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ANNE BRONTË AND THE RELIGIOUS NOVEL
IN THE
EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY

A Thesis

Presented to the

Department of English

and the

Faculty of the Graduate College

University of Nebraska at Omaha

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Sharon Anderson

April, 1972

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Accepted for the faculty of The Graduate College of the University of Nebraska at Omaha, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts.

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INTRODUCTION

Religious Milieu of the Early Nineteenth Century (to 1850)

> In that Fire-Whirlwind, Creation and Destruction proceed together; even as ashes of the Old are blown about, do organic filaments of the New mysteriously spin themselves: and amid the rushing and the waving of the Whirlwind-element come tones of a melodious Deathsong, which end not but in tones of a more melodious Birthsong.[1]

To the introspective, sensitive, religious individual, the opening years of the nineteenth century must have indeed appeared to be a "Fire-Whirlwind" in which destruction and creation were simultaneous and immediate. It was an era of religious transition and uncertainty. The traditional religious beliefs and values were rapidly crumbling, and new currents of thought proliferated. Writing in 1884, J. A. Froude recalled that the first half of the century had been "an era of new ideas, of swift if silent spiritual revolution. . . . All were agreed to have done with compromise and conventionalities. . . . The present generation which has grown up in an open spiritual ocean and has learnt to swim for itself will never know what it was to find the lights all drifting, the compasses all awry, and nothing left to steer by but the stars."[2]

[1] Thomas Carlyle, Sartor Resartus (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1937), pp. 244-45.

[2] J. A. Froude, Carlyle's Life in London (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1919), pp. 310-11.

The static emphasis of Deism had been that God had created a perfect universe which operated independently according to mechanical laws. Divine revelation was thought to be superstition, and man could not know anything beyond his own power of reason. A comparatively personal God had become a distant Universal Cause, and the New Testament account of a single man had lost the concreteness of history and had begun to take on the abstract quality of myth.

The re-assertion of the "primacy of feeling in Christian experience"[3] had begun in Germany in the seventeenth century as a reaction against scholastic tendencies which were passive and dogmatic. In England, it arose as a "reaction from the depreciation of the supernatural and of special revelation, and from that emphasis on reason, common sense, and attainable morality which [were] the hallmarks of the rational and respectable pragmatism of the Augustan Age."[4] The problems attendant upon the industrial revolution in England--illiteracy, drunkenness, the savagery of the law, the spiritual destitution of the lower classes, the pressure of hard work, the increased tempo of life--also triggered this revival of emotional response. "Societies" arose within the Church to promote a warmer

[3]Williston Walker, A History of the Christian Church, rev. ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959), p. 445.

[4]Horton Davies, Worship and Theology in England From Watts and Wesley to Maurice, 1690-1850 (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 12.

religious life, and soon preachers such as John Wesley and George Whitefield had begun to awaken England. This revival of religious patterns of thought and feeling came like "some seismic upheaval after the flat indifferentism prevailing in the eighteenth century."[5]

Wesley emphasized "conversion, confident faith, and a religious life manifested in work for others,"[6] and he advocated the assimilation of his "societies" with the Church of England. His view of predestination was Arminian (Christ died as a sacrifice for all men rather than for a selected few), but this view was opposed by Whitefield who, with Lady Huntingdon, formed a group of Calvinistic Methodists known as "Lady Huntingdon's Connection." It was the latter group which finally gained control of the Evangelical Party within the Church of England.

The evangelical movement profoundly affected the lives of the English people, though certainly not all of them were converted to its theology. The movement instilled in the national consciousness an awareness of the need for education which resulted in Sunday Schools, parish schools, and national schools. It awakened a humanitarian concern for the problems of the common man which led to mission work in foreign countries, to the growth of tract societies whose

[5]"Victorian Uses for the Novel: Fiction as Pulpit, Confessional, and Battlefield," Times Literary Supplement, 9 March, 1962, p. 154.

[6]Walker, p. 462.

work was to guide and admonish the poor, and even, eventually, to the development of trade unions. Yet the indirect influence of the "moral temper of evangelicalism was stronger and more enduring than the direct influence of its theology. As early as 1830, evangelicalism was already becoming more a code than a creed. . . ."[7] It resulted in the Victorian "cult of respectability," based on an overt Sunday School morality, whose ideals were "deliberate sobriety, self-imposed inhibition, consciously restrained living."[8]

But the evangelical movement was not the only force that stirred controversy in the early nineteenth-century Church of England; the Church seemed almost to be given over to anarchy because of the divisions within it. In an essay on "Church Parties" written in 1853, the Reverend W. J. Conybeare made this attempt at classification:

Low Church	Normal type ("Evangelical") Exaggerated type ("Recordite") Stagnant type ("Low and Slow")
High Church	Normal type ("Anglican") Exaggerated type ("Tractarian") Stagnant type ("High and Dry")

[7]Hoxie N. Fairchild, Religious Trends in English Poetry, IV (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), p. 18.

[8]Jerome H. Buckley, The Victorian Temper, A Study in Literary Culture (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1953), p. 116.

Broad Church	Normal type (subdivided into "theoretical" and "anti-theoretical")
	Exaggerated type ("Concealed infidels")
	Stagnant type ("Concealed infidels")[9]

Although the strength and appeal of the evangelical movement lay in its personal appeal, its weakness was its extreme individualism. Evangelicals tended to forget the role of the Church in the process of conversion. In the 1830's, a group of men centered at Oxford, who came to be known as Tractarians, tried to pull the Church out of its spiritual and doctrinal lethargy by claiming for it Catholic truth and clear descent from the English Church of the Middle Ages. They opposed the authority of the secular state in religious matters, the rationalism of the Enlightenment, and the materialism of the middle class. They contended that the Church of England was not the creation of Henry VIII or of Elizabeth, nor was it a branch of the civil service. They asserted that with its continuous history of over 1200 years it had more in common with the Roman Church than most Englishmen suspected. In Tract No. 90, John Henry Newman went so far as to say that the Thirty-Nine Articles could be interpreted in such a way that no Roman Catholic would argue. Although the Oxford Movement was cloistered within

[9] Margaret Maison, The Victorian Vision: Studies in the Religious Novel (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961), pp. 12-13.

academic walls during its first decade, Newman's tract and his subsequent secession to Rome sent it forth into the world where it gradually became more practical, less doctrinal.

"The differences between the Anglo-Catholics and the greater portion of English Churchmen was and is, briefly, the difference between Catholic and Protestant. The Oxford Movement did not reveal its full potentialities immediately, but in time it had insisted on the doctrine of Apostolical Succession, on the importance of the Sacraments (with Mass as the central act of worship), on confession and absolution. It led to the establishment of many monastic institutions, to some practice of celibacy among the clergy, and to hope for reconciliation with Rome."[10]

The Oxford Movement was the product of crisis and continued as a focal point for the religious controversies of the Victorian era. Eventually the old "High and Dry" Churchmen with their love of ease and their cold common sense were influenced by these new Anglo-Catholic High Churchmen.

There was yet another impulse which strongly affected the minds and souls of many pre-Victorians--the Romantic Movement in art and literature. When traditional spiritual authority had begun to be questioned in the eighteenth

[10]Joseph Ellis Baker, The Novel and the Oxford Movement (New York: Russell and Russell, 1965), p. 4.

century, many thoughtful men had searched in vain for something to believe in; their spiritual despair had led them to look within themselves. Wordsworth had found that Divinity lay within him and that his personal experiences were the only guide to faith. In 1825, Coleridge identified reason as being a power of intuitive perception by which religious truths are revealed and the moral reason as being synonymous with conscience. For him, religious certainty was not based on external proofs but on religious consciousness.[11] The Romantic imagination sought intimations in nature, beauty, and human love to avoid solipsism, but it could not assent to the truth of divine revelation or authority. The Romantics were apostles of natural revelation as opposed to supernatural revelation.

In the Church of England, this thinking was reflected through the more liberal Broad Church Party in an increased belief in the natural goodness of the individual and in the growing belief that human love could alleviate social misery and lead the way to God.

> The outstanding concern of the movement was the conviction that the Church of England should be a comprehensive institution marked by charity and toleration. For this purpose its Articles should be interpreted as generously as possible: that is, neither in an exclusively Calvinistic direction, as the Evangelicals tended to do, nor in the

[11] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Aids to Reflection (Burlington: Chauncey Goodrich, 1840), p. 12.

> tendentious Roman Catholic way that Newman had tried to interpret them in Tract XC. . . . They regarded themselves as essentially a party of inquiry, while others were the parties of authority. They rejected the antiquarianism of Tractarianism in favour of the Transcendentalism and Immanentalism of the nineteenth century.[12]

Jerome Buckley characterizes the Victorian religious temper this way: "Craving adjustment amid the peril of change, representative Victorians, at least until the seventies, sought either in the radiance of God or in the dim consciousness of man some spiritual absolute by which to interpret and control their material advance; whatever misdirections they may frequently have followed, their impulse was in essence deeply religious."[13]

The household of the Reverend Patrick Brontë at Haworth Parsonage, though geographically isolated on the windy northern moors, was almost a microcosm of the religious milieu of early nineteenth-century England. The Reverend Mr. Brontë was a clergyman of the Church and a member of the Low Church or Evangelical Party, and Mrs. Brontë had been a fervent Methodist with an abundant capacity for "feeling and loving." Their courtship had been staged "in the glad atmosphere of revived Methodism. What a setting for a honeymoon we have for that year of 1812: 'The very grove echoed with the voice of praise and thanksgiving. Indeed

[12]Davies, Worship and Theology, pp. 285-86.

[13]Buckley, p. 10.

to have heard the sweet warbling of the birds in the wood and the melting strains of the boys in the chapel uniting in one blessed, heavenly chorus of praise to God, was enough to have moved the heart of a stone.'"[14] But Maria Brontë was to die soon after the birth of her six children, leaving them only her legacy of the capacity to respond poetically to nature and to imagine human drama and passion.

Although Patrick Brontë became a morose and disillusioned man after the death of his wife, he was not alone in influencing the impressionable Brontë children to turn away from their inherited religious faith. Mrs. Brontë's sister, Elizabeth Branwell, had come to care for the children during Maria's illness and decided to stay on after her death to cast a dreadful shadow on the family at Haworth Parsonage. Aunt Branwell had been converted to Methodism during the revival that had swept through Cornwall in her youth, and to that faith she remained committed. Her "native Cornwall though in the beginnings of Methodism 'notorious for the most flagrant opposition to the Gospel,' had, in the fifty years of John Wesley's ministry, become the very stronghold of the movement. Between his first visit there in 1742 when he found 'the strongest opposition

[14]Grace E. Harrison, Haworth Parsonage: A Study of Wesley and the Brontës (London: The Epworth Press, 1937), pp. 22-23.

to Methodism in the country,' and his last in 1789 when he could say: 'Methodism has conquered Cornwall more completely than any other county.' the whole status of religion--and of the religious-minded--had been revolutionised."[15] The Branwells were civic leaders and much involved in the "Society of People Calling Themselves Methodists."

In contrast to that of her sister Maria, Aunt Branwell's religion was not one of love, but rather of gloominess and fear. To her "the Everlasting Fire was a furnace of very real substance and combustible power; the likelihood of an infant falling into it was just as great as of her falling into the nursery fire."[16] It was this conflict between love and fear, between salvation and damnation that haunted Anne Brontë all her life.

When one considers the adult world of the Brontë home, it is not difficult to understand why the little Brontës turned their thoughts to the inner world of their imaginations and to the outside world of nature. It was Emily Brontë who introduced her younger sister to the moors where they ran, and walked, and played. Everything that they saw outdoors was beautiful, friendly, and lovable. What Anne felt as a child, she expressed later: "A little girl loves

[15]Winifred Gérin, Anne Brontë (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1959), p. 29.

[16]Ibid., p. 36.

her bird--Why? Because it lives and feels; because it is helpless and harmless? A toad likewise lives and feels and is equally helpless and harmless; but though she would not hurt a toad, she cannot love it like the bird, with its graceful form, soft feathers, and bright, speaking eyes."[17]

Emily Brontë had the soul of a Romantic. She refused to rely on any force external to herself; the principles of goodness and strength which she found within herself, supplemented by her communion with the wild nature of the moors, were adequate for her.

So, for Anne, Aunt Branwell and Emily represented two divergent religious paths. Aunt represented "all that was conventional in religion, all that was lowering, debilitating in a rule of life; Emily everything that was kindling, joyous and free."[18] Anne's life and her writing illustrates her lifelong struggle to reconcile these opposing forces and to find spiritual unity for herself.

Hoxie Fairchild summarizes the religious diversity of the Brontë sisters: "Anne, never tempted to smash through the wall which surrounded her, was a mildly faithful Evangelical. Charlotte, in whose mind Jane Austen and Mrs. Radcliffe contended for mastery, was a Broad Churchwoman. Emily, so pure a Romantic that she reminded Matthew Arnold

[17] Ibid., p. 41.

[18] Ibid., p. 40.

of Byron, cared nothing about Christianity, broad or narrow. No coward soul was hers. In these famous valedictory lines, she spurns all creeds as 'unutterably vain.'"[19]

[19]Fairchild, p. 406.

CHAPTER ONE

Reflection of Religious Thought and Feeling in Some Contemporary Nineteenth-Century Novels

Charles Knight, in an analysis of the London Catalogue of Books for 1816 to 1851, found that one-fifth of the works published during that time were "works of divinity," that is, works which contained religious testimony.[1] That the early nineteenth-century writer and his reader found expression in literature for their religious doubts and convictions is axiomatic, but the forms of literary expression were changing gradually from the sermons, poetry, and philosophy which had previously pervaded all religious writing to fictionalized accounts of spiritual experience. Dinah Mulock, a popular mid-Victorian novelist and author of Sermons Outside of Church, wrote in a critical article: "The essayist may write for his hundreds; the preacher preach to his thousands; but the novelist counts his audience by the millions. His power is three-fold--over heart, reason, and fancy. The orator we hear eagerly, but as his voice fades, his lessons depart; the moral philosopher we read and digest, by degrees, in a serious, ponderous way; but the really good writer of fiction takes us by storm."[2]

[1]Richard Altick, The English Common Reader (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), pp. 108-09.

[2]Quoted in Robert A. Colby, Fiction with a Purpose: Major and Minor Nineteenth-Century Novels (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967), p. 10.

Yet, the Victorian religious works that are generally considered most profound and most enduring are not predominantly fictional; they are philosophical and poetical. Thomas Carlyle's Sartor Resartus (1833-34) is partly spiritual autobiography, thinly disguised with some fictional elements, and partly discursive and philosophical. Carlyle once spoke of it as being a "Didactic Novel. . . a kind of 'Satirical Extravaganza on Things in General,'" but he later admitted that the book "contains more of my opinions on Art, Politics, Religion, Heaven, Earth and Air, than all the things I have yet written."[3] In Book II, Carlyle traces the pattern of his spiritual death and rebirth in the person of Teufelsdröckh, a pattern which is repeated, consciously or unconsciously, in much nineteenth-century religious fiction and non-fiction. In "The Everlasting No," the hero is full of doubt and unbelief. "For, as he wanders wearisomely through this world, he has now lost all tidings of another and higher. Full of religion, or at least of religiosity, as our Friend has since exhibited himself, he hides not that, in those days, he was wholly irreligious."[4] He seems to be totally alienated from mankind, convinced only of his own wretchedness and obsessed with sorrow and

[3]Quoted in William E. Buckler, ed., Prose of the Victorian Period (Boston: The Riverside Press, 1958), p. 85.

[4]Thomas Carlyle, Sartor Resartus, in Prose of the Victorian Period, ed. William E. Buckler (Boston: The Riverside Press, 1958), p. 86.

fear. At the depth of his depression, he says, ". . . and then was it that my whole Me stood up, in native God-created majesty, and with emphasis recorded its Protest. . . . The Everlasting No had said, 'Behold, thou art fatherless, outcast, and the Universe is mine (the Devil's)'; to which my whole Me now made answer: 'I am not thine, but Free, and forever hate thee!'"[5]

The reintegration into society and to the duties of the higher life proceeds slowly. For Teufelsdröckh, there is a "centre of indifference" in which his unrest is increased, and he becomes interested in worldly concerns. Gradually, however, he tires of it. "Pshaw! what is this paltry little Dog-cage of an Earth; what art thou that sittest whining there? Thou art still Nothing, Nobody: true, but who, then, is Something, Somebody? . . . Too heavy-laden Teufelsdröckh! Yet surely his bands are loosening; one day he will hurl the burden far from him, and bound forth free and with a second youth."[6] He begins to realize that "Life is compassed round with Necessity. . . . With other eyes, too, could I now look upon my fellow man; with an infinite Love, an infinite Pity. . . . Truly, the din of many-voiced Life, which, in this solitude, with the mind's organ, I could hear, was no longer a maddening

[5]Ibid., p. 90.

[6]Ibid., pp. 97-98.

but a melting one; like the inarticulate cries, and sobbings of a dumb creature, which in the ear of Heaven are prayers."[7] "The Everlasting Yea" then is the affirmation that God is the supreme ruler of life and that man only finds fulfillment in doing His will. "'Doubt of any sort cannot be removed except by Action. . . . Do the Duty which lies nearest thee,' which thou knowest to be a Duty! Thy second Duty will already have become clearer. . . . 'Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy whole might. Work while it is called Today; for the Night cometh, wherein no man can work.'"[8]

Indeed this kind of autobiographical "confessional" writing was a prominent feature of the nineteenth-century literary scene. "In many respects the most Victorian literary genre of all is the spiritual autobiography, religious confession, or apologia, a kind of writing intended at once as a record of spiritual struggle, a vehicle for controversy, and an explanation and justification of orthodox, heterodox, or even heretical views."[9] John Henry Newman's Apologia Pro Vita Sua (1864) traces the author's spiritual history beginning with his early doubts about the Church of England and his growing interest in the Roman Catholic

[7] Ibid., p. 101.

