**The Governess and the Female Bildungsroman:   
 ‘Agnes Grey’ and ‘Jane Eyre’**

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 21 June 2012

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Introduction

The governess is a common figure in the Victorian novel. The depictions of governesses range widely: from a scheming governess wanting to marry the son of the house in *Vanity Fair* to the portrayal of the occupation as a governess as some form of slave trade in *Emma*. The governess novel was popular in the long eighteenth century. However throughout the years, the way in which the governess was portrayed changed. In this essay I will compare two books which have a governess as the heroine, namely the novels *Agnes Grey* by Anne Brönte and *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brönte. I shall analyze how being a governess effects and relates to their stories of Bildung. The novels are both written by a Brönte, and as such I will be comparing the novels written by sisters, who came from the same background and upbringing. The Brönte-sisters were living together in one house when they wrote these novels. Charlotte Brönte wrote about that time in the introduction to *Agnes Grey*. The sisters were back together after a period of separation, as both had been working as governesses and began to make as Charlotte describes ‘their literary attempts.’ In their family home the sisters wrote from a very young age and read each other work. Together all of the three sisters have contributed to the canon of English literature, with works that are still widely read and popular. Charlotte says about the reasons for writing of her sisters:

Neither Emily or Anne was learned: they had no thought of filling their pitchers at the well- spring of other minds; they always wrote from the impulse of nature, the dictates of intuition, and from such observations as their limited experience had enabled them to amass. (A. Brönte 12)

Both sisters, Anne and Charlotte, worked as a governess before and there might be certain matters that were drawn from experience. This thesis is concerned with the way writers portray governesses. These two novels have two different perceptions on the governess. The books explores the ways in which the governess deals with society and finds her own way throughout the story. It is about the two young women and their journey to self-development and it is important to further analyze whether being a governess defines their story.   
 There were a lot of novels that centered on the governess. In the time that Anne and Charlotte wrote their books there was an ongoing debate on the position and rights of the governess. The debate centered on the following points:

The governess debate focused on terms of employment, salaries, and on the socially intermediate position of the governess. In the novels, this intermediate position functions both as a device of bringing the governess’s plight in focus, and to furnish to writer with a framework for female development. (Lecaros, Wadsö Cecilia ‘The Victorian Governess Novel’ *Victorian Web* 2000. Web. 18 Jun. 2012 <<http://www.victorianweb.org/gender/wadso2.html>>

These new points of debate on the governess can also be found in *Agnes Grey* and *Jane Eyre*, where they were used as a framework for the female development. The two novels feature a young woman who takes her first steps into the world as a governess. They have the task of instructing their pupils, whilst still learning themselves. It is the journey they make throughout the story, that is of interest in this thesis.  
 In the first chapter I will look at the social position of the governess and how the governess was depicted in literature. Because of the intermediate position the governess holds, it can affect her development. I shall describe the features of the governess novel and look at the turn in the genre of the governess novel throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century. I will look at these changes by discussing an example of the early governess novel, namely *The Governess: or little female academy* written by Sarah Fielding and then look at the novels *Jane Eyre* and *Agnes Grey*, which fall in the tradition of the nineteenth century governess novel. In the second chapter I will focus on the character building in the novel. I shall examine the tension between the expected character and the abilities of a governess and how this tension is portrayed in the two governess novels. Attention will also be paid to the editorial voice of the heroines in the books. In the third chapter I will be using the theoretical framework of the Bildungsroman in order to look at the development of the characters. A line of research has argued that Agnes does not change and is a static character, but I will argue that the characters develop. I shall consider the tension between the fact that the novels end in a marriage and how this works with the Bildungsroman. The conclusion will provide a comparison of the novels *Agnes Grey* and *Jane Eyre* and will explore if there is a continuation of the figure of the governess in literature.

“It is a curious proof of the present feeling towards governesses, that they are made the heroines of many popular novels.” - Mary Maurice, *Governess Life* 1849 (Hughes 1)

**Chapter 1 The Governess in Literature and Society**

A substantial amount of women were working as governesses around the year 1846, to be precise 25.000 (Hughes xi). By then the governess became more prominent in society, a great deal of manuals for governess appeared and the figure of the governess was popular in the novels. The portrayal of the governess has been very diverse but already in the mid eighteenth century a hundred years before *Jane Eyre* and *Agnes Grey*, shared themes could be found in these novels . In this chapter I will first discuss the social position of the governess. I shall look at the novels about the governess chronically. First I will analyze the early governess novel in the eighteenth century, with the example of *The Governess; or little female academy* written by Sarah Fielding, to illustrate the traits of those novels about the governess. Then I will go further in time and look at the debate about the governess that arose in 1830 and how this comes back in the characteristics of the governess novel. Finally, there will be attention to how *Agnes Grey* and *Jane Eyre* are part of this second tradition of the governess novel.

