of three but also as a Christian educator in a wider sense: she is ready to share her painful experiences and innermost feelings with the public in order to help other people. Agnes identifies herself as being first and foremost a faithful servant to God, a role that she accepted already before her marriage, and while her duties as a God's servant may change when circumstances in life change this is a role that will last under any circumstances. Brontë implies that her protagonist's spiritual development does not stop here - Agnes knows that the future holds new trials - but that she has reached a solid spiritual basis for facing whatever life brings to her way.

4. Conclusion

This thesis set out to analyse *Agnes Grey* as a story of the protagonist's spiritual development. My purpose was, first of all, to look into how the novel is structured as a story of spiritual development, and secondly, to explore the novel's female point of view and the doctrinal aspects of Agnes's faith in the context of Victorian Christianity. In order to be able to evaluate the implications of Agnes's spiritual development and the nature of her faith in the Victorian religious context, I discussed the central elements of the religious scene in early Victorian England, concentrating especially on the Evangelical faith and its impact on Victorian society in general and on women in particular.

In my analysis I have shown that the spiritual dimension of the story runs through the novel systematically and constitutes a story of the protagonist's spiritual development. In addition to the narrative pattern of a pilgrimage story, Brontë's use of Biblical allusions and quotations, Biblical imagery, and nature imagery to illustrate Agnes's spiritual feelings and states of mind creates a spiritual framework for her narrative. In several places of the novel, Brontë's depiction of Agnes's environment and circumstances as such serves to evoke Biblical echoes. Agnes's spiritual journey, that takes her from the state of spiritual naivety to a tested and mature faith, is portrayed as a painful learning process where trials and suffering have an essential role. While the governess setting emerges prominently in the novel and many of Agnes's tribulations are related to her subordinated social position, the crises she experiences are of a spiritual nature and result from the moral corruption and spiritual emptiness she witnesses around her - and from her own weakness and vulnerability. In its depiction of Agnes's spiritual growth, *Agnes Grey* offers a dramatic and disturbing depiction of what it means to live as a Christian in the world. Yet, despite of her troubled existence outside the confines of her Christian home, the destination of Agnes's pilgrimage remains clear: while she doubts her own strength as a Christian, temporarily drifts away from God, and

rebels at God, Agnes's faith grows stronger and the heavenly destination becomes clearer. Many nineteenth-century novelists, including Charlotte Brontë, used the traditional pilgrimage narrative to describe more secular aspects of an individual's development. *Jane Eyre* and *Agnes Grey* bear some interesting resemblance to each other as concerns their themes and structure but the destinations of the two pilgrims are different.

Brontë describes Agnes as an Evangelical Christian woman who takes responsibility for her own spiritual growth. There is even something masculine about Agnes's curiosity about the world outside her home, her readiness to leave her family, and her self-assurance in moral and doctrinal matters. Agnes, like her mother, stretches the Victorian ideal of a submissive, meek and home-living woman in some respects. Victorian Evangelicalism offered women a role as gentle moral guardians of home and family life. Brontë's description of Agnes as an uncompromising female moral agent working outside of her home in other people's families certainly deviates from the Evangelical ideal. Brontë presents Agnes as a woman with a strict moral sense but she also introduces a more human side to her by honestly describing Agnes's emotions of bitterness and despair at losing Mr Weston. It is noteworthy that Agnes does gain a command of her life and find a spiritual balance before Mr Weston appears in her life again. Yet, her new independence lasts for a relatively short time: it would have been interesting to see how Agnes's life would have turned out had she not met Mr Weston on the beach quite so soon.

Agnes's story ends with her somewhat abrupt statement "And now I think I have said sufficient" (p. 251). These words remind the reader of Agnes's words on the instructive purpose of the story at the beginning: Agnes has now told what she thinks is sufficient for finding the "treasure", the instruction of the story. Brontë's shift from narrating Agnes's life events to referring to Agnes's actual act of narration makes also another important point: Brontë presents Agnes's narrative act as a part of Agnes's story. So, how is Agnes's decision to "candidly lay before the public what [she] would not disclose to the most intimate friend" (p. 61) to be related to her story of

spiritual development? Meyer (2003) argues that Agnes is a “silenced heroine” (p. 133) who in her autobiography finally reveals her side of the story and ‘talks back’, offering the readers “a scathing account of what self-styled social superiors say and do in the privacy of their own home” (p. 137). That Agnes tells her story, with all its detailed revelations of her employers’ lives, is a brave act in itself and indicates that she does not approve the way she was treated. However, the purpose of Agnes’s story is not to offer a shocking memoir of a governess who has been wronged. Brontë’s protagonist carefully emphasizes from the very beginning that the primary purpose of her story is not just to entertain but to provide the reader with instruction. After dealing with her spiritual crisis and deciding to devote herself to her duties as a Christian, Agnes became more determined and outspoken in her endeavour to make other people aware of the spiritual truths of Christianity. Against this background, Brontë appears to present Agnes’s narrative act as an extension of her role as a Christian educator. As Colón (2004: 404) puts it, “Brontë allows Agnes to search for a way to have a moral influence beyond the confines of personal relationships”. In addition to her duties as a clergyman’s wife and a mother, Agnes extends her role of a Christian educator beyond the boundaries of her husband’s parish and her own home by telling her story to the public, hoping that it will offer them spiritual instruction. Victorian Evangelicalism offered women new opportunities of participating in religious activities but women’s involvement in the religious sphere were strictly defined. That Agnes seeks to exert her spiritual and moral influence outside of her home again stretches the Evangelical ideal of a woman’s proper sphere – especially as Agnes in the story questions men’s spiritual authority and takes a stance on theological matters. As a result of her experiences as a governess, Agnes is acutely aware of the harsh realities of life that exists outside her own current Christian safety zone. Agnes’s story, filtered through her Christian consciousness, bears witness to the distorted moral behaviour of respected upper-class people who consider themselves as civilized and proper Christians. Ultimately, the story bears witness to the inherent evil of human nature, the effects of ungodly living, and the transforming power of the Christian

gospel. Thus, within the framework of Agnes's spiritual development, the instruction that emerges from the story is deeply spiritual: it is about the meaning of Christianity in people's lives. Morse (2001: 104), who analysed the theme of witnessing in Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, notes that for the protagonist Helen Huntingdon to witness her experiences to a wider audience ultimately means "to stand up for Christ, to testify to the truth of the Word made flesh". The same applies to Agnes, Brontë's other protagonist, who states that she seeks to glorify God in everything she does.

Agnes is sometimes described as a restrained and dull character that does not evoke much interest. Yet the above analysis of *Agnes Grey* as a story of spiritual development shows that Agnes is a brave and independent woman who has strong feelings – indeed, sometimes Agnes's feelings overwhelm her. Agnes's uncompromising Christian faith and morality are a great source of strength to her. Throughout the story Agnes shows admiration and respect for her resourceful and quick-witted mother whom she calls "a woman of spirit" (p. 62). Agnes, while different from her mother in some respects, has inherited from her both her strong faith and independent mind. There is no doubt that Agnes is a woman of spirit too.

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