[8] Ibid., pp. 104-05.

[9] Kingsbury Badger, "Christianity and Victorian Religious Confessions," Modern Language Quarterly, 25 (March 1964), 95.

Church. "I felt affection for my own Church, but not tenderness; I felt dismay at her prospects, anger and scorn at her do-nothing perplexity."[10] As Newman became more disenchanted with the English Church, visions of his own falling from grace and hopeless future began to haunt him. He endured "a deep despondency when 'all save the spirit of man [seemed] divine.' Only after his crucial illness in Sicily, his bodily 'sickness unto death,' did he achieve a genuine conviction of duty, a resolve, specifically Christian in impulse. . . . 'I have work to do in England.'"[11] His earlier novel, Loss and Gain (1848) had been a fictional account of his conversion that sparkled "with wit and gaiety. . . . Newman thus has the distinction of being the only eminent Victorian who could write a confessional novel of spiritual biography in high spirits as well as high seriousness: a unique and delightful achievement."[12]

Newman's younger brother, Francis William Newman, underwent a spiritual experience, which, if different in substance from that of his brother, was similar in pattern. His Phases of Faith (1853) recounts "shuddering" at his early religious training, his rejection of ethically offensive doctrines of the Church (Election, Reprobation, Baptismal

[10] John Henry Newman, Apologia Pro Vita Sua, in Prose of the Victorian Period, ed. William E. Buckler (Boston: The Riverside Press Cambridge, 1958), p. 245.

[11] Buckley, p. 94.

[12] Maison, pp. 143-44.

Regeneration, Vicarious Atonement) and his eventual decision that it is life in this world that should concern the Church rather than its preoccupation with the immortality of the soul. Similarly, J. A. Froude's Nemesis of Faith (1849) includes a chapter entitled "Confessions of a Skeptic" in which the author rejects both Protestantism and Tractarianism. Froude's hero, though he confesses an illicit love for a married English lady and is carried off to an Italian monastery, never overcomes his doubts and fears and dies a broken spirit. Froude himself eventually ignored the theological questions which raised doubt in his mind and "turned without further ado to the more practical aspect of the problem--the upholding of the political and cultural legacy of the Reformation against the subversive wiles of the Scarlet Beast and its English agents."[13]

The pattern of spiritual doubt, indifference, and rebirth was also prominent in Victorian poetry. Tennyson, for example, works with the faith-versus-doubt dialectic and the spiritual rebirth theme in many of his shorter poems, but nowhere as dramatically as in In Memoriam (1833-1850). Here the poet moves from desolation and despair toward a revived interest in living and finally to a sense of his larger commitment to the whole of humanity.

[13]Howard R. Murphy, "Christian Orthodoxy in Early Victorian England," American Historical Review, 60 (1955), 810.

If e'er when faith had fallen asleep,
I heard a voice, 'believe no more,'
And heard an ever-breaking shore
That tumbled in the Godless deep. . . .

No, like a child in doubt and fear:
But that blind clamor made me wise;
Then was I as a child that cries,
But, crying, knows his father near;

And what I am beheld again
What is, and no man understands;
And out of darkness come the hands
That reach thro' nature, moulding men. . . .

That God, which ever lives and loves,
One God, one law, one element,
And one far-off divine event,
To which the whole creation moves.[14]

"Through a determined social dedication, [the poet] rose above the paralysis of private grief, the stone-stiff inactivity which was death itself. Life, he concluded, could only have meaning if it were brought into harmony with 'the eternal process moving on'. . . ."[15]

The enduring value of these works, however, seems to lie in the style and form of the expression as much as in the strength and fervour of the spiritual substance. A more widespread, if stylistically less excellent, form of religious writing in the early nineteenth century was the fictional religious tale which evolved later into the religious novel. "Religious literature. . . was everywhere

[14]Alfred Lord Tennyson, "In Memoriam," in Victorian Poetry and Poetics, ed. Walter Houghton and G. Robert Stange (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968), pp. 81-85.

[15]Buckley, p. 87.

in nineteenth-century England. Tracts were flung from carriage windows; they were passed out at railway stations; they turned up in army camps and in naval vessels anchored in the roads, and in jails and lodging houses and hospitals and workhouses; they were distributed in huge quantities at Sunday and day schools, as rewards for punctuality, diligence, decorum, and deloused heads. They were a ubiquitous part of the social landscape."[16]

Evangelical religion was one of the most potent forces in the widespread distribution of religious literature especially at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Believing as they did in the supremacy of Holy Scripture and the necessity of personal salvation for all, the evangelicals undertook the writing and publication of didactic tales with fervent missionary zeal. Societies were formed for the distribution of these moral and religious stories, the most prominent of which were the interdenominational Religious Tract Society, the evangelical and Non-Conformist British and Foreign Bible Society, and the venerable but lately dormant High Church Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge.

Pious female writers and devout clergymen undertook the task of mass producing tales intended mainly for the

[16]Altick, p. 103.

edification and moral improvement of the lower classes. Hannah More, Maria Edgeworth, and Mrs. Sherwood were among the most prolific writers in this group. The simple moral situation, where the wicked are punished and the virtuous receive their reward was the backbone of each tale. As Sir John Herschel shrewdly observed in 1833: "The story told, or the lively or friendly style assumed, is manifestly and palpably only a cloak for the instruction intended to be conveyed--a sort of gilding of what they cannot well help fancying must be a pill, when they see so much and such obvious pains taken to wrap it up."[17] Indeed, in many cases, the tales in the tracts were ill-fitted to appeal to the working classes, many of whom were practically illiterate or so poor or ill that they hardly had the strength to hold the thin piece of paper on which the tale was printed. Although the tracts testify to the good intentions of their writers and distributors, they were often middle-class in tone and message, and thus they appeared to their lower-class readers as marks of a social class barrier.

When the religious novel arose, it was partly an outgrowth of these tracts, but it was also partly to fulfill the need of middle-class and even upper-class readers for safe, edifying fiction. The polite fiction of the day might have been moral in tone, but it usually didn't focus

[17] Quoted in Altick, p. 105.

the reader's attention on Christian thought or principles. Religious writers used the currently fashionable novel types--the domestic novel, the biography, the gothic novel--and infused them with their strongly religious tone and message. The essential quality of the religious novel was that the dominating character had to be motivated by religious impulses and judged by religious norms. The good religious novel was a study in chiaroscuro--white and black, often the sacred and the profane--in which the hero's good qualities gradually prevailed by the grace of God. "By giving the human scene the eschatological backcloth of Heaven and Hell, the religious writer [saw] that apparently trivial actions of men and women have abiding consequences unperceived by the humanist. . . . Unless a novel includes these dimensions of sin and grace, time and eternity, it cannot be considered a religious novel of any significance."[18]

The religious novels of the nineteenth century share several common characteristics. A summary of Margaret Dalziel's excellent discussion seems to cover those that are most prominent:

> (1) Although the conception of God in the novels is definitely Christian, it is not always orthodox.
>
> (2) The characters with whom the reader is asked to identify are almost always pious or at least

[18]Horton Davies, <u>A Mirror of the Ministry in Modern Novels</u> (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 178.

tending in that direction, but the villainous characters are irreverent or unyielding to the will of God.

(3) Heroines in particular often take refuge in prayer

(4) Moral decisions are based on religious considerations.

(5) The reader must anticipate that possibly the author is hostile to a particular religious sect and that he shows a definite preference for another; yet there is also a great deal of non-institutional piety.

(6) The idea that life on earth is simply a preparation for eternity is a dominant theme; therefore suffering is to be regarded as a blessed part of life, a means of perfecting the soul and fitting it for heaven.

(7) Faith in life after death is generally accepted as an undisputed premise, and the deathbed scenes of Christians display a courage and hope that is nearly supernatural.

(8) Man is seen to be master of his own destiny. His innate moral sense tells him what is right, and he has only to do his duty. If he does right, he will in one way or another be rewarded; if he does wrong, he will suffer now and in eternity.

(9) The writers anticipate and defend themselves against charges of moral laxity by proclaiming that their purpose is always to elevate and reform.[19]

A closer look at two of these early Victorian religious novels in the light of these themes as well as stylistic criteria will show both the similarities that existed among the novels and the differences that made

[19]Margaret Dalziel, Popular Fiction 100 Years Ago: An Unexplored Tract of Literary History (Philadelphia: Dufour Editions, 1958), pp. 159-72.

each of them a unique, even pleasurable reading experience. Then, an examination of the two novels of Anne Brontë will show that, although among the earliest of their kind, they are clearly in the mainstream of the religious novel and are perhaps among the best of the genre, because they bear the stamp of the Brontë genius.

In order to provide a fair basis for comparison with Anne Brontë's novels and also to attempt a representative sample, the following criteria were used in the selection of these two novels:

(1) The authors are roughly contemporary with Anne Bronte.

(2) The novelists are all women.

(3) The novels were first published in the decade between 1848-1858, Anne's being the earliest.

(4) They are Protestant novels.

(5) The novels propose possibilities for Christian living and dying rather than simply defending a theological position previously taken (such as Newman's Loss and Gain).

(6) Both novels are domestic as well as religious novels.

The Experience of Life by Elizabeth Missing Sewell, first published in 1852, is perhaps the most overtly didactic, least palatable to modern taste, of the novels to be considered here. Yet it does bear witness to a profound Christian experience and sheds some light on the various religious influences and pressures which affected

young people in the eighteen-forties and fifties. "'Nothing I have written has ever been as really popular as The Experience of Life,' wrote Miss Sewell in her autobiography. Its popularity is well deserved, and even those who cannot share Miss Sewell's extremist views. . . can yet appreciate The Experience of Life as a most readable novel, a penetrating study of character and a valuable piece of confessional literature."[20]

Sally, the young heroine of Miss Sewell's autobiographical novel, begins her "battle with life" at the tender age of fourteen. It is on her confirmation day that she first catches a glimpse of the possibilities of the Christian life and after-life. "What first made me think seriously about religion I cannot tell. Is it not indeed a deep mystery why and how the mercy of God vouchsafes to awaken us, either early or late, to a sense of the true end of existence."[21] She is first conscious of the deep well of moral strength available to her when she is able to resist the temptation of going down to luncheon with her family on the Sunday of her confirmation.

Very soon, however, she is plunged into a deep depression which makes her physically ill--she is plagued by

[20]Maison, p. 47.

[21]All references are to Elizabeth Missing Sewell, The Experience of Life (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1853), p. 24.

loss of strength and headaches which send her to bed for more than half of each day. "I began to judge the smallest events by their supposed consequences; to estimate every pleasure by the value which it would retain in my last moments. . . . From the external I turned to the internal world--my own mind, my habits of thought, my self-training. I read scarcely any book but the Bible, and spent hours by myself in meditation and prayer." (p. 46) She tortures herself by trying to remember every naughty thought or action of her childhood, so that she can ask specific forgiveness for every sin she has ever committed. At this point, the reader is struck by the fact that her indulgence in prayer and self-criticism is not solely a realization of sin and guilt in an otherwise well-adjusted individual. Sally is suffering simultaneously from the realization that her happiness will not be found in marriage or children or riches or good health or any of the values which people seek in this life; rather she is doomed to a colorless earthly existence. "Sickly, plain, and indifferently educated, what better could I expect than to live in shade, whilst others glittered in sunshine? to what duties could I look forward except those which were scarcely deemed worthy of thanks?" (p. 34)

Sally is shown the way to overcome her negative feelings of insignificance and condemnation by her old maid aunt

Sarah who teaches her that she can do God's will in her own way. Though elderly, poor, and partly disabled, Aunt Sarah, in her quiet and unobtrusive way, devotes her energy and limited means to helping the poor people of her community. The rector of the Church even testifies inadvertently to his own inadequacy when he tells Lady Emily Rivers that Sarah Mortimer knows most about the poor people of the district. "In pursuing her own course, [Aunt Sarah] had lived far more earnestly, and to a far higher purpose, than hundreds who have been held up to the world's admiration as heroines of fortitude and energy." (p. 14) After staying with Aunt Sarah during her time of personal struggle and torment and observing her aunt's manner of coping with loneliness and emptiness, Sally gradually comes to realize her own role: "A new faint light dawned upon me. Perhaps I was to live for others. Perhaps if I did not marry,--and it was absurd to suppose I ever should, such a sickly, unattractive, uninteresting person as I was,--I was still to have an object in life: to be the help, the comfort, the sympathising friend, the unwearied watcher, in sickness and suffering. . . ." (p. 104) Sally's escape from the Slough of Despond comes, as it did for Carlyle, in devotion to duty. Sally's moralizing indeed nearly echoes Carlyle's own words: "Never be afraid of doing little because you can't do much.

Take the first duty that comes before you, and put your heart into it, and it will lead to a second." (p. 349)

Miss Sewell's novel lacks real thrust and power even by comparison with other contemporary autobiographical novels though because the reader does not see much evidence of her heroine's resolution having an effect on the people around her, even though about two-thirds of her sixty years' "battle with life" remains (recounted, alas! in the last two-thirds of the novel). The remainder of the novel seems to be concerned with moralizing and providing the "warning and example" which the author announces to be her purpose on the first page of her account.

For example, after her first chance meeting with Mrs. Colston and Horatia Gray, Sally reflects: "One thing is certain, that we _are_ what we have _done_, and that there is no action in life which has not tended to make us what we are." (p. 114) Sally's preoccupation with sin continues as a reminder, seemingly, to the reader that sin is always present: It was "the crushing weight which bowed my spirit to the dust; the mocking, haunting phantoms of evil, from which I would have fled into the wilderness, and hidden myself from the sight of all men, to live alone with God and the sorrowful memories of my sins." (p. 195) Aunt Sarah performs the preaching function too by quoting appropriate

Bible verses to Sally when she goes to visit for the express purpose of having her "mind set right."

Although many of the previously-mentioned conventions of the religious novel are utilized here, they seem extraneous to the central religious experience of the heroine. Characteristically, there are many foils to the heaven-bound spirits of Sally and Aunt Sarah. Sally's father and oldest brother, Vaughan, are least offensive in that their sin is simply indolence--they fritter away both time and money carelessly and irresponsibly. Her sister Joanna is "variable and moody, and fond of excitement, and exceedingly alive to the opinion of the world, and fearful of being unfashionable or deficient in style or manner." (p. 23) Her oldest sister, Caroline, and her husband, Mr. Blair, together with brother Reginald, Uncle Ralph, and Horatia Gray are selfish and grasping and only interested in pursuing material wealth for their own pleasure. All of them die prematurely or live out their lives in unhappy self-centeredness, but Sally takes very little trouble about their eternal welfare; the duty which lies nearest--in her own family--is sadly neglected.

Miss Sewell's sympathies are obviously with the High Church, although she sees where it needs to be reformed. Lady Emily Rivers, perhaps the most sympathetically-drawn

character in the novel, exclaims as she looks at the church building: "There can be nothing like an old English village church I am sure." (p. 88) Miss Warner, Lady Emily's governess, represents the Dissenters' viewpoint when she responds somewhat tartly that it is probably the spirit which induces the erection of a building that gives it its charm. In reply to Lady Emily's question concerning the appeal of the dissenting chapels, Miss Warner exclaims, "They talk to the people in a language which can be easily understood. . . . They have service on other days besides Sunday, and so bring religion publicly into the affairs of the week. . . and they mix with them daily and know their needs." (p. 89) But Miss Warner has some glaring faults too. She "had a keen eye to other persons' imperfections. . . [which] showed itself in a mournful and impatient lamentation over the evils of life, and especially the sins of the clergy." (p. 171) It is because of her own imperfections that Lady Emily is eventually compelled to dismiss her, and the Church is revitalized when the rector, Mr. Malcolm, replaces the aged Mr. Benson, so that the fault is shown to be more in the spiritual leader than in the institution.

Aunt Sarah, whose death is the most edifying in the novel, is on the verge of dying for about twelve years or

for about 300 pages of the novel. She even admits: "I rehearse my death-bed daily. . . so I may be perfect when God calls me to it." (p. 339) Her death is most glorious as contrasted with the miserable, even horrifying, deaths of Sally's grandfather and Uncle Ralph.

If the heavy didacticism of the novel is offered little relief by power of theme and character or interest of plot, it is lightened even less by creative use of poetic devices. Symbolism of place is used a few times. The yard of the house in Castle Street which was the family home at the beginning of the novel is like the unfruitful condition of the family itself: "There was a strip of lawn also at the side, and a tiny kitchen garden at the back, which, however, was never known to produce anything but blighted currants and gooseberries, late asparagus, that had evidently outgrown its strength, and cucumbers, which from some unknown cause always ran to seed before they were pronounced eatable." (p. 5) Later, after the father has died and the family is financially ruined, they move to a house in Cross Street--poverty is the cross they must bear. The symbolism of light and weather are used to contrast the weddings of wicked Uncle Ralph to haughty Horatia Gray and of humble and benevolent Mr. Malcolm to pure and beautiful Hester. "Horatia Gray's wedding day stands out distinctly, with its forced light and dark shadows amongst my reminiscences of

the past." (p. 517) It was a cold January day, and both bride and groom were as cold and polished as marble. Hester's wedding was on a warm summer day, and during the ceremony "the light streamed gladly through the curious windows in the roof of the old church, and the blue heaven, which had once seemed to me an angel's eye, looked down upon the small marriage party. . . ." (p. 351)

Although The Experience of Life is obviously sincere and genuine, it focuses on the sober and serious aspects of the religious experience to the exclusion of the more intense experiences which transform the individual into a new person as he strives to do God's will. By contrast, in Charlotte Yonge's The Heir of Redclyffe, the stress is on the individual's striving for perfection amid the luring temptations of this world and the ever-present snare of his heredity; yet it is not morbid and self-pitying like The Experience of Life. Instead, the struggle is exciting, even sensational and romantic. "For in The Heir of Redclyffe the religious, the romantic and the domestic are all most happily combined. The idea of a wild solitary figure coming from a doomed family in a grim old Gothic castle on the crags and being tamed by religious principles and cozy Victorian domestic influences was a new and attractive one, and this High Church Heathcliff, this Byron made virtuous, this

new type of gentleman-saint with the passionate temper of a Bronteesque hero, the face of Sir Galahad and the conscience of a Hurrell Froude, conquered the Victorian public. . . ."[22]

Sir Guy Morville's spiritual struggle is a battle with himself and with the family curse for control of his romantic fun-loving nature and his violent temper. Sir Guy's cousin Philip describes the origin of the Morville curse: "There is a room called Sir Hugh's chamber over the gateway, but the honour of naming it is undecided between Hugo de Morville, who murdered Thomas à Becket, and his namesake, the first Baronet, who lived in the time of William of Orange, when the quarrel began with our branch of the family." Mrs. Edmonstone adds, ". . . the Morvilles were always a fiery violent race, and the enmity once begun between Sir Hugh and his brother, was kept up, generation after generation, in a most unjustifiable way."[23] (p. 55) Sir Guy firmly believes that the doom of sin and death is upon him and that the sins of his fathers will be visited on all future generations of the ill-fated Morvilles. "The doom complete, himself heir to the curse of Sir Hugh, and fated to run the same career; and as he knew full well, with the tendency to the family character strong in him,

[22]Maison, p. 33.