It is noteworthy that there are three kinds of educators that were referred to as governesses. Firstly, a daily governess, who resided at one place and traveled to another home to teach. School teachers, who were mistresses at school, where also seen as governesses. Finally, there was a private governess, a woman who lived in a household in order to teach the children and serve as a companion to them. Kathryn Hughes explains in her book *The Victorian Governess* the advantages of the daily governess and shows at the same time the disadvantage of the private governess: “On the plus side, the private of the daily governess was not subject to the same degree of control and scrutiny as that of the woman who boarded with her employers” (Hughes 36). Nonetheless Hughes also states that the journey the daily governess made every day, emphasized the fact she was a hired employee rather than a family member (36). In this chapter the focus will be on the private governess.  
 Often, the governess was isolated from the family as well as the servants and was expected to eat alone. She was set apart from the other servants, because she was expected to act like a lady and serve as an example for her pupils. However, she was also dependent on her employer and did not receive a higher pay than the other servants. She was not able to sustain herself very long outside of her employers house. This precarious social position of the governess is important. “In her dependent and wage-earning position the governess resembles the domestic servant, but she also has some affinity with the mistress of the house because of her middle-class background”(Lecaros, Cecilia Wadsö “The Victorian Governess Novel: Characteristics of the Genre” *Victorian Web* 02 Nov. 2005. Web. 18 Jun. 2012. <<http://www.victorianweb.org/genre/wadso1.html>>) . Not quite part of the servants, nor a part of the family, she attains a special position in the household. This intermediate position is also determined by how other people interact with the governess. Common themes in the governess novel include “the pitting of the lady of the house against the governess and the often cruel behavior inflicted upon the governesses by her pupils” (Lecaros).  
 The shared themes in governess novels did not remain the same over time. In the early eighteenth century the governess novel was a platform for didactic lessons. In these novels the governess was a well-respected person. For instance, we read the story of the school of Mrs. Teachum, in the book *The Governess; or the little female academy* written by Sarah Fielding in 1749. She is a forty year old widow, who set up a school and restricted the number of pupils to nine. This little school is highly respected and people were glad if a spot became available. The girls who board there had high respect for the teacher as well and wanted to please her. The story told in this novel is largely about the pupils themselves, who tell each other stories about their lives. They each relate to the past faults of the others and how they were able to improve after they began attending the school. The eldest pupil Jennie Peace, teaches her fellow students valuable lessons, while relating the progress to the Mrs. Teachum. In the end Jennie Peace goes back to her family and says goodbye to Mrs. Teachum:

I shall attribute every happy hour, madam, that I may hereafter be blessed with, to your wise and kind instruction, which I shall always remember with the highest veneration, and shall ever consider you as having been to me no less than a fond and indulgent mother. (Fielding 96)

She has the highest respect for Mrs. Teachum and has obeyed her in her instruction of correct conduct. Mrs. Teachum, her governess, has been as kind to her as her mother. In her book *A galaxy of governesses* Bea Howe explains that during the eighteenth century it was considered bad manners to be rude to the governess and the governess was not slighted in public by her pupils like the Victorian governess was (Howe 55). Howe mentions another writer of the governess novel: “Miss Maria Edgeworth informed her readers how: “In her time, the Governess was no longer treated as an Upper Servant but as a Gentlewoman ” (55). In these early stories the role of the governess was a positive one and they were only well treated. But in these novels the governess herself was not yet the central character. The stories centered more around valuable life lessons that could be learned, than about the character of the governess.

By the mid-nineteenth century things changed, a discussion about the social standing of governesses arose. This discussion about the governess was of influence on the portrayal of governesses and lead to a different kind of governess novel. As said by Cecilia Wadsö Lecaros in the article *The Victorian Governess*:

While most early portrayals of governesses have a clearly didactic purpose and present highly appreciated teachers, a noticeable shift in attitude seems to have taken place in the 1830s. From then on, the governess heroine was usually depicted as a victim of circumstances at the mercy of inhospitable or even hostile employers. Economic and social changes in the mid-1800s affected the position of governesses, and those shifts seem to have influenced and intensified the fictional delineation of governesses. (Lecaros, Cecilia Wadsö “The Victorian Governess Novel” *Victorian Web,* 2000. Web. 18 Jun. 2012. *<*<http://www.victorianweb.org/gender/wadso2.html>>)

