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Agnes Grey

Anne Brontë · *1847 · original English text*

A clergyman's daughter, needing to help her family, goes out as a governess and finds that teaching other people's children can be a moral trial as well as a living. Anne Brontë's first novel is quieter than her sisters' and unsparing about spoiled pupils, careless parents, and the small dignities of a young woman who will not become hard.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What instruction is there in a true history of governessing, and how does Agnes keep a Christian patience without pretending that cruelty in a drawing-room is a small thing?

"All true histories contain instruction; though, in some, the treasure may be hard to find"

The opening sentence of Chapter I

Agnes goes first to the Bloomfields, where the children are encouraged in their worst habits, and then to the Murrays, where elegance hides a cold worldliness. She is not a saint by temperament; she is a young woman who prays, works, and refuses to flatter. Mr. Weston, the curate, shares her sense of the poor and of truth. The book's reward is modest and earned: a parish, a marriage, a mother brought home. The instruction of this 'true history' is that the hidden life of a governess is a test of character the fashionable house would rather not see.

KEY CHARACTERS

Agnes Grey
The narrator, a young governess of conscience, pride, and a wish to be useful.

Mr. Weston
A curate whose religion is pastoral care, not display, and Agnes's true counterpart.

Rosalie Murray
A beautiful pupil trained for conquest, whose marriage is a lesson in vanity.

the Bloomfields
The first employers, whose children are indulged into cruelty.

Mrs. Grey
Agnes's mother, a gentlewoman who can work when she must and who shares the last home.

A TRUE HISTORY

> *"All true histories contain instruction; though, in some, the treasure may be hard to find"*
>
> Chapter I

Grades 8–12

Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01

A Clergyman's House

CHAPTERS I–III

Mr. Grey's loss of money sends Agnes, against some tenderness at home, out to earn her bread. She is young and sure she can do good.

- The opening names the book as a history with instruction in it.
- Her mother's gentility and her father's decline set the stakes.
- The first leaving is hopeful, and already a little proud.

> *"All true histories contain instruction; though, in some, the treasure may be hard to find"*
>
> Chapter I, the first sentence

02

Wellwood: the Bloomfields

CHAPTERS IV–VI

At her first situation the children are unruly and the parents support them against the governess. Agnes's conscientious methods cannot survive a house that will not have discipline.

- Tom's cruelty to animals is a moral fact, not a childish joke.
- Mrs. Bloomfield's talk of 'firmness' is not the same as backing the teacher.
- Agnes is dismissed, and the failure is the family's more than hers.

03

Horton Lodge: the Murrays

CHAPTERS VII–XIII

A second place brings older pupils: Rosalie, handsome and vain, and Matilda, loud and horse-mad. Agnes is needed and not respected. She meets Mr. Weston among the poor.

- Rosalie's education is toward a good match, not toward goodness.
- Agnes's visits to the cottages show what she thinks religion is for.
- Mr. Hatfield, the rector, is a foil to Weston's plain care.

04

Rosalie's Marriage, and a Silence

CHAPTERS XIV–XX

Rosalie marries Sir Thomas and tastes the emptiness of a triumph. Agnes, mourning her father, must also watch the curate seem to slip out of reach. She goes home.

- The fashionable marriage is the book's warning, not its prize.
- Agnes will not scheme; her reserve costs her visible chances.
- Work and grief are borne without a speech to the drawing-room.

05

A Parish and a Home

CHAPTERS XXI–XXV

Agnes and her mother keep a small school by the sea. Mr. Weston finds them. The ending is a quiet competence—duty, affection, and a household made at last.

- The reward is fitted to the virtue the book has been teaching.
- Anne Brontë will not inflate the last chapters into opera.
- The instruction promised at the start is in patience, truth, and a just tenderness.

Instruction | Patience | A Governess's Dignity | True Religion | Vanity

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 8–12

1. The hosted text is the original English of Project Gutenberg #767, Anne Brontë's first novel, in twenty-five chapters.
2. The opening is exact so far as it runs here: "All true histories contain instruction; though, in some, the treasure may be hard to find." Do not add a tidy ending to the sentence unless you have checked the next clause on the page.
3. This is the most plainly moral of the Brontë first novels, and the most exact about paid work in another person's house. Its small scale is not slightness.
4. Cruelty to animals at Wellwood is written to be judged. Do not skip it as comic local color.

Quotations are verbatim from the original English text, Project Gutenberg #767, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/agnes-grey/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.