[23]All references are to Charlotte Yonge, The Heir of Redclyffe (London: Macmillan and Company, 1879).

the germs of these hateful passions ready to take root downwards and bear fruit upwards, with the very countenance of Sir Hugh, and the same darkening, kindling eyes, of which tradition had preserved the remembrance." (p. 68)

When Sir Guy fully faces the problem of his familial guilt and sin, he feels he must begin to take steps to counteract and overcome it. Quietly and gradually, he begins to deprive himself of the pleasures which excite and gratify his exuberant spirits. Although hunting has always been his favorite pastime, he tells Mr. Edmonstone that he must give it up in order to devote more time to his study of Latin. "The fact is only this, the hunting is too pleasant; it fills up my head all day and all night; and I don't attend rightly to anything else." (p. 64) Similarly, he decides to give up reading Byron, dancing, and eventually going to the theatre. But, perhaps his largest task is learning to cool his naturally violent temper. Whenever he is vexed, a cloud passes across his face, and his eye flashes; yet he tries valiantly to control it. It is only when he is falsely accused of gambling and trifling with Amy's affections that he explodes. His face was "a burning, glowing red, the features almost convulsed, the large veins in the forehead and temples swollen with the blood that rushed through them; and if ever his eyes flashed with the dark lightning of Sir Hugh's, it was

then. . . . 'Intolerable! --insulting! Me? What does he mean?' continued Guy, his passion kindling more and more. 'Proofs? I should like to see them! The man is crazy! I to confess? Ha!' as he came towards the end, 'I see it,-- I see it. It is Philip, is it, that I have to thank. Meddling coxcomb! I'll make him repent it,' added he with a grim fierceness of determination. 'Slandering me to them! And that,' looking at the words with regard to Amy,-- 'that passes all. He shall see what it is to insult me!'" (pp. 194-95)

Guy's deadly struggle with the powers of evil within him follows this explosion. He bursts out of the house and hurries away "fast, faster, conscious alone of the wild, furious tumult of rage and indignation against the maligner of his innocence, who was knowingly ruining him with all that was dearest to him, insulting him by reproaches on his breaking a most sacred, unblemished word." (p. 196) He carefully plans his revenge, looking forward to the punishment he will inflict on Philip. "He devised its execution, planned his sudden journey, saw himself bursting on Philip early next morning, summoning him to answer for his falsehoods. The impulse to action seemed to restore his power over his senses." (p. 197)

Suddenly he shudders as he realizes that despite all

his previous efforts at discipline, the old Morville demon stands ready to take control of him at any moment. He forces himself to repeat the words, "'Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us!' Coldly and hardly were they spoken at first; again he pronounced them, again, again,--each time the tone was softer, each time they came more from the heart. At last the remembrance of greater wrongs, and worse revilings came upon him; his eyes filled with tears, the most subduing and healing of all thoughts--that of the great Example--became present to him; the foe was driven back." (pp. 197-98)

Although Guy has won the victory over himself, he must endure a period of single isolation, during which he learns to do the duties required of him toward his fellow men. He returns to the lonely and desolate Redclyffe mansion, and begins the arduous task of helping the poor people of his district for whom he is responsible. He installs the benevolent Mr. Wellwood as clergyman at Coombe Prior, his poorest, most crime-ridden, most miserable property, and begins work on plans to provide better housing, lower rents, schools, and adequate food for the people there. Similarly, he befriends Mr. Ashford, the rector of the Redclyffe parish and personally assists him with his duties there. He begins to view his work as preparation for eternity. "It had been of a darkened and lonely course,

yet, in another sense, neither dark nor lonely, of a cheerless home and round of duties, with a true home beyond." (p. 260) Toward the end of this period of trial, we see how strong Guy's faith has become, for he uses the power of salvation to rescue a crew of shipwrecked men during a dangerous and violent storm. After the rescue, he tells Mr. Ashford, "It was most merciful. That little boat felt like a toy at the will of the winds and waves, till one recollected who held the storm in His hand." (p. 273)

After this period of endurance and strengthening, Guy is granted his earthly reward--a short time of happiness with his beloved Amy. But he is called upon to return good for evil toward the person who caused his unhappiness. When Guy and Amy and their cousin Philip are traveling in Italy, Philip becomes very ill with a fever. Guy and Amy rush to his aid with their love and assistance and nurse him past the point of crisis. Of course, Guy himself becomes infected and dies from the fever. But his love for his enemy, his self-discipline, and his constant view of heaven as his true home break the curse and give him victory not only over life but also over death. "It was a distant grave, far from his home and kindred, but in a hallowed spot, and a most fair one; and there might his mortal frame meetly rest till the day when he should

rise, while from their ancestral tombs should likewise awaken the forefathers whose sins were indeed visited on him in his early death; but, thanks to Him who giveth the victory, in death without the sting." (p. 419)

The Heir of Redclyffe, though certainly inspiring in its own way, seems less like religious propaganda than Miss Sewell's work. This is partly because theological questions and clerical characters are practically absent from the novel. ". . . the novel is exceptionally unecclesiastical in nature, churches and clergymen playing very little part in it all. [Guy's] struggle is for the control of his own pride and passion. He is the sincere penitent, battling for self-conquest. . . but (daring domestic touch!) he is under the spiritual guidance not of a cleric but of a comforting and comfortable middle-aged matron."[24] In some respects, however, this novel is very similar to other religious fiction of the day. Philip, who is a good and admirable man in many ways, is the antithesis of Sir Guy in his inability to conquer his own faults, repent of his errors, and guide his actions toward a heavenly reward. His overwhelming sins are his pride, self-righteousness, and jealousy which lead him to mistrust and misrepresent Guy to Mr. Edmondstone. Philip admits after Guy's death that his head aches and almost bursts

[24]Maison, p. 33.

with thoughts. . . of him whom I knew too late,--willfully misunderstood, envied, persecuted. . . ." (p. 429) Although he is sorry for his injuries to Guy, he cannot truly repent in the Christian sense. He must keep the Morville inheritance which he now abhors and give up all his cherished hopes of sacrifice for Amy and her child. "He was a distinguished man, one of the most respected and honoured in the country, admired for his talents and excellence, and regarded universally as highly prosperous and fortunate. . . . Yet it was a harassed, anxious life with little of repose or relief." (p. 524) In a real sense, the Morville curse had passed on to Philip; he bore the wounds of his sins toward Sir Guy and could not break through the barrier of guilt which separated him from God.

That life on earth is a preparation for eternity is certainly at the center of the theme of this novel. Early in the novel, Guy defines happiness as being "Gleams from another world, too soon eclipsed or forfeited," but later after his victory over evil, he changes it to "Gleams from another world brightening as it gets closer." (p. 380) Guy's legacy to his wife Amy is her knowledge that she must remain on earth in order to perfect herself for heaven. "Perhaps that was the hardest time of her trial, and she felt as if, without his child in her arms, she could never

have held up under the sense of desolation that came over her, left behind, while he was in his true home. Left, she told herself, to finish the task he had begun and to become fit to follow him." (p. 500)

The rise and fall of Sir Guy's domestic and spiritual fortunes coincide with the changes in season, so weather is an important clue to the inner climate of the leading characters, as it is in the other novel. Miss Yonge, however, uses the Christian holidays as pivotal points for the inner lives of her characters. Guy is always at Hollywell during his school vacations--in the summer and during holiday seasons. These are the times associated with family warmth and spiritual security. But his outburst of temper comes during the term before Christmas, so when the Christmas vacation arrives, he has no place to go but to the lonely, accursed Redclyffe. "It was dreariness and despondency by day, and he struggled with it by energy and occupation; but it was something even worse in the evening, in the dark, solitary library. . . . There, evening after evening, he sat,--his attention roaming from his employment to feed on his sad reflections. . . . . Was not the lone, blank despondency that had settled on him more heavily than ever, a token that he was shut out from all that was good?" (pp. 256-58) But on Christmas

day, after going to church, he receives a letter supporting and encouraging his plan to help the tenant farmers at Coombe Prior and including a message from Hollywell. Guy is re-invigorated to engage in the immediate duties that lie before him. He works zealously but with sadness until just before Holy Week when he must return to Oxford. "He said he should not come home at Easter, as he should be very busy reading for his degree; and as his birthday this year fell in Holy Week there could be no rejoicings. . . . For his own part he was glad the season would prevent any rejoicings, for he was in no frame of mind to enter into them, and his birthday had been such a sad day for his grandfather than he had no associations of pleasure connected with it." (p. 284) But Easter is to bring resurrection of his hopes for a bright future. Mr. Edmonstone visits him in London, the misunderstanding is cleared up, and Guy and Amy are reunited at Easter. That evening Mrs. Edmonstone looks in at Amy. Her "candle was out, and she was in bed, lying full in the light of the Easter moon, which poured forth in glorious whiteness through her window." (p. 296)

As in this Easter scene, light is used frequently in this novel to show Heaven's pleasure. Guy's and Amy's wedding day is a "showery day, with gleams of vivid

sunshine, and one of these suddenly broke forth, casting a stream of colour from a martyr's figure in the south window, so as to shed a golden glory on the wave of brown hair over Guy's forehead, then passing on and tinting the bride's white veil with a deep glowing shade of crimson and purple." Either that golden light, or the expression of the face on which it beamed, made Mary think of the lines--

> Where is the brow to wear in mortal's sight,
> The crown of pure angelic light?" (p. 337)

Laura and Philip's wedding is marked, however, by sadness and care, and the central figure is really the widowed Amy in her black silk dress. But the brightest light is saved for Guy's death. "At that moment, the sun was rising, and the light streamed in at the open window, and over the bed; but it was 'another dawn than ours' that he beheld, as his most beautiful of all smiles beamed over his face, and he said, 'Glory in the Highest!--peace--good will'. . . ." (p. 412)

Natural symbols are closely associated with Guy and Amy--the two characters in the novel in closest harmony with God and nature. Philip's interfering and self-assertive nature is shown in the first scene of the novel. Amy brings in a tall white camellia--pure, white, and regular--which she is going to take to the horticultural show. Philip insists on taking it from her to put in the window. "Oh, take care,"

cried Amabel, "but too late; for as he took it from her, the solitary flower struck against Charles's little table, and was broken off." (p. 2) On the other hand, Guy is the child of nature. Charles says of him, "Never had man such delight in the brute creation. . . . The chief of his time was spent in wandering in the woods or on the beach, watching them and their ways. . . . Here, Charlotte, come and tell Mary the roll of Guy's pets. Charlotte began, 'There was the sea-gull, and the hedgehog, and the fox, and the badger, and the jay, and the monkey, that he bought because it was dying and cured it, only it died the next winter, and a toad, and a raven, and a squirrel, and--.'" (p. 33) Guy and Amy first discover their love for each other as they work together in the flower gardens. "A merry, clear laugh followed, and a turn in the path showed her Guy, Amy, and Charlotte, busy over a sturdy stock of eglantine. Guy. . . was lopping vigorously with his great pruning knife, Amabel nursing a bundle of drooping rose branches. . . ." (p. 148) On their wedding day, as they leave Hollywell, a long cluster of laburnums in yellow bloom bends down and touches Amy's bonnet with crystal drops of rain, and Guy's fondest memory of their honeymoon is remembering Amy in Munich with the orange blossoms in her hair. Guy and Amy's daughter, Mary Verena Morville,

demonstrates her family's complete forgiveness and affection toward Philip when she gives him her bouquet of primroses and violets on the day of his marriage.

The other device which Miss Yonge uses to deepen her characters is to identify them with literary types and figures. Philip is the Latin scholar--dry, precise, always correct. Charles enjoys novels and legends which prepare him to be sympathetic toward the romantic Guy. Guy is tempted by Byron, poetry, and music, and sees his life as a parallel to that of Sintram--"a strife with the powers of darkness; the victory, forgiveness, resignation, death." (p. 101) And Amy compares Guy's battle against selfishness to the holly tree in Southey. "The young leaves are sharp and prickly, because they have so much to defend themselves from, but as the tree grows older, it leaves off the spears, after it has won the victory." (p. 122)

After reading The Heir of Redclyffe, one finds himself in agreement with Henry James' statement that although many religious novels are "semi-developed. . . occasionally . . . they almost legitimate themselves by the force of genius. But this is only when a first-rate mind takes the matter in hand."[25] Although James was speaking of Miss Yonge's masterpiece here, he might have found similar marks

[25]Quoted in Kathleen Tillotson, Novels of the Eighteen-Forties (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 137.

of excellence in the work of Anne Brontë.

It may be said, in summary, that a predominant pattern in early nineteenth-century religious fiction, non-fiction, and poetry is the one established by Carlyle in Sartor Resartus: the hero moves from doubt and despair to indifference to a re-integration with God manifested in devotion to Duty. This pattern is utilized in many religious novels, including The Experience of Life, The Heir of Redclyffe, and the two novels of Anne Brontë (to be discussed in subsequent chapters). Sally, the heroine of Miss Sewell's autobiographical novel, though overwhelmed by a deep despondency because of her sins, gradually realizes her duty to be of service to others. From a Christian point of view, the novel seems to fail in that Sally mentally accepts her role, but never really moves out of the "center of indifference" to a life governed by Duty.[26] By contrast, the heroine of Anne Brontë's autobiographical Agnes Grey suffers the same self-scrutinizing agony over her sins as Sally does, but she is able to pass through "the center of indifference" and translate her faith into a devotion to the duties that lie near her. The young Sir Guy de Morville, in Miss Yonge's The Heir of Redclyffe, in trying to curb his sinful nature, is at first unsuccessful

[26]In another very famous mid-nineteenth century novel, Ruth by Elizabeth Gaskell, the heroine is able to overcome her guilt about the illicit love affair of her youth and devote herself to helping the poor, the sick, and her own son. Similarly, Hester in Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter (1850) becomes an angel of mercy and expiates her guilt in service to the community.

which causes him to despair. He must endure a spiritual "sickness unto death" until he recognizes and devotes himself to the Christian duties which surround him. In Anne Brontë's second novel, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, the problem of conquering sinful passions is again presented, but the reader is not only treated to a view of the heroine who tries to discover and cling to her duty, but also is shown the results of irresponsibility and refusal to submit to God's rule and will for life.

It has been shown that the religious novel characteristically revolved around problems of sin and grace considered against the backdrop of the finality and infinity of Heaven and Hell. Thus, the hero or heroine was motivated by religious impulses, whereas the villain was usually very worldly. Both lived in a world where actions were judged by religious and moral norms. The heaven-bound characters regarded suffering as a blessed part of life on earth, a preparation for eternity, and the contrast between the deathbed scenes of believers and those of non-believers indicated the focus of their earthly endeavors.

Although writers of religious novels did not always espouse the tenets of orthodox religion and indeed were often hostile toward a particular sect, they always insisted that their purpose was to elevate and reform.

In the discussion of Anne Brontë's religious experience translated first into her poetry and then into her autobiographical novel, we see the familiar pattern and many of the ordinary trappings of the religious novel. In her "novel with a purpose"--*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*--we realize that she knew the conventions very well and observed them when she could, but she was not afraid to depart from them when a compelling problem drove her to use techniques never considered by other religious novelists of her day.

CHAPTER TWO

Anne Bronte: Religious Elements in Poetry and Autobiographical (Agnes Grey)

Charlotte, writing in a preface to Anne's poetry published with Agnes Grey and Wuthering Heights, said:

> In looking over my sister Anne's poems I find mournful evidence that religious feeling had been to her but too much like what it was to Cowper; I mean of course in a far milder form. Without rendering her a prey to those terrors that defy concealment, it subdued her mood and bearing to a perpetual pensiveness; the pillar of a cloud glided constantly before her eyes; she ever waited at the foot of a secret Sinai, listening in her heart to the voice of a trumpet sounding long and waxing louder. Some perhaps would rejoice over these tokens of a sincere though sorrowing piety in a deceased relative; I own, to me they seem sad, as if her whole innocent life had been passed under martyrdom of an unconfessed physical pain. . . .[1]

Although Charlotte characteristically failed to understand the true depth and strength of Anne's religious life, she did touch on the contrasting elements of her sisters spiritual experience that undoubtedly did produce that apparent "perpetual pensiveness." Anne's poetry and her first novel reveal that indeed she had to subdue and conceal the very violent, often torturous struggle between despair and hope that raged within her. There was for a long time as Charlotte suggests, a cloud between Anne and

[1] Ada Harrison and Derek Stanford, Anne Brontë: Her Life and Work (London: Methuen and Co., 1959), p. 50.

her distant vision of heavenly grace, but the events of her life and perhaps the cathartic effect of her artistic endeavors helped to dissipate that cloud and bring her, near the end of her short life, to a clarity of vision and a closeness to God that Charlotte never imagined.

