

THE COQUETTE'S PRISON: ROSALIE MURRAY AND THE FAILURE OF HIGH-SOCIETY MARRIAGE AS A PATH TO AUTONOMY

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Abstract

Research on women's agency in Victorian literature typically focuses on the marginalized figure of the governess. At the same time, the upper-class coquette—who appears to wield power—remains overlooked in critical readings as a victim of systemic oppression. This research examines the coquette's prison in Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey*, specifically analyzing how Rosalie Murray's pursuit of high-society marriage serves as a mechanism of self-erasure rather than a path to autonomy. The study employs a qualitative approach rooted in feminist literary criticism and historical realism. The data consist of textual evidence from the novel, analyzed through close reading and character-comparative analysis. The research evaluates the transition from pre-marital performative power to post-marital domestic entrapment. The results indicate that Rosalie's flirtatious artillery provides only a temporary and illusory agency. Upon marrying Sir Thomas Ashby for rank and wealth, she experiences a catastrophic loss of freedom, becoming a prisoner and a slave within the physical and psychological enclosures of Ashby Park. The research concludes that Victorian high-society marriage, when divorced from moral compatibility, leads to psychological petrification. Further studies are recommended to employ a digital humanities approach to map motifs of spatial and psychological confinement across the broader canon of the Brontës and to identify systemic patterns of gender inequality.

Keywords: Anne Brontë, Agnes Grey, Coquette's Prison, Female Autonomy, Victorian Marriage

INTRODUCTION

The literary legacy of the Brontë sisters has long been dominated by the dark romanticism of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and the rebellious subjectivity of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. However, contemporary scholarship has increasingly focused on the youngest sister, Anne Brontë, whose debut novel, *Agnes Grey* (1847), offers a stark, unflinching look at the Victorian social fabric. Unlike the gothic or high-romance elements of her sisters' works, Anne Brontë's narrative is grounded in a rigorous, almost clinical realism that prioritizes moral instruction and social critique over emotional melodrama. Central to this critique is the character of Rosalie Murray, the eldest daughter of the wealthy Murray family at Horton Lodge, whose trajectory serves as a poignant case study in the limitations of Victorian female agency. Through Rosalie, Brontë explores the coquette's prison—a paradoxical state where a young woman's brief window of social power

through flirtation leads directly to a lifetime of domestic and psychological incarceration within a high-society marriage.

In the mid-19th century, the role of the governess provided a unique vantage point from which to observe the inner workings of the landed gentry. As Agnes Grey moves from the sheltered, principled environment of her father's parsonage into the service of the Bloomfields and later the Murrays, she acts as a silent dissembler, recording the moral decay of the families she serves. It is within the Murray household that the novel Agnes Grey's most significant gender-based conflict unfolds. Rosalie Murray is introduced as a paragon of the Victorian belle—beautiful, accomplished in showy arts, and acutely aware of her market value in the marriage mart. For Rosalie, autonomy is initially defined as the ability to attract and manipulate multiple suitors, a practice she describes as shooting them through the heart. However, contemporary analysis suggests this behavior is not merely a sign of vanity; it is a desperate attempt to exert control in a world that offers her only one significant life event: a strategically advantageous marriage.

Although several scholars, such as Lecaros (2011) and Langland (2012), have explored the liminal position of the governess as a social observer, highlighting this gap shows the importance of your work. It can inspire the audience to see its relevance. There is a dearth of studies that treat Rosalie Murray as the primary subject of analysis, underscoring the need for this research. Even fewer have specifically traced the temporal transition from pre-marital performative power to post-marital psychological confinement as a cohesive process. Simonton (2017) briefly addresses the illusory agency of young women but does not explicitly connect it to the mechanisms of self-erasure within marriage. This research aims to fill that gap by focusing its analysis on this contrasting transition, employing the concept of the coquette's prison as a new analytical framework that integrates the spatial, psychological, and legal dimensions of the institution of upper-class Victorian marriage.

The coquette's prison is a conceptual framework that highlights the transient nature of female power in the 1840s (Simonton, 2017, p. 42). Before marriage, a young woman of Rosalie's status enjoyed a degree of social visibility and influence through flirtation; yet, as Brontë illustrates, this power is illusory and acts as a preamble to the self-erasure of the female self-occurring under Victorian marital doctrine. Rosalie's pursuit of Sir Thomas Ashby—a man she openly admits to detesting—is driven by the desire for Ashby Park, the physical embodiment of rank and wealth. Brontë (1847/2026) meticulously documents the failure of this pursuit. Instead of gaining autonomy through her elevated status as Lady Ashby, Rosalie finds herself in an enclosure of entrapment, subject to the whims of a dissipated husband and the suffocating surveillance of a mother-in-law.

