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Lydia Pejovic

Chapman University, [pejovic@chapman.edu](mailto:pejovic@chapman.edu)

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Poverty, Social Isolation, Uselessness, and Loneliness: The Fears  
and Anxieties of 19<sup>th</sup>-Century British Governesses

A Thesis by

Lydia N. Pejovic

Chapman University

Orange, CA

Wilkinson College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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May 2022

Committee in charge:

Lynda Hall, Ph.D., Chair

Joanna Levin, Ph.D.

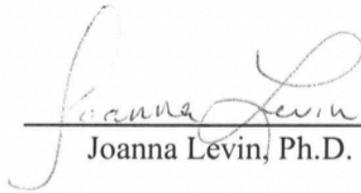
Samantha Dressel, Ph.D.

The thesis of Lydia N. Pejovic is approved.



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Lynda Hall, Ph.D., Chair



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Joanna Levin, Ph.D.



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Samantha Dressel, Ph.D.

May 2022

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## ABSTRACT

Poverty, Social Isolation, Uselessness, and Loneliness: The Fears and Anxieties of 19<sup>th</sup>-Century

British Governesses

by Lydia N. Pejovic

This essay focuses on the prevalent fears of governesses in nineteenth-century Britain: poverty and social isolation, uselessness/redundancy, and a life of loneliness. Through looking at *Emma*, *Jane Eyre*, and *The Turn of the Screw*, novels which span the century (their publication dates ranging from 1814-1898), and comparing them to the historical reality of many middle class women at the time, these fears are revealed to be quite valid. The fears and anxieties displayed by the characters in the three novels are reflected in statements made by former governesses (including Mary Wollstonecraft), and are likewise reinforced through census reports and common thought of the period. The rigid structure of British society during the period forced many middle class women without male support into employment as governesses, offering little escape from their roles and rare opportunities at upward social mobility. Jane Fairfax, Jane Eyre, and the unnamed governess in *The Turn of the Screw* serve as significant representations of the experiences of real women in their situations, and likewise reveal the precarious social status of governesses, who had to navigate being both gentlewomen and paid employees. These three novels illuminate the constancy and repetition of the fears and anxieties of single, employed, middle class women in nineteenth-century England.

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# 1 Introduction

In Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Jane quite excitedly thinks about her work as servitude, saying, "It is not like such words as Liberty, Excitement, Enjoyment: delightful sounds truly, but no more than sounds for me that it is mere waste of time to listen to them. But Servitude! That must be matter of fact" (101). Brontë, when writing *Jane Eyre*, was likely influenced by her personal experience as a governess, touching on the "servitude" of Jane's employment as a way to further explain the working conditions faced by real-life governesses. In fact, as writer Ruth Brandon explains, "Charlotte Brontë, though suffering agonies of homesickness and longing to see her friends, worried that visits to them might be considered improper" (16). For women like Brontë and her character Jane Eyre who were middle class and educated yet impoverished, servitude as an employee to a wealthy family was the only path to survival in a rigidly patriarchal and hierarchal society. Though this employment may have been undesirable and would oftentimes separate women from their friends and family, options were extremely limited for single, impoverished women.

The purpose of women of all classes in nineteenth-century England was, at least in terms of common thought of the period, servitude. A woman was meant to be a caretaker and Christianizer of men, a wife and mother, an all-around "Angel in The House" who served her family, as described in Coventry Patmore's famous narrative poem from 1851. This role of a pure, Christian wife and mother was far easier to fulfill for women with the socioeconomic means to marry into a wealthy, highly esteemed family and become the head of the domestic realm. Leading the home, including a staff of servants and the charge of the couple's children, was expected to be the chief desire of any well-bred woman. However, for women that were not

born into British high society, the expectations of being a homebound wife and mother were often dashed before they could begin. For middle class young women and girls, becoming a governess, or live-in teacher and caretaker for wealthy families, was one of the few respectable career opportunities they could hope to explore. Since women from middle class families could not afford to have substantial dowries in comparison to other wealthier, higher status young women, their prospects for an advantageous marriage were low. Instead, placing young women as governesses in wealthy households became the chief aim of middle class families searching for respectable employment, housing, and social standing for their unmarried daughters.

