

The Position of a Governess on the Example of Charlotte Brontë's Life

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The governess was one of the most familiar figures in mid-Victorian life and literature. The 1851 Census revealed that 25,000 women earned their living teaching and caring for other women's children (Poovey 127). Most governesses lived with their employers and were paid a small salary. Yet, an English mid-Victorian governess in a way challenged the society's idealized standards of womanhood. She was a lady, however being forced to work, her social status could no longer be on equal terms with other well-born women. Though the qualified governess differed very little from the typical middle-class lady, her status could not be equivalent to that of her upbringing.

The occurrence of her subordinate position was usually initiated by some unfortunate circumstances which demanded that young women seek a job. The most common reasons were male relative's financial failure or a death which perhaps led to impoverishment (Hughes 147). By becoming a governess a girl was able especially to uphold her position as a lady, though she was obviously not able to exhibit this fact with financial resources:

[I]f a woman of birth and education found herself in financial distress, and had no relatives who could support her or give her a home, she was justified in seeking the only employment that would not cause her to lose her status. She could find work as a governess. (Peterson 6)

In contrast to other roles such as serving in a shop or working in a factory alongside working-class women the position of governess was usually the only possibility for a woman of having a decent and appropriate professional position.

The upper classes had employed governesses since the Tudor Times. But from the beginning of the nineteenth century employing a governess became a sign of the economic power of the Victorian middle-class father, as were servants and carriages (Peterson 5). Just as the lady of the house employed servants to clean her

house, she paid another woman to raise her children. Hiring a governess became a status symbol.

Moreover, hiring a governess indicated also the extent to which a man's wife was truly a lady of leisure. The function of the mother had traditionally been, among some other housewifely duties, that of teacher of the children. Both boys and girls in the middle-class family began their education with their mother. Boys were later sent to school or a tutor was hired for them, but girls continued to learn their roles as women from their mothers. Unlike cooking or cleaning, the education of children could not be classified as manual labour. For this reason the employment of a governess was even more a symbol of the movement of wives and mothers from domestic to ornamental functions (Peterson 5).

The woman who lived in a household in order to teach the children and serve as a companion to them as a resident governess (Hughes 37). The position of the governess and the nurse were different and therefore should not be confused with one another. Unlike the governess, the nurse was a member of the servant class and responsible for all the physical and emotional needs of the children during their first four to five years of life.

The responsibilities of the governess were varied, nevertheless, the constant supervision of pupils seemed to have been a common duty of governesses. It kept them busy all day leaving hardly any time for a private life (Peterson 8). As for the youngest pupils, the governess would teach them reading, writing and arithmetic, while coaching the older girls in French, History or Geography. The governess would also be expected to instruct them in key “accomplishments” such as drawing, playing instruments and dancing. Having been taught in the fine arts, the girls, by the ages of seventeen or eighteen, would then be ready for their social debut. The skills were designed and honed, of course, to attract a proper husband in a crowded marriage market. Boys, on the other hand, typically entered a preparatory school at the age of eight, instead of staying under their governess’ tutelage. This was in keeping with the Victorian belief that the education of boys was of vital importance, based on their future roles as masters of their own families. Girls had a smaller need for a formal education, since they were destined to get married and their prospects for marriage were based on their personal fortunes and personal appearances as well as gentle manners.

The governess was a beloved figure of the Victorian writers. Like orphans, the governess had to make her own way in the world, travelling alone far from home and finding her own place in an unfriendly environment. Her status as a lady allowed her to live with the members of the upper-class under one roof, but the fact that she worked meant that she also encountered different people and situations which would

have been unavailable for a girl who lived with her parents. The governess was a blank slate onto which all possibilities were open, so that novelists could write any plot that they wanted.

Charlotte and Anne Brontë, who both published novels with governess heroines, used their real-life experiences of the schoolroom. The Brontës themselves were obliged to find means to support themselves when marriage eluded all three girls, and their father's clergyman salary was insufficient to provide for all three daughters. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* was published in 1847 and became a bestseller almost instantly. However, working as a governess was far more unpleasant for Charlotte Brontë and her sister Anne than for Jane Eyre. One might say that Charlotte created on the pages of her novel her dreamed-of workplace and the ideal life she would have loved to live.

Charlotte Brontë, discussing Anne's novel, *Agnes Grey*, with Elizabeth Gaskell, told her:

None but those who had been in the position of a governess could ever realize the dark side of 'respectable' human nature ... daily giving way to selfishness and ill-temper, till its conduct towards those dependent on it sometimes amount[s] to a tyranny. (Gaskell 186)

Charlotte kept repeating similar assertions describing a governess' life as miserable, finding all her efforts completely vain.