Due to the rise of the middle class, more people were able to take on a governess. Hiring a governess could be seen as a status symbol, because this meant that the mother was truly a woman of leisure, no longer responsible for the education of her children. The governess was expected to be very patient with the children, a humble and meek spirit was seen as the best characteristic for the governess. Howe describes the view on the governess in this society: “By 1845, a governess had never been so easy to distinguish with her pale, depressed look; even the clothes she wore had become an uniform” (Howe 113). The governess novels mainly used the private governess as the heroine. By using a private governess in the novel the social position is more plain to see. The outsider is pushed into an inside position, while still remaining marginal. A daily governess is also an outsider, but she has the interaction with the pupils in the school or traveling to the pupils in their house, while still having her own home situation. The depiction of governesses varies in the governess novel, but many use the outsider position that the governess held in the household.  
 *Agnes Grey* and *Jane Eyre* fall into the later tradition of the governess novel. The didactic lessons can still be found in these novels but no longer form the main message of the story. Agnes and Jane are employed as private governesses. They are therefore a part of a household, and are both very much aware of the sensitive nature of their position. Agnes first situation is at the Bloomfield’s. Her lessons are constantly undermined by the higher class visitors in the house and even by the parents. She cannot say too much and knows that Mrs. Bloomfield would never accept any criticisms regarding her children. Agnes feels alone, and neither the servants nor the family itself behave very welcoming towards her. The only support she receives at times comes from the nurse, but she is aware that their situations are not the same, as Agnes is accountable for teaching the children and for the conduct of the children. Where other governess novels had the theme of rivalry between the mother, nurse and governess, for the affections of the child, this is not the case with *Agnes Grey* or *Jane Eyre*. Agnes finds sympathy, not rivalry, in the nurse at the Bloomfield family. Plus it is clear that the pupils do not hold her in high regard, so stealing the affection away from the mother is not the problem. In *Jane Eyre*, there is no mother figure for Adele, and Jane does not associate much with Adele’s nurse Sophie, besides Sophie is not someone who contradicts Jane. Where in the earlier novels the focus was on how well the governess was respected, in both of these novels it is clear that the occupation of governess is looked down upon. Mrs. Teachum in *The Governess* had pupils who listened to her, they were sad to go for she was like a mother to them. What more marked difference can there be than the situation Agnes finds herself in with the children of the Bloomfield’s: “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” (A. Brönte 49).  
Agnes’s second situation at the Murrays is not much better in terms of the treatment of their governess. She is greeted by my Mrs. Murray just as her mother would have greeted a servant girl. Mrs. Murray is concerned with feelings of children and expects Agnes to treat them mildly and with patience. Mrs. Murray found all her previous governesses, even the best, lacking in that way. “They wanted that meek spirit, which St. Matthew, or some of them, says is better than the putting on of apparel- you will know what passage to which I allude, for you are a clergyman’s daughter” (A. Brönte 102). She does not mention the feelings or happiness of Agnes. The life of the governess was about the pupils, they should be her priority. Agnes and Jane both dress plainly and now what they are expected to do. This image of the genteel governess was present in the Victorian society and the expectations of how the governesses must behave, are used in the novels.  
 For Jane, her social position as a governess is perhaps less clear than Agnes’s. Still, *Jane Eyre*, too, is a novel where the debate about the position of the governess is present. At the start of her employment at Thornfield Hall Mrs. Fairfax welcomes her as her new companion and in the course of the story she does find friendship and love in Mr. Rochester. But that does not mean that she as a governess does not feel the intermediate position. Instances where she is more painfully aware of her station are, for instance, when the party with Blanche Ingram comes to visit.The party is talking about governesses, while Jane is also present. The whole party speaks degradingly about their past governesses and Blanche Ingram recalls that she had the control over her governesses: “Oh, don’t refer him to me, mamma! I have just one word to say of the whole tribe; they are a nuisance. Not that I ever suffered much from them; I took care to turn the tables” (C. Brönte 176). The defiant nature of the pupils is a characteristic of the governess novel. In *Jane Eyre* Blanche Ingram and her siblings tells mockingly that they did not make it easy on their governesses. In *Agnes Grey* Agnes also has to deal with difficult children. The struggle for authority over the children is something that comes back in the novels. This is because it can be problematic if the parents or other people intervene and think they know better than the governess, the very person they hired to educate their children.  
 The debate surrounding the governess was still very much alive in the year 1847 when both books were published. *Agnes Grey* first appeared in a volume with *Wuthering Heights* in the autumn of 1847. It was well received and “George Moore declared it to be ‘the most perfect prose narrative in English literature”(Howe 109). *Jane Eyre* was an instant success and quickly became a bestseller. An example how fiction and real life intertwine and influence each other is when Howe describes how Charlotte Brönte received letters asking for advice concerning the subject of becoming a governess. “ Eight months after the triumphant publication of *Jane Eyre* in 1847, Mr. William Smith Williams, reader to Charlotte’s publishers, sought her advice on a delicate family problem. Should his two daughters go out as governesses? ”(Howe 97).