Anne Brontë's realism is particularly hard because it refuses to grant Rosalie a romantic redemption (Carnell, 2014, p. 5). When Agnes visits Ashby Park toward the end of the novel, she finds a woman who is physically and spiritually diminished. The once-radiant Rosalie describes herself as a prisoner and a slave, trapped in a cycle of boredom and resentment. This outcome serves as Brontë's most severe didactic warning: that the commodification of marriage and the neglect of moral compatibility in favor of class ascension are catastrophic for the female psyche. Rosalie's failure to achieve autonomy through high-society marriage stands in sharp contrast to Agnes Grey's own path. Agnes,

despite her lower social standing and her labor as a governess, eventually achieves a marriage of true minds founded on shared values and mutual respect.

Although originating in 19th-century literary texts, this research has interdisciplinary relevance and underscores its importance for addressing ongoing social issues. The concept of the "coquette's prison" offers an analytical framework for understanding how social and legal structures within patriarchal cultures transform women's agency into domestic traps. This issue remains highly relevant in current debates on gender equality, symbolic violence, and social policy. This article aims to contribute to cultural studies and social policy discussions that are central to this journal's focus, highlighting the urgency of these conversations.

The significance of Rosalie Murray has often been sidelined in favor of discussing Agnes's own struggles with social invisibility and labor (Botelho, 2025, p. 1). However, by focusing on the coquette's prison, this study aims to reposition Agnes Grey as a seminal text in the Woman Question of the Victorian era (Botelho, 2025, p. 1). Brontë's critique extends beyond the plight of the working governess to encompass the systemic entrapment of the very women who appear to sit at the top of the social hierarchy (Simonton, 2017, p. 55). Through a close reading of Rosalie's interactions with her mother, her suitors, and her eventual husband, this article will utilize contemporary feminist and historical frameworks to analyze the failure of high-society marriage as a vehicle for autonomy.

Furthermore, the environment of Horton Lodge serves as a microcosm for broader societal issues. The Murray children's lack of moral education—their roughness and unprincipled nature—is a direct result of a domestic sphere that prioritizes outward polish over internal virtue. Rosalie's mother, Mrs. Murray, acts as the primary architect of Rosalie's entrapment, coaching her in the arts of insinuating, skilful flattery and rouse[ing] her dormant vanity to secure a wealthy match. This dynamic underscores Brontë's belief that the failure of the Victorian home begins with parents' failure to view their daughters as anything more than social commodities.

To understand Rosalie's prison, one must first examine the artillery of her flirtation. She views courtship as a game of conquest, where the idea that one conquest would be enough is rejected in favor of breaking all their hearts save one. This competitive performance is her only means of asserting presence in a society that otherwise ignores her intellectual potential. The suitors—the ugly beast Sir Thomas Ashby, the clever but ultimately rejected Mr. Hatfield, and the insensate Mr. Weston—represent different facets of the Victorian male gaze that Rosalie attempts to navigate and manipulate. Yet, her wisdom and prudence in managing these men are ultimately self-defeating.

The physical manifestation of Rosalie's failure is Ashby Park itself. Described by Agnes as princely, it becomes for Rosalie a site of desolation where she must play the hermit. The transition from the buoyant step and radiant smiles of her youth to a state where she feels life, health, and beauty wasting away marks the completion of the prison walls. Brontë emphasizes that the pleasure of possession is a hollow substitute for the promise of anticipation. The presence of her infant daughter, rather than providing the genuine affection Agnes suggests, only serves as a reminder of her lost youth and her husband's disappointment that the child is not a male heir.

