



Investigating the Role of the Governess in *Agnes Grey* from a Psychoanalytical Perspective

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Abstract: *Agnes Grey* is a novel written by Anne Brontë which describes the condition of a young girl, the daughter of a curate, who works as a governess at the service of two middle-class families in Victorian England. Being employed as a governess was very hard and demanding because of the challenges and difficulties these young girls had to tolerate and manage. In this paper, the role of the governess will be analysed from a psychoanalytical perspective in order to better comprehend the mental distress and emotional strain that caused so much concern at the time, particularly for the writers who depicted the condition of these educators. Sigmund Freud's theories of mental functioning will therefore be useful to the investigation of the role of the Victorian governess as illustrated by the youngest of the Brontë sisters in her autobiographical novel. In the end, the contribution of psychoanalysis to this literary work provides a further understanding of the psychological and social problems of the Victorian governess.

Keywords: *Agnes Grey*, governess, psychoanalysis, Freud, Anne Brontë

1. INTRODUCTION

The importance of a psychoanalytical approach to the analysis of literary works is widely described in many literary theory and criticism guides (Barry, 2002, Goring, 2001 & Rabaté, 2014). The investigation of literary works from a psychoanalytical perspective is commonly conceived as the examination of the hidden meanings of a text in relation to the author or writer as in psychobiography, to the personality of the characters of a novel, poetry or play and to the cognitive and emotional effects of the literary composition on the reader. This article will focus primarily on the analysis of the personality of the main character, Agnes Grey in her role as a governess in relation to the Freudian theories of mental functioning.

Sigmund Freud is generally considered to be the father of psychoanalysis, a branch of psychology that deals with the treatment of mental disorders by the exploration of aspects of the mind of which an individual is usually unaware. Terms such as unconscious, Id, Ego, Super-Ego, Oedipus complex, sexual drives, death wishes, repression of emotions, transference, defence mechanisms and interpretation of dreams (Appendix 1) are well common and widely accepted by many mental health providers even though there has often been some scepticism about their scientific foundation. However, psychoanalytic theories can be very helpful to the analysis of literary works for several reasons as Barry outlines in his theoretical approach to literature (2002). Firstly, it is possible to make connections between the hidden content of a novel or poem and the unconscious mind as well as between the explicit content of a text and the conscious. Secondly, the repression of emotions and the disclosure of unconscious elements can be related either to the characters of a novel, for example, or to the author himself. Thirdly, theories of sexuality can be associated to the representations of emotional suffering and mental dysfunctions in the form of psychological complaints or even madness. Fourthly, the Oedipus complex plays a relevant role in influencing gender dynamics and the relationships between men and women in social contexts as it clearly appears, for example, in the Shakespearean play Hamlet. Lastly, the belief that the analysis of psychological elements is more important for the critical reading of literary works than any other social or historical approach.

Agnes Grey is a novel written by the youngest of the Brontë sisters which depicts the condition of a young girl of humble origins who works as a governess at the service of two middle-class families in

Victorian England (Alexander, 2006). It was first published in 1847 after some criticism from the first editor but, notwithstanding, the first printing was well sold and further editions of the novel were also published in the United States. It is the story of the young daughter of a curate of North England who decides to work as a governess to earn money and help her family face a financial crisis. She will take on two positions, the former will be very demanding and disastrous while the latter will be less draining and more agreeable. In this historical period, the governess was an ambiguous figure because she was not considered as a servant, was not a member of the house where she worked rather an employee. She was essentially an educator whose main task were that of instructing young children. It was undoubtedly a respectful position at the time but the challenges and difficulties a governess had to bear were often exhausting and consuming and required a great deal of patience and perseverance (Jwan Adil, 2019).

2. METHODOLOGY

The investigation of this research paper consists in a qualitative close analysis of selected passages of the novel with a particular focus on the descriptions of events and mental states, significant utterances, language choice and figures of speech which best depict the personality and the role as a governess of the main character, Agnes. The analysis is performed from a psychoanalytical perspective since it is concerned with the understanding of the unconscious parts of the human mind, of hidden meanings and psychological conflicts as well as relational and emotional aspects. This approach to a literary text is called *textanalysis* by a French academic who argues that analysing the psyche of a patient in an analytical setting is not different from analysing a text (Bellemin-Noel, 2012). Therefore, the two disciplines, literature and psychoanalysis, can support each other in an ultimate interpretation of the text that should be sensible, thoughtful and discernible. In addition, the author of this paper is a psychiatrist who is trained in psychoanalytic psychotherapy and has a consolidated experience in the study of literary works from a psychological perspective.. Lastly, previous research concerning the figure of the governess from a psychoanalytical view is scarce, then this paper may contribute to a further understanding of the psychological and social problems of these young heroines.

