“Those are the Real Gifts”

Fictional Representation of Philanthropy in Anne Brontë’s *Agnes Grey* and Mary Cholmondeley’s *Red Pottage*

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Samandrag på norsk

Denne oppgåva tek sikte på å greie ut om skildringa av filantropi i to viktorianske romanar av to kvinnelege forfattarar. Dette aspektet ved romanane er sett i lys av ein figurskikkelse kalla "Lady Bountiful," som oversatt vil lyde noko liknande "Fru Velgjerer."

Anne Brontë sin roman, *Agnes Grey*, og Mary Cholmondeley sin roman *Red Pottage* tek begge opp temaet velgjerdshjelp og motsetnaden mellom usjølviske og sjølviske ytingar. Romanane skildrar også motsetnaden mellom ekte og falsk gjennom sine skildringar av det øvre samfunnslaget. Romanane tilhøyrer begge den viktorianske epoken, og trass i at dei vart skrivne med 50 års mellomrom tek dei føre seg nokre av dei same tema.

Velgjerdshjelp vert sett i lys av tanken om "gåva," og oppgåva tek utgangspunkt i Jean Starobinski sine tankar rundt emnet. Velgjerdsarbeid vart sett på som eit anstendig virke for kvinner i viktoriansk tid, og denne aktiviteten gav meir fridom for kvinner si rørsle i samfunnet. Det vert i tillegg teke omsyn til litteraturen sin funksjon på attenhundretalet, då romanen både skulle underhalde og opplyse.

CONTENTS

Introduction

The inspiration for this thesis was the figure of the Lady Bountiful in Victorian literature. I was amazed by how a middle or upper-class woman could in a sense roam the streets alone in the nineteenth century when there were so many restrictions on a woman's movement. The reason for this freedom, or her alibi, was the basket in her hand. In addition to reports and newspaper coverage, the industrial novel made people aware of the conditions of the poor in England. Lady Bountiful appears in novels both by male and female writers, and she may be given a minor or a major role. The two novels which I am looking at are both written by women and portray female protagonists; *Agnes Grey* (1847) by Anne Brontë and *Red Pottage* (1899) by Mary Cholmondeley. Lady Bountiful figures in these two novels albeit in different forms. In *Agnes Grey* we find her in the shape of the protagonist, but the more satirized version of the charitable lady is found in the characterisation of the misses Murray. The novel thus sheds light on the ambiguity of the philanthropic cause, since it also portrays examples of patronising philanthropy. *Agnes Grey* is set in the countryside, and deals with local cottage visiting, whereas *Red Pottage* alludes to the philanthropic work in East London. The figure of Lady Bountiful in *Red Pottage* is perhaps less prominent than in *Agnes Grey*, but the gift is still an important theme. In this novel too, the superintending charitable lady is found in a ridiculed minor character. *Red Pottage* is also considered to be "New Woman" fiction. The New Woman was promoted by the progressive few, and due to its break with general norms it was not a generally accepted ideal.

There has been, and there continues to be, a revival in the field of under-read Victorian literature by women. The writings of women in the Victorian period were anew given attention in the 1970s and 80s by feminist critics such as Elaine Showalter and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, and the initiative made scholars investigate the field of female authors.

Their aim was to shed light on forgotten or slighted novels written by women from the period and to establish a female tradition of women's writing. To this day there is still an interest in the field of women writers from the Victorian period. Nonetheless, the two novels examined in this thesis are still under-read and have thus suffered from a lack of attention from scholars.

Red Pottage was a great success when published. According to Linda Peterson it sold 8,000 copies of the first edition and 10,000 of the second edition in Britain. The novel sold impressively 1,500 copies a day when it reached the United States (174-75). The same success cannot be claimed for *Agnes Grey*, but this was due to several circumstances. For instance, the publisher was slow to publish it, and even though it was written prior to *Jane Eyre* it seemed a bleak resemblance of it. *Agnes Grey* was published in the same set as *Wuthering Heights*, a novel which attracted much attention, and in effect, it seems as if Anne Brontë's novel "drowned" in comparison (Goreau, Introduction 10). But Anne Brontë's second novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, was such a success that a second edition was brought out after a month (12). Surprisingly, more recently these novelists have not received very much attention, and *Red Pottage* has at times been out of print. I do not intend to take on a project of reassessing these novels as forgotten masterpieces, but it is interesting to look beyond the established canon when investigating Victorian literature.

Philanthropy is a subject which is of a special concern in this thesis along with the notion of the gift. Philanthropy and the gift are brought together with gender in the figure of the Lady Bountiful. The term Lady Bountiful was first used in the eighteenth century. According to the OED this figure was first deployed as a character in literature in George Farquhar's comedy *Beaux' Stratagem* (1707), and it has since been "used for the great (or beneficent) lady in a neighbourhood" ("Lady Bountiful"). The figure goes by several names, such as female visitor, lady visitor and Lady Bountiful. I have not differentiated between these and may use terms interchangeably. Fiction from the nineteenth century deployed this

figure, and perhaps the most famous Lady Bountiful in fiction is Margaret Hale in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1855). The figure of the female visitor in fiction may have become more prominent in the Victorian age due to literary interest in the social concerns of the time. This was the era that produced the Condition of England novel or the industrial novel, and at the same time upper- and middle-class women were gradually becoming more involved in charitable work. It must be understood that it was women of the upper and middle class who took on the role of the Lady Bountiful. The two novels by Anne Brontë and Mary Cholmondeley portray philanthropy and engage in the contemporary social debate. Their social critique is related to the theme of philanthropy and is above all directed at the established church, the clergy, and institutions and individuals involved in charity work, and thus to a large degree represented a critique against certain social layers of the Victorian society.

The story about the governess Agnes Grey may at first sight seem an innocent piece of literature, but at closer inspection it reveals surprising social critique. *Red Pottage*, too, shares a critical view on Victorian bourgeois society. The Victorian age can be said to present a double standard, as women's virtue was at the height of importance, while at the same time prostitution thrived. What these novels acknowledge is that there is not only a double standard in sexual matters, but also within the society itself, which involve matters such as religion and charity. Both novels criticise the established church and its rigid view on Christianity. The novels also criticise patriarchy and women's limited access to the social and public realm, and their critique goes a long way in pointing to the lack of proper education for women as a problem.

Given the concern for women's education, the novels can also be regarded as trying to educate the reader. Anne Brontë wrote in her preface to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, which appeared a year after *Agnes Grey*, that her purpose for writing the novel was "not simply to

amuse the Reader" but to "tell the truth, for truth always conveys its own moral to those who are able to conceive it" (Brontë, "Preface" 3). She nonetheless writes that she does not see herself as "competent to reform the errors and abuses of society," but that she wishes to contribute in her own modest manner to "gain the public ear." And if by so doing she would rather "whisper a few wholesome truths therein than much soft nonsense" (3). It is evident from Brontë's preface that she was concerned about truth, and she writes about *Agnes Grey* that it was accused of "extravagant over-colouring in those very parts that were carefully copied from life" (3). Contending that it is more agreeable for a writer to present "bad things in its least offensive light" she asks whether it is "better to reveal the snares and pitfalls of life to the young and thoughtless traveller, or to cover them with branches and flowers" (4). Anne Brontë is very much aware of her position as a writer with the power to influence the young mind. The novel in the nineteenth century was viewed upon as an alternative to social education (Flint 81). Accordingly, the inspirational and educational value of the novels is important.

Lady Bountiful portrayed in Victorian literature was the inspiration for this thesis, and she also represents the connection between these two novels. However, these novels take on many topics relevant for the discussion of the portrayal of the middle-class woman in nineteenth-century fiction. *Agnes Grey* should not merely be regarded as only a governess story, and *Red Pottage* should not just be labelled as New Woman fiction. There are many layers in these novels which I will try to unveil. In my first chapter entitled "An Introduction to Philanthropy and Charity," I look at the historical significance of charity and how it was considered a natural element of women's domestic routine. The chapter is also a starting point for the discussion of women's literature. In chapter two entitled "The Philanthropic Work of a Governess," I look at how philanthropy is presented in *Agnes Grey* as a means to promote healthy ideals, and how the novel also sheds light on the importance of education and true

Christian values. In chapter three on *Red Pottage*, "The Woman Writer and the Gift," which focuses on the figure of the New Woman, I examine how true values are contrasted with pretence, and how the novel promotes the same ideals of true values as *Agnes Grey*.

Chapter One: An Introduction to the Traditions of Charity

When writing about two novels dealing with philanthropic activities during the nineteenth century it is important to look at the historical setting and consider what charity meant to the Victorians. In the nineteenth century women joined, and sometimes also developed, philanthropic work, and the history of the female philanthropist is of special interest in relation to the novels examined in this thesis. The two novels are written by women, and hence the role of the woman writer in the nineteenth century is also worth discussing. Women's reading was a matter of discussion since it was believed that women were easily influenced by what they read. In that connection, the effect of literature and its implication as social education will also be examined.

The Gift and the Traditions of Charity

In Jean Starobinski's *Largesse* the author investigates the concept of the gift, using an exhibition at the Louvre as his point of departure. Starobinski also comments on works of fiction in his reflections on the gift. The concepts of the gift and of charity seem irrevocably connected to religion, and Starobinski, who is predominantly looking at Western art and culture, is more or less exclusively commenting on the Christian tradition.

In his investigation of the concept of largesse, Starobinski found that the tradition of giving or throwing gifts to the public was common during festivities such as weddings and baptisms (10). The throwing of gifts is compared to the concept of fertilizing rain, and Starobinski writes: "There is magic in this gesture. In making it, its agents take on the role of sovereign dispensation" (11). By dispensing gifts in such a manner, those who were wealthy enough to display this abundance showed the common people that they were in charge. Among the nobility and high clergy in Catholic Europe and the Byzantine East, the giving of

gifts to the people was an element of the royal ceremony (19). However, such a public display of the giving of goods could take on a chaotic form. At Louis XVI's coronation, French guards fought with the public for the largesse distributed (30). The fighting over largesse in this case was accidental and not foreseen, but there was also a tradition of distributing gifts in an unevenly manner so as to create chaos. According to Starobinski, Emperor Augustus enjoyed that sort of scene: "Organized plunder (*direptio* in Latin) was a pure spectacle for him." But this was not singular to Rome: "The same practice was retained throughout the Middle Ages on carnival days and during other fetes, in the form of *cocagnes*, treasure hunts, and so on" (40). Starobinski renders an episode from the ninth reverie in Rousseau's *Rêveries d'un promeneur solitaire* [Reveries of a solitary walker] where Rousseau and his friends throw cakes to the poor in order to see them fight for the crumbs. Rousseau is not comfortable with the spectacle and leaves his friends, but the story continues and he notices a girl selling apples. He buys the apples from the girl and distributes them to the hungry children standing around her. He turns his participation in the chaos of the cakes around and creates a positive story, but we are made aware of a different outcome of largesse than power display, namely the return gift. Rousseau explains:

> I then was witness to one of the sweetest spectacles that can flatter a man's heart, that of seeing joy and the innocence of youth spreading around me. For when the spectators saw it, they too shared it, and I, who shared that joy at so little expense, had the additional joy of feeling it was my doing. (qtd. in Starobinski 8)

In the instance above, Rousseau is rewarded by his own feelings, the children's joy and the spectators' gaze, when in fact his contribution was small.

We learn two important things from these traditions. Firstly, the ability to give and to show largesse put the distributor in a position of power. Only the nobility and high clergy had

the means to display such wealth, and by so doing, were most likely offered gratitude in return. The people would praise an emperor who showed them largesse, but the same emperor would steal from the people through taxes in order to be able to give gifts: "True largesse is tax relief. Making gifts to people who are being crushed by fees is clothing them with one hand and ripping off their skin with the other" (Jaucourt qtd. in Starobinski 36). Secondly, we learn that even from ancient Rome and up until now, charity, largesse, or the act of giving has been fraught with ambivalence. And it seems clear that one has to question the giver's motivation; for instance, was the chaos intended for entertainment? Perhaps it is this ambivalence that leads Starobinski to consider the word *gift* from a semantic perspective. *Gift* both means gift and poison in the Germanic languages (62). The largesse given to the public can in this view be seen as a poison. Receiving the gift is in an abstract sense taking the poison which pacifies you into not seeing the abuse behind the gifts. The upheaval which is created due to the display of largesse can destroy the gift especially if it consists of food: "the effect of the gift is disastrous and may even be attributed to a perverse intention" (124). Any gift, whether it be food or the gift of charity, would be distorted when it is laden with the wrong intentions. When we consider the traditions of charity in connection to the role of philanthropy in the Victorian age we find similarities; for instance, there is ambivalence connected to charity and a questioning of the motivation of the distributer. And in a class-based society such as England one must not forget the fact that by being able to give one displays power.

Philanthropy in the Victorian Age

What we consider as philanthropic work today would have been too marginal for the Victorians. Philanthropy was not only donating money to a good cause, but was also about reform movements, home visiting and political groups. In other words, charity demanded time

and effort, and perhaps for that reason philanthropy attracted the involvement of women of the upper and middle classes, as they had the most leisure time on their hands.

Brian Harrison examines the topic of philanthropy and what kind of relationship the Victorians had to this concept, and he notes: "For the Victorians, the philanthropic societies were subjects for national pride" (357). To help the poor involved some sense of self-worth also in the nineteenth century. In general giving was not entirely unconditional; one expected something in return, in this instance a sense of self-righteousness. Harrison comments on the fact that some charitable organizations were trying to point out the sins of the poor, and that by so doing raised themselves above the poor. According to Harrison, Tocqueville commented on the difference between France and England regarding the poor: "the Frenchman constantly raises his eyes above him with anxiety. The Englishman lowers his beneath him with satisfaction" (qtd. in Harrison 357). To know that someone was below them on the social ladder seems to have been satisfying to the Englishman. The rise of the middle class and the involvement of the middle-class women in philanthropic causes imply that the middle class signalled their capability of taking care of a lower class, hence that there was someone below them.

The working class had reasons to be suspicious of charity. Not only were nineteenth-century charities subject to charity frauds, but the motives of the contributors were questioned (Harrison 364). It was evident that they benefitted from participating in charity due to the social prestige it gave them. Harrison writes: "through the subscription list one could display one's wealth to public view, co-operate openly with the aristocracy, and thus buy a place in public life and even a seat in Parliament" (364). We understand from this that philanthropy was not just about supporting a good cause or doing one's Christian duty, but had the implications of power and prestige. As Harrison points out, philanthropic work both reflected and consolidated social class structures: "Philanthropy helped to validate existing social

institutions by highlighting the generosity of the rich and the inadequacies of the poor" (368). In the Victorian age, then, charity held massive social implications both for the benefactors and the benefitted. Social prestige was awarded the givers while the receivers were held under a scrutinizing eye as to whether they were worthy of the gift or not. But one must not forget the philanthropy from the poor to the poor. In fact, Harrison urges historians not to ignore "the widespread generosity of the poor to their relatives and neighbours" (368). However, the focus in this thesis is on the middle or upper-class women, since they are portrayed in the two novels.