The rigid socioeconomic standards and viewpoints of nineteenth-century British society made any transgression of such norms frightening, especially for women. These fears are explored in many novels spanning the period, but are especially prominent in *Emma* by Jane Austen, *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, and *The Turn of the Screw* by Henry James. The middle class female characters in these novels (Jane Fairfax, Jane Eyre, and the unnamed governess in *The Turn of the Screw*) reflect the anxieties that many real women at the time would have had: fear of poverty, loss of social status or complete ostracization, redundancy or uselessness, and a life spent alone and loveless. Considering that middle class women could not work jobs outside of governessing or teaching without losing their social credibility (as being a governess was more respectable than working as a common house servant), the fear of social ostracization was prominent. Likewise, poverty was a crippling fear, as lower wages, or no wages at all, were of serious concern to women who lacked the social power to advocate for themselves as men could – and destitution was a quick path to social isolation. Loss of socioeconomic status could also lead to redundancy or a sense of uselessness, as a jobless woman would be considered as a drain

on the nation. These major issues (destitution, social ostracization, and redundancy) can be seen as stemming from the lack of the love and care of a husband/male provider.

The prevalence of these fears in novels written in the time period reveals the necessity of studying literature alongside historical context – these novels remind readers of what writer Joan Perkins calls the ”lively and constant debate down the century” about the “woman question” (2). The experiences of the fictional characters detailed in the three chosen novels can serve as tools to reveal the historical reality of many women who lived during the nineteenth century. These authors, writing from their firsthand experiences of living during the period, reveal a constancy and repetition of specific fears in their middle class female characters, which can be seen as reflecting the fears of real women. Likewise, fiction provides a lens into the emotional concerns of governesses and provides these characters with a wide-reaching voice, a reach that could not often be achieved by the average single, middle class woman living during the period. In nineteenth-century British society, the attentions and affections of a man were the key to a comfortable life, and the absence of such offered a terrifying reality to many women. Governesses lived in a state of fear, stemming from the core issue of living without a male provider. Without money, status, usefulness, and/or love, a woman was quite valueless in the eyes of British society. This sense of fear can be seen in *Emma*, *Jane Eyre*, and *The Turn of the Screw*, three novels which span the nineteenth century to show the constancy of these fears.

## 2 What was expected of a nineteenth century British woman?

The ideal woman in the nineteenth century was chaste, pure, Christian, motherly; above all things, she was patient and angelic, especially regarding domestic concerns. Coventry Patmore's poem about his wife entitled "The Angel in The House" captures this otherworldly essence of the idealized woman through religious references. Patmore reinforces the Christian dynamics of marriage: "Till Eve was brought to Adam, he / A solitary desert trod..." (Patmore 112). He likewise describes the celestial nature of the perfect nineteenth century woman, wherein submissiveness, meekness, and purity are the shining attributes of her character:

Much rather, then, a woman deck'd  
With saintly honours, chaste and good,  
Whose thoughts celestial things affect,  
Whose eyes express her heavenly mood!  
Those lesser vaunts are dimm'd or lost  
Which plume her name or paint her lip,  
Extinct in the deep-glowing boast  
Of her angelic fellowship. (Patmore 133)

Patmore's praise of a devout, chaste, Christian woman aligns with the values of the period. In her introduction to *Victorian Women*, Joan Perkin quotes physiologist Alexander Walker. Walker proposed in 1840 that there was "scientific" reasoning for treating women as lesser to men based on Christian principles of gender inequality:

It is evident that the man, possessing reasoning faculties, muscular power, and courage to employ it, is qualified for being a protector: the woman, being little capable of reasoning,

feeble, and timid, requires protection. Under such circumstances, the man naturally governs: the woman as naturally obeys. (Walker qtd. in Perkin 1)

This position both stemmed from and was reinforced by religious sentiment. Christian teaching, beginning with Eve's temptation and fall, "held that women should be subordinate" and that "true Christian humility was the only proper response of a good woman" (Perkin 1). A woman was valued only for her ability to positively influence the men around her, not for who she was as an individual.