3. DISCUSSION

A first description of the personality of Agnes is given in the first chapter of the novel. The author depicts here the story of the Grey family with a particular emphasis on family characters and relationships. There are Mr and Mrs Grey who are described as having opposite temperaments: the man is insecure, weak and pessimistic while the lady is strong, reflexive with a positive approach to life. Mary, Agnes's sister, is temperamentally similar to her father as she grieved and ruminated on the present situation: '... but she brooded continually over the misfortune' (AG, 6) while Agnes, the youngest, is frequently referred as the 'child' (AG, 7). One might argue here that the stylistic choice made by the author was likely used to emphasise the immaturity and infantilism of the main character. As a matter of fact, Agnes is excluded from housekeeping as well as invited not to be too much concerned with family issues: 'No, love, you cannot indeed – there's nothing here you can do.' (AG, 7). Therefore, she is asked to stay aside despite her wish to participate to the daily activities and her efforts to be considered as an adult as shown by her own words: 'there was little I could do' (AG, 8). As a consequence, the reader might get the picture of a young daughter who is overprotected, saved from toils and strain though not spoiled. In this initial atmosphere of sadness and precariousness, a glimmer of optimism is given by the little one of the family which is clearly illustrated by Agnes when she communicates her most profound wish: 'I should like to be a governess' (AG, 9). This expression of positivity and cheerfulness is not well accepted by her parents and rather considered as childish: 'it is merely a whim of her own' (AG, 9) and, moreover, it may be seen as too idealistic, an attitude that can be referred to the 'ideal Ego' (Freud, 1914). This psychoanalytical concept refers to an unconscious way adopted by an individual who attempts to compensate the loss of the infantile narcissism with a new condition of herself projected into an ideal world or state in order to restore one's *amor proprio*. Agnes represents clearly this psychological mechanism because she is in contrast with the external world characterised by unhappiness and resignation and, most of all, with the condition of being belittled by her relatives: 'I was still a child in theirs ...' (AG, 7). In accordance with Freud theories, Agnes is under the pressures of her parents' reproaches and misjudgements to the point that she is forced to take a step forward for the sake of her self-love, for the realisation of her

dreams and her wish of emancipation. Moreover, Agnes's optimism, determination and self-will are surprising for a girl of her age and likely remarkable as shown in this short excerpt: '... to comfort and help my father, mother, and sister [...] Whatever other said, I felt I was fully competent to the task ...' (AG, 10). All these aspects together, that is optimistic attitude, self-realisation, pride and self-esteem, though idealised by the main character to preserve her own conceit, do not go beyond the limits of self-awareness or critical judgement. Therefore, they do not resemble the omnipotent belief which is common, for example, in pathological narcissism (Howell, 2003). The girl is not mentally disturbed since the reality testing and the capacity for introspection are preserved, a mental equilibrium that is proven by the emotions she feels when her departure from home is approaching: 'the sudden anguish', 'a feeling of sadness' and 'bathed in tears' (AG, 11) which express clearly her fears of separation from her loved ones, a very common psychological reaction.