The Female Philanthropist

Upper and middle-class women living in the Victorian era were subjected to strict norms; for instance, they could not walk alone in the city streets without damaging their own reputation. The public realm was considered to be a sexualized zone, and for a woman to venture on her own outside of the house was thought of as a promiscuous act (Harman 358). But there was an option for women to keep their integrity while appearing alone in the public sphere, and this was achieved by being engaged in philanthropic work. According to Deborah Nord women had to justify their public work by presenting it as "an extension of their domestic duties, a fulfilment of private responsibilities in the public realm" (209). In this respect female philanthropic work would fit perfectly, as it was their role as manager of the home that allowed them to manage other people's homes. The female visitor stepped out of her own domestic sphere in order to help with (or intrude upon) someone else's domestic sphere.

Harrison proposes some reasons why women, whom he terms as "respectable housewives and spinsters," would spend so much time on philanthropy:

> Deprived of alternative outlets for their literary and organising talents, and possibly also for their emotions, Victorian women could derive from philanthropy all the excitements and

> dangers of penetrating or observing the unknown while at the same time securing that change of scene and activity which is the essence of recreation. (360)

In a general perspective it may be assumed that some Victorian women turned to philanthropy for excitement, and saw "slumming," going into the poor quarters of the cities, as exciting. However, this statement from Harrison seems to underestimate the great work and devotion some women poured into their philanthropic work. Harrison seems to dismiss the female philanthropists as simply women with time on their hands only wanting something to do. He writes: "Indeed, reclaiming the intemperate was probably as effective a remedy for boredom and invalidism as alcohol itself" (360). Later critics have given the subject of female philanthropist more attention, and F. K. Prochaska concentrates on the female contribution to charity in *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century England*.

Prochaska contends that the tradition of visiting the poor was not something that was invented in the nineteenth century, but that it had been an old tradition in England (97). The organising of the visitors, however, was gradually built from the late eighteenth century, but it was not until the early nineteenth century that women participated as visitors and started their own female visiting societies (100-01). According to Prochaska religious charitable organisations flourished, and there was even a competition for the poor (106). But even so, the charitable organisations had to distinguish between deserving and undeserving poor as funds were not unlimited and impostors were working the streets (117). The female visitors contributed extensively to society, and Prochaska writes about the poor that, "it must be appreciated that if they were not attended to by charity, many of them would not have been attended to at all" (115). However, the upper- and middle-class women's motivation for charity differed. According to Prochaska some did it for salvation, motivated by the idea that by saving other souls they saved their own (119), and some did it for their own pleasure, or they wanted "to be useful, to be recognized" (125). Prochaska contends that visiting "was

becoming increasingly sophisticated as the nineteenth century progressed and that women played an important role in this process" (132). This kind of organising was predominantly done in the cities, but there were also smaller parish societies where the vicar's wife might take part in addition to rich ladies (107).

Rank or class is central to philanthropy since the existence of a dependent class seems to be a cornerstone in the performance of philanthropic work. There were even differences in the execution of the philanthropic work done by the upper and the middle classes. With the rise of the middle class the philanthropic work may have changed somewhat in character and evolved into a more organised performance. By the 1880s, doing charitable work in the slums of the East End in London was seen as an acceptable avocation among the middle class (Nord 189).

Jessica Gerard focuses on the rural gentry's philanthropic work. Arguing against Lawrence Stone, and other scholars, who dismissed the idea that philanthropy took up much time and money, Gerard finds that women's activities have been left out of the argument (183). Her study, then, concentrates on the philanthropic work carried out by women of the landed upper classes. Gerard comments on the upper-class women's "unavoidable public duty" in relation to philanthropic local work (184), and states that, "They knew the poor better and often developed a warmer relationship with them than did middle-class lady visitors in the slums" (184-85). As we will see, this statement is not wholeheartedly supported by the two novels examined in this thesis. Gerard writes:

> The aristocracy and gentry ruled, their power, privileges, and wealth legitimated by centuries of unquestioned acceptance of the principle of inherited authority. The whole system required permanent inequality; the landowner's wealth and power rested on the agricultural laborer's poverty and powerlessness. To prevent discontent and preserve stability such inequality needed its victim's support. (185)

Such a support was gained through the active work of philanthropy and the gift of charity. The landed gentry gave charity and expected obedience in return (185). The distributors of this charity were the women of the gentry, as they were the ones with most leisure time. But this was not new for the nineteenth century. According to Gerard it had been the duty of the lady of the manor's house personally to take care of the poor and the sick all the way back to the Middle Ages (186).

Philanthropy: "the special duty of the female sex"

It seems clear that philanthropy even among the gentry must be considered work. While Gerard remarks that "charity was seen as the special duty of the female sex" (189), the amount of time and effort that it took seems to qualify as a part time job according to today's standards. Gerard uses the example of the Christmas dole in order to exemplify how time-consuming philanthropy could be (196), and she adds: "These activities were indeed real work, demanding a sacrifice of time, considerable effort, and a whole range of skills" (206).

Elizabeth Langland views philanthropic work in connection to domestic ideology and argues that it contributed to class management. Running the household demanded a lot from the middle-class wife, and though this task may have been secluded from "economical and political storms" it was, according to Langland, an "exercise in class management" ("Nobody's Angels" 291). Upper- and middle-class women, she writes, played a vital role when it came to class power and were given the responsibility of bridging the gap between the classes (296). One possibility was to conduct this task in the home by gathering everyone (including servants) to family prayer. Another possibility was to get engaged in philanthropy, which implied an extension of the woman's role as the angel in the house to work outside of her home (296). This inclusion of the lower classes either in the home or outside of the home was not considered a selfless act of humanity but an important and extended part of the

middle-class woman's role as manager of the home and as manager of class control.

To be compassionate and helpful was considered part of a woman's "work," and not necessarily a (natural) consequence of her gender. Sharon Bolton regards this work as "emotion work" and wants us to see it as "labour power" and not unimportant or "natural" to the feminine subject (75). By viewing emotional work as labour power she seems to suggest a new model for the definition of work:

> [W]e are still embedded in a masculine model of what is work, what is skilled work, what is productive work and I think this is what we need to move away from if emotion work is to be recognised as *work*, not merely as social interaction, caring, embodied and/or women's work. (76)

Using the examples of a school teacher and a care worker, Bolton claims that they have a similar goal in their work: to change people's lives. Their labour is not "unproductive" even though a great part of their work is emotional, and not something easily transformed into a product, but Bolton wants to establish emotional labour as "productive" (77). By dealing with difficult patients or clients, for instance, the worker has to be conscious of his or her own emotions and at all times work on them (77-78).

This valuation of emotional labour is relevant to the two novels discussed in this thesis because the female protagonists are performing emotional labour. Even though the work is done voluntarily we know that the work strain could be hard. Prochaska writes that there were also male "missionaries," but in contrast to the women they were paid workers. And in parenthesis he writes: "If regular male visitors were required it was probably necessary to pay them" (109). We can deduce from this that being a visitor was no walk in the park, but still women were more willing to work for charities than men (110), and in contrast to men they did it as voluntary work, not paid work. In other words, even though the philanthropic labour

of women was seen as an extension of the woman's role there is no doubt that it could qualify for paid work. As we will see, in Brontë's novel the protagonist Agnes Grey visits the poor voluntarily, but to a certain degree she is performing some of the same tasks as the local clergy. Interestingly, the work that Agnes performs as a Lady Bountiful is institutionalised in the later part of the century when middle-class women worked in the slums of London, and some were paid workers. The character of Miss Barker in *Red Pottage* belongs to this set of organised women.

Charity and the Church

Charity as we understand it today need not be a result of any religious work or conviction, but in the Victorian Age many of the charitable organizations were linked to religious organizations. This was not unproblematic in an age so devoted to morals, and where charity, in some instances, was only given to the "good" or worthy poor. Starobinski writes:

> Alms are a gift of compassion (éléèmosynè). They assign a particularly important role to the poor. Since salvation is to be awarded to the compassionate, it must be attained through the object of compassion: the humble, the sick and the poor, in whom God is present. The gift that heaven will repay a hundredfold must be conveyed through the poor and humble. (79)

Starobinski posits that, "Jewish law and Christian theological discourse in some sense *invented* 'the poor man'" (79). To be able to be awarded with the heavenly favour of taking care of the poor, the Christian man needed someone to bestow his charity upon. But the concept of being rewarded through giving alms, or performing charity, was not exclusive to Christian thought. As already mentioned, there was also a tradition in the Western culture where princes and wealthy people found enjoyment in seeing the chaos that their gifts

produced among the poorer people. It seems, in those cases, as if the heavenly favour was displaced by power and entertainment as return gifts.

Harrison also points to the role which religion played in relation to charity and says: "indeed religious evangelism and social amelioration were seen as cause and effect at a time when poverty was supposed to result largely from moral failure" (356). And he continues with commenting on what had the most influence on early Victorian charity, namely: "The thirst for souls" (359). Religious changes also have a lot to do with the growth of social awareness and charity, and Harrison points to Evangelicalism as a considerable factor in changing attitudes (359). Gerard also comments on the effects of politics and religion in relation to philanthropy: "The Evangelical revival both supported and encouraged paternalism. Evangelicals accepted inequalities of wealth and power, but philanthropy was important to their faith: good works were the only sure sign of conversion" (188). Visiting the poor, then, was not only a fulfilment of a lady's duties, but also "a means of saving souls" (194). The visits could be just as much about helping the poor read the Bible as it was about distributing material support. Harrison contends that, towards the late Victorian period religion was no longer the greatest influence on philanthropy, and the focus is rather on social reformation (359). The shift from religious to social reasons for philanthropy finds expression in the two novels. Agnes Grey shows a religious concern for those she visits, whereas Rachel West has the funds to give material support to the poor. The figure of Miss Barker in *Red Pottage* takes part in organised women philanthropy, and her work seems to be more political than religious.

Women's Writing and Women's Reading

Gilbert and Gubar call the nineteenth century "a kind of golden age of women's literature" (300). But female participation in the genre of novel writing started with writers such as

Aphra Behn in the Restoration period (Carter and McRae 267). Though perhaps looked upon as a feminine genre, at least considering its audience, the novel was also seen as a man's genre after such writers as Sir Walter Scott gained popularity (267). Though women wrote novels, some still chose to take on a male pseudonym, like the Brontë sisters and George Eliot. Though admirable writers their choice to take a pseudonym reflects the fact that women writers did not have the best reputation. Even George Eliot condemned them in her essay "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists." She satirizes the romantic and sensational novels and their authors, and complains about the message they send that women devote their time to silly subjects: "And the most mischievous form of feminine silliness is the literary form, because it tends to confirm the popular prejudice against the more solid education of women" (Eliot 1465). The fact that women's education could come by reading is no understatement. The Victorian age was a time which produced a variety of conduct books and manuals. They were popular guides to society, and educated young women in the proper conduct. But the idea that novels too could serve as formative reading, is evident in subgenres such as the industrial novel and the Condition of England novel which emerged in the nineteenth century. Kate Flint examines the woman reader and writes that "two types of fiction were notable for causing concern: the 'sensation novels' of the 1860s, [...] and the so-called 'New Woman' fiction of the 1890s" (15). Even though these two types of fiction varied, they had something in common as they, "share a tendency to acknowledge, even flatter, the literary and social alertness of their readers" (15). *Red Pottage* thus serves as an interesting example since it belongs to New Woman fiction but borrows elements from the sensational novel. According to Flint the popular belief among the commentators of fiction in the nineteenth century was that reading could play a role in the formation of the subject (40-41). Flint also contends that due to the woman's "innate capacity for sympathy" she would, better than the man, identify with the characters from her reading. Commentators in the nineteenth century argued that

reading literature could serve as an alternative to social education, and Flint writes that: "It was particularly useful to those who looked for plausible grounds on which to defend fiction" (81).

We can deduce from this that the belief in reading as a source of influence was commonly thought to be great. Furthermore the young woman was particularly prone to be influenced by her reading both in negative and positive terms, due to her vulnerability (Flint 88). Since reading could have a vast influence on a young woman it was generally thought to be the mother's task to give advice about what to read (83). I do not propose to make suggestions about who the readership of the novels discussed in this thesis might be, but when it comes to the content, *Agnes Grey* may have been the sort of book which a mother in the Victorian age could have recommended to her daughter without fear of degradation of her mind. The novel's presentation of values such as that of philanthropy serves to promote Victorian ideals, even though the criticism of the upper class and the upper middle class is severe. Pamela Parker has written of Elizabeth Gaskell's work that she "entertains and educates her readers in the practices of appropriate Victorian philanthropy" (326). The same can be said about Brontë's *Agnes Grey*. As we will see, the effect of reading is also addressed in *Red Pottage*.

Both novels present two different methods of philanthropic work, and thus two different characterisations of the female visitor. The novels contrast the true with the pretence. As to the novel's influence on education, Nancy Armstrong claims that "[a]s education became the preferred instrument of social control, fiction could accomplish much the same purpose as the various forms of recreation promoted by Sunday schools" (17). The novel was not restricted to purposes of entertainment, but contributed to the education of women. Reading was not considered only as a means of social control over the working class; the novel was also found suitable for the middle class (18). Through reading novels middle class

women learned what kind of qualities would make women desirable (4-5). Agnes Grey's role as a governess might in fact be considered to underline the aspect of teaching and education in relation to the novel. Education and influence seem to correspond with Anne Brontë's own intention behind the novel as she focuses explicitly upon the topic in the text itself. The opening sentence of *Agnes Grey* reads: "All true histories contain instruction" (61), and it may be understood as an allusion to both the instruction of the reader and that of the pupils in the book.

Victorian literature may have served an educational purpose at the time of publication, but for readers today it may offer valuable insights into the society that produced it, even though we should be careful not to read literature as an unmediated documentation of reality. Frederic Jameson states that "the aesthetic act is itself ideological, and the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal 'solutions' to unresolvable social contradictions" (Jameson 1944). In *Sybil; Or the Two Nations* Benjamin Disraeli reveals that between the rich and the poor "there is no intercourse and no sympathy" (59), and one might say that in *North and South* Elizabeth Gaskell's offers an imaginary solution to this by creating a fictional philanthropic heroine from the middle class. Again I am tempted to say that the same applies to Brontë's novel, in which the narrator's middle-class position is also reflected in the difficult position of a governess. Brontë offers a solution in the sense that she presents a positive female character who, to a great extent, is able to choose her own path in life. That she visits the poor on her own accord is significant as this was uncommon at the time, and the district visitors would act more as representatives of a clergyman than carrying out their own visits (Elliott 33). These novels invent a solution to the problem of women's position by portraying their protagonists as performing practical and ideological work through the role as

female philanthropist. According to Langland, domestic novels or novels taking on topics of domestic virtues, such as philanthropy, may serve a critical function:

> Novelists and novels, I argue, do not simply reflect the contemporary ideology. Rather, by depicting a material reality filled with and interpreted through ideology, they also expose ideology. Although the nineteenth-century novel presents the household as a secure and moral shelter from economic and political storms, another process is at work alongside this figuration: the active deployment of class power. The novel, in sum, stages the ideological conflict between the domestic angel in the house and her other (the worker or servant), exposing through the female characters the mechanisms of middle-class control, including those mechanisms that were themselves fiction, stratagems of desire. (291)

As we will see the ideological conflict is present in *Agnes Grey*. Agnes's status is more as a servant than a domestic angel through her position as governess. In a sense this also applies to *Red Pottage*, as the unmarried Hester has less authority than a married woman. Her married sister in law tries to claim authority over Hester through her domestic power. However, these novels are not domestic novels but still "reflect" and "expose ideology." As we will see the novels offer descriptions of Victorian society, but also criticise society.

