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Ideals of Victorian Womanhood: Governess versus Lady

by Dara Huff

(English 103)

The Assignment: Students were assigned to write 2 researched papers totaling at least 12 pages based on their careful study of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* from interdisciplinary perspectives.

Women within the middle and upper class of England's Victorian era represented what society designed as the perfect lady: a woman of leisure defined by her matrimonial and maternal status. Women were expected to locate themselves within a setting of family and domesticity. One social role that challenged this ideal of womanhood was the governess. Throughout history, the governess has existed as instructress to other families' children. Her role, however, never initiated such heated deliberation as it did throughout mid-Victorian England, as evidenced by *Jane Eyre*, a novel published by a governess named Charlotte Brontë, which inspired an exceptional amount of critique on the position of the female instructor. In England, the governess posed a challenge to society's idealized standards of womanhood by occupying a contradictory social status throughout her career. She was, in almost every sense of the word, a lady; yet because she had to surrender leisure for work, the governess' social status could no longer be on equal terms with other leisurely women. Immediately, she was outcast from the idealized perception of leisurely womanhood, and cast into the realm of those who sought paid employment. Though the qualified governess differed very little from the typical middle class lady, her status could no longer be equivalent to that of her upbringing. This, however, was not usually the fault of the governess, as financial failure or some other unfortunate circumstance demanded that she seek payment. In contrast to other less advantageous roles such as servitude or labor, the position of governess was usually welcomed. Once her new role was initiated, though, the profession would pose many challenges for the governess and society's impression of the ideal womanhood. Her new role was an ambiguous one; newly labeled by scholars as incongruent. An examination of the incongruent role of England's Victorian governess reveals that while privately employed, she challenged the idealism of womanhood as a matrimonial and motherly status.

The governess, though born a lady and bred with the education and gentility descriptive of any middle-class female, was exiled from the ideal of leisurely womanhood. The occurrence of her subordinate position was usually initiated by some unfortunate circumstance through no fault of her own—perhaps a male relative's financial failure or a death which perhaps led to impoverishment (Hughes 147). By becoming a governess, however, she was at least able 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).

Whatever her fate, it was likely that the governess could not become a wife and mother, as financial insecurity would not allow it. The governess' destiny contrasted greatly with the idealized matrimonial and maternal fate of other women, and is one of the reasons why the governess challenged the idealism of womanhood. Victorian morale proclaimed marriage as a woman's destined profession, and as the governess was not able to fulfill this destiny, she immediately occupied a cynical role in the eyes of society, and furthered the ambiguity of her status. The governess could not perform a lady's highest calling and so was a "tabooed woman" to men. "...[T]he governess' position neutralized whatever temptation she, as a young woman herself, might have presented to her male associates; to gentlemen she was a 'tabooed woman,' and to male servants she was as unapproachable as any other middle-class lady" (Poovey 128). The governess' inability to encompass ideal womanhood, however,

was not singly defined by her incapability to marry and procreate. Other conditions helped to further this effect.

One of the conditions for why the governess challenged the ideal womanhood was the fact that she was employed. Behind the idea that a lady was to be married and have children, was a desire that she must also never work outside the home. Leisurehood was the new definition of the middle- and upper - class woman. Because of the rising prestige of the middle class, having the funds to employ a private instructress for one's children was an emblem of wealth and rising status. Employment of a governess reaffirmed a family's economic wealth and the leisure enjoyed by the lady of the house, as it was a sign of one's own gentility (Peterson 5). While providing work for a governess signified a family's higher status, being an employed governess elicited disturbing and ambiguous responses because the governess denied her personal appeal and status while elevating her employer's. The challenge was that against traditional female responsibility, the governess followed a masculine model of individualistic self-determination and empowerment. "...[T]he sight of middle-class women going out to work as governesses could not fail to mobilize a set of fears about the collapse of boundaries...between men and women and the separate spheres that they were supposed to occupy" (Hughes 149).

Because of their vulnerable position, governesses in terms of idealistic family values further provoked challenge to the idealization of womanhood. This point is developed by Mary Poovey in her book, Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England:

The image of an arena of freedom for women was, in turn, central to the representation of domesticity as desirable, and this representation, along with a disincentive to work outside the home that it enforced, was instrumental to the image of women as moral and not economic agents, antidotes to the evils of competition, not competitors themselves. (144)

Clearly, while Victorian ideals placed the woman as a mother figure who was to remain inside the home and occupy a leisurely life, the governess challenged this role by being childless, unmarried, and employed outside the home.

Moreover, the crux of this quandary lies in the fact that the governess could not be liable for her perceived aberration. Economic pressure and society was the reason for her dilemma. This point is referred to in "Vanity Fair and Jane Eyre," an article written in 1848 in the prominent journal, Quarterly Review. The author, Lady Eastlake, comments on the plight of the governess as one that is more punishing and obscure than any other class as the governess, though not as "liable to all the vicissitudes of life," is irrefutably supplied by them (176). Lady Eastlake goes on to say: "There is no other class which so cruelly requires its members to be, in birth, mind, and manners, above their station, in order to fit them for their station" (176-77). Simply stated, it was this conflict of social standards and roles that became the source of the challenges posed by governesses to their lady counterparts.

Conflicts and prejudices formed throughout society and the private household because of the uncertain status of the Victorian governess. Society sensed the contradictions of the position of the governess and sought to understand its implications more fully:

Incongruent social status results in confused and often contradictory behavior, both from the individual and his or her associates...If we look at the behavior of the members of the family toward the governess from the perspective of her incongruent position, it becomes comprehensible as a statement-in-action of the contradictions they sensed (Peterson 12).