The trajectory of Rosalie Murray from the flirtatious belle of Horton Lodge to the embittered mistress of Ashby Park provides a devastating critique of 19th-century marital expectations. By examining the nuances of Rosalie's entrapment, this paper illustrates how Anne Brontë dismantles the happily-ever-after trope commonly associated with her contemporaries (Botelho, 2025, p. 2). The coquette's prison is not just a physical space but a psychological one, created by the intersection of gendered social norms, legal inequities, and a moral vacuum within the landed gentry. Through this analysis, Agnes Grey emerges as an essential narrative of female resistance and a profound commentary on the true meaning of independence (Botelho, 2025, p. 2).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The concept of 'coquette's prison,' as the analytical framework for this research, is built upon three theoretical foundations. First, the theory of Separate Spheres (Poovey, 2014) divides social space into masculine public and feminine domestic realms, placing upper-class women in a paradoxical position: they are the center of familial honor yet alienated from public life. Second, the legal doctrine of coverture positions a wife as a legal entity absorbed into her husband's legal identity (Ward, 2013), effectively erasing women's independence within marriage. Third, the concept of illusory agency (Simonton, 2017) illustrates how young women develop temporary strategies of power that ultimately deepen their subjugation. Applying these frameworks to Rosalie Murray's case provides concrete insights into how these theories manifest in real-life situations, making the analysis more tangible and relevant for the audience.

METHOD

This research employs a qualitative approach utilizing three primary techniques: (1) close reading of primary texts, focusing on dialogue, internal monologue, and spatial descriptions related to Rosalie Murray; (2) comparative character analysis between Rosalie and Agnes Grey, utilizing a contrast matrix that encompasses educational background, value orientation, and post-marital trajectories (Summers, 2025, p. 8); and (3) discourse analysis based on the framework of Victorian gender ideology, particularly the Separate Spheres doctrine and the doctrine of coverture, to interpret textual data within the socio-legal context of the nineteenth century. The data collection instrument consists of thematic analysis cards that categorize text units into categories such as performative agency, commodification of status, physical confinement, and psychological petrification (Carnell, 2014, p. 1).

The foundational stage of the methodology involves a rigorous close reading of the primary text to contrast the moral and psychological trajectories of the novel's two primary female figures: Agnes Grey and Rosalie Murray. This comparative method is essential for assessing how disparate educational backgrounds and moral foundations lead to drastically divergent outcomes in the competitive Victorian marriage market (Botelho, 2025, p. 1). The analysis focuses on specific textual evidence regarding the Grey family's marriage, grounded in earnest affection and shared principles, serving as a direct foil to the Murray-Ashby union, presented as a cold transaction for rank and wealth.

By systematically tracking Rosalie's interactions with her suitors—most notably the ugly beast Sir Thomas Ashby and the clever Mr. Hatfield—this study documents the shift from her perceived power as a coquette to her eventually self-identified status as a prisoner. This approach uses the governess's gaze as a unique narrative tool to observe the internal decay of the landed gentry (Langland, 2012, p. 40). The methodology treats Agnes not merely as a protagonist but as a sociological participant-observer who records the degradation of female autonomy within the households she serves (Botelho, 2025, p. 8).

Furthermore, the analysis scrutinizes the dialogue and internal monologues of both women to gauge the petrifying effect of high society on the female psyche. By contrasting Agnes's eventual marriage of true minds with Rosalie's loveless union, the methodology highlights Brontë's didactic intent to privilege moral compatibility over financial security (Lecaros, 2011, p. 64).

The second stage of the methodology situates Brontë's narrative within the Woman Question and the ideological work of gender in the mid-19th century (Poovey, 2014, p. 12). The research applies contemporary feminist criticism to analyze the specific limitations placed upon Victorian women, particularly the doctrine of Separate Spheres and the legal reality of coverture. This framework is vital for understanding why Rosalie's pursuit of autonomy through flirtation is inherently self-defeating; her only available path to social advancement—marriage—necessarily involves the legal and psychological erasure of her independent selfhood (Summers, 2025, p. 6).

The study further explores the role of the Victorian family as an institution for reproducing class and gender norms (Berry, 2011, p. 210). By examining Mrs. Murray's active coaching of Rosalie in insinuating, skillful flattery, and in rousing her dormant vanity, the analysis demonstrates how maternal figures served as the primary architects of their daughters' entrapment. This stage of the method draws upon scholarship regarding the devalued intellectual labor of the governess and the commodification of the middle-class belle to highlight the systemic nature of Rosalie's crisis (Ahmad, 2015, p. 44). By analyzing the merciless pursuit of status over moral compatibility, the study identifies the Murray household as a microcosm of the broader Victorian socio-economic engine that traded female liberty for landed security (Lecaros, 2011, p. 3.2).