A Way Out of the Home

By taking on the role as a Lady Bountiful the middle-class woman was able to move around more freely than most other women in Victorian Britain. In a time when women's access to the public sphere was restricted, the female philanthropist was exempted from some of the social norms of the era. She was able to walk around alone when that same action could normally compromise a woman, even to the extent that she could be called a fallen woman. But in the errand of the lady visitor a woman was able to walk more freely in the Victorian

streets. While the role of the lady visitor very much builds upon domestic virtues, these virtues were no longer only constricted to the home. Elliott points to a contemporary review on *North and South* which shows that fictional accounts of the female visitor contributed to the debate about the role of the female visitor at the time of publication (22). Fictional representations of philanthropy caused debate, and it seems that philanthropy contributed to women's social involvement. Nancy Armstrong states that it was women's talents for charity that not only got them out of the house but also made them step onto the political arena (92). And Hilary Schor suggests that women's activities in the public realm of the 1850s may have contributed to Parliament considering the changes that led to the Marriage and Divorce Act of 1857 (175-76). She writes that although philanthropic organisations "had no explicit feminist ideas, [they] nonetheless brought women into the public realm with a vengeance" (176). The possibilities that philanthropy opened up for women in the Victorian society should therefore not be overlooked in a discussion of the fictional representation of philanthropy.

When examining these novels I do not view them as necessarily contributing to the emancipation of women, but their investment in women's position at least makes them a part of the social debate in the nineteenth-century. And indeed, these novels could contribute to the education of a woman with their focus on education and reading.

Chapter Two: The Philanthropic Work of a Governess

As mentioned in the introduction there has been a revival in the field of under-read Victorian fiction. It might come as a surprise that one of the Brontë sisters should fall into this category, but her work has not been valued equally to that of her sisters. Even though the youngest of the Brontë sisters has been gratified with more attention during the last decades, it is still my perception that some important aspects of the novel are left unnoticed. In her mellow and non-dramatic style, Anne Brontë draws our attention to the habits, conduct and attitudes of the upper class. Not constricting itself to a social critique of the upper class's treatment of governesses, the short novel also investigates the situation of upper-class women, the imbalance in marriage and the hypocrisy surrounding the question of the poor both in relation to class and religion. In *Agnes Grey* we are presented with the stereotypical figure of the Lady Bountiful as well as the genuine philanthropic figure, and the novel thus compares true values to pretence.

When discussing less famous novels, critics seem to focus on why the selected works are indeed valuable to re-evaluate. In that sense Anne Brontë is in a peculiar position since it seems difficult to consider her work without comparison with the work of her sisters. Although it may be interesting to link *Agnes Grey* to other novels by the Brontë sisters, I am looking at the novel in its own right. In fact, due to the comparison with *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, some important aspects in *Agnes Grey* have been overlooked. Thus, in my view, *Agnes Grey* is not a bleak resemblance of *Jane Eyre*, but rather a quite different novel with a different purpose.

"The name of governess"

Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey* is a novel about the young woman Agnes Grey who starts working as a governess in order to try her "unknown powers" (Brontë, *Agnes Grey* 69) and to help out with the family's financial situation. Agnes was brought up, as she herself writes, "in the strictest seclusion" (62). She has been homeschooled and contends that the family's "only intercourse with the world consisted in a stately tea-party, now and then" (62). Agnes's wish to go out into the world stems from always being regarded as the child of the family and a wish to be viewed as helpful, as the rest of the family would rather see her amuse herself than do any proper work: "although I was not many degrees more useful than the kitten, my idleness was not entirely without excuse" (67). At the very beginning of *Agnes Grey*, then, we find a young woman searching for autonomy and independence. She is hardly content with her situation and seeks employment to learn more of the world. Her ambitions and her hopes for her new life as a governess seem to imply the start of a romantic and melodramatic tale not unlike what we find in *Jane Eyre*. But her thoughts on making something of herself also imply a strong woman character: "How delightful it would be to be a governess! To go out into the world; to enter upon a new life; to act for myself; to exercise my unused faculties; to try my unknown powers; to earn my own maintenance" (69). However, the situations she finds herself in as a governess are quite different from what she expected.

Upon entering the home of her first employer, the Bloomfields, Agnes's soon realises that her hopes of a "kind, warm-hearted matron" has been false when she meets Mrs Bloomfield who is "cold, grave, and forbidding" (80). Agnes also finds that she is considered nothing but part of the workforce, "a mere upper-servant" (113-14), and she is surprised by how uncivil Mr Bloomfield is at their first meeting (82). Her romantic illusion of the task of the governess is soon broken and she asserts that:

> The name of governess, I soon found, was a mere mockery as applied to me; my pupils had no more notion of obedience than a wild, unbroken colt. [...] but I had no rewards to offer, and as for punishment, I was given to understand, the parents reserved that privilege to themselves; and yet they expected me to keep my pupils in order. (84)

Before entering her second position with the Murrays, Agnes hopes that she will be treated with more respect, as Mr Murray was of higher rank than Mr Bloomfield: "doubtless he was one of those genuine thorough-bred gentry my mother spoke of, who would treat his governess with due consideration as a respectable, well-educated lady, the instructor and guide of his children, and not a mere upper servant" (113-14). Even though Agnes fares better with the Murrays she is not treated with much respect. Dara Rossman Regaignon affirms that the position of the governess was a difficult one to inhabit. Regaignon investigates "governess advice literature" written in the 1840s and explains the existing attitudes towards women who made their living by working as governesses. To sum up, the most important qualities for a governess were to be invisible (93), to be insignificant and blank, and to be "trained to be a cipher, a transparent transmitter of maternal pedagogy and a reliably accurate reflection of the children's dispositions and performances" (94). It is fair to say that the novel is realistic in its display of the upper-class behaviour. Agnes Grey struggles to perform the tasks expected of a governess, while she is also expected to behave as if she were invisible and insignificant. Regaignon observes:

> The governess should not only be invisible but should also refuse to admit to having intimate knowledge: not only is she not to see; not only is she talked over and around, she should not even appear to hear – despite her usefulness as audience. (93)

If we consider these principles in relation to Agnes Grey, we find that in her role as governess, she is allowed much more information about her employers than people of their

own rank that they socialize with. She observes them, and as they do not consider her anything but a "blank sheet," they are not afraid of what she will do with whatever information or impression she might get from her stay with them. For instance, the Bloomfields argue at the dinner table in front of Agnes (Brontë, *Agnes Grey* 83), presumably unaware of how this is conceived by their governess. Accordingly, the families portrayed in *Agnes Grey* are given attitudes that display their contempt for the people below them and their thoughtlessness when talking about sensitive topics in front of the staff. This also serves to explain the plausibility that someone in the position of governess could have vital information on their hands.

By using a governess as a narrator Anne Brontë not only brings an obscure character into view. She is also benefitted with a character that functions as an observer. The governess is in a sense a lady visitor to a wealthy home. Due to her position, she is able to observe the family. One can argue that servants have had this opportunity for ages, but the governess was placed in a curious position between the servants and the family and thus enjoyed more freedom and status than the average servant. Furthermore, a governess would most likely come from a genteel family and be literate, as opposed to the working-class servants. According to Jonathan Rose, reading literacy was greater than writing literacy amongst the working class, and he contends that, "For the working classes, literacy was used primarily for leisure" (33). However, for those of higher rank, for instance a clergyman's daughter like Agnes Grey or Anne Brontë herself, reading and writing was important. Pursuing a career as a writer was also a respectable possibility for the women of the middle class. In other words, Agnes Grey is not an unlikely writer or narrator. When she chose to employ the governess story she was not only within a field where she held knowledge, but she was also entering an unexplored area in fiction. Angeline Goreau contends that the subject of the governess was still fresh when Anne Brontë wrote *Agnes Grey* and that, "It would not have been difficult,

then, for Anne Brontë to persuade herself that in writing *Agnes Grey* she was filling the urgent need for a true account of the governess's condition" (Introduction 42).

In her work as governess Agnes represses her emotions because it is expected from her. In her work she is to provide her charges with an education both in the schoolroom and socially. In *Agnes Grey* we can clearly see that this line of work was tough, and Agnes is supposed to make her clients happy and keep her charges in check. From what we have learned about the restraints on her powers of influence it is understandable that the emotional strain is severe. Furthermore, as no faults can be attributed to the children or to their parents, Agnes is left with all the blame if they are not satisfied. Agnes has to deal with her employers in order to maintain her job, much along the same lines as in the emotional labour process that Bolton writes about, which entails: "find[ing] ways to deal with difficult customers and keep them as customers" (78). Bolton sees emotion work as a formative activity through "its productive potential" (75), and she argues that emotion work is "not a natural emergent capacity; it is something that we do work on, in different environments with different ends in mind" (77). Agnes's work as a governess is a formative activity because, as Bolton puts it, it "involves physical and emotional labour quite a high percentage of the time" (76). In Bolton's view, devaluing emotional labour today "makes the woman disappear from view," but in the nineteenth century the same could also apply to class. The emotional strain could be just as hard for a male servant as for a female governess. However, due to the position of the governess as belonging to the middle ranks, it is also a gendered issue. Having to work for a living was degrading; at least that is what we can gather from the reaction of Agnes's father when she tells him about her plans of becoming a governess: "No, no! afflicted as we are, surely we are not brought to that pass yet" (68). A more honourable vocation is the visiting of the poor, albeit that is done without a salary. Even though she happily performs the task, it is not merely a hobby as she leaves her "selfish pleasures" to go to see a poor woman (144). But

for Agnes it is also a pleasing experience as she is able to be herself, as it were, in the companion with the cottager Nancy Brown. The rewards which Agnes receives from her visiting of the poor are further discussed later on.

Susan Meyer observes that, "Agnes is never able, throughout the events the novel narrates, to 'talk back' to her employers" (4). Meyer understands the restrained tone of the novel, one which Anne Brontë has been criticised of, to be important for the novel's intention. As Meyer writes: "In *Agnes Grey* Anne Brontë offers the chronicle of a life of emotional and verbal repression" (5). It is true that Agnes is repressed in her work as a governess and she struggles to argue against the unfair treatment she receives. While working at the Bloomfield's residence, Agnes is indeed able to reprimand the children or otherwise take action against their mischief. But her authority is limited due to the parents' behaviour. For instance, when the parents indirectly blame the governess for their children's bad habits, Agnes is not able to answer for herself partly because they do not openly accuse her:

> I knew this was all pointed at me; and these, and all similar innuendoes affected me far more deeply than any open accusation would have done; for against the latter I should have been roused to speak in my own defence: now, I judged it my wisest plan to subdue every resentful impulse, suppress every sensitive shrinking, and go on perseveringly doing my best; for, irksome as my situation was, I earnestly wished to retain it. (91)

Agnes finds it necessary to kill a nest of birds to prevent Tom Bloomfield from torturing them, and after hearing the news of this Mrs Bloomfield reproaches Agnes for "interfer[ing] with Master Bloomfield's amusements" (105). Agnes argues against Mrs Bloomfield's claim that "the creatures were all created for our convenience" (105). Agnes reflects upon the discussion of the torturing of the birds and finds that it was the nearest she had ever come to a quarrel with Mrs Bloomfield (106). It is thus interesting that following this discussion Agnes

is dismissed from her position as a governess. The reason given for the dismissal was that the children had made too little progress, and the faults of the children were "attributed to a want of sufficient firmness, and diligent, persevering care on my part" (107). Agnes is shocked and contends that, "Unshaken firmness, devoted diligence, unwearied perseverance, unceasing care, were the very qualifications on which I had secretly prided myself, and by which I had hoped in time to overcome all difficulties, and obtain success at last" (107). Agnes is fired even though she affirms that she has made some progress at last with the children. It is thus plausible that the reason for her dismissal is her near quarrel with Mrs Bloomfield, which means that when Agnes "talks back" she is punished by her superior in rank. In her second position Agnes's is to a degree given more authority from the parents, and she is able to talk back to her charges. For instance, when Rosalie demands that her people at home should send more lady-like notes, Agnes replies:

> 'The good people at home,' replied I, 'know very well that the longer their letters are, the better I like them. I should be very sorry to receive a charming little lady-like note from any of them; and I thought you were too much of a lady yourself, Miss Murray, to talk about the "vulgarity" of writing on a large sheet of paper.' (130-31)

Though Agnes is able to reply to her charges she often chooses not to, or at other times is prevented from doing so.

Meyer contends that, "*Agnes Grey* demonstrates that neither gender nor social class alone is explanatory: both class and gender are significant factors in determining who wields the power of language, the power to silence others." Meyer thus claims that property gives access to linguistic power (7). It is because of their social rank that the Murray girls regard it as their right to speak freely when they please. Agnes is shocked by Rosalie's carelessness

when Rosalie talks disrespectfully about her mother in law at Ashby Park in the presence of servants, but Rosalie replies:

> Oh, no matter! I never care about the footmen; they're mere automatons – it's nothing to them what their superiors say or do; they won't dare to repeat it; and as to what they think – if they presume to think at all – of course, nobody cares for that. It would be a pretty thing indeed, if we were to be tongue-tied by our servants! (233)

Rosalie displays contempt for those below her in social rank, and indirectly she also shows this contempt for Agnes. Her status has been that of an upper servant and since she has little authority through her position as a governess, her superiors do not care what she thinks, or what she observes.

Agnes has truly felt the effect of being tongue-tied, but in her confessions of the life of a governess, Agnes is not restrained by her superiors. Even though her superiors have authority and power over language in the situations rendered in the novel, Agnes demonstrates a power of language through her writing. What is more, her irony and sarcasm is clearly evident in her narration of events. As Meyer contends, it is "in the form of the novel itself [that] Agnes 'talks back'" (4). Through the novel, then, Agnes voices her criticism, and due to her position as a governess she has access to the different social layers. The choice of a governess as a narrator-protagonist is in fact quite a clever move. Even though Anne Brontë is not in a position to introduce reform, she nonetheless is able to influence public opinion through her position as a writer.

The Confessions of a Governess

The novel borrows elements from autobiographical writing, but is still a work of fiction. Even though Anne Brontë insists on the truth of her story, her novel should not be regarded as a record of real life. Goreau writes:

> The author's assertion that her novel is a true history was of course a convention that originated with the novel-form itself more than a century before, but Anne Brontë's emphasis on the truth of her narrative is especially important because believability was essential to her purpose in writing. (Introduction 38)

Agnes Grey takes the form of a confessional novel or a Bildungsroman where Agnes Grey is the first person narrator. According to Elizabeth Langland, Anne Brontë's use of a woman as narrator allowed her to "create a female reality formerly uncharted in novels" (*Anne Brontë* 31). Langland sees the female narrator as "intimately" addressing the reader, even as she addresses a more general readership. In her opening paragraph she announces: "Shielded by my own obscurity, and by the lapse of years, and a few fictitious names, I do not fear to venture, and will candidly lay before the public what I would not disclose to the most intimate friend" (Brontë, *Agnes Grey* 61). The tone of the novel is intimate also when the narrator addresses her readers directly to explain why she has omitted episodes from the narrative: "I spare my readers the account of my delight on coming home" (93). According to Langland this is done in order to emphasise the episodes where "her education is being forwarded" (*Anne Brontë* 106).