The seeds of Anne's "religious melancholy" were planted in her earliest childhood both by her very sensitive spiritual consciousness of her environment and by the overt actions and beliefs of those who were closestto her. Haworth village, where the Brontë family moved when Anne was only three months old, was a "village of grim and honest traditions now adapting itself determinedly to the new industrial outlook; it had been famous for its evangelical fervour in the last century, and much of this remained and kept the church-and-chapel controversy in full swing."[2] The famous William Grimshaw, rector of Haworth in the eighteenth century and close friend of John Wesley, had espoused Methodism and had tyrannically imposed his will on the people of the parish. The anecdote is told that during the singing of hymns at the Sunday morning worship services, the Reverend Mr. Grimshaw would slip out of his chair behind the pulpit and go to the local tavern where he would horsewhip the surprised tipplers until they would sulkily slink

[2]Harrison and Stanford, p. 16.

off to church.

Grimshaw also appropriated the barn which adjoined the Haworth parsonage for mass revival meetings, and one of the greatest days in Haworth's history was the one on which John Wesley himself stopped at the parsonage for tea with the Reverend Mr. Grimshaw. Not surprisingly, Grimshaw's influence and activities did promote a Methodist revival among the Haworth residents, and although the Reverend Patrick Brontë was the fourth incumbent at Haworth since Grimshaw's death, and some of the fervour of early Methodism had cooled, this heritage was an unconscious presence in the parish. Ernest Raymond even goes further and suggests that the stern and gloomy stone church was like a prison house which invested, confined, cramped, and maimed the Brontë family.[3]

But for the tragic circumstances that began to descend upon the Brontë family after they moved to Haworth, the effect of this sombre setting might have been lightened. Upon the death of the Brontë children's mother, their Aunt Branwell came to live at Haworth. Aunt Branwell's religion had a grim and fearful cast to it that especially affected Anne, the baby of the family who was to be closest to her aunt during her early childhood. Aunt Branwell, whose

[3]Ernest Raymond, "Exiled and Harassed Anne," Brontë Society Transactions, 11 (1950), 227.

Methodist background was described earlier, unfortunately believed in Wesley's views on bringing up children: "Break their wills betimes, begin this work before they can run alone, before they can speak plain, perhaps before they can speak at all. Whatever pains it costs, break the will if you would not damn the child. Let a child from a year old be taught to fear the rod and cry softly; from that age make him do as he is bid, if you whip him ten times running to effect it. . . ."[4] This belief combined with Aunt Branwell's own rigid personality must have indeed crushed the spirit of the fragile and sensitive Anne. Anne's first sampler bears witness to her aunt's efforts. It was a verse from Proverbs 3:9-18: "My child despise not the chastening of the Lord; neither be weary of his correction. For whom the Lord loveth he correcteth, even as a father the son in whom he delighteth."[5] And Anne herself described her early life:

> I see far back, a helpless child,
> Feeble, and full of causeless fears,
> Simple and easily beguiled
> To credit all it hears. . . .[6]

Aunt Branwell had a very strong belief in the imminence of Judgment and the terrors of Hell. Hell was very real, and damnation was inevitable for those who were not thoroughly schooled in good behavior. For Anne, who was often

[4] Gérin, p. 34.

[5] Ibid., p. 36.

[6] Ibid., p. 33.

ill with severe attacks of asthma, and who had witnessed the deaths of her two oldest sisters when she was only five years old, the closeness of death and her aunt's dreadful warnings about Judgment instilled a deep fear and doubt about her own salvation, or even the possibility of it.

> What shall I do, if all my love,
> My hopes, my toil, are cast away,
> And if there be no God above,
> To hear and bless me when I pray?
> ("The Doubter's Prayer," 1843)[7]

The monthly re-counting of death-bed scenes in the Methodist Magazine to which Aunt Branwell subscribed must have intensified the fear and sense of isolation in the young child. Charlotte describes them in Shirley as "mad Methodist Magazines, full of miracles, and apparitions of preternatural warnings, ominous dreams, and frenzied fanaticism. . . ."[8]

In these same magazines Anne was probably first introduced to the Calvinistic poetry of Cowper, the eighteenth-century poet and hymn-writer. "The Castaway" was a favorite among all the Brontës. Even though the brand of Methodism espoused by the Brontë family (including the tenets adopted by the Low Church parson) rejected the Calvinistic doctrines of Election and Reprobation, several members of the

[7]Harrison and Standford, p. 204.

[8]Charlotte Brontë, Shirley, in The Complete Works of Charlotte Brontë and Her Sisters, VI (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell and Sons, 1900), 305.

family had to personally do battle with these questions. Mr. Brontë opposed both. "When applying for a curate to his old friend, the former Miss Firth's husband, the Reverend J. C. Franks, he wrote in a letter of January 10th 1839, '. . . I could not feel comfortable with a coadjutor who would deem it his duty to preach the appalling doctrines of personal election and reprobation. . . I should consider these decidedly derogatory to the attributes of God. . . .'"[9] Charlotte had a more difficult struggle, especially in times of illness or when she was depressed about the financial condition of the family and the necessity for the sisters to work as governesses. She confessed herself "smitten at times to the heart" with the conviction that "_______'s ghastly Calvinistic doctrines are true."[10] Charlotte wrote to her friend, Ellen Nussey, "I abhor myself. . . I despise myself; if the doctrine of Calvin be true, I am already an outcast. . . ."[11] But Anne wrestled with these conflicting doctrines through much of her short life, not only in moments of crisis. "With Anne, religion was not an emergency measure. She was, all the time, a sincere Christian. Thus, being imbued like the

[9]Gérin, p. 34.

[10]Harrison and Stanford, p. 49.

[11]Gérin, p. 90.

others with Methodism and with Cowper, problems of faith and salvation were serious and continuous with her, not fitful and terrible as they were with Charlotte."[12]

Although Anne had rejected the doctrines of Election and Reprobation as they applied to other people, she was sadly in doubt about her own salvation for a long while. Her poem to Cowper suggests some of her fears:

> The language of my inmost heart
> I traced in every line;
> _My_ sins, _my_ sorrows, hopes and fears,
> Were there--and only mine.

Yet she assures him that a God of love would not forsake him.

> Is He the source of every good,
> The spring of purity?
> Then in thine hours of deepest woe,
> Thy God was still with thee.

But if Cowper's fears are valid, what about a soul such as hers?

> Yet, should thy darkest fears be true,
> If Heaven be so severe,
> That such a soul as thine is lost,--
> Oh! how shall I appear?
> ("To Cowper")[13]

In "A Word to the Elect" (1843), Anne declares indignantly:

> . . . That none deserve eternal bliss I know;
> Unmerited the grace in mercy given;
> But none shall sink to everlasting woe,
> That have not well deserved the wrath of Heaven.

[12] Harrison and Stanford, p. 51.

[13] Ibid., pp. 201-03.

And oh! there lives within my heart
A hope, long nursed by me;
(And should its cheering ray depart,
How dark my soul would be!)

That as in Adam all have died,
In Christ shall all men live;
And ever round His throne abide,
Eternal praise to give.

That even the wicked shall at last
Be fitted for the skies;
And when their dreadful doom is past,
To life and light arise. . . .[14]

But the opening lines of her most famous poem indicate her own spiritual sadness:

Oppressed with sin and woe
A burdened heart I bear--
("Confidence")[15]

During her second year at school, she described the conflict within her:

I see one kneeling on the sod,
With infant hands upraised to Heaven--
A young heart feeling after God
Oft baffled, never backward driven.
Mistaken oft, and oft astray,
It strives to find the narrow way,
But gropes and toils alone;
That inner life of strife and tears,
Of kindling hopes and lowering fears
To none but God is known.
("Self-Communion")[16]

And she confessed in "Despondency," (1841):

I have gone backwards in the work,
The labour has not sped;

[14]Gérin, pp. 196-97.

[15]Ibid., p. 33.

[16]Ibid., p. 98.

Drowsy and dark my spirit lies,
Heavy and dull as lead.

How can I rouse my sinking soul
From such a lethargy?
How can I break these iron chains
And set my spirit free?

My sins increase, my love grows cold,
And Hope within me dies;
And Faith itself is wavering now;
Oh, how shall I arise?

I cannot weep, but I can pray,
Then let me not despair;
Lord Jesus, save me, lest I die;
Christ, hear my humble prayer.[17]

Here Anne was not only oppressed by her own sins, but she also doubted God's love and mercy. The morbid sense of sin and guilt which had clouded her spiritual horizon since childhood seemed almost overwhelming. But she had been seeking a way of salvation offered by a God of love. During the critical illness that preceded her removal from Roe Head in 1837, she asked to see a local Moravian bishop rather than her own Anglican clergyman. The Reverend James LaTrobe wrote of her: ". . . I found her well acquainted with the main truths of the Bible respecting our salvation, but seeing more through the law than through the Gospel, more as a requirement from God than His gift in His son, but her heart opened to the sweet views of Salvation, pardon, and peace in the blood of Christ, and she accepted His welcome

[17] Gérin, pp. 177-78.

to the weary and heavy-laden sinner, conscious more of her not loving the Lord her God than of acts of enmity to Him. . . ."[18]

There were other sources of joy and hope that Anne had tapped for brief periods and that were firm enough to eventually encourage her, support her, and bring her to a confident faith in the love of God and her own salvation. As we look at the lives of the Brontës in retrospect, we see that, in a household of strong personalities, the most powerful though most independent force there had to be Emily Brontë. And when we consider that, by Ellen Nussey's description, Emily and Anne were as close as twin sisters could have been, we should not wonder that Emily's confidence and strength touched the sensitive Anne in a profound and positive way:

> . . . in Emily and Anne nature above and beyond any other influence was paramount in kindling their imagination. From the day Anne could run freely with Emily on the moors, Aunt's unquestioned rule suffered its first imperceptible suspension. At six years old deductions may not be clearly drawn, but Anne was to develop into a relentless little logician, and formless and unspoken as the reflection may have been, the contrast between Aunt's cosmos and these radiant stretches cannot have escaped her childish observation. . . . To fall in love with the pretty creatures on the moors, to pity and wish to protect them was a first and inevitable effect of her new-found liberty. Though the operation would take

[18]Harrison and Stanford, p. 52.

> years, out of this very sentiment would grow the first challenge against Aunt's theology: these pretty and helpless creatures were <u>not</u> born for 'our convenience' but created by God, like ourselves, to lead a free life, over which man's only dominion should be to exercise a merciful care.[19]

Anne's Gondal verse convinces us that she values and is inspired by the life of nature:

> Oh happy life! To range the mountains wild,
> The waving woods,--or ocean's heaving breast,
> With limbs unfettered, conscience undefiled,
> And choosing where to wander, where to rest!
> Hunted, opposed, but ever strong to cope
> With toils and perils; ever full of hope!
> ("Song," 1845)[20]

And the unshackled wind brings its message of hope to a despairing prisoner:

> That wind is from the North. I know it well:
> No other breeze could have so wild a swell
> Now deep and loud it thunders round my cell,
> Then faintly dies, and softly sighs,
> And moans and murmurs mournfully.
> I know its language; thus it speaks to me:
>
> . . . .
>
> 'No voice but mine can reach thy ear,
> And heaven has kindly sent me here
> To mourn and sigh with thee,
> And tell thee of the cherished land
> Of thy nativity.'
> ("The North Wind")[21]

While for Emily nature had become an end in itself, for Anne it was a pathway to God. In the wild and lonely

[19] Gérin, pp. 41-42.

[20] Harrison and Stanford, p. 177.

[21] Ibid., p. 173.

beauty of the moors, Anne saw God's power and love. Her most hopeful and confident poem begins with an outburst of joy at her natural surroundings and ends in an affirmation of the God who is within creation and within her soul:

> It was a glimpse of truths divine
> Unto my spirit given,
> Illumined by a ray of light
> That shone direct from Heaven!
>
> I felt there was a God on high
> By whom all things were made;
> I saw his wisdom and His power
> In all his works displayed.
>
> But most throughout the moral world
> I saw his glory shine;
> I saw his wisdom infinite,
> His mercy all divine.
>
> And while I wondered and adored
> His Majesty divine,
> I did not tremble at His power:
> I felt that God was mine.
>
> I knew that my Redeemer lived;
> I did not fear to die;
> I felt that I should rise again
> To immortality.
> ("In Memory of a Happy Day in February," 1842)[22]

Quite as much as Emily, Anne needed the direct contact with nature such as surrounded her daily life at home. It was necessary not only to her happiness but to her sense of security. Behind the smiling face of nature she had come to see a God of love, very different from the awful justiciary of her aunt's early teachings.

[22]Harrison and Stanford, pp. 198-99.

Eternal power, of earth and air,
Unseen, yet seen in all around,
Remote, but dwelling everywhere,
Though silent, heard in every sound. . .[23]
("The Doubter's Prayer," 1843)

There was also Willy Weightman, the curate who is thought to have captured Anne's young heart and who certainly is the prototype of Mr. Weston in Agnes Grey. Anne must certainly have admired him and emulated him, for he rejected those very doctrines of Election and Reprobation against which she had struggled for so long, and instead preached a gospel of love and compassion. Even the tight-lipped Mr. Brontë was moved to say of him: "He did not see why true believers, having the promise of the life that . . . is to come, should create unto themselves artificial sorrows, and disfigure the garment of gospel peace with the garb of sighing and sadness. Pondering on and rejoicing in the glad tidings of salvation, he wished others to rejoice . . . evermore in the glorious liberty of the gospel. . . ."[24]

By the end of Anne's life, a short twenty-nine years, she had reached a calm assurance and resignation. She wrote to Ellen Nussey shortly before her death in 1849 that she had prayed for her life to be spared so that she might live to some purpose and "do some good in the world before I

[23] Gérin, p. 97.

[24] Ibid., pp. 147-48.

leave it."

> I hoped amid the brave and strong
> My portioned task might lie
> To toil amid the labouring throng
> With purpose keen and high.
> ("Last Lines")[25]

And Charlotte wrote to W. S. Williams: [Anne died] "without severe struggle, resigned, trusting in God--thankful for release from a suffering life--deeply assured that a better existence lay before her. She believed, she hoped--and declared her belief and hope with her last breath. . . . I let Anne go to God, and felt He had a right to her. . . ."[26]

To those who would condemn Anne Brontë's poetry as merely didactic, one would have to retort that she was only searching for answers to her own questions; to those who would accuse her, as Charlotte does, of "religious melancholy," one would reply that although there is despondency there is also hope and confidence; and to those who would claim that the poetry is insignificant, one could only say that it provides insight into the spiritual development of a very sensitive mid-nineteenth century woman and artist. Derek Stanford asserts that in Anne's poetry we can discover "in place of respectable pieties, a record of the growth of a moral intelligence, earnest, self-questioning, and sincere."[27]

[25] Harrison and Stanford, p. 207.

[26] Ibid., p. 161.

[27] Ibid., p. 170.

In the autobiographical novel, Agnes Grey (1847), Anne's spiritual struggles are again delineated, this time in slightly fictionalized form, but here the overwhelming victory of hope and divine Providence clearly indicates that Anne was able to penetrate the darkness of her "religious melancholy"; at the same time, the novel appears to be a vicarious fulfillment of the devotion to duty that Anne saw as being the fruit of spiritual assurance--the "toil amid the labouring throng" that she was unable to pursue in her own life.

The pattern of spiritual despair gradually raised to melancholy equilibrium and finally lifted to triumphant and joyful hope and faith manifested in zealous devotion to duty, which is present in so much Victorian religious literature, is the basis of the thematic structure here. Instead of the struggles with personal and hereditary sin and guilt which were explored in the two religious novels discussed thematically in the first chapter, the theme in Agnes Grey is "the struggle of spiritual integrity to hold its own in a difficult world."[28]

The novel begins on a note of youthful optimism and innocent idealism as Agnes tells her parents that she would

[28]Phyllis Bentley, The Brontës (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1948), p. 105.

like to go out to work as a governess.

> 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 to use 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! Whatever others said, I felt I was fully competent to the task; the clear remembrance of my own thoughts in early childhood would be a surer guide than the instructions of the most mature adviser. 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.[29]

But Agnes' "bright hopes and ardent expectations" are dimmed first by her encounter with the uncivilized Bloomfield children and then by her longer experience with the Murray family at Horton Lodge. She comments: "I sometimes felt myself degraded by the life I led, and ashamed of submitting to so many indignities; and sometimes I thought myself a 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,

[29]All references are to Anne Brontë, Agnes Grey (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons).

endureth all things.'" (pp. 68-69) It is her isolation from sympathetic, loving human beings and her constant exposure to the selfish and superficial concerns of her employers that make her begin to despair.