Additionally, the research analyzes the male gaze and the arsenal of looks and words Rosalie uses to manipulate suitors, interpreting these actions not as simple vanity but as a resistance against the inevitable loss of agency (Simonton, 2017, p. 42). This provides a necessary context for the results section, which examines the catastrophic failure of these tactics once the marriage contract is signed.

The final methodological stage evaluates Brontë's use of hard realism to portray the psychological consequences of marital failure (Carnell, 2014, p. 5). Unlike the romanticized conclusions or gothic escapes typical of other 19th-century fiction, Brontë provides a stark, unvarnished depiction of post-marital desolation. This study analyzes the physical setting of Ashby Park as an objective correlative for Rosalie's internal state, documenting its transition from a stately mansion of desire to a site of desolation where she must play the hermit.

The methodology involves cross-referencing Rosalie's pre-marital buoyant step and radiant smiles with her post-marital altered appearance, plumpness... reduced, and melancholy sigh to quantify her loss of autonomy. To ensure the study's relevance to current academic discourse, the analysis incorporates a library of contemporary references specializing in Victorian domesticity, the legal imagination, and Brontëan studies (Ward, 2013, p. 55). This contemporary lens helps to move the analysis beyond simple character critique toward a broader socio-legal assessment of how 19th-century marriage functioned as a prison for the women it purportedly exalted (Summers, 2025, p. 11).

The study examines the presence of the infant daughter as a methodological pivot-point, analyzing Rosalie's inability to find solace in motherhood as the final indicator of her psychological incarceration. By synthesizing these qualitative data points—character trajectory, ideological constraints, and aesthetic realism—the study provides a robust defense of the thesis that Rosalie Murray's transition represents the ultimate failure of high-society marriage as a vehicle for female agency. The method relies on the unflinching nature of Brontë's prose to provide the evidence needed to dismantle the happily-ever-after trope commonly associated with her contemporaries (Lecaros, 2011, p. 1).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The Illusory Agency of Flirtation

The analysis of Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey* reveals that Rosalie Murray's extensive use of flirtation is not merely a character flaw of vanity, but a strategic, albeit ultimately failed, attempt to secure autonomy within a rigid patriarchal framework (Summers, 2025, p. 150). This artillery of looks, words, and social manipulation constitutes what this study terms the illusory agency of the coquette—a temporary state of power that precedes and paradoxically facilitates the permanent self-erasure of marriage (Simonton, 2017, p. 42). Rosalie enters the narrative as a young woman acutely aware of her market value in the Victorian marriage mart. Her self-described goal is to enjoy herself thoroughly, and coquet with all the world until she is on the verge of becoming an old maid. This performative flirtation serves as her primary means of asserting presence in a social sphere that largely ignores her intellectual potential. By refusing to limit herself to a single suitor, she temporarily defies the teleological pull toward a domestic role (Summers, 2025, p. 6).

Her interactions with the rector, Mr. Hatfield, provide the clearest evidence of this performative agency. Rosalie views Hatfield not as a potential partner, but as a target for conquest. She admits that she enjoys lifting the veil from his eyes and finds gratification in his agony of mind upon her refusal of his proposal. In these moments, Rosalie experiences a sense of dominance: I am delighted with myself for my prudence, my self-command, my heartlessness, if you please. As contemporary scholars note, such behavior is a survival mechanism for women whose only path to social advancement is through a transaction that will ultimately strip them of their rights (Poovey, 2014, p. 12).

Rosalie's flirtation is characterized by a deliberate use of physical and social artillery to maintain suitors in a state of suspense. She is coached by her mother, Mrs.

Murray, in the arts of insinuating, skillful flattery, and the cultivation of dormant vanity. This maternal influence underscores the systemic nature of the coquette's development; the Victorian home often acted as a training ground where daughters were treated as social commodities rather than sentient beings (Botelho, 2025, p. 1).

Rosalie's treatment of the curate, Mr. Weston, further illuminates the limits of her agency. Unlike her genuine (if distorted) engagement with Hatfield, her pursuit of Weston is an exercise in pure power. She vows to fix that man and shoot him through the heart simply because he initially appears insensate to her charms. By compelling his attention, she seeks to validate her own irresistibility (Lecaros, 2011, p. 81). However, this pursuit is hollow; it does not aim for emotional connection but for the total subjugation of the male subject—a mirror image of the subjugation she will soon face as a wife (Summers, 2025, p. 11).