It can also be argued that the narrator omits the episodes which do not contribute to the formation of the self. In essence, a Bildungsroman portrays the subject's path "from adolescence to maturity" (Holman and Harmon 53). It is also called the novel of development since it portrays the formative years of the protagonist's life. *Agnes Grey* can thus be seen as

borrowing elements from this genre. According to John Maynard the theme of education is often narrated and used as a theme in a Bildungsroman (289). As we will see, the theme of education is a prominent one in *Agnes Grey*. Maynard contends that there are advantages to the use of the Bildungsroman and writes:

> Taken as a form that encourages its readers to think about education as they see it thematized and conceptualized, the bildungsroman as novel of education oddly opens up the possibility of individual freedom in the place of social control of the individual. (291)

The novel also borrows elements from the confessional novel, and the narrator confesses her story, not to a friend but to the public, a general readership. In her confession Agnes is not simply seeking revenge, but also to render her experiences. In the novel, then, Agnes tells the reader about her experiences, be they good or bad. She has herself sought employment, and to be dismissed from her first vocation was experienced as a setback. According to Holman and Harmon the confession "usually has a theoretical or intellectual emphasis in which religion, politics, art or some such ideological interest is important" (104). *Agnes Grey* has an "intellectual emphasis" both on matters of religion and education. Education appears as a theme in the novel and the novel itself has a didactic function. Even though the Bildungsroman does not necessarily have a first person narrator, Holman and Harmon find that, "the term *confession* is often applied to fictional works that place an emphasis on the introspective view of character in the process of developing attitudes toward life, religion or art," and thus, the Bildungsroman can be regarded as a confession (104). *Agnes Grey* seems to fit nicely into the description of both genres since it not only portrays the maturing of the young woman but also employs a narrator-protagonist who tells her story as a confession. Brontë's deploying the governess as a narrator could even be considered, in Jameson's terms, "an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary

or formal ‘solutions’ to unresolvable social contradictions” (Jameson 1944) Brontë gives authority and voice to the voiceless; Rosalie’s “automatons” (233).

The Condition of the Poor

One might consider *Agnes Grey* a variation of the Condition of England novel, even though it does not take place in an industrial setting. In the 1840s there was a surge of literature that focused on the condition of England. The novels which dealt with the situation of the working classes became popular with the reading public, which mainly consisted of the upper and the middle classes. According to James Richard Simmons, Jr., “the novel became a method of teaching the middle and upper classes about the ‘real’ condition of England” (336). This subgenre of the Victorian novel, appropriately named “Condition of England” or industrial novels, was quite popular in the 1840s and 1850s with famous participant such as Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell. In the first Victorian industrial novels that emerged in the 1830s the focus was mainly on child labour and the condition of children in the industry. The novels were written with a purpose to influence regulations and bills (344), and in effect were probably propagandistic in their performance (341). As some improvements were made in relation to child labour, the authors directed their attention to the working-class adult. Simmons argues that gaining the sympathy from readers was harder when dealing with adults than with children (344). In effect, then, the novels had to be improved to gain significant attention, and so they did with authors such as Gaskell and Dickens. However, the popularity of the Condition of England or industrial novel was short lived, and even in their prime they became superfluous (349).

Anne Brontë, who published her novel *Agnes Grey* in 1847, wrote in the advent of the popularity of the industrial novel. While she did not write what we would consider an industrial novel, she still seems to touch upon the condition of England in an abstract manner.

Her ambition may not have been to portray and display the workers' bad conditions, but she did emphasise the treatment of the poor and the attitude towards them from the upper classes and the clergy. Her novel represented a voice in the debate at the time, but instead of using the subgenre of the industrial novel, Anne Brontë chose to write about a topic that she knew better, the condition of a young governess. Through the eyes and voice of the protagonist Agnes Grey the readers would learn about the treatment of governesses, the treatment of the poor and the ambivalence of the clergy.

"Angels of Light"

Another important aspect in *Agnes Grey* is the role of the female visitor and acts of philanthropy. As *Agnes Grey* appeared at the height of the popularity of Condition of England novel, it may have appreciated an audience that were accustomed to the debate about the poor, and philanthropy and the role of the female visitor represent central themes in the novel. Agnes accompanies the misses Murrays on their visits to the poor and is sometimes required to go alone. Though the visits seem to have started by the initiative of the Murray girls, Agnes also goes to see the poor cottagers on her "own account" (143). The narrator criticises the girls' behaviour in her rendering of the visits, commenting on their behaviour towards the poor. Just as the girls comment on the food, their manners, and that they call some of the elderly "old fools and silly old blockheads to their faces." Agnes Grey comments on the girls' manners and the effect it had on the cottagers:

> I could see that the people were often hurt and annoyed by such conduct, though their fear of the 'grand ladies' prevented them from testifying any resentment; but *they* never perceived it. 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. (144)

This passage reveals reflections and attitudes about class and about the role of a female visitor. The girls' upper-class attitude toward the working class reveals that they equal "poor and untaught" with "stupid," whereas in Miss Grey's middle-class view, their upper-class actions are not only condescending but also stemming from stupidity. Rosalie, the eldest, is described as "provokingly careless and inconsiderate as a giddy child of twelve." The fact that the Murray girls are unable to detect that their behaviour is hurtful to those they are supposedly helping is surprising to Agnes: "but *they* never perceived it" (144). Agnes affirms that their behaviour is due to "defective education" (143).

When describing her own visits the protagonist touches upon her sense of duty. While out walking in the park, she says, "it struck me that I ought to leave these selfish pleasures [...] and go to the cottage of one Nancy Brown" (144-45). Miss Grey tries to spend most of her spare time by visiting the poor, and especially Nancy Brown who struggles with religious doubt. The protagonist describes her visit in a manner that seems quite the opposite of the misses Murray's conduct. She describes Nancy Brown's cottage in a respectful manner, but does not try to hide that she is poor: "her little, close, dark cottage, redolent of smoke and confined air, but as tidy and clean as she could make it" (145). The visits to Nancy are frequent, and a friendship grows between the two, which means that Agnes Grey does not evince the didactic, condescending attitude that was fairly common for the charitable visitor. For instance, Deborah Epstein Nord states that the visits could be "presumptuous and invasive" (210), and according to Langland the visits would often involve instruction about domestic management ("Nobody's Angels" 296). The protagonist in *Agnes Grey* describes Nancy's cottage in her story, but it is not the domestic aspect of the visit which is important to her; rather it is the religious aspect. Agnes's reading of the Bible does not equal a religious

charitable performance either, since it is upon request from Nancy that she reads a particular part. The fact that Agnes is dedicated enough to care about what the people she visits feel or want, distinguishes her from the Murray girls who sometimes urge Agnes to "fulfil some promise which they had been more ready to make than perform" (Brontë, *Agnes Grey* 143). It is implied that they are careless of their responsibility.

The Return Gift and the Gift of Friendship

The visits to Nancy are not completely selfish, but leave Agnes feeling "nearly as happy as herself" (153). Jean Starobinski writes that "In Isaiah [...] the light or spring that wells up within the charitable person is considered the divine return gift, the very presence of God" (70). Consequently, the giver is rewarded with something in return, in this case a sense of happiness. We can also say that Agnes, and other female visitors, were given something apart from religious bliss. Nord comments on how the visitors would benefit from visiting the poor, not only by being able to participate in the civic life without hurting their reputation, but also by learning about the "domestic side of poverty" (211). For Agnes, the visits to Nancy Brown and the other cottagers represent her only opportunity for recreation except for going home on holiday. While employed at the Murrays, Agnes's movement seems to be constricted to a few places, her employer's home and garden, the church and the cottages. Visiting the poor is something she can do without being chaperoned. We can see the contrast with regard to Rosalie. When she meets Mr Hatfield in the field alone, it is taken to be improper and Agnes has to intervene. In contrast, when Rosalie goes to visit the poor in order to perchance meet Mr Weston, her virtue is intact as her performance of a female visitor is uncompromising. Rosalie uses the role of the female visitor in order to be able to meet men while the same cannot be said of Agnes. She visits Nancy Brown in order to offer help, but also because she finds a conversational partner that suits her intelligence. One could also argue that the

protagonist is selfish in her visits as she keeps returning to Nancy Brown for companionship. But if we can see both spiritual and practical return gifts, what do the gifts consist of in the novel? The Murray girls' gifts are "shillings or half-crowns or articles of clothing" (144). Matilda Murray even gives away a hare which her dog has killed (209). The gifts that the Murrays give away are easily given, as they are of no importance to the givers. In contrast, Agnes has little to give but herself, but her gift, then, requires more energy and consideration.

Agnes does not seem to give anything but her own company to the poor cottagers, except for when she acts as a messenger and brings something from the Murray girls. What she offers is her friendship, which, according to Starobinski, is "the highest gift" (66). Considering the fact that *Agnes Grey* is in many respects a novel about education, Starobinski also has some thoughts on the subject of student – teacher relations: "There is a kind of gift implying friendship that takes on a singular importance. That is the gift that occurs asymmetrically from a student to a teacher, which is then reciprocated by the teacher to the student" (66). Rosalie, the eldest Murray girl, is the closest Agnes comes to a student who respects her. However, Rosalie is so selfish and vain that she seems unable to allow Agnes any attention from Mr Weston without trying to charm him herself. Perhaps only reflecting upper-class mentality through her actions, Rosalie nevertheless seems to have friendly feelings for Agnes. For instance, Rosalie confides to Agnes her ambiguous feelings about the coming marriage with Lord Ashby (172). Towards the end of the novel when Rosalie has become Lady Ashby, she writes to Agnes: "I want you to visit me as a *friend* and stay a long time" (226). When Agnes arrives she is affectionately welcomed in spite of being "a poor clergyman's daughter, a governess, and a school-mistress" (228). Upon leaving her former student Agnes finds that matters seem to have turned between her and Rosalie:

> Nevertheless, it was with a heavy heart that I bid adieu to poor Lady Ashby and left her in her princely home. It was no slight additional proof of her unhappiness, that she should so cling to

> the consolation of my presence, and earnestly desire the company of one whose general tastes and ideas were so little congenial to her own, whom she had completely forgotten in her hours of prosperity, and whose presence would be rather a nuisance than a pleasure, if she could but have half her heart's desire. (239)

When she was Rosalie's governess, Agnes only saw glimpses of Rosalie's friendly side, but when Rosalie is all alone, surrounded by wealth, the former governess describes Rosalie as "poor." It seems, thus, that Rosalie craves Agnes friendship more than ever before. In an abstract manner, Agnes's visit to Lady Ashby is a charitable visit. However, Agnes is not a female visitor who gives money or clothing, Agnes is a visitor who offers her company and her friendship. In addition, the philanthropic work that Agnes performs is a formative experience which involves emotional work.

"All true histories contain instruction"

Langland states that "*Agnes Grey* is foremost a novel dealing with education" (*Anne Brontë* 97). If we consider the opening sentence in the first chapter of *Agnes Grey*: "All true histories contain instruction" (61), the reading audience is confronted with the idea of instruction and education from the very start of the novel. Education functions as a theme in the text at the same time as the novel itself has a didactic function, as it aims to educate the reader. The novel's portrayal of women's social education (or lack thereof) supports the argument that it serves to instruct the audience. Through her thoughts and comments, the narrator expresses a clear sense of right and wrong, and she does to some extent pass judgement. When the narrator renders the behaviour of the misses Murray visiting the poor, the reader is shown how not to practice philanthropy. The narrator's own visits function as a striking contrast, and like Gaskell, Brontë portrays "the practices of appropriate Victorian philanthropy" (Parker 326).

The disadvantages of women's education become an issue in connection with Miss Grey's first experiences as a governess with the Bloomfields. The eldest boy, Tom, has learnt to act like a "master," and he is called "Master Bloomfield" by his father. This affects his sisters as well as the governess; he claims that everything around the house and estate is his, and if his sister contradicts him he might be provoked to hit her (Brontë 76-77). Anne Brontë implicitly points to the disadvantage of being female, even in upper class families. In both of the families there seems to be no interest in giving girls a good education. The reason for starting the education for the eldest of the girls, Mary Ann, is that she "might acquire bad habits from the nurses" (75). Most likely the bad habit in question was the accent, as the nurses would be working class, and therefore would not speak in the manner and accent a young girl should acquire (Goreau, Notes 255n1). Brontë depicts this accent in a later chapter (101), when Agnes is talking to one of the nurses about the difficulty of rearing the children. Her choice to write in dialect is a sign of the nurse's lower class and education.

With the Murrays, the second family where Agnes Grey works as governess, the mother of the house has specific thoughts on the education of the girls: "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" (120). One of the implications of such a shallow education shows itself in the superficial conduct of Rosalie Murray. When made an offer of marriage by the rector, Mr Hatfield, Rosalie coolly disappoints him and offers no comfort to his unreturned feelings although she clearly led him on. Afterwards Rosalie confesses what happened to Agnes: "to confess the truth, I rather liked him […] and he evidently idolized me; and yet, though he came upon me all alone and unprepared, I had the wisdom, and the pride, and the strength to refuse him – and so scornfully and coolly as I did: I have good reason to be proud of that!" (180). The fact that Rosalie is so proud of how she handled the situations not only conveys her character but also

sheds light on what sort of education she has been given. Her behaviour is disturbing to Agnes, but she has only been working as her governess for a short time. Apparently the importance of "marrying well" has been instilled in Miss Murray from an early age by her mother. In conversations with Agnes, Rosalie reveals that she could have wanted to never marry, but if she does marry it has to be with Lord Ashby even though she does not like him (136). Rosalie's cruel play with men's feelings is perhaps nothing more than an attempt to control a part of the game she herself is but a helpless contestant in.

Criticism of the Church and Clergy

Agnes is critical of the way that the Rector, Mr Hatfield, performs his services. She finds his sermons "far too studied and too artificial" (Brontë, *Agnes Grey* 140). As a contrast she enjoys the curate's, Mr Weston's, preaching: "I did hear him preach, and was decidedly pleased with the evangelical truth of his doctrine, as well as the earnest simplicity of his manner, and the clearness and force of his style" (139). Their style in sermons and preaching is repeated in their handling of their duties towards their parishioners.