“Many ladies would not dare to treat their maids as they behave to the teacher of their children.”

-Anonymous, *Fraser’s Magazine* 1844 (Hughes 148)

**Chapter 2 The Character of The Governess**

*Jane Eyre* and *Agnes Grey* are novels that have a clear protagonist. In this chapter there will be attention to exploring the characters of Jane and Agnes. There is a tension between the expected character of the governess and how this is portrayed in both of the novels. First I will look at why Jane and Agnes decided to become a governess and what drives them. Then I shall analyze the struggles that in the novels arise from the position of the governess. Their characters are tested because the governess had to have authority over the children but also keep the parents satisfied with their functioning as the governess. I will conclude this chapter by looking at the editorial voice of the heroines in the books.

Jane and Agnes had to be believable heroines, to be accepted as the novels protagonists**.** As was said in the previous chapter, even though there were a lot of governesses, they were marginal figures in society. They do not have the a good high-class background. A character like Blanche Ingram can object, because why are these marginal figures the heroines? Although discussions on the social standing of the governess arose in 1830, a governess was still not a likely choice for the heroine of a novel. The reason why more attention was paid to the role of governesses around 1830, is because more middle-class women were going out to work. It is noteworthy to look at the reasons why Jane and Agnes became a governess and how they see themselves in that role. They have heard that governesses are not always treated well, but still they want to become a governess. Jane and Agnes have similar reasons as well as differing ones when it comes to their decision to become a governess. They come from different situations when they decide to search for a situation as a private governess.   
 Jane decides to become a governess after she has been at Lowood school for eight years. She spent six years as a pupil at Lowood and two as a teacher. When Miss Temple leaves, Jane decides that she wants to leave Lowood. Miss Temple, a teacher at Lowood school, has become a friend to Jane and gives Jane instructions as if she were both her mother, as well as her teacher and a companion. Jane noticed she behaved differently around miss Temple, more subdued. After Miss Temple marries and departs from Lowood, Jane’s old emotions come back. This is because the reason for tranquility is gone, and she is now back in her natural element. Her early childhood spent at the Reeds was not a very happy one. Even as a child she has known the outsider position and was constantly reminded of her position as a charitable child. When her parents died while she was just a baby, her uncle was willing to take her in to his own house. But after he fell ill he made his wife promise she would take care of Jane as if she was one of her own. Although Mrs. Reed does let Jane stay, she is never able to live up to her promise to love Jane as her own child. She thinks Jane is too passionate a child. This past had its effects on Jane’s character and aspirations in life. Jane learns to be more submissive due to the influence of Miss Temple and the strict rules of the school. After some time, Jane realizes she wants to leave Lowood, because she yearns for things like liberty, change and new stimuli. In the eight years she spent at Lowood school, she never once quit it. She thinks of what her options are and a new servitude as a governess does not sound too unattainable.

I know there is, because it does not sound too sweet. It is not like such words as Liberty, Excitement, Enjoyment: delightful sounds truly, but no more than sounds for me, and so hollow and fleeting that it is mere waste of time to listen to them. But Servitude! That must be a matter of fact. Any one may serve. I have served here eight years; now all I want is to serve elsewhere. (C. Brönte 87-88)

Jane thinks complete liberty is too far-fetched for her. She wants to be realistic and thinks she can serve and still be honorable. However there is more to her than just someone who is willing to serve and obey. She is still a bit of a dreamer, as shown by the fact that the idea of advertising for a position is dropped by a kind fairy.

It is worthy to notice that Agnes and Jane have very different backgrounds. Agnes is from a loving home, and her family is very protective and loving towards her. She and her sister were brought up in seclusion, with her mother as her teacher. Agnes always had a secret wish to see more of the world. However, her mother acts and thinks for her most of the time, and Agnes realizes her family still sees her as a child. A turn of events leads Agnes to entertain the idea of becoming a governess and earning her own living. Her father loses money and the whole family feels the consequences. In the governess novel this motive was common. This unforeseen development provides Agnes with a way of proving herself to her family. She feels that there is very little she could do at home to help out her family, and forms the idea that she should like to be a governess. Her family is not very understanding when she relates this idea to them. Her mother says that she can hardly take care of herself, let alone care for children. Her sister Mary says that Agnes will be going to a house full of strangers. She argues that Agnes will not be able to have her or her mother to speak or act for her there. Agnes disagrees: “You think, because I always do as you bid me, I have no judgment of my own: but only try me- that is all I ask- and you shall see what I can do”(A. Brönte26). Her father laughs at her idea of becoming a governess and does not see how his little Agnes could work in such a position. But Agnes is resolved to find a position as a governess, she thinks she can take care of young children, though perhaps not older girls. She has several reasons in mind as to why it will be delightful to be a governess:

To go out unto the world; to enter into 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. (A. Brönte 28-29)

Jane and Agnes have to leave their familiar surroundings. When Jane is traveling to Thornfield Hall, she realizes she is alone in the world and that thought scares her. For Agnes,

it is the realization that she is leaving her everyday life behind and is aware that things will change while she is away. The heroines begin their career as a governess because they have a wish to see more of the world. By going through the events that follow in the novels they test their character and come to realize who they really are.