The principles of Christian humility, including kindness and pacifism, are often considered to be positive or, at the least, not harmful. However, the view of women as subordinate to men is a hurtful principle stemming from Christian religious teaching of the Biblical story of Adam and Eve, as cited by both Perkin and Patmore. While Patmore places a positive spin on the story in his poem, making Eve out to be a simple gift that was "brought to Adam," the following events of Adam and Eve's fall into sin shows Eve as an easily fooled, helpless woman. After Eve is tricked into eating the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil by Satan, God curses the couple. Specifically, God curses Eve in Genesis 3:16 by saying, "I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labor you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you" (*The Bible* NIV). Through his decree, God acknowledges that male control over the female bodies of Eve and all women after her is a curse – not something to be glad about, but something to accept. Adam appears to take a sense of blame for his wife's transgression, though. God curses him as well in Genesis 3:17 and says it's "Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree which I commanded you, 'You must not eat from it'" (*The Bible* NIV). God considers Adam as responsible for Eve's behavior by way of being her husband. These excerpts from Genesis model, then, that men

should be in charge of male-female relationships. If a woman makes a decision that harms the couple, the man, like Adam, is ultimately responsible for the consequences, although the offending woman may likewise face punishment for her sin. Thus, Alexander Walker's proposition that women are "little capable of reasoning, feeble, and timid" and "as naturally obey" (Walker qtd Perkin 1) is rooted in hundreds of years of Biblical interpretation of Genesis and popular Christian messaging.

It is interesting that, though Eve's perceived feeble-mindedness was the instigator for the fall from grace and introduction of a sinful world, women were considered and instructed to be Christianizing forces for men. Scholar Jeanne M. Peterson explains that, oftentimes, the angelic model of a wife "was the one near to God, the pious one who kept the family on the Christian path" (677). This organizational "nature" of the woman appears to be at odds with the transgressive path of Eve, who, by common Christian interpretation, is the root cause of our troubles with sin as human beings. However, an angel in the house was characterized by "domesticity, unworldliness, asexuality, innocence, even helplessness in matters outside the domestic sphere" (Peterson 677). The chaste and devout expectations for women can be seen as an atonement for women's original sin. Instead of falling into Satan's hands as Eve did, women must instead be careful and kept inside the home for fear of shaking up the rigid boundaries of their Christian societies. To achieve and sustain male control over female desires and autonomy, an angel in the house

obeyed her husband, adored him, and promoted his spiritual and physical well-being. She supervised the servants' activities under the watchful eye of her husband and became the devoted and loving mother of a large Victorian family. She was an acquiescent, passive,

unintellectual creature, whose life revolved entirely around social engagements, domestic management, and religion. (Peterson 678)

British society cleverly reframed the curse of domesticity and marriage into a positive lifestyle to strive to emulate. The “passive, unintellectual” life of a housebound wife and mother made male control much simpler and more possible. The watchful eye of a husband ensured that the social order remained intact.

Patmore continued to reinforce the Christian nature of his wife and ideal women like her when he imagined his wife’s death in his narrative poem. He fears “Small household troubles fall’n to me, / As, ‘What time would I dine to-day?’” (Patmore 157). The separation between the male and female realms is so highly stratified and rigid in the nineteenth century that a man cannot even imagine worrying himself with domestic concerns. In fact, it’s nightmarish. However, as Peterson explains, it’s important to note that these demanding domestic “angel in the house” expectations

[are] appropriate only to the middle strata of Victorian society, where women had the leisure, privacy, and prosperity to aspire to the combination of innocence, piety, and dependency that she embodied... the Victorian angel in the house is... the women of the upper-middle class – the wives and daughters of clergymen, country gentlemen, and prosperous and well-born men in the professions and business. (Peterson 678)