> Habitual associates are known to exercise a great influence over each other's minds and manners. 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. . . . And I, as I could not make my young companions better, feared exceedingly that they would make me worse--would gradually bring my feelings, habits, capacities, to the level of their own, without, however, imparting to me their light-heartedness and cheerful vivacity. 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 baneful influence of such a mode of life. The gross vapours of earth were gathering around me, and closing in upon my inward heaven. . . .(p. 95)

But Agnes doesn't really lose hope until the cruel and self-centered Rosalie Murray designs the family's Sunday plans so as to prevent her from going to church in the afternoons and visiting the poor cottagers--the only activities that had provided her weekly spiritual nourishment and consolation. "If I had a cold, or any slight indisposition, they took advantage of that to make me stay at home; and often they would tell me they were not going again that day themselves, and then

pretend to change their minds and set off without telling me. . . lest I should go to see poor Nancy Brown or any other person, Miss Murray took good care to provide sufficient employment for all my leisure hours." (p. 139) Agnes tries during this time to find relief from her suffering in prayer and poetry. "My prayers, my tears, my wishes, fears, and lamentations were witnessed by myself and Heaven alone." (p. 141)

Agnes and the reader begin to recognize too that part of her despair is caused by her infatuation with the curate, Mr. Weston, whom she fears she loves more than God. Her conscience whispers that she is deceiving her self "and mocking God with the services of a heart more bent upon the creature than the Creator." (p. 129) And she eventually brings herself to a mental realization of her duty. "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. 143)

The mere decision to follow the dictates of conscience and of duty is not enough, and Agnes sinks further into her center of spiritual indifference. Although she performs her daily tasks with her usual quiet efficiency, her enthusiastic zeal is missing. "Besides, we cannot have cares, and anxieties, and toil without hope--if it be the

hope of fulfilling our joyless task, accomplishing some needful project, or escaping some further annoyance." (p. 156) She admonishes herself to dismiss thoughts of happiness from her mind, and turn instead to "duty and the dull blank life" that lies before her. Then again, she tries to hope in spite of despair: "'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? Will He entirely deny to me those blessings which are so freely given to others, who neither ask them or acknowledge them when received? May I not still hope and trust?' I did hope and trust for a while, but alas, alas! the time ebbed away." (p. 160)

It was in this middle stage between despair and hope that Anne Brontë spent most of her life and indeed, it may have been where she was when she died. Yet, in Agnes Grey, we are granted a glimpse of her spiritual vision and solid faith, because Agnes is rescued from her gloom and granted the domestic happiness which she desires and which offers her the ideal opportunity to devote her life to the duty which is most important to her--duty to God manifested in service to one's fellow man. (Parenthetically, it is

important for the reader to recognize that marriage itself is not enough to insure happiness. Anne Brontë graphically portrays, in the union of Rosalie and Sir Thomas Ashby, that a home and family that are not in God's service are indeed worse than the single life, for they perpetuate selfishness and greed which can lead only to further sorrow.) Mr. Weston, however, is both the fulfillment of Agnes' spiritual need and the avenue to a life of Christian service. In the midst of the emotional and spiritual wasteland by which Agnes is surrounded, Mr. Weston seems like a savior. "Mr. Weston rose at length upon me, appearing like the morning star in my horizon, to save me from the fear of utter darkness; and I rejoiced that I had now a subject for contemplation that was above me, not beneath." (p.95) Inga-Stina Ewbank comments: "The pathos of Agnes's need for any ideal outside the moral murkiness and sterility of her position is such as to justify the exalted imagery, with its definite religious undertones. In Anne's portrayal of Agnes's love, there is none of the passion that we find in the novels of her sisters, but there is another kind of intensity: the sense of love as an epiphany, as Grace."[30] For Agnes, the emotional and spiritual experiences coincide--Weston is her hope for domestic happiness and her

[30]Inga-Stina Ewbank, Their Proper Sphere: A Study of The Brontë Sisters as Early-Victorian Female Novelists (Göteborg, 1966), p. 69.

guide to spiritual fruitfulness. With his help, she can devote her life to Duty. The end of the story, true to the familiar pattern of the religious novel, is a victory for Hope against Despair.

Although Agnes Grey utilizes many of the conventions of the religious novel, Anne Brontë's direct force and simple, straightforward style provide a more sophisticated and integrated structure, thus avoiding the artificial, didactic quality that makes the typical novels of her day so unpalatable to modern taste. It was, no doubt, this achievement that moved George Moore to say, "Agnes Grey is the most perfect prose narrative in English letters."[31] The strength of Anne Brontë's moral vision dominates and shapes her work, so that theme, characters, and style are all subordinate to her purpose, clearly stated in the opening lines of the novel: "All true histories contain instruction, though in some the treasure may be hard to find, and when 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 history or not, I am hardly competent to judge. I sometimes think it might prove useful to some, and entertaining to others; but the world may judge for itself." (p. 1)

As a complement and as a means of showing contrast to

[31] Quoted in Harrison and Stanford, p. 227.

the main theme of the novel--the struggle of the individual to maintain her spiritual integrity in a hostile world--Anne Brontë illustrates the condition of an unspiritual world where human beings use their fellow creatures in merciless, inhuman ways. Agnes Grey "cries out against using your fellow beings."[32] Early in the novel, she presents several animal vignettes which are later amplified in human situations. The spoiled and arrogant Tom Bloomfield finds great pleasure in torturing birds. Agnes asks him what he does with those he catches, and he replies: "Different things. Sometimes I give them to the cat, sometimes I cut them in pieces with my penknife, but the next I mean to roast alive. . . . Papa knows how I treat them, and he never blames me for it. He says it is just what he used to do when he was a boy. Last summer he gave me a nest full of young sparrows, and he saw me pulling off their legs and wings and heads, and never said anything except that they were nasty things, and I must not let them soil my trousers; and Uncle Robson was there too, and he laughed, and said I was a fine boy." (p. 19) Agnes illustrates Anne Brontë's reverence for all of creation when Tom begins to carry out his devilish plans. "So saying, urged by a sense of duty, at the risk of both

[32]Ewbank, p. 66.

making myself sick and incurring the wrath of my employers, I got a large flat stone that had been reared up for a mouse-trap by the gardener; then, having once more vainly endeavoured to persuade the little tyrant to let the birds be carried back, I asked what he intended to do with them. With fiendish glee he commenced a list or torments, and while he was busied in the relation I dropped the stone upon his intended victims and crushed them flat beneath it." (p. 44) After this bold, insubordinate action, Agnes defends herself against Mrs. Bloomfield's insensitive, soulless rationale:

> "You seem to have forgotten," said she calmly, "that the creatures were all created for our convenience."
> I thought that doctrine admitted some doubt, but merely replied,--
> "If they were, we have no right to torment them for our amusement."
> "I think," said she, "a child's amusement is scarcely to be weighed against the welfare of a soulless brute."
> "But for the child's own sake it ought not to be encouraged to have such amusements," answered I, as meekly as I could to make up for such unusual pertinacity. 'Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.'"
> "Oh, of course! But that refers to our conduct towards each other."
> "The merciful man shows mercy to his beast," I ventured to add. (p. 45)

Similarly, Matilda Murray delights in letting her dog chase and kill a leveret: "I pretended to want to save it. . . as it was so glaringly out of season, but I

was better pleased to see it killed. However, you can both witness that I couldn't help it. Prince was determined to have her, and he clutched her by the back, and killed her in a minute. Wasn't it a noble chase?" This time it is Mr. Weston who, with quiet sarcasm, expresses the humane point of view. He replies, "Very--for a young lady after a leveret." (p. 149)

The same heartless cruelty is present in the human world which surrounds Agnes. Human beings use each other to achieve their own selfish ends. In her delineation of these human characters though, Anne Brontë is careful to balance each one with a counterpart who exemplifies the Christian virtues which are the subject of her "instruction."

Agnes is accustomed to a family life based on love, mutual sharing, and Christian charity. She firmly believes that she will be able to discipline the children of her employers by the same methods that were effective in her home. "In _my_ childhood I could not imagine a more afflictive punishment than for my mother to refuse to kiss me at night; the very idea was terrible." (p. 29) But she fails to recognize until later that she is dealing with unspiritual people who have never cultivated the capacity for love or human kindness. After she is dismissed from her situation, she tells her mother, "I know I was sulky

sometimes, and I should have been glad to see these children sulky sometimes too, for then I could have understood them; but they never were, for they could not be offended, nor hurt, nor ashamed. They could not be unhappy in any way, except when they were in a passion. . . . It is very unpleasant to live with such unimpressible, incomprehensible creatures. You cannot love them; and if you could, your love would be utterly thrown away. They could neither return it nor value nor understand it." (p. 50)

Similarly, the Murray family at Horton Lodge is preoccupied with superficialities. "Mrs. Murray was a handsome, dashing lady of forty who certainly required neither rouge nor padding to add to her charms, and whose chief enjoyments were, or seemed to be, in giving or frequenting parties, and in dressing at the very top of fashion. . . . For the girls, she seemed anxious only to render them as superficially attractive and showily accomplished as they could possibly be made, without present trouble or discomfort to themselves. . . ." (pp. 58-59)

Because of her heartless, yet skillful, maneuvering, she arranges a financially promising marriage for her oldest daughter which results in a very unhappy and dissipated way of life for her. Rosalie tells Agnes after one year of marriage: ". . . mamma ought to have known better

than either of us and she never said anything against it--quite the contrary. . . . But he will do as he pleases, and I must be a prisoner and a slave. . . . Oh, I would give ten thousand worlds to be Miss Murray again! It is too bad to feel life, health, and beauty wasting away, unfelt and unenjoyed, for such a brute as that!" (p. 177)

Rosalie though has also been responsible for using other people to gain her own selfish ends. She has deliberately encouraged the rector of the parish, Mr. Hatfield, to pursue her; yet when he proposes, she delights in spurning him. She gloats over her success to Matilda and Agnes: "I proudly drew myself up, and with the greatest coolness expressed my astonishment at such an occurrence, and hoped he had seen nothing in my conduct to justify his expectations. You should have seen how his countenance fell! He went perfectly white in the face. . . . But he was angry as well as disappointed. There was he, suffering so unspeakably, and there was I, the pitiless cause of it all, so utterly impenetrable to all the artillery of his looks and words, so calmly cold and proud. . . ." (pp. 116-17) Agnes' pithy remark illustrates her chagrin at her charge's behavior: "The greater his agony, I should think, the less your cause for gratification." (p. 120)

When Rosalie turns her thoughts to seducing Mr.

Weston, whom Agnes already secretly admires and loves, the conflict becomes even more intense. Rosalie feigns interest in the poor and the sick, because she knows Weston is concerned for them; her true attitude is quite the opposite.

> /The Murray girls/ never in thought exchanged places with them, and consequently had no consideration for their feelings, regarding them as an order of beings entirely different from themselves. They would watch the poor creatures at their meals, making uncivil remarks about their food and their manner of eating; they would laugh at their simple notions and provincial expressions, till some of them scarcely durst venture to speak. . . . They thought that, as these cottagers were poor and untaught, they must be stupid and brutish; and as long as they, their superiors, condescended to talk to them, and to give them shillings and half-crowns, or articles of clothing, they had a right to amuse themselves, even at their expense; and the people must adore them as angels of light, condescending to minister to their necessities and enlighten their humble dwellings. (p. 83)

Rosalie makes a point of telling Mr. Weston about a sick cottager but also wonders what time he will be there, so she can arrange to meet him. Then, she flippantly tells Agnes and Matilda: "I mean to take up Mr. Weston instead of Mr. Hatfield. . . . I am determined Hatfield shall not be the <u>only</u> man who shall lay his heart at my feet and implore me to accept the worthless gift in vain." (pp. 131-32)

By contrast, Agnes' charity is pure and unselfish.

She goes to visit the almost blind Nancy Brown during her very precious leisure time. She reads to her, helps her sew, and even sympathetically listens to her account of her religious melancholy. She feels very close to the poor and is grieved when the girls prevent her from visiting them. And it is this moral quality of compassion that she values in Mr. Weston. Significantly, when she describes even his outward appearance, she is not so impressed with his features as with what they express about the inner man.

> In stature he was a little, a very little above the middle size. The outline of his face would be pronounced too square for beauty, but to me it announced decision of character; his dark brown hair was not carefully curled like Mr. Hatfield's, but simply brushed aside over a broad white forehead; the eyebrows, I suppose, were too projecting, but from under those dark brows there gleamed an eye of singular power, brown in colour, not large, and somehwat deep-set, but strikingly brilliant, and full of expression. There was character, too, in the mouth--something that bespoke a man of firm purpose and a habitual thinker. . . . I had early formed my opinion of him. . . and was fully convinced that he was a man of strong sense, firm faith, and ardent piety, but thoughtful and stern; and when I found that, to his other good qualities, was added that of true benevolence and gentle, considerate kindness, the discovery perhaps delighted me the more, as I had not been prepared to expect it. (p. 96)

Rosalie, on the other hand, had based her impression of Weston on a superficial glance and had pronounced him "an insensate, ugly, stupid blockhead." (p. 76)

Hatfield, with his love of finery and his simpering,

patronizing attitude toward the wealthy members of his congregation, appeals more to Rosalie.

> Mr. Hatfield would come sailing up the aisle, or rather sweeping along like a whirlwind, with his rich silk gown flying behind him and rustling against the pew doors, mount the pulpit like a conqueror ascending his triumphal car; then, sinking on the velvet cushion in an attitude of studied grace, remain in silent prostration for a certain time; then mutter over a collect, and gabble through the Lord's Prayer; rise, draw off one bright lavender glove, to give the congregation the benefit of his sparkling rings, lightly pass his fingers through his well-curled hair, flourish a cambric handkerchief, recite a very short passage, or, perhaps, a mere phrase of scripture, and finally deliver a composition which, as a composition might be considered good, though far too studied and too artificial to be pleasing to me. (p. 79)

Hatfield's favorite topics were "church discipline, rites and ceremonies, apostolical succession, the duty of reverence and obedience to the clergy, the atrocious criminality of dissent, the absolute necessity of observing all the forms of godliness, the reprehensible presumption of individuals who attempted to think for themselves in matters connected with religion, or to be guided by their own interpretations of Scripture, and occasionally (to please his wealthy parishioners) the necessity of deferential obedience from the poor to the rich. . . ." (p. 79) Anne Brontë belies her own religious preference by the satiric tone she adopts when referring to Hatfield's High Church beliefs and practices and goes even further when

she expresses her approval of "the evangelical truth" of Weston's preaching, as well as "the earnest simplicty of his manner, and the clearness and force of his style." (pp. 78-79)

This striking difference is shown specifically in the responses of the two clergymen to one of their parishioners --Nancy Brown, the poor cottager who suffers from religious doubts and melancholy. Nancy tells Agnes that when she tried to explain her problems to Hatfield, he recommended that she attend church more regularly and partake of the sacraments, and if that didn't help, she must be one of those who seek "to enter at the strait gate and shall not be able." (p. 87) But Nancy is still perplexed. She says, "I hearkened and hearkened the ministers, and read and read at my prayerbook, but it was all like sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal. The sermons I couldn't understand, an' th' prayerbook only served to show me how wicked I was, that I could read such good words an' never be no better for it, and often feel it a sore labour an' a heavy task beside, instead of a blessing and a privilege as all good Christians does. It seemed like as all were barren an' dark to me." (p. 88) But Weston happens to visit her later, and after he listens compassionately to her problems, he responds with the gospel of love. "You say you cannot love God, but it strikes me that if you rightly

consider who and what He is you cannot help it. He is your father, your best friend. Every blessing, everything good and pleasant, or useful, comes from Him; and everything evil, everything you have reason to hate, to shun, or to fear, comes from Satan--*His* enemy as well as ours. And for *this* cause was God manifest in the flesh--that He might destroy the works of the devil. In one word, God is *LOVE*, and the more of love we have within us the nearer we are to Him, and the more of His spirit we possess." (p. 91) One can't help but recall Anne Brontë's own religious melancholy and the words of the Moravian minister which gave her hope. Her firm affirmation of this doctrine in *Agnes Grey* and her refutation of the purely ecclesiastical path to salvation certainly indicates that she had found a mooring place for her faith.

In terms of theme and characterization, *Agnes Grey* is clearly similar to many religious novels of the mid-nineteenth century; but it is the style of the novel--how the author uses her material--that makes it an outstanding work within the genre.

One notices very quickly that the narrator of *Agnes Grey* is not a timid, withdrawn Victorian woman who knows her place and keeps it; rather, she is adventuresome, bold and outspoken when her moral conscience requires it of her. Her

insistence on making her own way as a governess and her stand against the Bloomfields on the seemingly trivial matter of birds has already been noted. An equally important illustration of the audacity of this women is the situation in which the Bloomfield grandmother visits the family. At first, the elder Mrs. Bloomfield tries to ingratiate herself with Agnes by sympathizing with her dilemma concerning the children. Agnes is quick to discern though that the grandmother is insincere, even hypocritical, and she declares: "From what I now saw of her, and what I heard from the children, I knew that in order to gain her cordial friendship, I had but to utter a word of flattery at each convenient opportunity. But this was against my principles, and for lack of this the capricious old dame soon deprived me of her favour again, and I believe did me much secret injury." (p. 38) And later, at her second place of employment, Mrs. Murray has asked her to stay close to Rosalie on her long walks in the fields because the mother fears that her flirtatious daughter is deliberately seducing the rector, and of course such a marriage would not be advantageous. But when Rosalie deceptively, but rather obviously, requests that Agnes go to visit the poor cottager, Mark Wood, Agnes decides, against the express wishes of her employer, that "there'll be no great harm done.

Poor Mark will be glad of the half-crown, and perhaps of the good book too; and if the rector does steal Miss Rosalie's heart, it will only humble her pride a little and if they do get married at last, it will only save her from a worse fate; and she will be quite a good enough partner for him, and he for her." (pp. 114-15) Anne Brontë, in her first novel, establishes herself as a true sister of Charlotte and Emily; she exhibits the same boldness and directness in the person of her narrator that we see in Jane Eyre or in Catherine and Heathcliff. But Anne's motivating force is always conscience--that force which impels one to do one's duty at any cost. This quality will reappear in _The Tenant of Wildfell Hall_ with even greater strength and vigor.