In the novels, many struggles occur that are a test to their character. These struggles has to do with the contradictions within the figure of the governess. There are tensions between the power and the powerlessness of the governess and the inside yet marginal position of the governess in the household. There were certain expectations surrounding the character of the governess in society as well as in fiction. On the one hand society expected the character of the governess to be meek and gentle. At the same time, the governess needed to be a figure of authority if they wanted to be able to get the children under control. The word governess signifies a person who has to govern. The governess must have an authority over the children. It is important that the employers give them authority in that position. But the same people expect a submissive genteel governess, who teaches their children with tenderness, and who keeps the children happy. Besides having to be able to give orders, governesses also have to obey orders. This juxtaposition poses a certain tension, and this tension is clearly felt in the two novels.

In *Agnes Grey,*  the tension translates into the almost powerless figure she becomes in her treatment of the children. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Mrs. Murray expects a meek spirit in her governesses, a thing Agnes must understand because Agnes is a clergyman’s daughter. As Howe remarks: “ […]gentle, refined Miss Agnes Grey with her ‘pale hollow cheek and ordinary brown hair, [represents]the governess that was to be so cruelly exploited through the century- the clergymen’s daughter” (Howe 110). In the beginning, Agnes has the confidence that the children will listen to her and will develop into better characters. Agnes thinks that it will be a wonderful thing to be a teacher to children. Because she herself is still young, she can clearly remember her own childhood, and believes this will help when she is teaching children:

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. [...] To train the tender plants, and watch their buds enfolding day by day. (A. Brönte 28)

However, she is quickly disillusioned about the task of teaching children. At the Bloomfield family especially she deals with children that do not see her as an authority. This is clear, for instance, when it comes to their treatment of animals. Tom, one of her pupils, sets up traps for birds. Agnes tries to teach Tom that the torturing of the small animals is a wicked thing to do. She says that as long as she has the power to prevent it, she will. But she does not have much power in the house. Just when she believes she got through to the children about this horrible pastime, their uncle comes to visit and goes bird hunting with the children. Her lessons are constantly undermined by visitors or the family itself, as was mentioned in the previous chapter. They find a nest of young sparrows and Tom is already devising plans how to torture these helpless birds. Agnes’ only solution to spare this birds is by giving them a more merciful death. She drops a flat stone on the nest, so they are killed instantly. Unfortunately, her extreme measures are rendered useless afterwards, as the uncle proclaims he will look for another nest tomorrow. The mother also expresses she cannot understand why it is so wrong to torture these animals because “[. . .] the creatures were all created for our convenience”(80). Agnes judges it wise to not say anything more on the matter. It can be argued that Agnes knows and tries to act on what is expected of her as a governess. She does not think she will be able to get across her opinion on the matter, and also does not find it her place to do so. Even when Mr. Bloomfield is questioning her abilities, she does not speak in her own defense. When she is fired, she wants to defend herself, but chooses not to, as this is not something that is expected of her in her position. She is determined to silently bear it.