Thus, for a large number of women, the ideal angelic wife and mother role was unachievable. In order to emulate even a semblance of what a proper woman should be, many middle class women took the path of becoming governesses, or live-in teachers and pseudo-mother figures. While governesses were employees in wealthy homes, scholar Elizabeth Langland that they were “not ‘working girls’; they [were] educated and impoverished gentlewomen forced to the

expedient of working” (290). The social status of being an employed gentlewoman was quite liminal in nature, in that governesses were relegated to the awkward edges of social roles and expectations for working women. Liminality can be seen as the tense, uncomfortable, and paradoxical space of being both socially accepted and ostracized. Governesses were not common servants, yet they were not on the same level of upper-class wives and mothers, a point expanded upon by Ruth Brandon. Many of these women were educated by their middle class families with the knowledge that governessing was “a normal method of educating middle-class girls and a way of keeping destitute ladies off the streets... In the 1851 census, 25,000 women – that is, 2 per cent of all unmarried women between twenty and forty – described themselves as governesses” (Brandon 1). This normalization of governessing was a necessity in an economically and socially rigid society, as there were limited opportunities for middle-class women who needed support, yet could not receive it from their male relatives. Employment was not a desirable path for young women, meaning that, “since no middle-class woman worked unless circumstances compelled her to do so, that 2 per cent must mean that every respectable lady who was forced to earn her own living became a governess” (1). Because of women’s second-class social status and abilities, women who were raised respectably (i.e., not lower class) yet lacked the money or relationships to live on their own, risked losing their honor and a comfortable living situation if they refused to governess for a living. The ultimatum of becoming a governess or losing every comfort and all respect as a bred gentlewoman created intense fear and anxiety for these tens of thousands of middle class women.

The experience of governessing was detailed by a multitude of notable female writers, including Mary Wollstonecraft, an early women’s rights advocate and mother of *Frankenstein* author Mary Shelley. Wollstonecraft was tasked with being a governess to the wealthy

Kingsborough family, a task which influenced her writing and beliefs regarding equal education for women and girls. Most notably, Wollstonecraft touched on the precarious nature of being an employed caretaker and teacher, writing “I feel all a mother’s fears for the swarm of little ones which surround me, and observe disorders, without having the power to apply the proper remedies” (qtd. in Brandon 61). Wollstonecraft felt stuck in her strange situation – on one hand, she loved the children with a near-motherly devotion and enjoyed seeing her female pupils excel in their studies, and on the other, knew her station and social expectations. She became more uncomfortable in the Kingsborough house as time went on, especially when she was made to join in on dinner parties. She explained that, at these parties, ladies in conversation with her would come to have a look of “utter mortification” when they learned that she was, in fact, a governess and not a true gentlewoman (qtd. in Brandon 62). Wollstonecraft’s experience as a governess highlighted the feeling of powerlessness that women of the period often felt. This powerlessness, Brandon explains, “was essential to the functioning of the governess system... The governess had to be weak if she was not to be threatening” (66). In order to keep the social structure intact, women like Wollstonecraft had to fit rigid roles or risk job loss, which could easily put them on the street and reduce them to beggars or prostitutes if they lacked supportive male relatives or partners. The real life example of Mary Wollstonecraft parallels the experiences of the governesses in *Emma*, *Jane Eyre*, and *The Turn of the Screw*, in that these women were pushed towards employment in wealthy homes because of their social status. The fictional representations seen in these novels function to highlight the lives of women who were alive during the nineteenth century, as well as to illustrate more about what their daily lives and inner thoughts and emotions may have been. While Wollstonecraft’s opinions about and experiences with governessing were communicated to future readers because of her fame as a women’s rights

advocate, most women in her position were not as lucky as to have their concerns and thoughts documented and studied. Fiction, then, illuminates the struggles and voices of women who, because of their social status, were oftentimes not allowed to speak for themselves and have others intently listen. Most importantly, the lives of these fictional characters revealed that fear over destitution, loss of social status, uselessness, and, most importantly, being alone and loveless, kept governesses working despite the challenges and difficulties they faced during their employment.