A quality in Anne Brontë's style of writing which is very different from her family's dramatic flair but is better suited to her earnest moral purpose is her spare and direct prose style lightened by a quiet sense of humor and a demure irony. Derek Stanford notes that Anne's power as a writer comes from her ability to experience emotion and later to reflect on what she felt.[33] It is this quality of being somewhat removed from the experience that allows Anne to understate occasionally. Agnes' response to Mrs. Bloomfield's outrageous pronouncement that "the creatures were

[33]Harrison and Stanford, p. 222.

all created for our convenience" was simply "I thought that doctrine admitted some doubt." (p. 45) The conversation in which Agnes tells Rosalie about her sister Mary's forthcoming marriage is typical:

> "To whom is she to be married?"
> "To Mr. Richardson, the vicar of a neighboring parish."
> "Is he rich?"
> "No; only comfortable."
> "Is he handsome?"
> "No; only decent."
> "Young?"
> "No; only middling." (p. 71)

Even the occasion of her father's death requires only a very brief, but intense, scene:

> "How is he?" I asked, gasping for the answer.
> "Dead!"
> It was the reply I had anticipated, but the shock seemed none the less tremendous.

The next chapter begins simply: "My father's mortal remains had been consigned to the tomb, and we, with sad faces and sombre garments, sat lingering over the frugal breakfast table, revolving plans for our future life." (pp. 152-53) Derek Stanford observes that "what Anne remembers to perfection are the incidents and state of late adolescence and early womanhood under certain forms of stress. In the story of the governess in Agnes Grey, we meet with all those moments of hope and fear, those happenings, productive of keen joy or pain, which a young susceptibility and lack of experience guarantee to

their possessor. But the two things mainly remarkable about this record of early impressions is [sic] the accurate, sober unmisted fashion with which each detail is presented; and the stoic and un-self-pitying manner in which these griefs and hardships are described. . . . She holds on always to the thread of her tale; her style never registers hysterics; and even though there are tears her eye is on the object."[34]

Moreover, it is the same distance from her experience which allows Anne Brontë to gently poke fun at the pretense --especially religious hypocrisy--that surrounds her. The passage quoted earlier depicting Mr. Hatfield's swirls and flourishes and his foppish behavior in the pulpit has to be one of the funniest descriptions in Victorian religious fiction. Agnes describes a conversation with the stuffy Grandmother Bloomfield in equally devastating terms:

> At one time I, merely in common civility, asked after her cough. Immediately her long visage relaxed into a smile, and she favoured me with a particular history of that and her other infirmities, followed by an account of her pious resignation, delivered in the usual emphatic declamatory style, which no writing can portray. "But there's one remedy for all, my dear, and that's resignation" (a toss of the head)--"resignation to the will of Heaven" (an uplifting of the hands and eyes). "It has always supported me through all my trials, and always will do" (a succession of nods). "But then, it isn't everybody that can say that" (a shake of the head); "but I'm one of the pious ones, Miss Grey" (a very significant nod and toss). "And, thank Heaven, I always

[34] Harrison and Stanford, p. 230.

> was" (another nod), "and I glory in it" (an emphatic clasping of the hands and shaking of the head.) And with several texts of Scripture, misquoted or misapplied, and religious exclamations so redolent of the ludicrous in the style of delivery and manner of bringing in, if not in the expressions thenselves, that I decline repeating them, she withdrew, tossing her large head in high good-humour--with herself at least--and left me hoping that, after all, she was rather weak than wicked. (p. 37)

Ernest Raymond asserts that if it had not been for her harrassing conscience Anne would have been an "immeasurably greater novelist than she was. She wrote a beautiful prose, purer than Charlotte's because never empurpled or rhetorical, she had a narrative gift equal to Charlotte's; she had a fine dry humour when her conscience was looking away and let her use it; she could have created many rich fruity characters if she'd had more of such break-away moments--consider Miss Matilda in '<u>Agnes Grey</u>' who <u>would</u> use the word damn and even refer to her horse as a mare. . . ."[35] But must it not be said in Anne's defense that these "break-away moments" are particularly effective in her novel because she uses them as tools to support her total moral and spiritual vision?

In spite of what has been described as a sparse and unembellished style, Anne Brontë does utilize several poetic devices to intensify the mood or moral of her novel. The weather imagery, while not approaching the pervasiveness

[35]Raymond, pp. 227-28.

of the pathetic fallacy, is indicative of the mood of the narrator/heroine and often subtly balances her verbal attempts at rationalizing her situation. Thus, despite Agnes' statements about her hopes and dreams of teaching young children at the beginning of the novel, the reader senses a mood of descending gloom from the weather. The morning of Agnes' departure is cold and rainy, though the village spire and parsonage bask in "a slanting beam of sunshine. It was but a sickly ray, but the village and surrounding hills were all in sombre shade. . . ." (p. 13) Her first exposure to the Bloomfield family is one of "frigid formality," and her first dinner with them is torturous because of the "toughness of the beefsteaks and the numbness of my hands, almost palsied by their five hours' exposure to the bitter wind." (p. 15) And her worst days with the children are when the weather is bad. "I particularly remember one wild, snowy afternoon soon after my return in January. The children had all come up from dinner, loudly declaring that they meant 'to be naughty,' and they had well kept their resolution. . . ." (p. 34) Although May brings release from the oppression at the Bloomfields, Agnes departs for Horton Lodge on a "wild tempestuous day" in January. "There was a strong north wind, with a continual storm of snow drifting on the ground and whirling through the air." (p. 54) And the scene that

greets her the following morning is surely symbolic of the spiritual and emotional isolation she will experience. ". . . I awoke the next morning, feeling 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; 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, exacting nourishment from what appears so alien to its nature--if, indeed, it ever can. . . . A wide, white wilderness was all that met my gaze--a waste of 'deserts tossed in snow,/And heavy-laden groves.'" (p. 57) She describes her life as offering "no alternative between positive rainy days and days of dull gray clouds without downfall." (p. 173) But the scene is dramatically different in the town of A____ where Agnes and her mother set up their school and where she is finally re-united with Weston.

> . . . No language can describe the effect of the deep, clear azure of the sky and ocean, the bright morning sunshine on the semicircular barrier of craggy cliffs surmounted by green, swelling hills, and on the smooth, wide sands, and the low rocks out at the sea, looking, with their clothing of weeds and moss, like grass-grown islands, and, above all, on the brilliant sparkling waves. And then the unspeakable purity and freshness of the air! There was just enough heat to enhance the value of the breeze, and just enough wind to keep the

> whole sea in motion, to make the waves come bounding to the shore, foaming and sparkling, as if wild with glee. (pp. 180-81)

And when Weston proposes, a beautiful evening has followed a rainy, stormy day.

As one might guess from the early episode with the Bloomfield children and their animal traps, animals are an important clue to the inner life of a human being. Naturally the cruel, domineering men who represent Agnes' employers are boisterous fox-hunting squires. The spoiled and selfish Rosalie has a fat French poodle that lies curled upon a silk cushion. Hatfield, the wrong-hearted rector, kicks Nancy Brown's cat "right across th' floor" (p. 88) and thumps Agnes' dog Snap when he interferes with the courtship of Miss Murray. "Mr. Hatfield, with his cane, administered a resounding thwack upon the animal's skull, and sent it yelping back to me, with a clamorous outcry that afforded the reverend gentleman great amusement." (p. 111) But when Nancy Brown's cat jumps up on Mr. Weston's lap, he strokes her and smiles, and later rescues her from the gun of Mr. Murray's gamekeeper. Similarly, he finds and keeps Snap when Agnes supposes he is lost forever. It is, in fact, the dog that re-unites them on the seashore. "Presently I heard a snuffling sound behind me, and then a dog came frisking and wriggling on my feet. It was my own Snap--the little, dark, wire-haired terrier! When

I spoke his name he leapt up in my face and yelled for joy. . . . But how came he to be there?. . . I looked round, and beheld--Mr. Weston!" (p. 182) Weston's association with flowers--bluebells, primroses, and wild flowers in general--as well as with the wild beauty of the sea also serves to place him in a different world from that of the other artificial men in the novel.

The light touch of Anne Brontë in these matters of style indicates her superb taste and discretion and places her autobiographical novel well above the ordinary religious novel of her time. It remains, however, for The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, her second novel, to paint the bold and powerful strokes which put her on a separate plane.

CHAPTER THREE

Anne Brontë: *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* as a Novel with a Purpose

Anne Brontë's second novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, was probably conceived during those miserable months she and her brother Branwell spent at Thorp Green Hall as governess and tutor to the Robinson children. Anne saw at first hand the growth of the self-indulgent, immoral relationship between Branwell and Mrs. Robinson and the attendant suffering caused by Branwell's increasing dependence on alcohol and drugs. His abrupt dismissal from his position and Anne's subsequent resignation brought both of them back to Haworth Parsonage where Anne, though she struggled to understand and accept him, remained an almost helpless witness to his complete dissipation and tragic death. There is no doubt that the vision of degradation and deliberate self-destruction of Branwell pervaded Anne's thoughts and feelings during this time and contributed to the novel that was taking shape in her mind. In fact, Winifred Gérin notes that the period of Branwell's residence at home--from the summer of 1845 until his death in 1848--exactly coincides with the period of all the Brontë sisters' major literary achievements.

"Shut up in a small house with their drunken drug-addict of a brother, how could it be otherwise than that the stamp of Branwell is on so much of what they wrote? The wonder is he is not in everything."[1]

Certainly it was Branwell's suffering and the pain and anguish inflicted on those around him which made a strong impression on the mind of the compassionate and tender Anne; but to those critics who would dismiss _The Tenant of Wildfell Hall_ with the charge that she has simply retold her brother's unfortunate story with a tacked-on moral lesson sermonizing over his failure, it must be observed that between the experience and the novel lies the contemplative, reflective mind of the author, Anne Brontë. This dreadful experience played upon her sensitive spiritual and moral consciousness, and the result was a work of art in which she exorcised the demons of doubt and fear that had tortured her for manyyears. ". . .it was the novelist's obsession with the relentless battle between the good and dark angel for the soul of humanity, the eternal fascination of human beings in all the complexity of their good and evil natures. . . . The novel is the result of that disgust, of those obsessive misgivings which haunted her deeply religious mind."[2] Charlotte Brontë at least

[1] Gerin, p. 237.

[2] A. Craig Bell, "Anne Brontë, a Reappraisal," _Quarterly Review_, 304 (1966), 318-19.

partially recognized this source of the novel when she commented that Anne wrote The Tenant of Wildfell Hall "under a strange, conscientious, half-ascetic notion of accomplishing a painful penance and a severe duty."[3] The novel is a result of Anne's self-probing, not merely of a desire to point the moral of Branwell's fall.

Yet, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall is a novel with a purpose, and its purpose is "a didactic one, again not so much to instruct, as to lay bare candidly that by which the reader may instruct himself."[4] Anne herself delineates her purpose in the preface to the second edition of the novel:

> My object in writing the following pages was not simply to amuse the Reader; neither was it to gratify my own taste, nor yet to ingratiate myself with the Press and the Public: I wished to tell the truth, for truth always conveys its own moral to those who are able to receive. . . .Let it not be imagined, however, that I consider myself competent to reform the errors and abuses of society, but only that I would fain contribute my humble quota towards so good an aim; and if I can gain the public ear at all. I would rather whisper a few wholesome truths therein than much soft nonsense. . . . Oh, reader, if there were less of this delicate concealment of facts--this whispering 'Peace, peace' when there is no peace, there would be less of sin and misery to the young of both sexes who are left to wring their bitter knowledge from experience. . . . Such humble talents as God has given me I will endeavour to put to their greatest use; if I am able to amuse, I will try to benefit too; and

[3]Quoted in Harrison and Stanford, p. 239.

[4]W. A. Craik, The Brontë Novels (London: Methuen, 1968), p. 229.

> when I feel it my duty to speak an unpalatable truth, with the help of God, I <u>will</u> speak it, though it be to the prejudice of my name and to the detriment of my reader's immediate pleasure as well as my own.[5]

And, true to her own statement, Anne does not sermonize; she looks at the facts clearly and lucidly, and shows, in her straightforward manner, the gradual deterioration or salvation of individual souls as they face certain difficulties or temptations.

Although some have tried to prove that the scope of this novel is merely that of an extended temperance tract, the careful reader notes that the thematic structure supports two separate threads woven skillfully together to create the rich texture of the novel. The more shockingly prominent of the two is the tracing of the downward progress of the individual who fails to restrain his natural appetites, but the corollary theme which focuses on the far-reaching effects of the hero's self-indulgence upon the spiritual life of the heroine would have been the more crucial to Anne Brontë. It is the skillful interplay of these two themes together with the multitude of reverberations in the minor characters that makes the novel more than a sermon or a moral tract.

The temperance theme is lightly introduced in the first

[5]Quoted in Harrison and Stanford, pp. 236-38.

part of the frame story. We discover that the vicar of narrator Gilbert Markham's parish enjoys callâng at the Markham home because of the fine ale that they brew.

> "But then, Mr. Millward, you don't think it wrong to take a little wine now and then--or a little spirits either?" said my mother, as she handed a smoking tumbler of gin and water to Mrs. Wilson, who affirmed that wine sat heavy on her stomach, and whose son Robert was at that moment helping himself to a pretty stiff glass of the same.
>
> "By no means!" replied the oracle, with a Jove-like nod; "these things are all blessings and mercies, if we only knew how to make use of them." (p. 31)[6]

But when the supposed widow, Mrs. Graham, and her son are offered wine, she adamantly refuses, and a serious argument ensues. She says: "[Arthur] detests the very sight of wine. . . and the smell of it almost makes him sick. I have been accustomed to make him swallow a little wine or weak spirits-and-water, by way of medicine, when he was sick, and, in fact, I have done what I could to make him hate them. . . . I will lead him by the hand, Mr. Markham, till he has strength to go alone; and I will clear as many stones from his path as I can, and teach him to avoid the rest, or walk firmly over them. . . ." (pp. 22-23)

Thus the artist Anne Brontë arouses our curiosity in the opening scenes of the novel, but it remains for the

[6]All references are to Anne Brontë, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, in The Complete Works of Charlotte Brontë and Her Sisters (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell and Company, 1900).

central core of the work, the candid diary of Helen Huntingdon (Mrs. Graham), to reveal the terror and anguish which have aroused this aversion. The diary, which covers a period of about seven years, shows the gradual decline and deterioration and, finally, the utter destruction of Arthur Huntingdon. It is this time factor, together with the description of possible alternative actions taken by other members of Huntingdon's debauched circle, that lends realism and credibility to the account.

Arthur Huntingdon's problem, much like that of Sir Guy Morville in _The Heir of Redclyffe_, is to learn to restrain his natural appetites for food, drink, women, gambling, fighting, and other forms of vanity and self-indulgence. Whereas Sir Guy undertakes to discipline himself by refusing to over-indulge in those pastimes which gratify his sensual desires, first as a means of applying himself to his studies and further as a preparation for eternal life in Heaven, Huntingdon makes no such attempts at restraint and thus succumbs to one temptation after another until he is finally overwhelmed and destroyed by them.

Helen, having fallen in love with Huntingdon's charming manner, wonders what her uncle means by characterizing her lover as "a bit wildish." Her aunt replies: "It means destitute of principle, and prone to every vice

that is common to youth." (p. 107) But Helen rationalizes and excuses his behavior: ". . . I long to deliver him from his faults--to give him an opportunity of shaking off the adventitious evil got from contact with others worse than himself, and shining out in the unclouded light of his own genuine goodness--to do my utmost to help his better self against his worse. . . ." (p. 138) After their marriage, though, she begins to see that her husband has no intention of reforming; he likes his way of life. When plagued by boredom on rainy days, he delights in aggravating Helen with tales of his former escapades: ". . . his favorite amusement is to sit or loll beside me on the sofa, and tell me stories of his former amours, always turning upon the ruin of some confiding girl, or the cozening of some unsuspecting husband; and when I express my horror and indignation, he lays it all to the charge of jealousy, and laughs till the tears run down his cheeks." (p. 164)

Very soon, ennui overtakes him, and he flees to London for increasingly long "seasons." Each time when he returns, he is more spent and fatigued from the pleasures of the high life in the city. At first, Helen can write: "Thank heaven, he is come at last! But how altered! flushed and feverish, listless and languid, his beauty

strangely diminished, his vigor and vivacity quite departed." (p. 177) The next time, she cannot help but remark to him, ". . . you cannot deny that you have degraded yourself miserably. You have shamefully wronged yourself, body and soul. . . ." (p. 203) And finally, she confides to her diary: "I am tired out with his injustice, his selfishness, and hopeless depravity--I wish a milder word would do." (p. 212)

But the situation becomes even more intolerable when Huntingdon brings his friends home to Grassdale Manor for the hunting season. After dinner on the second evening of what is to be a prolonged stay, Arthur suggests "a regular jollification" which turns into a drunken brawl before the evening is over. The men are "sick and stupid," threatening and abusing their wives and poor Lord Lowborough who tries to abstain, and the women are in tears caused by fear and humiliation at this violent behavior. It is during several subsequent evening parties of this sort that Huntingdon and his friends undertake to "make a man" of the little three-year-old Arthur.

> [Huntingdon] was not going to have the little fellow moped to death between an old nurse and a cursed fool of a mother. So the little fellow came down every evening, in spite of his cross mamma, and learned to tipple wine like papa, to swear like Mr. Hattersley, and to have his own way like a man, and sent mamma to the devil when

> she tried to prevent him. To see such things done with the roguish naiveté of that pretty little child, and hear such things spoken by that small infantile voice, was as peculiarly piquant and irresistibly droll to them as it was inexpressibly distressing and painful to me; and when he had set the table in a roar, he would look round delightedly upon them all, and add his shrill laughter to theirs. (p. 278)

As if these excesses were not enough, Helen also discovers that her husband is carrying on an affair with Lady Lowborough and that he has lost all love and respect for her as his wife.