In *Jane Eyre,* the struggle for power over the pupil is less evident. In *Jane Eyre* there is less interference from people concerning the handling of the pupil than in *Agnes Grey.* Adele is a difficult pupil, but not unmanageable. Jane sees that she has to be constant with Adele and that a good education will improve Adele’s character. Jane spends a great deal of time teaching Adele, but has more spare time than Agnes, especially because she only has one pupil. She does not have to deal with parents or other family members intervening . Mr. Rochester serves as a ward for Adele and respects Jane’s capability of teaching Adele. In other instances he does see Jane as the inexperienced girl who has seen nothing of the world nothing of the world, however it is not about the inability of Jane in her role as a governess.   
 In the story of *Jane Eyre,* the tension between the inside and marginal position of the governess is explored more than the question of power. Throughout the whole novel, Jane has to deal with a position that sets her apart from everyone. Her character is often discussed in the novel. Jane is not the meek, calm governess society might expect her to be. Jane is an emotional woman, with a rich character. Jane sticks with her beliefs to the end. She is not afraid to be outspoken, although she does have limits. She is not afraid to express her opinion about social matters to her employer Mr. Rochester. Yet when Blanche Ingram talks badly about governesses, Jane does not defend herself. Both Agnes and Jane can be seen as having the role of the novel's moral center. Although Agnes has to deal with the wild children, she is determined not to lose her self-control. Her weapons are Patience, Firmness and Perseverance (A. Brönte 50).   
 The two governess novels are both written with a first person narrator. In the novels, a clear editorial voice can be found. The novels are written as if they were autobiographical. The voice narrating the story is subjective, because it can choose what to narrate and what not. Agnes and Jane are editors of their own stories. In *Jane Eyre,* we read the events from Jane's point of view. Sometimes she looks at the events in a retrospective way, at other times she narrates them as she experienced them at the time. She lets the readers know that she made certain choices concerning how and what to narrate when telling her story, editing for her is a matter of selecting: “[ . . . ] this is not to be a regular autobiography: I am only bound to invoke memory where I know her responses will possess some degree of interest; therefore I now pass a space of eight years almost in silence: a few lines only are necessary to keep up the links of connection”(C. Brönte 85). Her tone of writing is friendly and affectionate. Kathryn Hughes points out that in *Jane Eyre* there is almost a sense of an intimate conversation with the reader. For instance, in the first sentence of the last chapter she writes: “ Reader, I married him”(Hughes 2).  
 The editorial voice of Agnes is funny and satirical, as in the passage where she explains a certain habit of her pupil Mary Ann: [ . . . ]she generally preferred lying there like a log till dinner or tea time, when, as I could not deprive her of her meals, she must be liberated, and would come crawling out with grin of triumph on her round, red face(A. Brönte 54). Agnes delivers her observations in a very deadpan kind of way:“ Climax of horror! actually waiting for their governess!!!” (159). The humor in the novel can often be found in the tension surrounding the intermediate position of the governess. It is important for Agnes to let the readers know that she is not self- advertising. She knows that she is treated badly and that she has to deal with difficult situations and people. But she has not written it to glorify herself or to let her conduct shine in comparison to that of the family members she works for. Her motive for writing her story is not just to be “a martyr to filial piety”(92). She has written it with a goal, often she addresses the reader about this. She says for instance*: “* […] my design, in writing the last few pages, was not to amuse, but to benefit those whom it might concern […] [For instance] a parent has, therefrom, gathered any useful hint, or an unfortunate governess received thereby the slightest benefit, I am well rewarded for my pains”(A. Brönte 62).  
 Howe praises Anne Brönte’s writing style in *Agnes Grey*. She states that: “Her prose style mirrors her mind; it is as clear as water”(Howe 107). The tone in the novel is very realistic about for instance the conduct of the pupils. The editorial voice does say that she herself should not have believed this story: “Had I seen it depicted in a novel, I should have thought it unnatural ; had I heard it described by others, I should have deemed it a mistake or an exaggeration[…]”(A. Brönte 221).

“A governess’s experience is frequently, indeed, bitter, but its results are precious; the mind, feeling, temper are there subjected to a discipline equally painful and priceless. I have known many who were unhappy as governess, but no one who regretted having undergone the ordeal and scarcely one whose character was not improved.”   
-Charlotte Brönte to Mr Williams, Haworth, 11th June 1848 (Howe 93)

**Chapter 3 The Female Bildungsroman**

The novels *Jane Eyre* and *Agnes Grey* belong to the category of the Bildungsroman. In this chapter I will look at the definition of Bildungsroman and see how it applies to the two novels. Often, the definition of the Bildungsroman presupposes a male hero and their freedom of choice. But in this chapter we look at the development of the heroines and see how they find their own way in to the world. Both governess novels end happily with a marriage, but is that the end the novels have been working towards? I will look at the message of the novels.

The term Bildungsroman is often discussed and a unilateral definition cannot be given. Dilthey gave in 1906 the definition:

[The Bildungsroman] examines a regular course of development in the life of the individual; each of its stages has its own value and each is at the same time the basis of a higher stage. The dissonances and conflicts of life appear as the necessary transit points of the individual on his way to maturity and harmony. (Fraiman 147-148)

As Susan Fraiman points out in her book *Unbecoming Women*, the Bildungsroman was a maledominant form of literature. Even the broadest definitions of the Bildungsroman presuppose a range of social options only available to men. “[…] [The] Bildungsroman’s essential faith in the ability of individuals, however laboriously tried, to weather ‘plot’ and affirm the sovereignty of ‘character’” (Fraiman 10). Fraiman notes that the Bildungs plot of progressive development and coherent identity tends to exclude women. The hero of the Bildungsroman has more freedom to find himself. Fraiman argues:

Of course the Wilhelms and Pips get buffeted around as well and feel themselves in the hands of some higher power, but willful self-making is still the keynote of their stories, and self-regard is still the decisive factor. The heroines I will consider have, by contrast, a clearer sense that formation is foisted upon them, that they are largely what other people, what the world, will make of them. (Fraiman 6)