When visiting a poor labourer who is ill, Agnes learns more of Mr Hatfield and his habits when calling on the poor and sick. He is inconsiderate of a sick man's health and would "insist upon having the cottage door kept open to admit the fresh air for his own convenience, without considering how it might injure the sufferer" (153). Furthermore, his actions can be viewed upon as resembling those of a meddling visitor, as he would rebuke the sick man's wife instead of offering comfort (154). As a contrast Mr Weston behaves in quite another fashion. In Nancy Brown's words he is highly regarded by the poor: "He comes to see all us poor bodies a deal ofter nor Maister Bligh or th' Rector ever did; an' it's well he does, for he's always welcome" (146). The sick man in the example above also has a story to tell of Mr Weston, as he says he would "talk to me as kind as owt'; an' oft read to me, too, an' beside

[sic][1] me just like a brother" (154). In addition to helping them with their religious issues Mr Weston helps them with the small things he can offer, and sends the poor man and wife a sack of coal when theirs are empty (154). The two clergymen are given different character traits similarly to women who take on the role as female visitors. Mr Hatfield is portrayed as an upper-class clergyman but functions as the negative version of a female visitor, the meddling kind who comments on the failure of domestic appearance. It seems evident that his wish to be a clergyman does not stem from his wish to help people, but to have a profession that gives him status. The fact that he asks Rosalie Murray to marry him gives us a hint of where his sense of class lies. Mr Weston, on the other hand, through his attention to the poor villagers, shows a different kind of clergyman.

Jennifer M. Stolpa argues that *Agnes Grey* is written in such a manner as to make it seem like a sermon. Stolpa sees the religious element in Brontë's novel as controversial rather than conservative and points to the fact that women were not allowed to preach in major Christian institutions in England, but that in her novel Brontë does exactly that – she preaches publicly (225-27). On matters of form and style Stolpa argues that Brontë's novel is simplistic with a purpose: "This variety in Anne's style supports the arguments that *Agnes Grey*'s simplicity of structure is a construction of the novelist for a particular purpose." The novel is thus simplistic with a purpose. Stolpa sees this as a consequence of Anne Brontë's desire to make her narrative understood by everyone and not just the educated upper and middle classes (232). The religiously conflicted cottager Nancy Brown tells Agnes about Mr Hatfield's advice against religious doubt, which was to go to church. Despite her rheumatism Nancy follows the advice but affirms that it did not much help her soul, since the experience was: "all like sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal: the sermons I couldn't understand, an' th' Prayer-book only served to show me how wicked I was, that I could read such good words,

[1] In other editions, for instance The Oxford edition (1988) of *Agnes Grey*, the last phrase reads: "an' sit beside me just like a brother" (101).

an' never be no better for it" (149). Mr Hatfield is unwilling to explain his sermons any further, even upon request from Nancy. In contrast to this behaviour stands Mr Weston, who willingly comes to see Nancy and helps her with her religious doubt by taking the time to explain passages in the Bible to her: "an' explained 'em as clear as the day: and it seemed like as a new light broke in on my soul" (152). Stolpa contends that the morals that were taught in the church should be simple enough to follow in everyday life, and that this corresponded with Brontë's wish that, "readers apply the moral lessons of the novel to their own situations" (233).

Interestingly, the two ministers' treatment of animals serves as an indicator of their character traits. As Mr Hatfield would kick Nancy Brown's cat and run after the Murray girls (148), Mr Weston "only stroked her, and gave a bit of a smile" (150). According to Goreau, Anne Brontë felt that, "Cruelty to animals was the sure mark of a villain" (Notes 260n8). In fact, the treatment of animals takes up quite a lot of space in this novel. Maggie Berg claims that the treatment of animals can be seen as an indicator of the treatment of women. She says about the Victorian views of biology and hierarchy that,

> The ground of the Victorian social hierarchy was 'animal type' or 'animal' characteristics. 'Animal,' synonymous with 'natural' and 'biological,' was a category employed by those at the top of the ladder to justify the exploitation of those at the bottom. (178)

Berg claims that *Agnes Grey* "employs the representation of animals to challenge and denaturalize the 'natural' hierarchy" (178). Though Berg in some respects goes too far in her analysis, she nevertheless touches upon an interesting aspect of the novel. There is something perplexing about the idea that women's limited authority over their selves is shown through the images of the dependent animals.

If we follow Berg's argument it is understandable that Anne Brontë devoted so much space in her novel to the treatment of animals. Not only does the novel expose the wealthy people's lack of respect for people below them in rank, and both people and animals dependent on them, but it also portrays the cruelty which is so carelessly transferred from one generation of the family to the next. Due to the narrator's portrayal of how the upper class acts towards those who are dependent on them, it is plausible that Anne Brontë objected to the idea that the aristocracy was the most fit to take care of the poor, an idea that was presented in Benjamin Disraeli's novel, *Sybil, Or The Two Nations* (1845).

Middle-Class Strategies

In *Superintending the Poor* Beth Fowkes Tobin draws a picture of philanthropy and literature from the Romantic era to the middle part of the Victorian era (1770-1860). Asserting that the middle class felt more suitable to take care of the needs of the poor, Tobin claims:

> Middle class strategies of self-regulation and surveillance operate in these novels to discredit the landed upper classes as managers of the rural economy and to promote the talent, intelligence, and expertise of the middle classes in the regulation of the countryside and its people. (1)

Tobin finds that authors such as Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë and Charles Dickens among others display this sort of strategy in their novels. Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey* is discussed due to its criticism of the clergy and its portrayal of two contrasting clergymen. Tobin contends that Anne Brontë "uses gendered traits to highlight their religious and political differences" (103). The rector Mr Hatfield is associated with masculine traits such as "hunting with the local squirarchy and flirting with the daughters of the gentry" (104), while the curate Mr Weston is associated with feminine traits, and in contrast to Mr Hatfield he is "very sincere

about taking care of the spiritual needs of his flock" (104). Tobin claims that writers such as Austen, Gaskell and Brontë "sought to destabilize traditional male moral authority and to erect in its place a new, feminine version of moral authority" (105). However, in Tobin's view Agnes is not able to perform any social control or to reform the children's behaviour:

> Agnes's failure signals the failure of feminine forms of social control that rely on internalization of norms and codes and the need for a return to paternal authority, which relies on compliance with external forces of control. Women's mastery of the techniques of self-regulation does not mean, for Anne Brontë at least, that women are qualified or able to transfer these disciplines to other classes and to the opposite sex. (125)

But what Tobin leaves out of the argument is that Agnes has no authority in her position as governess.

By belonging to a class below her employers and their children, Agnes's reprimands carry no weight. The parents' behaviour towards Agnes essentially strips her of authority in front of the children. When Agnes tries to catch the children who have "escaped" the classroom to go out into the snow, their father cries out: "Miss Grey! Is it possible! What, in the d – l's name, can you be thinking about?" (95). The children witness their father's contempt for their governess and thus it is not difficult to see that Agnes Grey struggles to control her upper-class pupils, and that she finds it difficult to instil some sense of moral in them. In contrast, she is highly regarded among the poor cottagers; therefore Tobin's conclusion seems unfounded. In fact, as Tobin argues, it is Mr Weston with his feminine traits of sympathy and kindness who is regarded as the better clergyman. We also learn that Mr Weston has plans for reforms in his own parish (243), and considering his earlier devoted concern for the poor we can deduce that the reforms in question are of a social kind. Hence, there is no plausibility in Tobin's claim that "Agnes's failure signals the failure of feminine

forms of social control" (125). However, Tobin is quite right to say that Agnes's role as a governess generates difficulty in terms of social control as she does not have "any real power to punish" (125).

In many examples it seems as if the role of the governess is what makes the teaching, the punishing and the implementing of morality so difficult. While Agnes Grey's role as a female visitor does not suffer because of her lack of control on the upper class, in the role as governess she is not someone to fear and not even someone to take advice from. Agnes seems to have some influence on the eldest of the sisters, Rosalie, but in the end, Agnes's judgment weighs far less than that of Rosalie's parents'. Towards the end of the novel, Agnes leaves her position as governess for the upper class and joins her mother in a project of starting a school for girls. They accomplish this, and it is implied that they are successful in their endeavours. In a sense, Agnes's failure is turned into success when she leaves the post as a governess; she is then liberated from the rigid paternal structure which being a governess entailed. Agnes, then, does not give up trying to teach, but she gives up trying to impose any control on students from the upper class.

Nothing indicates that her role as a female visitor will suffer from her change of position or her marriage. Furthermore, it seems as if Agnes follows a modest middle-class strategy based on "Women's mastery of the techniques of self-regulation" (Tobin 125). In contrast to her father, of whom Agnes contends that, "saving was not my father's forte" (63), Agnes's mother seems to be handling finances well, and she keeps the family out of debt after her husband's unfortunate investment (65). We can deduce from this that the family's finances would have fared better if Agnes's mother had been in charge. One can also argue that Agnes follows her mother's example regarding finances:

> Our modest income is amply sufficient for our requirements; and by practising the economy we learnt in harder times, and never attempting to imitate our richer neighbours, we manage

> not only to enjoy comfort and contentment ourselves, but to have every year something to lay by for our children, and something to give to those who need it. (251)

The ending of the novel has to some been a disappointment, and some would perhaps even argue that Agnes leaves one paternal structure to enter another. Penny Boumelha writes that according to the conventions of realism only two options are left for the female protagonist; marriage or death (326). One can then argue that even though Agnes chooses to marry she had an option, namely to pursue a career as a school teacher. The option was provided by an industrious mother and the protagonist's own work to gain a reputation and thus attract pupils. Even before the option of a schoolteacher opened up, Agnes had pursued a career as governess. Anne Brontë did not limit her protagonist to the house or grounds of her employer, but allowed her the freedom to carry out her own charitable visits. This avocation of obligation in turn led to her meeting Mr Weston, the man she later marries.

Instead of arguing that *Agnes Grey* shows how women fail in their efforts of social reform, one could claim that Anne Brontë had to work within the limitation of the realist conventions. The fact that Agnes Grey stops teaching when she is married does not mean that she ceases to be clever and talented; in fact Agnes writes her story after she has become Mrs Weston. Marrying Agnes Grey to Mr Weston also implies that Brontë complied with the conventions and could not let the character off before she entered a new phase of her life. This also complies with the Bildungsroman, as we have followed Agnes to the stage of maturity, and thus the story comes to an end.

Chapter Three: The Woman Writer and the Gift

In *Red Pottage* the two main characters are Hester Gresley and Rachel West. Described as having been friends since childhood, they have had different experiences while growing up. Rachel was born into a wealthy family, but in her adolescence both her parents died revealing that their great fortune had disappeared. Living for a short time with poor relatives, Rachel went to live on her own in the poor quarters of London, barely managing with the help from her friend Hester. Without any proper education Rachel failed to gain employment as a teacher, but managed to earn some money by type-writing (Cholmondeley 24). After several years of living on almost nothing and among the poor in London, Rachel inherited a great fortune from the man who brought her own father to economic ruin. Hester on the other hand grew up with her aunt, Lady Susan Gresley. She was brought up in a less wealthy family than Rachel's, but Hester nonetheless grew up in the upper class society in London.

At the time of the setting of *Red Pottage* Rachel has rejoined London society and Hester is working on her second novel. Hester represents the New Woman artist and her story fits well with the "suffering genius" plot. Rachel's story, however, seems to be more identifiable with sensational fiction than with New Woman fiction. Her dramatic story of being bereft of money, then inheriting an even greater fortune seems almost too fantastic. Her romantic life too, is packed with drama as she falls for Hugh Scarlett. Hugh has had an affair with Lady Newhaven and is found out by her husband, Lord Newhaven. In an attempt to avoid the scandal of a public duel, he makes Hugh draw lots with him. The one who draws the shorter lighter will have to kill himself within five month's time. *Red Pottage*, then, seems to borrow elements from the sensational novel. But it is also a novel about religion, politics and social awareness. As to why the author has chosen to deploy features of sensational fiction one can only speculate. One possible explanation might found in the experimentation with

form. Another explanation can be found in the link between the sensational plot and the character traits of some of the characters, especially Lady Newhaven. Both of these possibilities will be further examined later.

The society which Cholmondeley portrays is in many ways a dysfunctional one, where most people talk more than they act, and those who live up to their principles are not rewarded. If we consider the two main characters, Hester cannot publish her second novel due to her brother's interference, and Rachel tries to help everyone, deserving or not, and loses the love of her life. The author uses satire and irony to expose certain characters and their high society attitudes, and thus emphasises their shallowness. The main focus is on women's situation and about women's endeavours. The novel culminates in the treatment of Hester and the burning of her book and Rachel's loss when Hugh Scarlett dies.

According to Gail Cunningham a heroine who was unconventional and opposed the traditional feminine role by either challenging marriage and maternity or by choosing to earn her living by working, was considered a New Woman by both readers and reviewers (3). In this sense it is not difficult to see that one of the protagonists of *Red Pottage*, Hester Gresley, was considered a New Woman simply by being unmarried and to a degree supporting herself by her writing. The unconventional heroine thus makes *Red Pottage* a New Woman novel. However, there are other reasons as to why the novel is considered a New Woman novel. *Red Pottage* does more than portray a figure associated with the New Woman, the woman writer; it also centres round the role of women in general, and offers social critique of the limited possibilities of women in a patriarchal society.

Though the New Woman's ideals were those of integrity and independence, she was by the public considered to be in the same league as the "predatory manhunter with her painted face and dyed hair" (Cunningham 9). The popular press embraced this version and cartoonists drew her with "short hair and mannish clothes" (11). *Red Pottage*, which was

published in 1899, portrays Hester's family and the uneasiness which they felt about her work as a writer. This is hardly surprising if they associated a woman writer with the New Woman. Though there is limited use of the term "New Woman" in the novel, the attitude towards literature and literature's effect is reflected. For instance, Hester's brother is worried about what kind of novels Hester reads, and while reading the manuscript for Hester's second novel, he finds that she exaggerates and concludes that it is due to the reading of French novels, which according to Mr Gresley, were "only read for the sake of the hideous improprieties contained in them" (Cholmondeley 173-74). We can deduce from this that Mr Gresley considers the effect of certain kinds of literature to be harmful. According to Sally Mitchell the term "New Woman" was invented in the 1890s and had "the same conflicted resonance that 'feminist' acquired in recent decades [...] Even more vexed is the matter of connotation. 'New Woman' and 'Feminist' could – and can – be claimed with pride, yet both also immediately became terms of anathema" (581).

As compared to specific terms such as "woman's right woman," the New Woman was a more general term; Sally Mitchell calls the New Woman of the 1890s a social phenomenon as the term would be used to describe personal behaviour rather than a political agenda. In theory, then, a New Woman could be a middle-class woman living by herself and earning her own money. But as Mitchell observers "self-supporting" women received "media attention in the 1890s because education and professions – along with publicity – made independence possible for larger numbers of young middle-class women" (582). Due to the growing independence of the middle-class woman one would, according to Mitchell, expect women's fiction to be concerned with ideology and social change: "one strand of New Woman fiction harks back to the early-Victorian social problem novel with its reformist focus on contemporary economic, social political, and religious material" (582). Instead of being

overtly political, Mary Cholmondeley portrays a Victorian society by using irony and sarcasm and is able to urge for reform without spelling it out in so many words.

Women's Writing as Part of the Debate

Red Pottage portrays the ongoing debate in late nineteenth century England about women's writing. The woman writer, Hester Gresley, moves beyond the domestic realm through her writing, and consequently, the bourgeois society questions her experiences. The novel can thus be seen to represent a voice in the debate about women's writing and women's reading.