> "Ah Huntingdon," said she reproachfully, pausing where I had stood with him the night before--"it was here you kissed that woman." She looked back into the leafy shade. Advancing thence, he answered, with a careless laugh:
>
> "Well, dearest, I couldn't help it. You know I must keep straight with her as long as I can. Haven't I seen you kiss your dolt of a husband scores of times? and do I ever complain?"
>
> "But tell me, don't you love her still--a _little_?" said she, placing her hand on his arm, looking earnestly in his face. . . .
>
> "Not _one_ bit, by all that's sacred!" he replied, kissing her glowing cheek. (p. 241)

Huntingdon further renounces Helen to his friends, and he does her the indignity of offering her to any one of them who will have her. "'My wife! what wife? I have no wife,' replied Huntingdon, looking innocently up from his glass--'or if I have, look you gentlemen, I value her so highly that any one among you, that can fancy her, may have her

and welcome--you may, by Jove, and my blessing into the bargain!'" (p. 282) But it is only after Huntingdon installs his latest mistress, Miss Myers, as little Arthur's governess that Helen decides to flee.

The intensity of this decline is increased by the hovering presence of Lord Lowborough, the only member of the Huntingdon circle who has had the courage to bridle his excesses. His painful withdrawal is accomplished after jeering and abusive threats from his friends.

> "It's only this, gentlemen, that I think we'd better go no further. We'd better stop while we can."
> "Just so!" cried Hattersley:
> 'Stop poor sinner! stop and think
> Before you farther go;
> No longer sport upon the brink
> Of everlasting woe.'"
> "Exactly!" replied his lordship, with the utmost gravity. "And if you choose to visit the bottomless pit, I won't go with you--we must part company, for I swear I'll not move another step toward it! What's this?" he said, taking up his glass of wine.
> "Taste it," suggested I. [Huntingdon]
> "This is hell broth!" he exclaimed. "I renounce it forever!" And he threw it out into the middle of the table.
> "Fill again!" said I, handing him the bottle--"and let us drink to your renunciation."
> "It's rank poison," said he, grasping the bottle by the neck, "and I forswear it! I've given up gambling, and I'll give up this, too." (p. 150)

Huntingdon laughs as he tells Helen about his attempts to "help" Lowborough by bringing him back into the fellowship. "All the company simultaneously pushed their glasses to him,

and I set them before him in a semi-circle, and tenderly patting him on the back, bid him drink, and he would soon see as bright a prospect as any of us. . . ." (p. 152) And it is Lord Lowborough that the group brutally attacks on the evening of the "jollification" previously mentioned.

> "By heaven and earth, you shall resemble us all!" cried Hattersley, starting up, and rudely seizing him by the arm. "Hallo, Huntingdon!" he shouted, "I've got him! Come, man, and help me! And d_n me, body and soul, if I don't make him blind drunk before I let him go! He shall make up for all past delinquencies, as sure as I'm a living soul!" There followed a disgraceful contest; Lord Lowborough, in desperate earnest, and pale with anger, silently struggling to release himself from the powerful madman that was striving to drag him from the room. . . . "I'm wishing you God-speed, Hattersley," cried Arthur, "and aiding you with my prayers. I can't do anything else if my life depended on it! I'm quite used up. Oh, ho!" and leaning back in his seat, he clapped his hands on his sides and groaned aloud. (p. 220)

Huntingdon further wrecks any hope of happiness that Lord Lowborough might have had by robbing him of the wife that he loves and esteems.

So Lord Lowborough's life is indeed bleak and dreary; he receives no comfort or solace from either his friends or his wife. Yet, he haunts the action of the diary section "like a skeleton at a feast," (p. 151) constantly reminding the reader of the depth of agony and grief caused by the dissipated life.

Although Huntingdon's refusal to reform and repent is

a major theme in the novel, the more important consideration for Anne Bronte was certainly the effect of his behavior on the spiritual life of his wife, Helen. Huntingdon's greatest sin may well be what he does to Helen in causing her springs of love and sympathy to dry up;[7] yet, inadvertently, he is also the source of her growth in faith. Early in the diary account, as Helen contemplates marriage, she is convinced of Huntingdon's essential goodness and the power of her love to redeem him from his evil ways. She invokes Heaven's blessing on her endeavor. "There is essential goodness in him; and what delight to unfold it! If he has wandered, what bliss to recall him! If he is now exposed to the baneful influence of corrupting and wicked companions, what glory to deliver him from them! Oh, if I could but believe that Heaven has designed me for this!" (p. 120) Helen's view of her mission must be somewhat altered even before her marriage when Huntingdon consents to go to church obviously just to ingratiate himself with her aunt. His conduct during the service borders on mockery as he holds his prayer-book upside down, stares about him, and draws a caricature of the preacher, Mr. Leighton, "giving to the respectable, pious elderly gentleman, the air and aspect of a most absurd old hypocrite." (p. 140)

The first quarrel after their marriage comes after they

[7] Ewbank, p. 83.

have been to church a second time. Huntingdon is jealous of Helen's love for God: ". . . . you are too religious. Now I like a woman to be religious, and I think your piety one of your greatest charms, but then, like all other good things, it may be carried too far. To my thinking, a woman's religion ought not to lessen her devotion to her earthly lord." Helen, of course, defends herself: "I will give my whole heart and soul to my Maker if I can. . . ." (p. 161) And it is not very long before she realizes that her husband cannot and will not share in her spiritual life. "How little real sympathy there exists between us; how many of my thoughts and feelings are gloomily cloistered within my own mind; how much of my higher and better self is indeed unmarried--doomed either to harden and sour in the sunless shade of solitude, or to quite degenerate and fall away for lack of nutriment in this unwholesome soil!" (p. 192)

Her optimism for Huntingdon's redemption is shattered when she clearly sees the reality of the profligate life that he enjoys so much. What is worse is that during this period when she realizes that she can't redeem him, she begins to lose faith in her own salvation and virtue. She gradually sinks from youthful hope and innocence into despondency and indifference. She writes:

> I am so determined to love him, so intensely anxious to excuse his errors, that I am continually dwelling upon them, and laboring to extenuate the loosest of his principles and the worst of his practices, till I am familiarized with vice and almost a partaker in his sins. Things that formerly shocked and disgusted me, now seem only natural. I know them to be wrong, because reason and God's Word declare them to be so; but I am gradually losing that instinctive horror and repulsion which was given me by nature, or instilled into me by the precepts and example of my aunt. (p. 208)

Later, she begins to doubt her own Christian commitment and compassion. "Instead of being humbled and purified by my afflictions, I feel that they are turning my nature into gall. This must be my fault as much as theirs that wrong me. No true Christian could cherish such bitter feelings as I do against him and her. . . ." (p. 250) And finally at the nadir of her misery, Helen cries out: "I am a slave, a prisoner. . . . Have I no faith in God? I try to look to him, and raise my heart to heaven, but it will cleave to the dust; I can only say, 'He hath hedged me about, that I cannot get out: he hath made my chain heavy. He hath filled me with bitterness, he hath made me drunken with wormwood. . . .'" (p. 293)

The title of the chapter which immediately follows this despairing confession though is "Hope Springs Eternal in the Human Breast," and it is at this point that Helen's dreams of escape begin to become a reality. Yet, even after

she flees to Wildfell Hall and is virtually free from the chains that have bound her, she finds it difficult to renew her spiritual fervor. In fact, the Reverend Mr. Millward even visits her to scold her for her non-attendance at worship services.

In an interesting parallel to many other mid-nineteenth century religious novels, including The Heir of Redclyffe, the backsliding Christian is called back to faith by duty--the duty to assist and even pray and hope for the life and salvation of the person who has sinned most against him. Just as Sir Guy and Amy rush to the bedside of their fever-stricken enemy, Phillip Morville, Helen Huntingdon, who desired never to see her husband again, is recalled to Grassdale Manor by her sense of Christian compassion and duty to the sick-room of the despicable and ungrateful Huntingdon. She writes to her brother: "I find myself in rather a singular position. I am exerting my utmost endeavours to promote the recovery and reformation of my husband, and if I succeed what shall I do? My duty, of course--but how? No matter; I can perform the task that is before me now, and God will give me strength to do whatever he requires hereafter." (p. 345)

In spite of her doubts and fears during the struggle, there is a real sense in which Helen is purified by her

afflictions, and indeed it might be said that Helen becomes a true Christian in the course of the novel. While her optimism is high at the beginning of her life with Huntingdon, her Christian faith is shallow, idealistic, and somewhat self-centered. In her early arguments with her aunt, Helen claims she has found nearly thirty passages in the Bible which prove that no one will suffer eternal punishment and that her love will redeem Huntingdon. Later, she realizes that she was foolish to think that she could save him. "Fool that I was to dream that I had strength and purity enough to save myself and him! Such vain presumption would be rightly served if I should perish with him in the gulf from which I sought to save him!" (p. 208) And in the death-bed scene, it is Huntingdon himself who delivers the most scornful and devastating attacks on her hope and faith in eternal life and her efforts to help him. "'Oh I see,' said he, with a bitter smile, 'it's an act of Christian charity, whereby you hope to gain a higher seat in heaven for yourself, and scoop a deeper pit in hell for me.'" (p. 340) "'Oh, this is sweet revenge?' cried he, when I had been doing all I could to make him comfortable and to remedy the carelessness of his nurse. 'And you can enjoy it with such a quiet conscience too, because it's all in the way of duty.'" (p. 343) Finally, she tells him:

"No man can deliver his brother, nor make agreement unto God for him. . . . it cost more to redeem their souls: it cost the blood of an incarnate God, perfect and sinless in himself to redeem us from the bondage of the evil one. Let _Him_ plead for you." (p. 358)

Helen progresses spiritually from dependence on herself to a dependence on God. Huntingdon's hopeless depravity and her futile efforts to save him drive her ultimately to true humility and confident faith. After Huntingdon's death, she writes: "But thank God I have hope--not only from a vague dependence on the possibility that penitence and pardon might have reached him at the last, but from the blessed confidence that, through whatever purging fires the erring spirit may be doomed to pass--whatever fate awaits it, still it is not lost, and God, who hateth nothing that He hath made, _will_ bless it in the end!" (p. 359)

In attempting to define the purpose of Anne Brontë's novel, _The Tenant of Wildfell Hall_, Linton Andrews suggests that Anne was moved to sublimate her horror at her brother's ruin "in a fictional homily that might call sinners to repentance. . . . Hers had to be a story with a moral, 'If sinners entice thee, consent thou not.'"[8] But Winifred

[8] Sir Linton Andrews, "A Challenge by Anne Brontë," _Brontë Society Transactions_, 14 (1965), 26.

Gérin enlarges the conception of the novel when she notes, "What makes The Tenant of Wildfell Hall something more than a novel with a purpose is its sense of life. The characters develop, they grow; they deteriorate, they age; they do not remain untouched by experience. They learn not by any theorising of the author's but from the lessons of life itself."[9] The Tenant of Wildfell Hall is indeed a novel with a purpose; but it is not merely the narrow, restrictive purpose proposed by Mr. Andrews; rather, Anne Brontë's dual focus on the disastrous effects of lack of restraint of the sensual appetites together with the spiritual implications both for the victim and his loved ones creates a depth of purpose in the novel which makes it an outstanding example of mid-nineteenth century religious fiction.

The rich texture of the dual theme is enhanced too by certain stylistic qualities by which Anne Brontë expands and clarifies her message. Her excellent craftsmanship is shown particularly in the structure of her novel, in the tone and language she employs, and in the imagery which surrounds certain incidents and characters.

The basic structure of the novel is similar to that of Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights; there is a frame story narrated by an ordinary young farmer, Gilbert Markham,

[9] Gérin, p. 249.

whose curiosity about and admiration for the mysterious Mrs. Graham compel him to defend her against the petty gossip and narrow provincialism of the Wildfell Hall neighborhood. The world of Gilbert Markham stands in sharp contrast to the past of Helen Huntingdon:

> Markham's is all domestic, rural, and unsensational. The Yorkshire farm and village life, going no higher up the social scale than the rector and the gentleman farmer and their families, is assumed to be familiar ground. The events are those of daily occurrence, or of very modest excitement, never rising above a small party for neighbours or a picnic by the sea four miles away. Such an opening section successfully enhances the more socially elevated setting and startling events of Helen's story, and at the same time, by being homely, ensures that the narrative keeps its feet on the ground when its material threatens to raise it to melodrama or fantasy.[10]

Helen's story, in the form of a seven-year diary, forms the central section of the novel. Although the social level is slightly higher and the events are more sensational, "society at Grassdale Manor--the outside world and surrounding families--is made of the same stuff as in the opening section; but has changed to alien beings who can only exacerbate private domestic agony."[11] Thus, the humorous but harmless drinking of the rector and Mrs. Wilson becomes the terrible and often violent obsession that ruins Huntingdon, Grimsby, and even Lowborough. The

[10] Craik, p. 233.

[11] Ibid., p. 234.

giddy match-making of the Millward and Wilson girls who look only for financial security and comfort becomes the heartless desperation of Mrs. Hargrave who must push her daughter off on the most dissipated reprobate because her selfish son requires that the small family fortune be spent entirely on his comfort. Even the rector's visits to Helen in an effort to save her depraved soul by encouraging attendance at church seem trivial and ironic by comparison with the intense spiritual struggles that Helen has endured. So the opening frame section sets up a backdrop against which the powerful drama of the diary is enacted. Similarly, the third section, which is the closing of the frame story, brings the action back into a calm and ordered domestic world.

We have already noted the three-part thematic structure within the diary section--Helen's spiritual optimism followed by despondency and despair raised finally to a more mature and confident faith as a result of suffering and the return to duty. Inga-Stina Ekeblad goes on to suggest that there are three-part episodes within this section that are planned like the acts of a drama to bring incidents and feelings into sharp contrast with each other and drive the action to a rapid climax. "Thus in the three episodes, rapidly following on each other, where Helen simultaneously

discovers her husband's adultery, and is beset by a would-be seducer, there is very deliberate use of suspense, irony, and peripeteia."[12] On one evening Helen surprises her husband in the garden and, in a moment of uninhibited joy and hope, rushes to embrace him. The next evening, Hargrave challenges her to a game of chess which has all the overtones and serious implications of a game of seduction. Shortly after losing this contest, she runs to the garden again, only to hear her husband renounce her and declare his love to Lady Lowborough.

Another structural device that Anne Brontë employs to enlarge the thematic scope of her novel is that of creating parallel situations among minor characters to intensify the qualities, problems, or relationships of the protagonists. We have seen how the utter degradation of Huntingdon is contrasted with the moderate social tippling advocated by the rector and Mrs. Markham as well as with the ghostly shadow of the ruined but reformed Lord Lowborough. Similarly, Helen's marriage to the "wildish" Arthur Huntingdon is foreshadowed by the warning of her aunt, based on her own marriage with Uncle Maxwell:

> "But I've heard uncle say he was a sad wild fellow himself, when he was young." She sternly shook her head.

[12] Inga-Stina Ekeblad, "The Tenant of Wildfell Hall and 'Women Beware Women,'" Notes and Queries, 10 (1963), 449.

> "He was jesting then, I suppose," said I, "and here he was speaking at random--at least, I cannot believe there is any harm in those laughing blue eyes."
> "False reasoning, Helen!" said she with a sigh. (p. 107)

The marriage of Millicent Hargrave to Hattersley of the Huntingdon circle is nearly a parallel to Helen's own marriage, but is different in that Millicent patiently and quietly endures her husband's abuse until he finally feels so guilty that he begins to treat her with more respect and consideration. Yet, ideal marriage in this novel must be more than that; it must be a mutual sharing of love and esteem with a spiritual element that is almost totally lacking in these three unions. Esther Hargrave, Millicent's younger sister, stubbornly refuses to follow her mother's commands that she marry some rich, but incompatible suitor. In spite of relentless persecution by her mother and brother, she holds out for someone whom she can love, and is finally rewarded when she meets a kindred spirit in Helen's brother, Frederic Lawrence.

But it is Helen herself who must find a spiritual dimension if she is to be happy in a second marriage. Although Gilbert Markham loves her, he must be tested by a long and possibly permanent separation with only the promise of heavenly bliss.

> "We shall meet in heaven. Let us think of that," said she in a tone of desperate calmness; but her eyes glittered wildly, and her face was deadly pale. . . ." But Gilbert, can you really derive no consolation from the thought that we may meet together where there is no more pain and sorrow, no more striving against sin, and struggling of the spirit against the flesh; where both will behold the same glorious truths, and drink exalted and supreme felicity from the same fountain of light and goodness--that Being whom both will worship with the same divine affection?" (pp. 323-24)

It is this very quality that has been missing in Helen's other suitors. Her early suitors made her angry by revealing her vanity. (p. 105) Huntingdon, whose love is always represented in the flesh, flatly refutes the idea of God: "What is God? I cannot see him, or hear him! God is only an idea!" (p. 357) Hargrave mocks God by exclaiming that Heaven is on his side as he tries to coerce Helen to live with him before her husband's death: ". . . you are flying in the face of Heaven's decrees. God has designed me to be your comfort and protector--I feel it--I know it as certainly as if a voice from heaven declared, 'Ye twain shall be one flesh.'" (p. 284) Gilbert Markham is the only lover who recognizes that a spiritual bond is essential. "May not kindred spirits meet, and mingle in communion, whatever be the fate and circumstances of their earthly tenements?. . . Never mind our kind friends. If they can part our bodies, it is enough; in God's name,

let them not sunder our souls!" (p. 321) He is rewarded with Helen's hand in marriage.