This is especially the case with the governess novels, where so much of the constrained identity of the governess is formed by society. The governess is characterized by her intermediate position in society and this has a profound effect on her development in her life. The governess novels related stories of the hardships of winning social and economic security.   
 The introduction of *The voyage in fictions of female development* shows that critics have assumed that society constrains men and women equally. But this assumption is wrong, as a clear difference can be found. “ In fact, while male protagonists struggle to find a hospitable context in which to realize their aspirations, female protagonist most frequently struggle to voice any aspirations whatsoever” (Abel, Hirsch, Langland 6-7).   
 Fraiman examines a description of the classic developmental path of the Bildungsroman: “First and foremost, like the precursor genres the picaresque and romance, it involves travel. As Howe says, “Going somewhere is the thing. And there- in all sorts of tempting variety- is your story”(Fraiman 6) Where the male hero of the Bildungsroman may be able to go abroad to find himself, the heroine does not have that liberty. Women in nineteenth century fiction have a problem with mobility, they are generally unable to leave home for an independent life. “[Even] when they do, they are not free to explore; more frequently, they merely exchange one domestic sphere for another”(Abel, Hirsch, Langland 8). Jane for example is aware of this, when she thinks of the things she would like to do after spending eight years at Lowood. As was pointed out in the previous chapter, she thinks that a new servitude is a humble ambition she can achieve. For women, very few social options existed, especially for unmarried middleclass women. The uncertain status of middle class unmarried women was something that can be found in the novels.   
 Fraiman looks at the conduct books that introduce novels with a heroine. The conflicts and narrative structures she finds in these conduct books are also often to be found in the governess novels. For instance she examines the early nineteenth century conduct books of Hester Chapone. Fraiman states:

The very shape of these narratives support an ideology of romance that rigidly equates

female maturity and gratification with the married state, and Chapone, ‘recommending your

husband to be your fist and dearest friend’(New Married 122), is not alone in seeing the

conjugal relation as primary. (Fraiman 16)

Karen E. Rowe contributes another point of view on the female Bildungsroman. She states that “Folktale patterns exert a subtle yet pervasive influence on the structure of female *Bildungsromane* and our expectations as readers and literary critics (Rowe 69).” Rowe’s idea is that in the fairy tale the heroine: “[...]psychologically inculcates a dependant and selfless sacrifice, one designed to culminate in marriage (70),” as a subtext for female growth.  
 Marriage is an important part of the ending of fairy tales and is also often the end for a female Bildung story. Both governess novels end happily. The stories narrated in *Jane Eyre* and *Agnes Grey* end with an account of their happy marriages. For both main characters, the decision to marry was one of free choice and made out of love (for their significant others). Their story of development culminates with a marriage but it could have been different. As Fraiman writes: “I would like to imagine the way to womanhood not as a single path to a clear destination but as the endless negotiation of a crossroads.”(Fraiman x) The novels relate romance stories but this is not the only aspect that defines them. The heroines do not start their journey with the aspiration of becoming someone’s wife. Jane wishes to see more of the world as she sets out to be a governess. Agnes wishes to prove herself to her family. Although finding happiness in marriage is an important matter in these stories, it is certainly not the central message of the story. There is more to these stories, it must not be forgotten that these are governess novels. The novels must first and foremost be seen as governess novels, narrating the trials and tribulations of governesses in the nineteenth century. Although in the books they do not spend much time actually governing or teaching lessons as in *The Governess* by Sarah Fielding, it still an important factor. In these novels, certain social problems are tested that deal with being a governess, but also with being a woman in the nineteenth century .   
 *Jane Eyre* uses a narrative pattern that is often used in the Bildungsroman. From childhood conflicts to adult resolutions that provide some closure to the heroines apprenticeship (Abel, Hirsch, Langland 11) Her story reveals a balance between the developmental tensions of separation and relationships . In *Jane Eyre*, we read about Jane’s solitary introspection and see how much importance she lays on relationships. She really starts to realize who she is and how she has changed when she leaves Thornfield. The first step of this realization is made when she goes back to Gateshead, to say goodbye and forgive her aunt. The second time when she goes away is when she flees from Thornfield, after she discovers that Mr. Rochester is already married. Jane must separate from Rochester, only to subsequently reunite on a basis of human equality. She really tests her own identity when she roams the streets as a beggar for a while. She is not even a governess anymore, her social status is now lower than a servant. When she works as a schoolteacher to poor children; she cannot help feeling degraded. When she hears from St. John that she is an heiress, she does not react much. But when she hears that they are cousins, she rejoices. Jane may not be ambitious but she is impassioned as St. John points out: “I mean that human affections and sympathies have a most powerful hold on you”(C.Brönte 352).Jane refuses St. John’s marriage proposal. She does not confirm to the expectations that are placed on her. As an unmarried women, she was expected to marry him. She chooses not to, as her inheritance grants her the means to fend for herself and she is determined to marry out of love.