As a whole, 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. "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). For

instance, in public, the governess might one day be shown off by her employers, while the next, she would be treated as an inferior. Her education and genteel attributes might be flattered on one occasion and the next, be ignored. A passage that perhaps best illustrates the social incongruence of the governess, and relates to Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre, is written by Emily Peart, once a governess herself:

...sometimes [the governess] is made a confidante, and a recipient of family secrets; sometimes she witnesses scenes which ought never to take place; sometimes she is treated with familiarity by one head of the household, and with coldness and suspicion by the other; noticed alike with approbation and jealousy; unavoidably witnessing and hearing much which should never go beyond the family circle....It is this very position – this anomalous half-way place, which has given rise so often to what is unpleasant, and has caused a kind of unacknowledged slur to rest on the name of 'governess.' (qtd. in Broughton 103-4)

It is interesting to note a few similarities between the previous passage and certain passages in the novel Jane Eyre. The sentence, "...sometimes she witnesses scenes which ought never to take place," can be compared to Jane's inadvertent participation with Mr. Mason's strange accident in Chapter 20 and the fire that Jane suspects Grace Poole of starting in Chapter 15. Also, the line, "...sometimes she is treated with familiarity by one head of the household, and with coldness and suspicion by the other; noticed alike with approbation and jealousy," can be correlated to Jane's friendship with her approving employer, Mr. Rochester and the cold tension between Jane and the suspicious Miss Ingram. Finally, there is another intriguing resemblance demonstrated by the sentence, "...unavoidably witnessing and hearing much which should never go beyond the family circle...." During Chapter 15, Jane's knowledge of the story behind Adele's mother and why Adele came to live with Mr. Rochester shows significant similarity with Peart's indication.

Though it can be assumed that many governesses during their tenure at an employer's house never experienced anything quite as mysterious as Jane's story relates, Jane Eyre serves nonetheless as a further insight into just how contradictory the governess' social status was inside her employer's home. In any case, the governess' position was merely pushed even further into ambiguity due to these social confrontations. Clearly illustrated is how the ideal womanhood and the ambivalent status of the governess were at constant disagreement.

Another interesting point to relate is the incongruence of the relationship between governess and domestic servant. By acknowledging the challenges that the domestic servant introduced to the already uncertain identity of the governess, it can be better understood why the role of the governess conflicted with the traditional women's role. Clearly, the governess did not consider herself a servant, making apparent effort at not being defined as such:

No one was more anxious to uphold the governess' claims to ladyhood than the governess herself. Severely compromised by the fact that she had left her family home and taken up paid employment, it was inevitable that she should wish to remind the people around her that she had been born and raised a gentlewoman. (Hughes 90)

Domestic servants, however, would often disagree with the governesses' own view of themselves. It was this difference of opinion that caused another challenge to the identity of the governess as a woman who claimed to be a lady. The servants testified that if the governess did not enjoy the leisure their employers did, then the governess was not a lady, and therefore, no better than themselves. While the employer strove to differentiate themselves from the governess, the servants tried to point out how little different their own situation was to the governess'.

Of course, the position of governess became oversaturated with an abundant amount of women. Many of these women were incompetent to teach morals, manners, and education to the minds of children. An 1859 essay entitled "Female Industry" written by Harriet Martineau, an English novelist and

economist, argues that the plight of the governess is heightened due to the fact that the position is crowded by underqualified women who were simply seeking to raise their lower status. As Martineau explains, “The injury to the qualified governesses is cruel. The reputation of the whole class suffers by the faults of its lowest members; the emolument is depressed, first by the low average quality of the work done, and again by the crowded condition of that field of labor” (170).

Perhaps this is one of the reasons why domestic servants harbored a distrust of the position of governess. The position was becoming overwhelmed by common women who sought to raise their status. It must have seemed offensive to a servant: a woman who originating from the same class as the servant, trying to present herself as one with a higher social rank and thus claiming to be more attention worthy. In any event, it is indisputable that the governess did not fail to cause reflection among all classes of people during the mid-Victorian era. The servants, the employers, and society in general all recognized the governess’ position as ambiguous and challenging toward the traditions of female role.

There can certainly be no argument against the fact that the governess challenged ideal womanhood, or that it invited an advance of possibilities open to women. It can be debated, however, that the governess experienced prejudice from society and her employers due to her incongruent status. It can never be known for sure if the statements made in personal diaries, journals, or essays are indeed the subjective opinions of zealous writer’s, both governesses and society included. This point is made clear by Katherine Hughes when she states:

In reality the infinite combination of social circumstance and human personality make it impossible to be so certain about who was to blame: there were sensitive and insensitive employers, secure and insecure governesses. Doubtless the situation looked quite different depending on where one was standing. (108)

Some may even argue that if the governess experienced prejudice at all, it was most likely attributable to the fact that she was indeed of lower rank and a paid employee, both of which are circumstances that immediately placed her at the discretion of her employers.

Admittedly, in comparison with other female workers of those times, the governess’ situation was not entirely bad. They were not subjected to manual labor, such as factory work or cruel living conditions. Yet, despite all this, the amount of controversy that the governess instituted is testimony that her position amongst society was tremendously ambiguous. This ambiguity, therefore, elicits an interesting examination of England’s mid-Victorian governess and the ideals of society during those times.

The Victorian governess is an interesting figure for scholars curious about the changing social roles in a kingdom defined by a system of classes and social rank. In particular, the private governess symbolized society’s changing ideal of how a woman ought to be defined. The plight of the governess, as some label it, signified the flux of middle-class theory of traditional female role as a field of domesticity and family. Her plight also signified changing social norms such as the employments and professions attained by women who were not part of the working class. Together, restructuring social roles and the figure of the incongruent governess symbolized the slow degeneration of the ideal womanhood as a matrimonial and maternal status.

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