Agnes's first experience as a governess was very challenging. Anne Brontë creates a sharp contrast between two maternal figures, that of Mrs Bloomfield, the new employer, and Mrs Grey and also between two children of different educational and cultural backgrounds, Agnes herself and the little Tom. The differences between the two mothers is shown by the description of the character of Mrs Bloomfield who appears physically as a 'stately woman with thin black hair, cold grey eyes and extremely sallow complexion' (AG,14) and emotionally as 'cold, grave and forbidding' (AG 18). These features are in clear opposition to those of Agnes's mother who is caring, humble and sensible, 'a woman of spirit' (AG, 3). For what concerns the character of Tom, the so-called 'little boy' and 'the flower of the flock' is portrayed as an attention-seeker ('her brother claimed all my attention', AG 15), as a dominant figure over his siblings ('I'm obliged to do it now and to keep her in order', AG 16), and, finally, as an aggressive and violent child who likes to kill animals ('I may do what I like with ... you see it is no wicked', AG 18). All these behavioural patterns may be interpreted in accordance to Freud's theories as a lack of moral values expressed by a weak superego which is unable to banish the aggressive drives of the id. This is clearly depicted by the lack of awareness of the brutality of his behaviour ('I cut them into pieces ... I mean to roast them alive') and the support of his father, Mr Bloomfield, who approves the child's conduct: 'Papa knows how I treat them, and he never blames me for it' (AG 17). The personality of the boy, as well as that of his sister Mary Ann, can therefore be related to that of an antisocial person in which the dysfunction of the superego is explained by the assimilation of distorted parental values and by the excessive expression of the aggressive impulses over which the ego of a little boy has poor or no control (Kamur, 2022). This aspect is confirmed in the text itself when Agnes realizes that one of her main tasks is 'to make the widest possible distinction between good and bad conduct' (AG, 22) and also when she notices that any kind of reprimand has no effect on the children: 'With me ... neglect and disgrace were the most dreadful of punishment; but on her they made no impression (AG, 25). In addition, terms such as violence, perverse, mischievous, falsehood, deception, obstinate, intractable, rebels, wild and creature are likely used to emphasise the beastly and unsocial behaviour of the Bloomfield children. In performing her educational role, Agnes tries to discipline Tom and Mary Ann but, despite all her efforts and good intentions, it turns out to be a fiasco. From a psychoanalytical view, the reasons of this failure may be attributed primarily to the discrepancy between the ethical values, social conduct and conscience of a governess on one side and the lack of moral standards, prohibitions, inhibitions and discipline of the infants on the other side, an aspect which is clearly the consequence of the internalization of abnormal and distorted parental rules which, in the end, contributed to the creation of a weak and defiant superego. The gap between these two mental dispositions is confirmed in the following excerpt from chapter 5 when Agnes describes her disappointment in managing the children's demeanor during a family meeting: 'by reproaching their unmannerly conduct, to make them ashamed to repeat it. But they knew no shame; they scorned authority which had no terrors to back it' (AG, 39). This contradiction may be further explained from a social perspective because the role of a governess in Victorian society showed many inconsistencies (Huff, 2003). The governess was typically considered as an instructor and an example of good moral conduct but, at the same time, she was an employee not a member of the family nor a servant. Moreover, she was a spinster with no or few marital prospects, not a mother rather a surrogate, sometimes a confidant, in other occasions even a rival. In the end, it is this rivalry and discrepancy between the two female figures, employer and employee,

ladies of different social status, moral conscience (or superegos), instinctual drives (or id) and educational beliefs that will contribute to the end of Agnes' service at the Bloomfield family.

The new employment at Mr Murray's residence was undoubtedly less challenging from the previous one but, notwithstanding, the feelings experienced by Agnes towards her second position as a governess were conflicting. As a matter of fact, her initial optimism and fervour in looking for another situation are in clear contrast with the gloomy state that occurs when she leaves her family to move to Horton Lodge; this is confirmed by the unpleasant climate conditions on the day of her departure. The 'continual storm of snow' (AG, 45) elicits images of harshness, coldness and bitterness which will have a strong impact on her emotions and thoughts. Indeed, Agnes is in a distressed mood as she had a 'hearty fit of crying' (AG, 46) along with a 'a strange feeling of desolation' and 'a joyless kind of curiosity' (AG, 47). Feelings of loneliness and isolation as well as disappointment related to the role of a governess in the family's entourage were very common at the time (Hughes, 2014) thus confirming that these young ladies were exposed to a lot of emotional distress. Agnes is initially concerned on how to call the children of the new family, preferably with the titles of Miss and Master rather than by name, even if this might seem cold and distant to her. In this case, the heroine is adopting a way to cope with the problem of relating to her new pupils by avoiding the expression of emotions as the narrative voice will confirm in the text: 'Miss and Master seemed to have a surprising effect in repressing all familiar, open-hearted kindness' (AG, 48). The repression of emotions may have negative consequences on the body and mind of the individual as suggested by Patel and Patel (2019) who underline the links with stress and depression, two psychological conditions of which governesses were commonly affected. There is also a considerable negative impact on physical health as shown in the following excerpts from the novel: 'The task of instruction was as arduous for the body as the mind' (AG, 23); 'you are a good deal paler and thinner than when you first left home, and we cannot have you undermining your health ...' (AG, 42) As a matter of fact, the governess is commonly struggling with mixed emotions and fears to affirm her position and be accepted by her new pupils and employers: The situation becomes even more complicated and challenging because these girls were often considered as a disturbing element for the family serenity as well as a danger for social equilibrium and for the preservation of class distinction (Regaignon, 2001).