Hester's first novel, *An Idyll of East London*, received attention and, according to the narrator, was "reaping its harvest of astonished indignation and admiration, and her acquaintances – not her friends – were still wondering how she came to know so much of a life of which they decided she could know nothing" (Cholmondeley 27). At Sybell Loftus's dinner party Hester's novel is discussed:

> How strange it seems that she who lives in the depths of the country should have written a story of the East End! "That is always so," said the author of *Unashamed*, in a sonorous voice. "The novel has of late been dwarfed to the scope of the young English girl" – he pronounced it gurl – "who writes from her imagination and not from her experience. What true art requires of us is a faithful rendering of a great experience." (19)

At a different dinner the author of *Unashamed*, Mr Harvey, turns to Rachel: "I trust, Miss West [...] that I have your sympathy in the great cause to which I have dedicated myself, the emancipation of women," upon which Rachel responds: "I thought new woman had effected her own emancipation" (102). What is interesting is that Mr Harvey contradicts himself when he chooses to write about women's emancipation, a topic evidently far from his own experience. The fact that Mr Harvey does not react to Rachel's reply may signal that the male

author does not consider New Woman fiction as good enough for the cause of the emancipation of women. In fact, when he says earlier that the novel has been "dwarfed to the scope of the young English girl" (19), the implication is that the novel has been made insignificant so as to fit the range of women. One can safely assume that Mr Harvey discards novels written by women as hardly owning up to those written by men. In fact, he thus voices a current concern, as some critics such as William Courtney claimed that the novel was no longer an art form due to the fact that novels were written "by women for women," and that women lacked "the neutrality of the artistic mind" (qtd. in Ardis 336).

Though some understand Hester's work to be important and noble, her own family is unable to give her space and time to continue her writing. Her brother, James Gresley, is on several occasions portrayed rather ironically in *Red Pottage*. For instance, he has a thought and a word for every subject: "Evolution! Ha! Ha! Descended from an ape. I don't believe that for one," and when it comes to women's rights his arrogant thoughts on the matter are rendered by the narrator: "women's rights received their death-blow from a jocose allusion to the woman following the plough while the man sat at home and rocked the cradle" (Cholmondeley 82). These comments on the character of Hester's brother are made in connection with a temperance meeting, a case which is important to James. The narrator comments that, "He was not a man of compromise" (82). Obviously, this attitude relates to the matter of alcohol, but the description is appropriate for James's character as a whole. After opening by mistake Hester's manuscript of her second novel, James decides to help her by proofreading her work, thinking she will not mind since she helped him with his "Modern Dissent" (171). But when he starts reading the novel, which is entitled *Husks*, he is so vexed at the novel's content that he decides to burn it for her sake. The fact that he cannot comprehend the damage he has done to her, even when she tries to explain that her work was to her like a child, is even more incomprehensible (185). Ann L. Ardis considers James's

reaction as representing something more than his personal judgement and sees it as "an instance of the general critical response toward New Woman novels at the turn of the century" (335). Though the fatal burning is done by James, as we have seen, there are several characters that criticise Hester's novel in *Red Pottage*.

Wendy Parkins argues that New Woman fiction shows the shift from the "Victorian bourgeois domestic to a different form of subjectivity" (48). This new form of subjectivity was influenced by modernity and by "public-ness," and thus female subjectivity was no longer solely influenced by domestic life, but also by experience from outside of the home. According to Parkins, female knowledge which is formed by non-domestic experience is disputed in *Red Pottage* (49). Society in general does not believe in female experience outside of the home. Firstly, people cannot understand how Hester could have written *An Idyll of East London*, and secondly, people find what she portrays too unbelievable for anyone to have experienced, let alone Rachel. The characters who challenge Rachel's and Hester's knowledge are, as Parkins observes, "married women, social reformers, male authors and the clergy" (49). Even though Rachel's and Hester's female knowledge is contested by certain characters, the narrator's portrayal of these characters is ironic. In *Red Pottage*, then, "bourgeois domesticity does not constitute the most valued realm of experience" (49). In this respect, Cholmondeley's novel challenges Armstrong and Langland's claim that "the Victorian novel privileges the domestic as the source of knowledge and subjectivity and therefore of power." In fact, according to Parkins, married women who base their statements on their own domestic experience are portrayed sarcastically (49), while Hester and Rachel, who both transgress the domestic sphere, are described sympathetically. But even so, Hester's position as a writer is limited by the bourgeois society in the course of the novel. Parkins writes:

> In the figure of Hester *Red Pottage* represents the liminality of the female author, who usually writes from the home and may write about the domestic but, through publication, also occupies the public sphere and public discourse. And it is the liminality of Hester's position which leads to tragedy. (52)

Hester's brother does indeed burn her second manuscript, but Hester is not an author who writes about domestic matters. The bishop thinks that if Hester would write "little goody-goody books" James would "admire her immensely, and so would half the neighbourhood" (Cholmondeley 60). In fact, it seems as if James is worried that Hester's talent is misused: "If I had Hester's talent [...] I should use my talent, as I have often told her, for the highest ends, not for the lowest." And he feels that she succumbs to the public's sense for "trashy fiction to amuse its idleness." James fails to see that through *An Idyll of East London* Hester has probably done what he would have done if he had the talent for writing, namely to "raise my readers, to educate them, to place a high ideal before them, to ennoble them" (171). But it is not merely the content that troubles James about Hester's writing. He also fears that Hester's "worship of her own talent" has "shut out the worship of God" (107). It is not the fact that she becomes public through publishing but that she writes about topics on which he, as a clergyman and a man, should rather write but is unable to. Hester steps into his domain as it were. By criticising the clergy she not only represents a threat to his profession. By moving from the feminized domain of philanthropy to a social critique of the church in her writing, she also takes on a more masculine role. Her masculine approach, or the "unfemininity" of her mind, would scare a man such as James, who considers "women being pillows against which weary masculine athletes could rest" (197).

Brenda R. Weber writes that Cholmondeley, among other women writers, uses the text-as-child metaphor in order to fuse "idealized Victorian womanhood (expressed through the trope of the mother) to the fin-de-siècle woman writer" (550). Consequently, for a woman

writer to conceive her text as her child was a way of legitimising her work as a woman artist. Earlier in the nineteenth century women were advised not to read "misleading novels," as "unchecked novel reading could enflame their imagination and lead them to commit imprudences" (Martino 226). But toward the end of the century the conservatives turned the argument they had used against romantic and sensational fiction toward realistic novels. As one magazine article put it: "the perusal of too many novels, particularly of the more modern school, is gravely injurious to young girls whose imagination is immature and too easily biased" ("What Should Women Read?" qtd. in Martino 226). By making Hester's book a child of her brain (Cholmondeley 223), and by making Hester refer to it as something living which has been killed and burned alive (185-86), Cholmondeley feminizes the writing process and the writer by using the trope of the mother to legitimize her protagonist's writing. One could also argue that the philanthropic theme of the novel within the novel and thus *Red Pottage* itself, represented a way of legitimising the protagonist's writing and essentially the writing of *Red Pottage*.

"Apostle of Humanity"

*Red Pottag*e contrasts two versions of the figure of the philanthropic woman, the true and the pretence. Even though the novel promotes philanthropic behaviour, it satirises the stereotype that turns care for the poor into business. True generosity displayed in the novel contains no class boundaries, and the ideal philanthropist extends her sympathy to all class levels.

Red Pottage is not only about the woman artist and the endeavours she faces; the other main character, Rachel, represents a different sort of Victorian woman. She is a loving and generous woman, and there is an element of mothering care about her (Cholmondeley 146). Another trait which is also typically Victorian is Rachel's philanthropic character. Rachel is contrasted with another woman, Miss Barker, who is introduced as the "apostle of humanity"

by Mrs Loftus (18). The same woman is clearly interested in or devoted to charity and speaks up during dinner:

> The need of the present age is the realization of our brotherhood with sin and suffering and poverty. West London in satin and diamonds does not hear her sister East London in rags calling to her to deliver her. The voice of East London has been drowned in the dance-music of the West End. (19)

Hugh Scarlett comments on this outburst by saying that Hester Gresley's book *An Idyll of East London* is "a voice which, at any rate, has been fully heard." But Miss Barker disagrees and calls it a "little book" which is both "misleading and wilfully one-sided" (19). Miss Barker's hostility towards Hester's book is explained when Rachel says that: "the district visitor and the woman missionary are certainly treated with harshness" (20), in the *Idyll*. Miss Barker, being a district visitor herself, claims that Hester is destroying her cause by criticising district visitors, and therefore must be imagining the situation of the poor, rather than basing her description on experience. Miss Barker explains: "but it is a misfortune to the cause of suffering humanity – to *our* cause – when the books which pretend to be set forth certain phases of its existence are written by persons entirely ignorant of the life they describe" (19). Miss Barker seems to represent a negative image of a philanthropist. She claims that a book such as Hester's damages her cause, the "cause of suffering humanity," a claim that more than anything tells us that Miss Barker herself is trying to gain some sort of profit on the cause, which in this case does not necessarily have to be material profit, but personal profit, such as self-worth and self-esteem and social standing.

Miss Barker represents herself as knowing more than anyone else the true nature of the London poor, and says that, "Those who have cast in their lot with the poor [...] would recognize at once the impossibility of Miss Gresley's characters and situations" (20). But

Rachel cannot let this pass and says that the situations Hester portrays in the *Idyll* seem real, whereupon Miss Barker replies:

> Ah my dear Miss West, you will excuse me, but a young lady like yourself nursed in the lap of luxury, can hardly be expected to look at life with the same eyes as a poor waif like myself, who has penetrated to the very core of the city and who has heard the stifled sigh of a vast perishing humanity. (20)

After this Rachel can no longer hold her tongue and says "I lived in the midst of it for six years [...] I did not cast in my lot with the poor, for I was one of them, and earned my bread among them." She validates the truthfulness of Hester's novel by saying that "as far as my experience goes, *The Idyll* is a true word from first to last" (20). The novel, then, is based on Rachel's experiences. We know little about the novel within the novel, except that Hester was inspired by Rachel and her situation. We also know little about Rachel's philanthropical work in the East End after regaining wealth, and what we do know is not focalized through her eyes but someone else's, for instance, when Hugh reflects on Rachel's avocation: "What her work was he vaguely apprehended: that she was spending herself and part of her colossal fortune in the East End" (144).

Even when Rachel is devastatingly poor she finds means to give to those around her. After finding work as a typist she meets an old lady who accuses Rachel of taking over the work she used to be offered: "He always employed me till you came" (25). She gives the woman some of what she has to spare and reflects upon the old woman's words: "She looked out dumbly over the wilderness of roofs. The suffering of the world was eating into her soul; the suffering of this vast travailing East London, where people trod each other down to live" (25). She realizes that her background has conditioned her, and that it has provided her a perspective on class structures:

> If I had not been rich once myself I should think as all these people do, that the rich are devils incarnate to let such things go on. They have the power to help us. We have none to help ourselves. But they never use it. The rich grind the poor for their luxuries with their eyes shut, and we grind each other for our daily bread with our eyes open. I have got that woman's work. I have struggled hard enough to get it, but, though I did not realize it, I might have known that I had only got on to the raft by pushing some one else off it. (25)

Rachel spends her time and her fortune in the East End, but she also functions as a lady visitor who pays visits to members of other classes than the working class. She helps others than those who are in material need; in fact, one of the characters she devotes most time to in the course of the novel is Lady Newhaven. Helping Lady Newhaven is selfless or even self-annihilating since Rachel is interested in Hugh, whom Lady Newhaven had an affair with. She has promised to be with Lady Newhaven on the night of the suicidal pact's end even though she herself has more at stake than Lady Newhaven. Nevertheless, Rachel goes to see her saying to herself: "I cannot bear it, and I must bear it. I cannot desert her now. She has no one to turn to but me" (150). In a sense the sort of philanthropy that she is performing can be considered in Bolton's terms as emotional labour (77-78). Rachel is conscious of her feelings towards Lady Newhaven, but strives to conceal them as if she was handling a difficult client or patient. Rachel has the ability to see the need both of the poor and the rich, which she tries to fulfil. Surprised as she was to learn of the poor people's condition when she found herself among them, she is even more surprised at finding "the starved soul in the delicately nurtured, richly clad body, the atrophied spiritual life in hideous contrast with the physical ease and luxury which were choking it" (71).

But helping the people of "society" proves to be more difficult than sharing her bread with the poor:

> She longed to comfort them, to raise them up, to wipe from their hands and garments the muddy gold stains of the gutter into which they had fallen, to smooth away the lines of mean care from their faces. But it had been far simpler in her previous life to share her hard-earned bread with those who needed it than it was now to share her equally hard-earned thoughts and slow gleanings of spiritual knowledge, to share the things which belonged to her peace. (71-72)

Even though Rachel's emotion work is taken up by choice, the upper classes do not need a lady visitor per se; however, she sees that there is a need for her emotional labour. As in *Agnes Grey* the lady visitor functions as a visitor to both poor and rich. Turning the attention to the rich people of "society" can be considered an ironic twist made by the writer to illustrate how shallow the fortunate classes can be. It could also be a way of underlining what is missing, namely the wealthy giving to the poor, as seemingly only Rachel and Hester are interested in the welfare of the poor. As Rachel affirms when she is poor herself, "They have the power to help us. We have none to help ourselves. But they never use it" (25).

Hester, also, sometimes functions as a lady visitor, especially in her relationship with Rachel. Their friendship makes it difficult for Rachel to accept the gifts or money she is offered, but because of, and not in spite of, their friendship she accepts Hester's help. After the inheritance, Rachel is able to return the kindness and help she received from Hester. Though Hester is not in need of financial or material assistance, Rachel can help her spiritually and intellectually, contributing to Hester's physical and psychologically health by coming to visit and by making her stay with the Bishop for a time. It can also be said that Hester's becoming friends with doctor Brown's invalid sister is an act of philanthropy. But her sister in law Mrs Gresley says it must be because "Hester loves adulation [...] she has to go to those below her in the social scale, like Miss Brown, who will give it to her" (52). Mrs

Gresley is very conscious of her own social standing and finds it difficult that Hester comes from an upper class society in London. Although Hester's actions are motivated by philanthropy, Mrs Gresley reveals her narrowness and her jealousy when she accuses Hester of seeking the praise of others. This comment from Mrs Gresley is revealing due to the fact that as a clergyman's wife she would be expected to take part in charity or perform philanthropic work. However, she looks upon Hester's philanthropy as mere confirmation of her own status.

"To be first in the society which they gather round them"

Class and class consciousness represents a central theme in *Red Pottage*. The novel takes a critical stance against the sort of mentality which produces a society incapable of imagining the situation of others, for instance the poor.

Hester has grown up in the house of her aunt, Lady Susan Gresley. It seems as if she has mostly associated with the upper class and finds that things are different in the house of her brother, in "Middleshire." She could still visit her high rank friends, but she "must never mention them, as it was considered the height of vulgarity to speak of people of rank" (51). Hester's sister in law even finds it necessary to warn Hester that "it was a very bad thing to get a name for running after titled people" (51). However, Mrs Gresley wants her husband to be made a bishop (65), so she obviously has aspiration of upward mobility. According to the narrator Mr Gresley "evidently belonged to a social status rather above that of the average clergyman," but Mrs Gresley fares worse, "though his wife may not have done so" (37). It is clear that Mrs Gresley is jealous of Hester's fine clothes and upper-class friends, and it seems as if she wants to keep her in her place, since she neither wants Hester to associate with those above her or those below her on the social scale. The character of Mrs Gresley represents a sort of narrowness which one can associate with people who seek upwards mobility.