The light-hearted tone and language of the frame section are also in sharp contrast to the often bitter, sometimes tragically ironic, but always serious diary section. In true Brontë fashion, Anne never misses an opportunity to poke fun at the stuffy rector. "Mr. Millward was mighty in important dogmas and sententious jokes, pompous anecdotes, and oracular discourses, dealt out for the edification of the whole assembly in general. . . ." (p. 27) "I thought Mr. Millward never would cease telling us he was no tea drinker, and that it was highly injurious to keep loading the stomach with slops, to the exclusion of more wholesome sustenance, and so give himself time to finish his fourth cup." (p. 64) Fergus, Gilbert Markham's foppish younger brother, always speaks sarcastically but to the point about the trivialities of neighborhood gossip. He tells Gilbert on one occasion: "Go back to your fields and your cattle, you lubberly fellow; you're not fit to associate with ladies and gentlemen like us, that have nothing to do but to run snooking about to our neighbor's houses, peeping into their private corners, and scenting out their secrets, and picking holes in their coats, when we don't find them ready-made to our hands;

you don't understand such refined sources of enjoyment." (p. 45) Even in the early part of the diary section when Helen's hopes are still high, Anne Brontë has her call her tedious suitor Mr. Boarham, "Mr. Bore'em," and Huntingdon laughingly refers to the pious Mr. Leighton as "Mr. Blatant."

The analogy of nomenclature takes on a more tragic tone when we learn the names and circumstances surrounding some of Huntingdon's friends--the unfortunate Lord Lowborough has indeed been brought low by his misfortunes. Grimsby, though he doesn't realize it, is the unredeemable victim of his own vices; and Hargrave, though the most disciplined of the group, is a hard, cold, selfish man. Even Huntingdon's name reveals his absorption in physical pleasure and his never-ending, but fruitless search for happiness.

But Anne Brontë becomes more bitterly ironic as she illustrates the actions of these men. In one particularly pathetic scene, Grimsby is hopelessly drunk, but tries to convince Helen and Hargrave that he can hold his liquor:

> "You are pouring the cream into your saucer, Mr. Grimsby."
> ". . .But, as I was saying, Mrs. Huntingdon, they have no head at all; they can't take half a bottle without being affected some way; whereas I--well, I've taken three times as much as they have tonight, and you see I'm perfectly steady. Now, that may strike you as very singular, but I think I can explain it. You see *their* brains--I mention no names, but you'll

> understand to whom I allude--their brains are light to begin with, and the fumes of the fermented liquor render them lighter still, and produce in them an entire light-headedness, or giddiness, resulting in intoxication; whereas my brains, being composed of more solid materials, will absorb a considerable quantity of this alcoholic vapor without the production of any sensible result--"
>
> "I think you will find a sensible result produced on that tea," interrupted Mr. Hargrave, "by the quantity of sugar you have put into it. Instead of your usual complement of one lump, you have put in six."
>
> "Have I so? . . . Um! I perceive. . . . With your permission, I'll turn this into the slop basin."
>
> "That is the sugar-basin, Mr. Grimsby. Now that you have spoiled the sugar, too. . . ." (p. 219)

In addition to illustrating Anne Brontë's often bitterly ironic tone, this passage beautifully illustrates her skill in rendering the language of a debauched society. There is nothing stilted or timid about her realism here.

The language of innuendo used in the more sinister game of chess further illustrates her versatility and candor:

> "Now, Mrs. Huntingdon," said Hargrave, as he arranged the men on the board, speaking distinctly, and with a peculiar emphasis, as if he had a double meaning to all his words, "you are a good player, but I am better; we shall have a long game, and you will give me some trouble; but I can be as patient as you, and, in the end, I shall certainly win." He fixed his eyes upon me with a glance I did not like--keen, crafty, bold, and almost impudent; already half triumphant in his anticipated success. . . . "Check," cried he; I sought in agony some means of escape--

> "mate!" he added, quietly, but with evident delight. He had suspended the utterance of that last fatal syllable, the better to enjoy my dismay. (pp. 238-39)

Anne Brontë's use of contrasting tones and her superb skill and frankness in depicting the scenes and language of a dissipated society further deepen the moral thrust of her novel and support the view that May Sinclair took in _The Three Brontës_ (1914): "There was, in the smallest . . . of the Brontës, an immense, a terrifying audacity. Charlotte was bold, and Emily was bolder; but this audacity of Anne's was greater than Charlotte's boldness or than Emily's, because it was willed, it was deliberate, open-eyed. Anne took her courage in both her hands when she sat down to write _The Tenant of Wildfell Hall_."[13] Anne Brontë was certainly one of the first morally realistic female authors of the early nineteenth century in England.

In addition to structural and tonal contrasts, Anne Brontë skillfully employs imagery to empower her moral themes. Thus, the calm, ordered, nature-oriented world of the narrator is sharply contrasted to the unnatural, distorted world of the artificial Huntingdon circle. In Gilbert Markham's world, there is fertility and a close relationship between man and his environment. Gilbert's

[13]Quoted in Harrison and Stanford, p. 236.

work is outdoors, and he appreciates the beauties that surround him. He describes one mild, sunny morning thus: It was "rather soft underfoot; for the last fall of snow was only just wasted away, leaving yet a thin ridge, here and there, lingering on the fresh, green grass beneath the hedges; but beside them, already, the young primroses were peeping from among their moist, dark foliage and the lark above was singing of summer, and hope, and love, and every heavenly thing--I was out on the hillside, enjoying these delights, and looking after the well-being of my lambs and their mothers. . . ." (p. 44) Gilbert, too, is associated with a love for animals; his dog, Sancho, is his constant companion whether in rambles through the fields or before the fireplace at home. It is Sancho in fact who first awakens a spark of interest within little Arthur: "The child, though shy, was not sullen. In a minute he was kneeling on the carpet, with his arms round Sancho's neck, and in a minute or two more, the little fellow was seated on my knee, surveying with eager interest the various specimens of horses, cattle, pigs, and model farms portrayed in the volume before me." (p. 21) As in _Agnes Grey_ and other typical religious novels, notably _The Heir of Redclyffe_, sympathetic characters may be identified by

their kinship with nature. Thus, little Arthur is often associated with green grass and flowers, his mother is invigorated by her visit to the sea, and of Frederic Lawrence it is said that "his heart was like a sensitive plant, that opens for a moment in the sunshine, but curls up and shrinks into itself at the slightest touch of the finger, or the lightest breath of wind." (p. 29) And intimate scenes are set in beautiful gardens:

> And we sauntered through the garden and talked of the flowers, the trees, and the book--and then of other things. The evening was kind and genial, and so was my companion. By degrees, I waxed more warm and tender than, perhaps I had ever been before; but still, I said nothing tangible, and she attempted no repulse; until, in passing a moss-rose tree that I had brought her some weeks since, in my sister's name, she plucked a beautiful half-open bud, and bade me give it to Rose.
> "May I not keep it myself?" I asked.
> "No; but here is another for you." (p. 70)

But Anne Brontë's powerful boldness and driving moral purpose are delineated most clearly in the images that surround the unnatural world inhabited by the elder Arthur Huntingdon and his friends. When Helen becomes Huntingdon's wife, she discovers that he doesn't pay any attention to his farming; his world centers around himself and the artificial pleasures of his society. For Helen, the seasons of the natural year become perverted. Spring, which should bring hope for new life, brings only bleakness and despair, for that is when Arthur goes to London. "Spring is

approaching; and, I repeat, I dread the consequences of its arrival. That sweet season, I once so joyously welcomed as the time of hope and gladness, awakens now far other anticipations by its return." (pp. 210-11) Summer, in nature's cycle, a season of fruition and plenty, only brings Huntingdon back from his carousing, fatigued, impatient and irritable. "All the sweet summer is passing away without one breath of pleasure to me or benefit to him." (p. 176) And autumn, the time of harvest and fulfillment of cherished dreams and hopes, is only another opportunity for Arthur's friends to gather for drunken revelry and hunting.

Huntingdon's lack of consideration for his dogs and servants further illustrates that he is out of harmony with the natural order.

> But his favorite cocker, Dash, that had been lying at my feet, took the liberty of jumping upon him and beginning to lick his face. He struck it off with a smart blow; and the poor dog squeaked, and ran cowering back to me. When he woke up, about half an hour after, he called it to him again; but Dash only clung closer to me, and licked my hand, as if imploring protection. Enraged at this, his master snatched up a heavy book and hurled it at his head. The poor dog set up a piteous outcry, and ran to the door. (p. 167)

In another incident, Huntingdon is peevish with the servants, and when Benson accidentally drops a tray of crockery, he "turns furiously around at him, and swears

at him with savage coarseness. The poor man turned pale, and visibly trembled as he stooped to pick up the fragments." (p. 201) In fact, the only natural image that Anne Brontë chooses to use in connection with Huntingdon is fire, a destructive force. He complains: ". . . my head is split in two and all on fire with this consuming fever." (p. 202) And on his death-bed, he cries, "This cursed thirst is burning my heart to ashes!" (p. 342)

This contrasting nature imagery serves an important thematic function in showing Helen's total despair and submission to a sterile world. When she enters Gilbert Markham's world, the images that surround her contribute to the mystery and disharmony of her presence. First of all, she chooses to wear black to convince the neighborhood that she is in mourning for a dead husband. Then, Wildfell Hall is in a state of disrepair, bordering on ruin.

> Behind it lay a few desolate fields, and then the brown heath-clad summit of the hill; before it (inclosed by stone walls, and entered by an iron gate with large balls of gray granite, similar to those which decorated the roof and gables, surmounting the gate-posts), was a garden, once stocked with such hardy plants and flowers as could best brook the soil and climate. . . now having been left so many years, untilled and untrimmed, abandoned to the weeds and grass, to the frost, the rain and the drought, it presented a very singular appearance indeed. (pp. 15-16)

And the feelings of passion and indignation aroused within the normally placid Gilbert Markham are accompanied by the imagery of fire and blood. "Meantime, my brain was on fire with indignation, and my heart seemed ready to burst from its prison with conflicting passions." (p. 63) There is a blood-red harvest moon shining on Wildfell Hall (p. 79), and Markham chooses a dull, gray, drizzly day to physically assault his friend Lawrence who has been paying "improper" attention to Mrs. Graham. When Markham returns to the scene of his crime, all that is left to witness against him are two objects: ". . . in one place, the hat saturated with rain and coated with mud, indented and broken above the rim by that villainous whip-handle; in another the crimson handkerchief, soaking in a deeply tinctured pool of water. . . ." (pp. 93-94)

But there are signs that domestic and spiritual order will be restored to Helen. She begins to bring some signs of life back to Wildfell Hall with her merry child romping in the fields and her attempts to start a garden. "'You see I have effected some little improvement already,' continued she, turning to the window. 'There is a bed of young vegetables in that corner, and here are some snowdrops and primroses already in bloom; and there, too, is a yellow

crocus just opening in the sunshine.'" (p. 46) And when, at the end of the frame story, she agrees to marry Gilbert in August instead of December (the month of her marriage to Huntingdon), there is an assurance that the regular cycle of nature will be restored.

There is also some religious imagery which deepens the moral and spiritual thrust of the novel. Aunt Maxwell poses this question to Helen early in the diary section when they are discussing Helen's relationship with Huntingdon: "'What fellowship hath light with darkness; or he that believeth with an infidel?'" (p. 139) Helen is thus associated with light and the Huntingdon circle with darkness. Even Huntingdon, in comparing her with Lady Lowborough, can say: "She is a daughter of earth; you are an angel of heaven. . . ." (p. 187) Helen ironically believes that Huntingdon is also light. When he rescues her from the despicable Mr. Wilmot at a party, she comments: "It was like turning from some purgatorial fiend to an angel of light, come to announce that the season of torment was past." (p. 115) And later, "He knows that he is my sun; but when he chooses to withhold his light, he would have my sky to be all darkness. . . ." (p. 182) But Huntingdon's social world very soon turns into a world of darkness. The lucid, but half

crazed Lowborough interrupts a drinking bout with his morose observation: "Well! it puzzles me what you can find to be so merry about. What *you* see in life I don't know--*I* see only the blackness of darkness and a fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation." (p. 152) Even Huntingdon on his death bed can dwell only on "the shroud, the dark, lonely grave, and all the horrors of corruption." (p. 356) Helen has recognized the darkness of his life earlier and has been almost enveloped by it. She cries: "I will remember the counsel of the inspired writer to him, 'that feareth the Lord and obeyeth the voice of his servant, that *sitteth in darkness and hath no light*: let him trust in the name of the Lord, and stay upon his God!'" (p. 259)

Christmas, the most joyous of Christian holidays, has been for Helen a particular time of darkness. She remembers that she wedded Huntingdon at Christmas, and when her baby is born at Christmas, she wishes it would die so that it could be "transplanted to a fitter soil to ripen and blow beneath a brighter sun. . . ." (p. 189) Only after her husband's death when she is free to love Gilbert Markham is she able to pluck the Christmas rose and present it to him as an emblem of her heart: "This rose is not so fragrant as a summer flower, but it has stood through hardships none of *them* could bear: the cold rain of winter has

sufficed to nourish it, and its faint sun to warm it; the bleak winds have not blanched it, or broken its stem, and the keen frost has not blighted it." (p. 387)

The darkness and bleakness of the autumn evening when Helen discovers Huntingdon with Lady Lowborough is relieved by the moon and stars, representing God's presence: "I saw distinctly the pure moon shining on, and the light clouds skimming the clear, dark sky; and then I saw the eternal stars twinkling down upon me; I knew their God was mine, and he was strong to save and swift to hear. 'I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee,' seemed whispered from their myriad orbs." (p. 242)

Nature is thus seen to be not only a backdrop for the action of the novel, but in the delicate interplay of action and image, it becomes an integral part of the thematic structure of the novel.

In _The Tenant of Wildfell Hall_, Anne Brontë admirably succeeds in accomplishing her purpose--that of telling the truth as she sees it. In doing so, she harnesses all of her artistic resources, integrating them and subordinating them to her central design. As a novel with a purpose, _The Tenant of Wildfell Hall_ is powerful; as an excellent example of mid-nineteenth century religious fiction, it is outstanding--in conception, in design, and in execution.

CONCLUSION:

The Novels of Anne Brontë Are in the Mainstream of the Early Nineteenth-Century Religious Novel

The first half of the nineteenth century in England was a period of religious confusion and controversy. The Church of England itself was split into three separate parties, and countless groups outside of the Church were challenging traditional beliefs. It was a time when religious doubts and questions assailed both the sensitive, reflective thinker and the common man. Consequently, in the early nineteenth century, religious literature began to permeate every segment of the society, ranging all the way from the simple moral tracts which literally blanketed the countryside to the very sophisticated treatises and apologies of such men as Thomas Carlyle and John Henry Newman. In response to the need and demand for a type of religious writing that could appeal to the middle-class reader, religious fiction, particularly in the form of the religious novel, became very popular.

The genre which we know as the religious novel, having arisen out of the spiritual uncertainties and struggles of a society and of individuals within it, was at once personal and universal; that is, although many of the tales

recounted spiritual problems and solutions experienced by an individual writer, a pattern emerged which indicated that many people were having similar experiences. The pattern is most clearly identified by Carlyle who has his autobiographical hero, Teufelsdröckh, undergo three stages in his spiritual development: The Everlasting No, The Centre of Indifference, and The Everlasting Yea. A similar pattern appears in many religious novels of the period, including the two typical novels examined in Chapter One and in the two novels of Anne Brontë.

Other major identifying characteristics of the religious novel as a genre are: (1) the presence of an obvious contrast between the sacred and the profane in which the hero's good qualities usually prevail by the Grace of God, and the villainous characters are irreverent and unyielding to the will of God; (2) the view of life which stresses that earthly suffering and restraint are part of the preparation for eternal life coupled with an emphasis on death-bed scenes which vividly illustrate the results of heaven-bound and hell-bound temporal lifetimes; (3) the belief that man is master of his own destiny and has only to follow his innate moral sense in order to know and do his duty; (4) the authors' insistence that their motivation for writing is always to elevate or reform the reader.

The two typical early nineteenth-century religious novels chosen for comparison with the novels of Anne Brontë are similar in theme and pattern to her novels. _The Experience of Life_, like _Agnes Grey_, is a thinly-veiled spiritual autobiography. _The Heir of Redclyffe_, like _The Tenant of Wildfell Hall_, is more sensational and focuses on the problems of restraint of the natural appetites and the accompanying spiritual struggles. Each of the four novels clearly illustrates all of the previously-mentioned characteristics of the religious novel.

But Anne Brontë lived in a very different world from that of Elizabeth Missing Sewell or Charlotte Yonge or most of the other religious novelists of her time. Anne was surrounded by a community tradition and a family that exposed her directly to many of the conflicting religious and social currents of the early nineteenth century; moreover, she was in daily contact with two of the greatest literary minds of the century in the persons of her sisters, Charlotte and Emily. Anne's private world reflected many of the forces that worked upon her: the stern and cold evangelicalism of Patrick Brontë and Aunt Branwell, the natural romanticism of her beloved Emily, the practical humanitarianism of the business-like Charlotte, and the hopeless dissipation of the talented but frustrated Branwell.

Anne's novels, though they are certainly within the genre of the religious novel, definitely surpass many others of their kind. The differences lie mainly in the manner in which the artist presents her material. Anne Brontë, as a result of her own very severe moral and spiritual suffering, had attained a personal vision of God's love and benevolence that pervaded and formed her work from within. Thus, the structure of each of her novels is precise and simple, straightforward and clearly dominated by her moral/spiritual purpose. Yet, her work is not blind propaganda; she is painfully aware of the alternative to a life devoted to God. The brutal, unspiritual qualities of her ungodly characters are realistically and lucidly portrayed. The superior skill which she displays in utilizing language, tone, irony, humor, and imagery to complement and enhance her thematic design is evidence of her total command of both the style and the substance of her novels.

The novels of Anne Brontë deserve more attention than they have been given. Her craftsmanship is excellent, and her design is complete. Critics who would tend to slight her work because of its obvious moral purpose fail to recognize that she is writing within the genre of the religious

novel with its inherent limitations; yet, her novels are not only among the first of their kind, but also among the best of the early nineteenth-century religious novels. She is both innovative and masterful--a credit to her talented family and an influential force in the development of the religious novel.

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