Agnes marries the clergyman Mr. Weston. Just like her mother, she marries out of love. Her story is one of suffering but it does not mean that marrying Mr. Weston is her reward for this. She is changed and has developed throughout the story. Especially when she is at the Murrays and Rosalie has gone out to society and she only has Matilda left as her pupil, Agnes has more free time for herself. As a reader we learn more about her, outside her role of the governess. From this moment onwards, her journey become a bit easier, as it is no longer governed only by the actions of her pupils or the family she works for. Some have described Agnes Grey as a static character. However the reader does learn more about her. In the parts of the novel where she is a governess and has to deal with these out of control children, she does stay the same in attitude. But this can be seen as her strength, as she insists on trying to keep teaching the children. She never gives up and is determined to bear these unfair treatments. For a large part of the story, she is defined by her position as a governess and all duties that come with this position. As Mrs. Murray says that “When we wish to decide upon the merits of a governess, we naturally look at the young ladies she professes to have educated, and judge accordingly” (A. Brönte 235). Nevertheless there is room for development.

There are implications of a structuring narratorial voice for our sense of the Bildung of the heroines and what message they wanted to convey in the novel. Agnes as a narrator often points out that her story is not just to amuse. People have to learn from it. In the beginning she notes that: “All true histories contain instruction […]”(A. Brönte15). I believe that Agnes as a narrator and Anne Brönte the writer have written this story to provide the reader with instructions to other people, whoever might benefit from the lessons learned. With Jane the lessons that are learned from her story, are even more in the background. There are still there but in a more subtle way. In that respect *Agnes Grey* and likewise *Jane Eyre* have the characteristic of the early governess novel, like *the Governess* of Sarah Fielding.

**Conclusion**

The governess novel of the nineteenth century had its differences and similarities when compared to the early eighteenth century governess novel. *Agnes Grey* and *Jane Eyre* are two nineteenth century governess novels where the governess is the central character and where a great deal of attention is paid to the intermediate position of the governess. However, they still have certain characteristics of the early eighteenth century governess novel. *Agnes Grey* and as well as *Jane Eyre* convey lessons in their stories. Not to the degree we saw in *The Governess* by Sarah Fielding, but they can still be found in an explicit way. If you look at the development Agnes and Jane go trough in their stories, there are very different in nature. This is partly because we do not just follow Jane as a governess, as we do with Agnes. Throughout her story, we see her in such differing roles as a child, student, teacher, governess, beggar, schoolteacher, heiress and finally as a wife.  
 The story of *Agnes Grey* is centered more around the social position of the governess, and is realistic about the middle position she holds in the household. There is more struggle for power and authority. *Jane Eyre* is also concerned with the questions that surround the marginal position of the governess, but this novel does not only concern her role as a governess. Through the editorial voices, certain differences between Agnes and Jane become apparent. Both of the stories are written as an autobiography. But in Agnes Grey the editorial voice pays more attention to the everyday life, to being realistic. In Jane Eyre it is more passionate, more about extreme highs and lows. In a way the novels are complementary to each other, just like Charlotte and Anne are as sisters.  
 The stories are different in many respects, for instance, if we look at the popularity of the novels. Jane Eyre is often seen as a timeless love story and has been, and still is, more successful. *Agnes Grey* is more the neglected one, and although *Agnes Grey* is a love story too, Agnes' story is rooted more in the social structures of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. It is often appraised by saying that no one else could have written such a story except a governess in that time. But the fact that it is so clearly a product of that time, with the debate surrounding the governess playing an important role when it was written, can also be the cause of its lesser popularity today when compared with *Jane Eyre*. Today love is a universal theme seen in books throughout the course of history, but how many center around the difficult situation of the governess?  
 The female teacher or governess as a theme in literature has not completely died out. After the nineteenth century, the number of governesses declined and with that the depiction of governesses in literature did too. Now it has taken a different avenue in the shape of the chicklit novels that often have a middle class working woman as a protagonist. In the article *Angels in the house or girl power*, Kerstin Fest argues that these middle class working women also have to deal with certain expectations surrounding their character and behavior. Just as Agnes and Jane were supposed to be calm and genteel, the heroines of the chicklit genre are supposed to be thoroughly nice and caring. The main theme of the chicklit novel is arguably the search for true love, with the protagonists' working life often playing a central role too. The tension between Bildung and marriage as we have seen in the governess novel is also one that comes back in these chicklit novels. Just as Charlotte and Anne Bronte were former governesses, a book like *The Nanny diaries* was written by Emma Laughlin and Nicola Kraus, two former nannies. In this way the middle class heroine still lives on in literature.

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