The failure of flirtation as a path to autonomy becomes evident the moment Rosalie transitions to the role of Lady Ashby. Her marriage to Sir Thomas Ashby is the sealed fate she both desired for its status and feared for its constraints. Brontë's hard realism shines through in the depiction of Rosalie after only a year of marriage: her plumpness is reduced, her radiant smiles are gone, and she is replaced by a woman of dreary composure.

Rosalie's pre-marital power is revealed to have been an illusion because it was contingent upon her availability. Once she is legally bound to Ashby, her artillery no longer functions to secure her freedom; instead, it is reframed by her husband as coquetry and extravagance that brings him dishonour. She finds herself a prisoner and a slave in the very park she once coveted. This shift illustrates the catastrophic consequences of trading moral compatibility for rank and wealth—a central didactic warning in Brontë's work (Lecaros, 2011, p. 64).

Discussion of Rosalie's post-marital life at Ashby Park highlights the physical and psychological reality of her prison. The presence of her mother-in-law, who acts as a usurper, a tyrant... and a spy, ensures that Rosalie is under constant surveillance. Her husband, the ugly beast who has turned out to be ten times worse than she expected, exerts control by limiting her social interactions and forcing her to play the hermit in the country.

Rosalie's despair is magnified by her inability to find solace in motherhood. She views her infant daughter not as a source of genuine affection, as Agnes suggests, but as a potential rival who might grow up to eclipse her. Furthermore, she resents that the child is not a boy, as a male heir would have at least secured her position within the estate's legal line of succession. This rejection of maternal domesticity marks the total collapse of the happily-ever-after trope that Rosalie initially hoped to inhabit.

The case of Rosalie Murray demonstrates that in the mid-Victorian era, the coquette's agency was a fragile, temporary construct that served only to lead her into a deeper state of enclosure (Gordon, 2022, p. 50). Her failure to achieve autonomy through a high-society marriage stands in sharp contrast to Agnes Grey's path. While Agnes accepts the yoke of labor as a governess, she retains her moral and intellectual integrity, eventually securing a marriage grounded in mutual respect and shared principles. Rosalie, conversely, loses her selfhood to a man she detests and despises, proving that without a

foundation of virtue, the pursuit of status leads only to a petrifying of the heart (Lecaros, 2011, p. 1; Carnell, 2014, p. 5).

The "Merciless Pursuit" of Status

In *Agnes Grey*, Anne Brontë (1847/2026) provides a scathing critique of the Victorian landed gentry's merciless pursuit of social status, a drive that fundamentally distorts the moral landscape of the Murray family and ultimately leads to the domestic imprisonment of Rosalie Murray. This pursuit is not merely a background social pressure but an active, destructive force that prioritizes commodification over character, and rank over reality (Summers, 2025, p. 150). The Murray household serves as a primary site where status is treated as a supreme good, often at the direct expense of ethical development and personal autonomy (Botelho, 2025, p. 1).

The pursuit of status begins with the educational grooming of Rosalie and Matilda Murray. At Horton Lodge, education is stripped of its intellectual and moral purpose, replaced by the acquisition of showy accomplishments designed solely to increase a daughter's marketability in the marriage mart. Brontë highlights that Rosalie's mind was never... cultivated and her intellect, at best, was somewhat shallow, precisely because her mother, Mrs. Murray, valued outward polish over internal virtue.

Mrs. Murray acts as the primary strategist in this pursuit, treating her daughters as assets to be deployed for maximum familial gain (Berry, 2011, p. 210). She coaches Rosalie in insinuating, skillful flattery and actively works to rouse and cherish her dormant vanity. This process transforms the young woman into a social commodity, where her beauty and ringlets serve as artillery to secure a high-ranking alliance. As contemporary scholarship suggests, this commodification is a hallmark of the mid-Victorian bourgeois family, where the daughter's successful marriage serves as the ultimate validation of the parents' social standing (Lecaros, 2011, p. 3.2).

The merciless nature of this pursuit is most evident in the selection of Sir Thomas Ashby as Rosalie's husband. Despite Rosalie's own admission that Ashby is an ugly beast and her initial instinct to detest that man, the allure of Ashby Park—the physical manifestation of rank—overrides all moral considerations. Mrs. Murray is the chief architect of this match, knowing more against him than she reveals to Rosalie, yet encouraging the union because it secures the title of Lady Ashby.