Being a paid employee was particularly hard to bear for Charlotte who grew up in a loving company of her beloved father and siblings. As she used to feel free physically and mentally being at Haworth parsonage or wandering through the moors, she struggled with the feeling of having an oppressed and imprisoned mind while staying at her employers' estate.

Charlotte temporarily sacrificed her longing for freedom and personal fulfilment for her own family's sake and her first "situation" as a governess began in May 1839 (Gerin 141). At an estate named Stonegappe, Charlotte was to care for a young girl and her brother. Brontë had already been working as a teacher at Roe Head, yet the inferior position of governess in a wealthy family was almost intolerable for shy and socially awkward Charlotte. She was ignored by adult family members, though she considered herself not only more than their equal in terms of intelligence and ability but also a potential writer of genius.

Of her lady employer Charlotte wrote:

Mrs. Sidgwick did not know me. I now begin to find that she does not intend to know me, that she cares nothing in the world about me except to contrive how the greatest possible quantity of labour may be squeezed out of me, and to the end she overwhelms me with oceans of needlework ... I see now more clearly than I have ever done before that a private governess has no existence, is not considered as a living and rational being except as connected with the wearisome duties she has to fulfil. (Shorter: Charlotte Brontë to Emily Jane Brontë, 8th June 1839)

Charlotte's observations were not exceptional as middle class family members consistently attempted to disassociate themselves from classes of inferior position. Yet, the governess inhabited a class of her own in many people's opinion and so society was always uncertain of how to treat her (Huff 2).

The real discomfort of a governess' position in a private family arises from the fact that it is undefined. She is not a relation, not a guest, not a mistress, not a servant – but something made up of all. No one knows exactly how to treat her. (Peterson 10)

The behaviour of the children used to reflect their parents' attitude and there was often disobedience and even physical cruelty. Brontë was charged too with insolent and rebellious children at Stonegappe. She was expected to enforce the mother's authority, but with no support from her employers' side, she was the victim of her pupils. However, Charlotte did not divulge that her forehead was cut with a stone thrown at her by one of her pupils (Gaskell 187). That gained her some respect from the children. And so when one of the Sidgwick children at dinner one day put his hand in Charlotte's saying, "I love 'ou, Miss Brontë," the mother exclaimed before all the children with indignation, "Love the *governess*, my dear!" (Gaskell 187).

Charlotte Brontë felt the pain of her solitude among strangers away from her home. It was a feeling associated with a governess' life and this picture of a lonely, unhappy governess was immortalized by many nineteenth century painters. Charlotte's months at Stonegappe were rather depressing ones, despite her expensive accommodation and a "holiday" with the family in a residence near the opulent spa resort of Harrowgate.

Brontë's great consolation was the exchange of letters between her and her sister, beginning usually with a tender expression towards Emily:

Mine bonnie love, I was as glad of your letter as tongue can express ... Write whenever you can. I could like to be at home. I could like to work in a mill. I could like to feel some mental liberty. I could restraint to be taken off. But the holidays will come. *Corragio!* (Gaskell 189)

Charlotte's desire was fulfilled and in July 1839 she left Stonegappe. As she wrote to her friend, Ellen Nussey, she never had been so glad to get out of a house in her life (Gerin 151).

Early in 1841 Charlotte arrived at Upperwood House, Rawdon, to care for two quite young children of the White family. Working as nursery governess caring for small children, Charlotte faced new demands - some never-ending calls upon her time and attention. Though her early impressions of her new place were rather optimistic, she suffered still from home-sickness (Gerin 170). Charlotte eventually left the Whites in December 1842 hoping for achieving a new goal - setting up a school. However, this daring project was never realized.

What we can remark now is how much Brontë drew from these experiences as she began to write *Jane Eyre*, including the stone-throwing boy, the feelings of alienation and solitude, and the experience of a well-appointed, comfortable country home in which, like *Jane Eyre* later, Charlotte from the upper rooms watched people happily enjoying themselves utterly oblivious to her and her internal feelings.

Charlotte's last workplace was in Brussels where she and Emily worked as part-time English teachers at a school led by Mr. and Mrs. Heger. That place also became an inspiration for Charlotte. It is believed that the object of her unhealthy fascination, Mr. Heger, was the model for mysterious, brooding Mr. Rochester from *Jane Eyre*. Brontë went through a difficult time, trying to forget about her platonic love. However, due to her bitter experiences from Belgium, she was able to create a timeless novel which is still considered to be one of the greatest literary achievements of all time.

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