

## The Governess

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In mid-nineteenth century usage, the term "governess" could refer to a woman who taught in a school, a woman who lived at home and travelled to her employer's house to teach (called a "daily governess"), or a woman who lived in her employer's home and who taught the children and served as a companion to them. The subject of this study is the governess who lived with the family, sometimes referred to as the private governess." In considering her intimate position within the family, we may see most clearly the problems of the governess's place in Victorian society.

The employment of a gentlewoman as a governess in a middle- class family served to reinforce and perpetuate certain Victorian values

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But inherent in the employment of a lady was a contradiction of the very values she was hired to fulfill. The result was a situation of conflict and incongruity for both the governess and the family, a conflict which called forth a variety of responses from governess, family, and society.

From at least Tudor times the governess had been part of the households of the upper classes. In the nineteenth century, increasing numbers of governesses were employed by the English middle classes. The governess was a testimony to the economic power of the Victorian middle-class father, as were servants, carriages, and the other "paraphernalia of gentility." Although the governess was often behind the scenes and not as conspicuous as other items of genteel equipage, there were ways in which the family could indicate her presence in the home and display her as a symbol of economic power, breeding, and station. Drawing room conversations about the governess served to bring her into public "view." If she was foreign, her exotic history might be discussed. Even complaining about a governess was a way of "showing her off."

The governess was also an indicator of the extent to which a man's wife was truly a lady of leisure. The function of the mother had traditionally been, in addition to housewifely duties, that of educator 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, cleaning, and scrubbing, the education of children was hardly classifiable as manual labor. 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.

Victorian parents sought a woman who could teach their daughters the genteel accomplishments which were the aims of female education. More important, they sought a gentlewoman. But the new ethos of the ideal woman was that of a woman of leisure and, no matter how occupied a lady might have been at home, an outside career was another matter-- in Frances Power Cobbe's words "a deplorable dereliction." If work in the home was thought to "pervert women's sympathies, detract from their charms," work for pay brought down the judgment of society and testified to the inferior position of both the wage-earner and her family. Sophia Jex-Blake's father told her that if she accepted a salary she "would be considered mean and illiberal, ... accepting wages that belonged to a class beneath you in social rank." Others put it more strongly: Society has thought fit to assert that the woman who works for herself loses her social position." The women of

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the middle classes were very consistent in their attitude toward being paid: “they would shrink from it as an insult.” The image of the lady as a creature of leisure, enclosed within a private circle of family and friends and completely supported by father or husband, was reinforced by the ban on paid employment - a ban so strong that many who wrote for publication, even though writing at home, did so under pseudonyms, or signed their work simply “By a Lady.” [...]

A word should perhaps be included here about the possibility of upward social mobility through occupation as a governess. There are a few suggestions in the literature of the period that such attempts

at social climbing were in fact taking place. Harriet Martineau, in an *Edinburgh Review* article in 1859, noted the practice of “tradesmen and farmers who educate their daughters for governesses” in the hope of raising their station in society.’ There is no way of assessing the extent to which this took place, but it is clear that the Victorian middle class regarded such mobility as undesirable. In the fiction of the period the governesses who were figures of evil or immorality were women of humble origins. Thackeray’s Becky Sharp, for example, was the daughter of a poor artist and a French “opera-girl” who, in order to find employment, claimed origins in the French nobility. The wicked Miss Gwilt, in Wilkie Collins’ *Armadale*, was an abandoned child whose origins were unknown and who was reared by a “quack” doctor and his wife. As will become clear later in this essay, the possibility of real upward mobility was a chimera. Indeed, employment as a governess was only of very limited use even in maintaining gentle status. It is sufficient here to note that however educated a girl from the “lower ranks” might be, she was still “ill-bred” in the eyes of those who made themselves judges of governesses. Conversely, however destitute a lady might be, she continued to be a lady.

We have been looking at the governess from the point of view of the family that employed her. Her own viewpoint was very different, of course. Once it was clear that she had to seek a post as governess, the task of finding a situation was taken up through a variety of channels. The first source of aid was the help of relatives and friends who might know of a family seeking a governess. If such help was not available or effective, a woman was forced to turn to public agencies-- newspaper advertisements or a placement service. Newspaper advertising was disliked, partly because of its public nature and partly because reputable employers were unlikely to utilize such a source. Experience with the falsification of letters of reference among servants obtained through newspapers had brought public advertising under suspicion. The Governesses’ Benevolent Institution, established in 1843, provided a registry for governesses seeking employment, and many seem to have used the service.

Pay was notoriously low. Governesses were, of course, housed and fed, but they were expected to pay for such expenses as laundry, travel, and medical care. They had to dress appropriately, and it was wise for them to make their own provisions for unemployment and old age. A governess often tried to support a parent or a dependent sister or brother as well. According to some estimates, pay ranged from £15

to £ 100 a year. The larger sum would only be applicable to the “highly educated lady” who could find a position in a very well-to-do family. The average salary probably fell between £20 and £45 a year. To give some meaning to these figures it will be useful to compare them with typical salaries of other

groups. The fairest comparison is probably with that of other domestic employees since they were also paid partly by maintenance:

	Banks, 1848-52	Martineau, 1859
Housekeeper	no data	£ 40- £50
Cook	£15-£16	£12-£18
Housemaid	£ 11- £11/13	£ 10-£ 14
Nursemaid	£ 11- £ 12	£ 5- £ 30 [...]

The difficulties which governesses had with their young charges were a well-known occupational hazard. A frequent theme of novels is the mistreatment and disrespect directed toward the governess by'

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children, and her lack of authority over them and failure of the mother to cooperate in discipline. Evidence about the problems of non-fictional governesses, though sparse, suggests that the novelistic theme was not unrealistic. In the Stanley family's correspondence, for example, there is a casual reference to the scratches and bruises which one of the children inflicted on the governess and the nurse.

Occupational problems did not end with finding a position and coming to terms with the duties and the children. A governess always faced the danger of unemployment, either because her work with the children was finished or because her employers were dissatisfied with her. Inadequate preparation for teaching, and faulty placement practices, were often to blame for the frequent hiring and firing of governesses. The aristocratic practice of continuing to support domestic servants who had outlived their usefulness after long service was not often extended to aged governesses in middle-class families. Long service was much less the rule, and paternalism was expensive. In the event of illness or old age and inability to work, the governess faced the prospect of charity, such as that provided by the Governesses' Benevolent Institution in the form of small annuities for retired governesses. The number was limited, however, and reports of governesses in workhouses or asylums were not uncommon. [...]

One sensitive observer of the Victorian social scene made the following assessment of a governess's situation: "the real discomfort of a governess's position in a private family arises from the fact that it

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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."

The observation is an acute one because it defines the problem as one of status and role. But one can go further and suggest that the real discomfort arose not from lack of definition but from the existence of contradictory definitions of the governess's place in society. In every aspect of the governess's occupational situation these contradictions in her social status are apparent.

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