This decision represents a total abandonment of moral responsibility. Sir Thomas is described as a rake, a scamp, and a man whose soul is ten times worse than his reputation suggests. By pushing Rosalie toward such a man, the Murrays demonstrate that status is a merciless master that requires the sacrifice of their child's future happiness (Summers, 2025, p. 6). Brontë uses this transaction to illustrate that when rank is sought without regard for virtue, the result is not social elevation but moral and psychological degradation (Carnell, 2014, p. 5).

The pursuit of status reaches its zenith and its ultimate failure at Ashby Park. Initially, the park is the object of Rosalie's intense envy and ambition; she declares, "I MUST have Ashby Park, whoever shares it with me." However, upon Agnes's visit a year later, the park is no longer a site of triumph but a site of desolation. The stately mansion and noble room that Rosalie once coveted have become the walls of her prison.

Rosalie's status as a baronet's wife grants her the material wealth she desired, yet it strips her of the very freedom she used to enjoy as a coquette. She finds herself a prisoner and a slave, subject to the suffocating surveillance of her mother-in-law and the neglect of a husband who does not care a bit about her. The merciless pursuit ends with Rosalie fairly bursting into tears over her lost youth and the realization that she has traded her selfhood for a hollow title. As contemporary critics note, Ashby Park serves as a gilded cage, demonstrating that high-society status offers no refuge from the systemic inequalities of Victorian marital law (Gordon, 2022, p. 50).

Brontë underscores the folly of the Murrays' pursuit by contrasting it with the Grey family's alternative. As the Greys suffer from poverty and straits, their home is characterized by genuine friendship, earnest affection, and a marriage of true minds. Agnes's refusal to treat status as the chief good allows her to retain her integrity and eventually achieve a sense of autonomy that Rosalie, despite her wealth, can never possess (Botelho, 2025, p. 2).

The merciless pursuit of status is thus revealed to be a self-defeating endeavor. It devalues human life, reduces marriage to a transactional fate, and replaces genuine domestic joy with a performative, embittered social existence (Lecaros, 2011, p. 64). Brontë's hard realism ensures that there is no romantic escape for Rosalie; she remains, at the end of the novel, a grave old matron, an embittered monument to the cost of prioritizing rank over the soul (Carnell, 2014, p. 1; Summers, 2025, p. 11).

The Physical and Psychological Prison

Anne Brontë (1847/2026) utilizes the transition from the relatively open spaces of Horton Lodge to the restrictive environment of Ashby Park to illustrate a young woman's descent into absolute domestic incarceration. The coquette's prison is portrayed as both a tangible geographical location and a pervasive mental state, characterized by the systematic erosion of the self under the weight of Victorian marital expectations (Summers, 2025, p. 8). Through the character of Rosalie Murray, Brontë demonstrates that high-society status does not confer independence; rather, it creates a gilded cage in which the estate's physical walls mirror the psychological entrapment of a loveless union (Summers, 2025, p. 11).

The physical prison begins with Ashby Park, which initially represents the pinnacle of Rosalie's ambition. While she once perceived the acquisition of this property as her ultimate goal, declaring, I MUST have Ashby Park, whoever shares it with me, the reality of her arrival a year later reframes the princely magnificence as a site of desolation. The spacious grounds and magnificent old trees, intended to signify liberty and wealth, instead define the boundaries of her confinement. She is forced to play the hermit in the country, a term that emphasizes her forced isolation from the lively social circles of London she once dominated.

This physical enclosure is compounded by a total lack of mobility. While Rosalie once enjoyed the buoyant step of a coquette wandering the fields near Horton Lodge to waylay suitors, she is now a prisoner within her own home. Her husband, Sir Thomas Ashby, utilizes his patriarchal authority to restrict her movements, effectively punishing her for the coquetry and extravagance that characterized her youth. The estate functions

as a site of enclosure where Rosalie is constantly restricted by the physical and social structures of the landed gentry (Gordon, 2022, p. 50).

The psychological dimension of Rosalie's prison is primarily manifested through the suffocating surveillance of her mother-in-law, old Lady Ashby. Rosalie describes her as a usurper, a tyrant, an incubus, and a spy, highlighting a domestic environment in which every action is scrutinized for adherence to rigid decorum. This constant oversight prevents Rosalie from assuming the role of mistress in her own house, leaving her frightened and powerless to enact any personal agency.