The family context that Agnes found at Norton Lodge was somehow dissimilar to that of Wellwood. Differently from the previous employer, Mrs Murray is attentive to the education of her children and gives instructions to Agnes on how to behave with the little boys: 'I hope you will keep your temper, and be mild and patient throughout' (AG, 49); 'And remember ... when any of the young people do anything improper ... let one of the others come and tell me' (AG, 50). The active participation of the mother in the instruction and upbringing of her own children was of much concern in the Victorian time as highlighted by Regaignon (2001). It was discouraged to leave the education of pupils exclusively to the responsibility of a young lady whose training as educator could have been questionable and it was strongly recommended that the role of the mother, as well as that of the wife, should not be assumed by any other female figure. To put it simply, it was advisable that the governess's role was that of support and assistance not that of a substitute, which means that she had to be considered as "the mother's educating arm". It is clear that this juxtaposition was favourable to Agnes since her second employment turned out to be professionally pleasant and enriching though initially hard and disappointing. From a psychoanalytical perspective, Agnes is a model of good manners and morality, especially for the two Misses Murray, as she attempts to affect positively the development of their superegos even though not in a very successful way. This is evident in the following passage in which a positive remark is made about Agnes: 'She had her own opinions on every subject ... very tiresome opinions they often were; as she was thinking of what was right and what was wrong, and had a strange reverence for matters connected with religion ...' (AG, 57). As claimed by Freud's structural theory of the mind, the superego is that part of the personality composed of the internalized principles and values that are generally acquired from parents and society as a result of a regular interaction between parent/caregiver (in this case, the governess) and child/pupil (Holtz Deal, 2007). In practice, there should be a positive and constructive relationship between Agnes and the two adolescent girls, Matilda and Rosalie, that causes changes to the structure of their superegos as well as modify their internal images, opinions and ideas about the others and themselves. The failure of this interaction is depicted in the following excerpts from the novel in which Rosalie persists in her selfish behaviour, frivolity and lack of moral sense: 'I don't suppose he will ask me to

marry him – nor should I desire it ... but I intend him to feel my power' (AG, 106) when commenting about Mr Weston; 'Besides, I don't care for his letters ... he may ... look as great as a calf as he likes when I meet him; it only amuses me' (AG, 110) when referring to Mr Green. If Freud's statement about the formation of the superego at the age of five or six years is true, it does not surprise that further attempts in life to remodel its structure are likely worthless. This aspect did indeed put much pressure on the person in charge of the education of young children since the tasks required to the governess were that forming the mind, generate new habits, instil a moral conscience and rectify inappropriate behavioural patterns (Devlin, 2022).

4. CONCLUSION

To conclude, the governess played a significant role in Victorian society since she represented high ideals of morality, educational beliefs, interpersonal relationships, and womanhood. As discussed in this paper, this responsible, honest and disciplined model collided with a mental position and societal structure which hardly accepted that a person from a low class, and a stranger in the house, could interfere positively with familiar dynamics and habits. This final aspect could be interpreted as a sort of resistance to the change and improvement of cultural and ethical values of the new generation if the target of this amelioration was the offspring of wealthy people. Responsibility, honesty, discipline and morality all belong to the mental structure called by Sigmund Freud the superego. In *Agnes Grey*, the superego of the main character came eventually into conflict with the conscience of young children, mothers and other family members which was unlikely to be remodelled. This impasse may explain a great part of the challenges and difficulties that a young girl had to face when assuming the role of a governess. The results of this study can be a reference for other researchers who are interested in conducting similar studies as well as explain the failures and disappointments that may occur to educators while performing their valuable profession.

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Appendix 1 - Definition of Freudian terms (From Fodor and Gaynor, (1950) "Freud: Dictionary of Psychoanalysis")

Freudian term	Definition
Unconscious	“..we call “unconscious” any mental process the existence of which we are obliged to assume.. but of which we are not directly aware..”
Id	“It contains everything that is inherited, that is present at birth, that is fixed in the constitution - above all, therefore, the instincts, which originate in the somatic organization and which find their mental expression in the id in forms unknown to us.”
Ego	“We recognize in a man a physical organization which is interpolated between his sensory stimuli and perception of his bodily needs on the one hand, and his motor activity on the other..”
Super-Ego	“The Super-Ego holds a special position between the Ego and the Id. It belongs to the Ego, shares its high psychological organization, but stands in an especially intimate connection with the Id.”
Repression	“The essence of repression lies simply in the function of rejecting and keeping something out of consciousness”

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