In contrast to *Agnes Grey*, *Red Pottage* seems to address more directly the question of class. In the opening of the novel we are presented with the upper-class society of London at the dinner party of Lord and Lady Newhaven. Richard 'Dick' Vernon, an old friend of Lord Newhaven's, visits after four years and comments: "I did not know you had got a handle to your name" (5). This suggests that Newhaven received a title in a later stage of life. At a different dinner party we learn about Sybell Loftus and how she wants to make London society better, and invites "clever people" to dine, since she felt that,

> most of the really "clever people" did not belong to her set. The discovery which all who love adulation quickly make – namely, that the truly appreciative and sympathetic and gifted are for the greater part to be found in a class below their own – was duly made and registered by Sybell. She avowed that class difference were nothing to her with the enthusiasm of all those who since the world began have preferred to be first in the society which they gather round them. (16)

Hester criticises people like Sybell Loftus who can only "sympathize with what one has experienced" (92), and when she talks of being unconscious of class and feeling sympathy for the poor it does not really mean anything to her, because she does not know what it signifies.

Rachel too, is presented as an unimaginative person who can only see things for what they really are, and without her own painful experiences would not have been able to see the poor around her in the way she does after experiencing poverty herself (92-93). Hester confronts her by saying: "There was a slum almost at the back of that great house in Portman Square where you lived many years in luxury with your parents" (93). Hester uses this as a case in point to illustrate that Rachel is someone who will only learn and get stronger through her experiences. People who are unimaginative or who are not able to consider other people's troubles are criticised, and the critique is also directed at people like Miss Barker who cannot

imagine that her method of helping the poor is not the best one. As already suggested, the fact that she is critical of Hester's book implies that she is the sort of district visitor whom *An Idyll* is criticising. In contrast, Hester is portrayed as imaginative and is therefore able to write a book about the poor, without experiencing the situation herself, even though most of her associates cannot quite believe that she is capable of doing so. The novel does not value the experiences of women like Sybell Loftus and Lady Newhaven, but the experiences of Rachel is treasured perhaps because her experience moves beyond the domestic realm. Thus, we understand certain experiences to be valuable; however, Hester's literary imagination is also highly regarded in the novel. Moreover, how would the condition of the poor be made accessible to the literate classes if not someone from the middle or upper classes had the imagination to portray it? For instance, as Elliott contends, Gaskell's *North and South* can be regarded "as a philanthropic act akin to visiting" (25). Cholmondeley's novel also takes a critical look at the philanthropic cause, in that the novel within the novel criticises certain kinds of visitors. The reason for Rachel's eligibility for performing philanthropic acts is that she has once been at the other end of the receiving line.

"Those are the real gifts"

The difficulty of both giving and receiving help is focused on in the course of the novel. It is emphasised that through true gifts, people can help, and perhaps also raise the ability for others to give. *Red Pottage* also raises awareness about aborted gifts.

Rachel knew how it felt to be receiving alms, even from a friend who once was below her in social rank. Because she cared so much for Hester, Rachel accepts her gift after Hester's appeal to her: "'If I were poor, Rachel, how would you bear it if I would not let you help me?' And Rachel had wept slow, difficult tears, and had given Hester the comfort of

helping her" (23). In a sense it is Rachel who offers a gift in this respect, she "gives" Hester comfort by allowing her to help.

Struggling with the inability to help Rachel, Hester refers to a conversation with Hugh Scarlett who claimed that no one could help anyone, and finds it devastating that this seems to be true. Upon this Rachel replies: "Then are love and sympathy nothing? [...] Those are the real gifts. If I were rich to-morrow I should look to you just as I do now for the things which money can't buy. And those are the things [...] which you have always given me, and which I can't do without" (27). Even in her most desperate times Rachel is able to help others. In fact, she is the inspiration not only for Hester's novel, but also Hester's inspiration for becoming a writer:

> And as Hester leaned against Rachel the yearning for her soul towards her suddenly lit up something which had long lain colossal, but inapprehended, in the depths of her minds. [...] She saw, in a dream, terrible, beautiful, inaccessible, but distinct, where her power lay, of which restless bewildering hints had so often mocked her. She had but to touch the houses and they would fall down. [...]
>
> Hester kissed her absently and went out into the new world which had been pressing upon her all her life, the gate of which Love had opened for her. (27)

Rachel's gift to Hester is perhaps the most important gift in the novel. The gift which Hester receives is the ability to give, and her writing represents her gift to the world. When Hester realises that she can write she composes her first novel, which apparently is a social novel since it concerns the poor in the East End. It raises awareness, and from the various allusions to the novel in *Red Pottage* we gather that it attracted a large readership. What Rachel has been given is what Jean Starobinski calls "the most precious thing one can receive within oneself," which is "the power to give." And what Rachel is able to give is also commented on

by Starobinski: “the most precious thing one can give to others is that which awakens the capacity to give in them” (130). That is, Rachel has been given the power to give to others so that they in turn can give; Hester’s novel is a gift which will raise awareness, and might in its turn inspire others to give.

Another important gift in the novel is that of forgiveness. Rachel, who is in every sense a generous giver, forgives Hugh for his past adulterous life and accepts his offer of marriage. But when Hugh admits it was he who drew the short lighter after Lord Newhaven’s suicide, Rachel cannot forgive him any more, and tells him: “Leave me [...] coward and liar, I will have nothing more to do with you” (232). The Bishop, even though he is a good friend of Lord Newhaven’s, is able to talk Rachel into forgiving Hugh. The chapter where the Bishop convinces Rachel to forgive is opened by an epigraph which consists of a quote from Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*: “I thought ‘Now, if I had been a woman, such / As God made women, to save men by love – / By just my love I might have saved this man’” (234). As Rachel earlier in the novel talks of love and sympathy as the real gifts, she must give Hugh her unconditional love, which entails forgiving him and saving him by marriage.

Red Pottage is in a sense about aborted gifts or gifts not reaching their recipients. Rachel’s forgiveness of Hugh comes too late, and he dies before she is able to give herself in marriage to him. Hester’s gift in the form of her new novel is also destroyed or aborted. It is not just the book in itself which is destroyed, but also the benefits of the book had it been sold and published. Hester planned to support the schooling of her nephew, Regie, and in that way help her brother in money matters. She had also planned what sorts of gifts she would give to other people in her family and to her friends:

> When it was published she should give Minna a new sofa for the drawing-room, and Fräulein a fur boa and muff, and Miss Brown a type-writer for her G.F.S work, and Abel a barometer, and each of the servants a new gown, and James those four enormous volumes of Pusey for

> which his soul yearned. And what should she give Rachel – dear Rachel? Ah! What need to give her anything? The book itself was hers. Was it not dedicated to her? (182)

None of these gifts are possible when the book is destroyed, but the dearest gift, the book itself which was dedicated to Rachel is irretrievably lost. The impact that the book may have had had it been published, or rather the gift of inspiration which it could have given the readers, is destroyed. Regie's gift to Hester, in the form of a baked potato, is disastrous as the potato was baked in the flames of her book. Hester who is furious after learning what has happened to her book "thrust[s] him violently from her" (185), and afterwards Regie says: "it was only crumbs afterwards" (190). The scene recalls Starobinski's views on how a gift of food is destroyed in chaos and "is no longer fit for consumption" (124). Regie's gift is not deliberately "attributed to a perverse intention" (124), but the fact that it is prepared in the bonfire where Hester's book was "killed" makes it in a sense perverse.

Though these instances of gifts aborted may seem to leave the two protagonists with broken hearts and broken dreams, the narrator leaves a postscript which signals that life goes on. One can speculate why the postscript has been added to the novel, but it may have been to satisfy a public demanding a happy ending and thus softening the more frequent New Woman novel ending, that of the heroine's defeat (Martino 233). Elaine Showalter expresses disappointment with the New Women writers and claims: "They represent a turning point in the female tradition and they turn inward [...] Given the freedom to explore their experience, they rejected it, or at least tried to deny it" (Showalter 215). Instead of blaming Cholmondeley for not having the courage enough to let her heroine succeed, one could say that the novel finds the positive in a negative outcome. Hester urges Rachel to see the benefits of learning from experience when she reminds her of how she has learnt from her poverty, and soon, she says, she will also learn from her first unhappy love experience with Mr Tristram. Rachel responds:

> I have not reached the place yet; but I can believe that I shall come to it some day, when I shall feel as thankful for that trouble as I do feel now for having known poverty. Yes, Hester, you are right. I was a hard woman, without imagination. I have been taught the only way I could learn – by experience. (Cholmondeley 93)

Even though Hester is the imaginative one, it is not implied that she cannot learn from experience. Thus, Hester's brutal experience upon losing her book can be turned around into something positive, just as in the case of Rachel who has learnt from experience. Ardis finds the ending of *Red Pottage* a pessimistic one, and writes:

> Hester Gresley lives out her life as a spinster. Her second book is never published, and the end of *Red Pottage* finds her still mourning that loss. Her hands heal, but Cholmondeley's narrator does not promise us that she will write, let alone publish, again. In other words, Hester has failed both as a woman and as a writer in her own culture's terms. (343)

Ardis's use of the word "failure" invites a discussion of whether or not Hester actually has failed. The moral lesson of how one can learn by experience is repeated in the novel. Firstly, we know that Hester advices Rachel and makes her see how she has learnt by experience. Secondly, Rachel and the bishop agree that if Hester had stayed in London, where her admirers were, "she would have met with so much sympathy and admiration that her next book would probably have suffered in consequence" (60). According to this sort of moral, then, Hester can gain strength from experience even though she has suffered a severe backlash from her own family. Indeed, in the postscript the narrator tells us: "I seem to see Rachel with children round her, and Dick not far off, and the old light rekindled in Hester's eyes. For Hope and Love and Enthusiasm never die" (251). And one must not forget that Hester Gresley's first book, *An Idyll of East London*, was published and lives its own life as it

were. But Ardis sees her as a failure in "her own culture's terms" thereby implying that the domestic realm, or even England is not able to endorse the new kind of women's writing. Ardis sees the ending of *Red Pottage* as a "retreat" from a society's "unwillingness to endorse the New Woman's agenda of radical social and literary change at the turn of the century" (334). The fact that Hester does not succeed with her second publishing is due to circumstances outside of her control in a patriarchal society, and not due to the lack of talent. For instance, we do not find in the novel that the protagonist is unsure of her own abilities; rather what is reflected is how society in general works against a woman writer. By contrast, an author such as Mr Harvey, whom the narrator implies is not a talented writer, is not challenged due to the fact that he is a man.

Playing with Genre Conventions

Red Pottage borrows elements from the sensational novel and combines it with the New Woman plot. This mixing of genres produces an effect which serves to highlight the theme of reading and education. Furthermore, Cholmondeley's use of elements from the sensation novels heightens the irony of *Red Pottage*.

Red Pottage combines two narratives and two heroines. The two heroines are friends, and to some extent they belong to the same social circle. But due to Hester's work on her second novel they spend a lot of time separated from each other during the narrative. Hester is confined to her brother's parish while Rachel spends time both in the country and in London. The narrative focused on Rachel shares characteristics of a sensational novel where she inhabits the figure of the young heroine. But even though Rachel likens herself to a "conventional heroine of second-rate novels" (Cholmondeley 91), she is, in fact, rather unconventional. She is a woman who has gone through phases of being rich, becoming poor and then rich again. She has no family and her money has left her with great independence.

She lives by herself and her greatest friend except for Hester is the bishop of Southminster. It is also her connection to Hugh that makes her narrative thread stand out as a more sensational tale as he has been involved in an adulterous liaison with Lady Newhaven. Winifred Hughes claims that, "The definitive feature of the sensation genre [...] is the trend to domestication of crime, secrets, and illicit sexuality" (261). According to Hughes, the difference between the adventuress and the more common heroine was blurred, and consequently, "The other characters, and often the reader as well, could no longer tell the difference between the feminine ideal and the bigamist's fraudulent imitation of it" (262). Evidently it is not Rachel who is likened to the sensational heroine, but Lady Newhaven. However, her imitation has been discovered by characters and readers alike.

The narrative focused on Hester borrows elements from the New Woman plot. She establishes herself as a woman writer, and then tragically her life's work is destroyed. As Martino observes, like George Paston's *A Writer of Books*, Cholmondeley's novel does not restrict itself to a single theme – that of the struggling artist – but "combine[s] it with a number of problems relating to women" (224). For instance, Hester's difficulties with the writing process are presented as an outward problem, as she continually has to live up to the role of a spinster sister always ready to contribute to the domestic work in her brother's home. Rachel's plot is also fraught with problems brought on her from outside. Even though her money has given her independence, the society around her expects her to marry, and with money on her hands she has to ward off many suitors. According to Martino, a New Woman novel would traditionally have two different women, one traditional and the other "new." But other characters would also be representative: "When female characters acting as foils to the heroine do not rise to the dignity of a story of their own, we still find them inserted into the main stream of the novel in order to illustrate some point" (Martino 227). Sybell Loftus, Mrs Gresley and Lady Newhaven can be regarded as such foils, all representative of the traditional

domestic woman. These characters are presented as caricatures and are thus ridiculed in the novel. Rachel, on the other hand, can be seen as the more traditional one of the pair which she and Hester make up, but her character is portrayed positively. However, the term traditional is perhaps a bit too strong when it comes to Rachel, who is quite unconventional as she lives, in many respects, an independent life, and moves beyond the domestic sphere in her work as a lady visitor.

According to Martino, New Woman writers avoided romance since it was "an essential component of that Victorian tradition in fiction that they considered obsolete and dangerous, blinding young woman readers to the realities of life and perpetuating a system of ignorance and submission" (226). However, Rachel's story is a romantic and dramatic story, and the man she falls in love with has been involved in adultery. The other romantic character, Lady Newhaven, is seemingly more a character of ridicule, a means to show how farfetched the sensational novels are from real life. She is often seen reading a novel, and she also pictures herself as in a scene from one of the novels she reads. Having few good personal traits, the fault of her character may be due to her education. Martino writes: "Escapist reading was often seen as stemming from an inadequate education for women, a recurring topic in New Woman novels" (226). Lady Newhaven is unable to see Hester Gresley's talents and finds it "curious [...] how the books are mostly written by the people who know least of life." She thinks that if she wrote a book herself "with all the deep side of life in it, and one's own religious feelings, and described love and love's tragedy as they really are, what a sensation it would make!" (Cholmondeley 96).

Belonging to the upper class, and being a married woman, Lady Newhaven represents the kind of female subjectivity that can only sympathize with what they have experienced, like Sybell Loftus (92). If we presume that *An Idyll of East London* is a social novel, the world depicted in it is so far away from Lady Newhaven's own world that she cannot even

imagine it. But she is convinced that her own story would be "a sensation," the word itself playing on the sort of novels which Lady Newhaven probably reads, the sensation novels. The omniscient third person narrator of *Red Pottage* is ironic and thus leaves an impression of a certain detachment, in a sense mirroring a society lacking ethical values. The narrator reserves the irony for certain characters, but is sympathetic when it comes to Rachel and Hester, perhaps reflecting their "true" values.