The psychological trauma is further exacerbated by the character of Sir Thomas himself. Rosalie's initial admission that he was an ugly beast proves to be a tragic understatement; after marriage, she discovers he is ten times worse in character than his reputation suggested. The realization that she is bound to a man she detest[s] and despise[s] leads to a melancholy sigh that characterizes her new existence. This mismatch in moral character creates a mental enclosure in which Rosalie's intellectual potential is stifled by a husband who prefers to sit over his wine. As contemporary scholars observe, this depiction reflects the hard realism of Brontë's critique: the legal and social reality of 19th-century marriage offered no psychological refuge for women who traded virtue for rank (Carnell, 2014, p. 5).

Brontë's most devastating critique of the psychological prison involves Rosalie's failure to find solace in motherhood. Unlike the idealized Victorian Angel in the House, Rosalie rejects the genuine affection that a child might provide. She views her infant daughter not as a source of joy but as a potential rival who might grow up to eclipse her. This resentment is rooted in the petrifying effects of her environment; having been raised as a social commodity herself, she can only view her child through the lens of competition and inheritance (Lecaros, 2011, p. 64).

Rosalie's rejection of her daughter is also a reaction to the perceived failure of the patriarchal lineage. She laments that it is a girl, and notes that Sir Thomas has never forgiven [her] for the lack of a male heir. The child thus becomes another bar in her psychological prison—a reminder of her failed duty to the Ashby line and her own diminishing market value as her beauty [is] wasting away.

The ultimate result of this physical and psychological incarceration is the profound degradation of Rosalie's character. When Agnes encounters her at Ashby Park, the transformation is complete: the radiant smiles of her youth have been replaced by a dreary composure. Rosalie is portrayed as a grave old matron whose spirit is crushed by the suffocating reality of her choices.

Brontë contrasts this petrification with Agnes Grey's own psychological state. While Agnes endures the physical confinement of being a governess, she maintains an inward heaven of moral integrity. Rosalie, conversely, has sacrificed her internal freedom for an external status that she cannot enjoy. This comparison serves Brontë's didactic purpose, proving that autonomy is a product of ethical strength rather than social elevation (Botelho, 2025, p. 1). The coquette's prison thus stands as a permanent warning against the merciless pursuit of status at the cost of the soul (Summers, 2025, p. 150).

Contrast with the Governess

The structural integrity of Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey* relies heavily on the ideological and moral juxtaposition of the titular protagonist and Rosalie Murray. This contrast functions as a powerful tool of social critique, highlighting the coquette's prison by comparing it to the paradoxically liberating labor of the governess (Langland, 2012, p. 40). While Rosalie seeks autonomy through social dominance and a high-status marriage, Agnes finds a more sustainable independence through ethical resilience and the retention of her intellectual selfhood (Botelho, 2025, p. 1).

The primary point of contrast lies in the two women's relationships with labor and social identity. Rosalie Murray represents the pinnacle of Victorian leisure; she is a belle whose education is limited to showy accomplishments like music and fancywork, intended solely for display. For Rosalie, the absence of productive labor is a marker of status, yet it leaves her with a shallow intellect and an insatiable need for external validation (Summers, 2025, p. 150). Her leisure is, in itself, a form of confinement that prepares her for the idleness of Ashby Park.

Agnes, conversely, is defined by her labor. As a governess, she is positioned in a liminal space as a hireling among strangers, often despised and trampled upon. However, this yoke of labor provides Agnes with a psychological fortress (Ahmad, 2015, p. 44). Unlike Rosalie, who is a commodity within her own home, Agnes is an observer who maintains her moral autonomy even when her physical agency is restricted. The merciless pursuit of status that consumes Rosalie is entirely absent in Agnes, who prioritizes duty and true benevolence over class ascension (Lecaros, 2011, p. 3.2).

The divergence in their marital paths serves as Brontë's most significant didactic lesson. Rosalie views marriage as a strategic transaction for rank and wealth, choosing Sir Thomas Ashby despite her open detestation of his character. This choice represents the ultimate submission to the coquette's prison, as Rosalie trades her internal freedom for a princely estate that soon becomes a site of desolation (Summers, 2025, p. 8). Her post-marital state is one of dreary composure, proving that status without virtue results in psychological petrification (Carnell, 2014, p. 5).

In contrast, Agnes's marriage to Mr. Weston represents a marriage of true minds grounded in shared evangelical values and mutual respect. While Rosalie's union is a sealed fate that reduces her to a prisoner and a slave, Agnes's marriage is presented as a liberation (Botelho, 2025, p. 8). Agnes does not marry for Ashby Park, but for a partner who appreciates her unimportant saying[s] and moral character. Brontë uses this contrast to argue that true autonomy for women is only possible when the marriage contract is a moral rather than an economic one (Summers, 2025, p. 11).

The contrast also extends to their occupation of physical and psychological space. Rosalie's world shrinks as her social status grows. As a coquette, she is free to wander the fields and lanes to waylay suitors, but as Lady Ashby, she is a prisoner within the walls of her estate, subject to the surveillance of a spy mother-in-law. Her psychological space is equally cramped, filled with resentment and the fear of being eclipsed by her own daughter.

Agnes, though restricted by her duties and often sitting with her back to the horses in a crowded carriage, maintains an inward heaven. Her ability to botanise and

entomologise along green banks provides her with a psychological expanse that Rosalie lacks. Even in the drudgery of her work, Agnes remains a socially disposed creature capable of finding genuine friendship with characters like Nancy Brown. By the end of the novel, Agnes has secured a home that, while modest, is amply sufficient, while Rosalie is left in a princely home that offers no comfort (Botelho, 2025, p. 2).

Ultimately, the contrast between the governess and the coquette reveals that Rosalie's high-society life is the true prison. Her artillery of flirtation and her merciless pursuit of status are self-defeating weapons that lead to a melancholy post-marital existence (Lecaros, 2011, p. 64). Agnes Grey, by accepting her low status and focusing on her moral perceptions, escapes the gross vapours of earth that cloud Rosalie's horizon. Through this juxtaposition, Anne Brontë dismantles the Victorian myth of the happily-ever-after high-society wedding, proposing instead that autonomy lies in the labor of virtue and in the rejection of social commodification.

CONCLUSION

The examination of Rosalie Murray's trajectory in *Agnes Grey* confirms that the pursuit of high-society marriage, when divorced from moral compatibility, acts as a mechanism of self-erasure rather than a vehicle for female agency. The most significant finding of this research is the identification of the Coquette's Prison—a paradoxical state where the performative power wielded by a young woman through flirtation serves only to facilitate her entry into a permanent state of domestic incarceration. Rosalie's transition from the buoyant step of a belle to the dreary composure of a prisoner and a slave at Ashby Park provides a stark, unvarnished look at the psychological petrification caused by Victorian marital expectations. Brontë's hard realism effectively dismantles romanticized tropes about the landed gentry by showing that material wealth and rank are insufficient substitutes for intellectual autonomy and ethical integrity. Ultimately, the study reveals that while labor and low social status appear to constrain the governess, it is the coquette who suffers the more profound and irreversible loss of freedom.

The implications of these results for contemporary society remain significant, as they challenge modern echoes of the merciless pursuit of status and the commodification of personal relationships for social visibility. Brontë's critique serves as an enduring reminder that autonomy is rooted in internal character rather than external validation or socioeconomic elevation. However, this study is limited by its singular focus on the landed gentry within a specific mid-19th-century English context, potentially overlooking the intersectional experiences of women across different racial or broader cultural backgrounds of the same period. Furthermore, the reliance on *Agnes Grey*'s subjective narrative voice, though a deliberate literary device, restricts the analysis to a single moral viewpoint. To address these limitations, future research should incorporate comparative studies with contemporary global literatures that address similar themes of marital entrapment, as well as digital humanities approaches to map the physical and psychological enclosures described across the wider Brontëan canon.

The continuity of upcoming studies should focus on the psychological impact of domestic surveillance, specifically comparing the spy mother-in-law archetype across various Victorian genres. Further exploration of the governess's gaze as a sociological

tool could yield new insights into how marginalized laborers acted as early analysts of class-based moral decay. Additionally, future inquiries might examine the environmental and architectural symbolism of the gilded cage, analyzing how the physical layouts of Victorian estates, such as Ashby Park, were intentionally designed to enforce the Separate Spheres ideology. By expanding the scope to include the failed domesticity in Anne Brontë's second novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, researchers can further define the evolution of her polemic against the systemic legal and social prisons that women inhabit. Such studies will ensure that Brontë's contributions to the Woman Question are recognized not just as historical relics, but as foundational critiques of structural gender inequality.

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