Converting Life into Fiction

Reading is a prominent element in *Red Pottage*, and there are several instances of people reading, for instance, Lady Newhaven, and each chapter opens with an epigraph by a famous writer or poet. There are also several allusions within the novel which the attentive reader will notice. Rainwater and Scheick also find that *Red Pottage* gives instructions to the reader of the turn of the century: "They should become creative readers actively reading their own birthright into the art of their life" (114). According to Rainwater and Scheick, Cholmondeley explicitly describes "the desirable reader" in her novel. This creative reader "interacts imaginatively and creatively with the text so as to come as close to thinking the thoughts of another (the author)" (102). In other words, what Rainwater and Scheick seem to argue is that Cholmondeley writes the novel to influence and educate her readers:

> To be true to life, to achieve fidelity (genuineness and loyalty in life), Cholmondeley insists, one must become a creative reader by preferring such true-to-life art, this art, true to life because it reclaims the divine birthright of humanity, will both genuinely reflect and influence people and culture. (115)

The creative reader should read realist fiction and not delight themselves in improper art, art that "emphasizes artifice over genuineness" (112). But surprisingly Rainwater and Scheick do not point to the fact that Cholmondeley makes use of a sensational plot more along the lines

of what Lady Newhaven would read, and how this influences a work that they claim tries to be true to life. I agree that all the literary references in *Red Pottage* may serve as a reminder of the great effect of literature on the public, and in effect, Cholmondeley postulates herself as a reformer, a writer with a mission. Perhaps the philanthropic theme functions as a reminder of the social novel and the Condition of England novel in the middle of the nineteenth century, as Mitchell argues that "one strand of New Woman fiction harks back to the early Victorian social problem novel" (582). Even though traditionally conceived philanthropy seems to play a minor role in the novel, the fact that one of the protagonists can be considered a Lady Bountiful and the other has written a philanthropic or social novel underlines the philanthropic and educational role of the novel.

Mistaking Paper Money for Real Money

The title of the novel plays on the concept of broken illusions. Thus, the reader is made aware of the difference between real and pretence in the novel. When Hugh discovers that he truly loves Rachel he reflects upon his relationship with Lady Newhaven, and how he once thought that he loved her, but realising he never did: "He had sold his birthright for a mess of red pottage, as surely as any man or woman who marries for money or liking. He had not believed in his birthright, and holding it to be worthless, had given it to the first person who had offered him anything in exchange" (144). Hugh's use of the biblical expression is the only usage of the novel's title within the novel. The title is an allusion to the biblical story of Esau and Jacob. In the story, Esau sells his birthright for a mess of red pottage (Rainwater and Scheick 104). Hugh regrets his relationship with Lady Newhaven badly, not only because it was morally wrong, but also due to the consequences it brought on him. Reflecting of the suicide pact with Lord Newhaven, Hugh thinks to himself: "To be hounded out of life because he had mistaken paper money for real was not only unfair, it was grotesque" (144). The title

and Hugh's use of the expression allude to the fact that people give up important things (their birthright) for a short-lived material output (mess of red pottage). Rainwater and Scheick find that what this "red pottage" signifies in the novel is "a disappointingly artificial, material social existence" (104). However, Hugh is transformed by Rachel and is redeemed by her, emphasising her redemptive character (Rainwater and Scheick 104). Hugh seems to belong to the shallow and false upper social scale, but his character is valued in the sense that he is drawn to Rachel who seems to be the embodiment of goodness. And early on he also approves of Hester's book. In fact, there are several instances in the novel where things or people turn out to be something else than what one thought at first.

The narrator reveals early on that the loser of the drawing of lots is Hugh, while both Rachel and Lady Newhaven mistake it to be Lord Newhaven. The character that most obviously comes to mind when discussing things that are not what they seem to be is Lady Newhaven. Or rather, the narrator portrays her sarcastically, and the reader is led to see her conduct as artificial, but on several occasions it seems as if she has no knowledge of being false herself. This is how Lady Newhaven is portrayed after finding out that her husband had known about her affair with Hugh all the time, and after her husband and Hugh had drawn lots:

> Her attitude had the touch of artificiality which was natural to her. The deluge had arrived, and unconsciously she met it, as she would have made a heroine meet it had she been a novelist, in a white dressing-gown and pink ribbons in a stereotyped attitude of despair on a divan. (9)

Lord Newhaven comes to see his wife after the drawing of lots, and after letting her know that he knew all the time, he leaves her because he "particularly dislike[s] a scene" (11). Disregarding her husband's comment, Lady Newhaven indeed creates a scene: "With a sudden movement she flung herself upon her knees before him and caught his arm. The

attitude suggested an amateur" (12). Lord Newhaven seems calm and collected after just revealing that he knew about his wife's affair, but presumably he has recognized her as an actress of sorts long ago. Yet, it seems as if Lady Newhaven does not realise what sort of impression she leaves on others. When she receives a visit from Rachel she describes herself in flattering terms: "I never speak of what concerns myself. I am *most* reserved. I dare say you have noticed how reserved I am. I live in my shell" (32). Rachel detects this artificiality in Lady Newhaven but cannot help herself from helping her, at least not when Lady Newhaven behaves with real anguish. When she tells Rachel about her affair and the drawing of lots she appears for the first time genuine in her despair and then, "Rachel's heart went out to her the moment she was natural" (33). But as Lady Newhaven recovers from her earnestness, she "recalls a phrase which she had made up the night before. 'I look upon it as a spiritual marriage'" (33). In example after example we find that the character of Lady Newhaven is infected with falseness; she writes, in a sense, her own tragic love affair and imagines the next chapters as she goes along. If there are any genuine feelings in her they seem disguised by her elaborate thoughts about herself and of events.

The contrast between pretence and artificiality on the one hand, and honesty, genuine philanthropy and true values on the other, can also be found in the novel's scrutiny of Christian values, the church and the clergy. Lady Newhaven, for instance, also regards herself as a good Christian and the narrator writes: "She had gone through the twenty-seven years of her life believing herself to be a religious and virtuous person. She was so accustomed to the idea that it had become a habit" (Cholmondeley 10). The good Christian Lady Newhaven is an adulterer, and she seems oblivious to the prospect of her children losing their father, and only thinks of herself when believing that Lord Newhaven drew the short lighter: "I have been so horribly frightened. Oh if he might only go away, and that I might never, never look upon his face again!" (150).

The clergyman, James Gresley, is likewise portrayed in unflattering terms. He is "not a man of compromise" (82), and he goes after dissenters and his own sister with the same vigour, even if Hester's "crime" is only that of not attending morning service. His "*nom de guerre*" is that of "Veritas," Latin for truth. Hester is astonished by his choice of pen name and asks: "But is not *Truth* rather a large name to adopt as a *nom de guerre*? Might it not seem rather – er – in a layman it would appear arrogant." But Mr Gresley is not concerned and replies: "I am not a layman, and I do not pretend to write on subjects on which I am ignorant" (43). After reading his work on "Modern Dissent" Hester says: "Why not hold out our hands to our fellow-creatures instead of striking at them?" whereupon James replies: "I have no belief in holding out our hands to the enemies of Christ," and the implication is that everyone who did not hold his narrow view on Christianity was an enemy (45). Hester is shocked by his views, and after leaving his presence she says to herself: "According to him, our Lord must have been the first Nonconformist" (45). Consequently, James is exposed as someone who has a rigid view on Christianity and on all who do not follow his example. He is contrasted with the bishop, a very good friend both of Hester and Rachel. The bishop's goodness is shown through his care for Hester when she is ill and his devotion for Rachel when he convinces her to forgive Hugh. The bishop seems to be teaching his doctrine through the very gifts that Rachel tells Hester are the greatest – those of love and sympathy.

Red Pottage is an interesting New Woman novel as it portrays a society in transformation and women's role in transition. The figure of the New Woman is in a sense under scrutiny by the narrator, as both real and fake idealists are represented in the novel. The figure of Miss Barker, the "apostle of humanity," is presented as a philanthropic woman, but through observations made by the narrator she also figures as a sort of New Woman. Her appearance is unfeminine as she is a "large-faced woman," who talks in an "intense manner" (Cholmondeley 18). And she disregards common politeness when she puts "both elbows on

the table after the manner of her kind" (19). Seemingly, the character of Miss Barker represents the woman who regards herself as a New Woman and is thought to be so by the public just by being eccentric. According to Cunningham there are two essential points to consider in order to see the real New Woman: "Firstly, a woman was only genuinely New if her conflict with social convention was on *a matter of principle*." To be eccentric would not suffice to be a New Woman. "Secondly," she says, "the New Woman's radical stance was taken on matters of personal choice. It was not based on any recognisable movement or organisation" (10). Miss Barker, who talks about "our cause," is most likely associated with an organisation of philanthropic mission. Rachel, who in a sense functions as Miss Barker's opposite, has started her philanthropic work due to personal choice since she once experienced poverty first hand. And Hester does not write because she wants fame or wishes to live a life of flamboyance as Lady Newhaven would if she was a writer. She writes because she finds she has a talent for it and because she wants to influence society through her writing and to "touch the houses and they would fall down" (Cholmondeley 27). Her criticism of society and church were a "matter of principle." Accordingly, both Rachel and Hester represent the "real" New Woman, but by figuring Rachel as a woman who is more traditionally Victorian in her sentiments – she is philanthropic and is described in the postscript surrounded by children – Cholmondeley does not undermine the value of the traditional feminine role. This feminine role does not necessarily imply complying with Victorian bourgeois ideals, but Rachel does indeed marry and become a mother. However, Dick Vernon whom she marries is probably just as unconventional as Rachel is, as he is not interested in conforming to bourgeois society either.

The novel thus draws attention to the stereotypical figures of the New Woman and the sensational heroine and ridicules them both. In contrast, Rachel and Hester stand out as they are presented as sincere and not pretentious. Through the embodiment of these "true"

characters the novel also values the true philanthropy and the true gift. The friendship between Hester and Rachel sustain them in difficult times, but they are also able to use their true qualities to help others. Rachel helps others by working as lady visitor to both poor and rich, and Hester helps others by using her literary gift to educate her readers.

Conclusion

The figure of the Lady Bountiful appears both in Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey* and Mary Cholmondeley's *Red Pottage*, although the term itself does not appear in the novels. The figure is valuable for the novels' didactic function as well as for their display of social critique. There is good reason to believe that the importance of philanthropy for women in the nineteenth century in England was great. Some critics point to the significance of charitable organisations for the development of women's participation in the public realm, while others contend that philanthropic work represented an extension of domestic work outside the home, and that the Lady Bountiful was an established role for the ladies of the landed classes. While this thesis has not sought to establish any causal relationship between women's philanthropy and women's emancipation, it is fair to conclude that a concern for women's role in society and their educational opportunities nonetheless represents a theme in both novels.

The fact that both novels have been undervalued and under-read actually contributes to making them interesting objects of study. This thesis has not tried to provide an explanation for the lack of attention given to these writers, and has only barely touched upon the issue. In Anne Brontë's case it seems to be that due to her early death and her sisters' fame, she has been largely forgotten. Another reason might be that *Agnes Grey* has been regarded as too simple, too conservative or too religious. While this might be a plausible conclusion when compared with her sisters' works, if the novel is examined in its own right, it displays surprising social critique. When it comes to Mary Cholmondeley, and other New Woman writers, their popularity in their own time makes the lack of more recent attention harder to fathom. However, great women writers such as Virginia Woolf who followed shortly after may have contributed to a neglect of the fin-de-siècle women writers. I am not suggesting here that these writers are virtually unknown, but they have not received the

attention they deserve from academics. It is my hope that this thesis has shown that there is no good reason for the critical neglect of these novels

The protagonists in the novels have different experiences with philanthropy but there are connections between them. Agnes Grey is a vicar's daughter and since the visiting of the poor comes naturally to her we can assume that it has been a part of her upbringing. Agnes Grey was thus educated to be aware of the poor and their needs, whereas Rachel West had been oblivious to the conditions of the poor until she found herself amongst them. But what is interesting is that both of these characters perform their philanthropic work outside of any organisation and that, in part, it is a formative experience. The two novels also question and criticise the lack of true values and the different ways in which philanthropic work would be organized, and neither the clergy nor people of high rank are spared.

The novels' emphasis on true values is inspirational and serves an educational purpose. One can argue that both novelists sought to influence the woman reader and make their readership aware that women's education was deficient. Their use of irony and their experimentation with form invite the reader to become actively engaged in addition to being entertained. *Agnes Grey* is experimental in the sense that it deploys the first person female narrator, previously unexplored in Victorian fiction (Langland, *Anne Brontë* 31). *Red Pottage* experiments with elements of the sensational novel, a genre it eventually argues against.

Both novels are critical of class power and of the clergy. Their portrayals of clergymen serve to bring out the contrast between the true benefactor and the pretender, between true charity and pretence, and the same applies to the female philanthropists. Through the ways in which they are represented it is clear that both Mr Hatfield in *Agnes Grey* and James Gresley in *Red Pottage* are judged by the narrators of the novels, and that their teaching of Christianity is questioned. The classification of *Red Pottage* as New Woman

fiction is interesting as the novel presents both genuine and false versions of the New Woman. In this sense, it is as though the novel resists being categorized as New Woman fiction.

Both novels portray the shallowness and narrowness of upper- and middle-class society. The narratives display "the starved soul in the delicately nurtured, richly clad body" (Cholmondeley 71). They criticise contemporary bourgeois society but also point to what might be wrong, and turn the attention to education in general, and perhaps specifically the education of women of the upper classes. They thus "tell the truth, for truth always conveys its own moral to those who are able to conceive it" (Brontë, "Preface" 3). However, truth may be dangerous, as Lord Newhaven affirms when talking about Hester's first novel: "Her first book was very clever [...] and, what was more, it was true. I hope for her own sake she will outgrow her love of truth, or it will make deadly enemies for her" (Cholmondeley 87). Lord Newhaven's warning thus foreshadows the "death" of Hester's second novel. But neither Hester, or for that sake Anne Brontë and Mary Cholmondeley, are trying to write "little goody-goody books" (Cholmondeley 60) in order to please their audience. Through their position as writers they are able to make the public aware of social issues and also to promote "true" ideals.

The protagonists of *Agnes Grey* and *Red Pottage* have been judged as failures by some critics. Agnes has been called a failure by Tobin due to her lack of social control, while Hester has been called a failure by Ardis since she does not fully realize her ambition to be a writer. However, I find that these novels do not end on a note of failure for the female protagonists. Rather, they expose the forces that women are up against in a bourgeois society, in which pretence and false values count for more than true philanthropy.

In retrospect I find that these novels contain many interesting aspects to which I did not foresee at the outset. While it would have been interesting to explore different aspects of each of the two novels separately, it has been rewarding to focus on how the theme of

philanthropy figures in the two texts, published half a century apart. In extension of this study, it would be appealing to explore the theme of philanthropy or the figure of Lady Bountiful in the works of both male and female authors from the Victorian period, or to look at how the portrayal of the female visitor changes over time in different literary periods.

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