### **3 Fear of destitution and loss of social status.**

Though middle class women would apply for governess jobs in order to have the money and housing to survive on their own, their salaries were often quite meager compared to the work and dedication such positions required. Instead, the status and years of stability offered by such a position was the true draw for employment. Poverty and high social status were entirely incompatible; if someone were impoverished, she likewise would lose her respectable social standing. Considering that governesses were more respected than common servants, their wages usually ranged from £10 to £30 a year, which included room and board. This salary was higher than the that earned by female factory workers, yet much less than the pay a male would receive as a teacher or tutor (Perkin 164). Still, there was a serious level of dissatisfaction regarding the governess job for many women, especially considering the exploitative nature of governessing. The job was quite difficult, and the compensation did not match the intensity of the required work. Joan Perkin details this, explaining that the governess was

Too low for the family, too high for the servants, she was isolated, yet had no privacy, and was almost universally despised. She worked all day, often sharing a bedroom with the children and taking care of their baths and meals as well as their lessons, yet was discouraged from being affectionate to them; in odd moments she did family mending.  
(Perkin 164)

The necessity for a salary in order to avoid even further social degradation for a middle class woman created anxiety and difficulty.

The concerns faced by real women in the nineteenth century were likewise represented in literature of the time. In Jane Austen's *Emma*, published towards the beginning of the century in

1815, Jane Fairfax, a beautiful and accomplished yet lower-middle class woman, is pushed to apply for governess positions because of her limited options. When pushed by her wealthy friend Mrs. Elton to apply to governess for upper class women she knows, Jane argues: “Excuse me, ma’am, but this is by no means my intention; I make no enquiry myself... There are places in town, offices, where enquiry would soon produce something – Offices for the sale – not quite of human flesh – but of human intellect” (Austen 283), and goes on to refer to the game of finding employment the “governess-trade” (284). Jane Fairfax’s fear of destitution is at odds with her disgust at the cheap sale of women’s intelligence and abilities. She further insists that, when the timing is right, “...there are advertising offices, and that by applying to them [she] should have no doubt of very soon meeting with something that would do” (284). For Jane, the mortification of selling herself to live with a wealthy family is almost too much to bear, especially since she was taken in by the wealthy Campbell family and educated alongside their daughter in her youth. However, she recognizes her options as incredibly limited as a single, impoverished woman, and thus accepts that, if she cannot governess, she will have to find work “that would do.” Jane is willing to accept social degradation, but not poverty. Mrs. Elton becomes upset by Jane Fairfax’s statement, exclaiming “Something that would do! Aye, *that* may suit your humble ideas of yourself; – I know what a modest creature you are; but it will not satisfy your friends to have you taking up with anything that may offer, any inferior, commonplace situation” (Austen 284). While Jane does not fear losing status for fairer wages or a happier life, Mrs. Elton steps in to remind her of the rigid standards she must uphold. The fear of Jane facing destitution and loss of the status she has is a motivating factor behind the push for her to secure a governess position.

Austen provides helpful clues as to the differences between the novel’s wealthy protagonist, Emma Woodhouse, and Jane Fairfax, in order to further illustrate the significance of

the intersection of wealth and status. Emma has her pick of whichever husband and/or future she desires, and she discusses with her friend Harriet about her wish not to marry:

I shall not be a poor old maid; and it is poverty only which makes celibacy contemptible to a generous public! A single woman, with a very narrow income, must be a ridiculous, disagreeable, old maid! The proper sport of boys and girls; but a single woman, of good fortune, is always respectable, and may be as sensible and pleasant as any body else... a very narrow income has a tendency to contract the mind, and sour the temper. (Austen 82)

Emma's prejudice towards impoverished women, specifically single ones, reinforces the importance of attaining a respectable career as an unmarried middle class woman. Emma, unlike Jane Fairfax, has no need to "degrade" herself with employment, as she does not fear poverty; she is wholly supported by her father's money and will inherit a significant amount. She even scoffs at the thought of a marriage proposal from the young vicar Mr. Elton, thinking "He only wanted to aggrandize and enrich himself; and if Miss Woodhouse of Hartfield, the heiress of thirty thousand pounds, were not quite so easily obtained as he had fancied, he would soon try for Miss Somebody else with twenty, or with ten" (Austen 128-29). For a young woman like Jane Fairfax who did not have the privilege of inheritance and instead only had the gift of gentle breeding and intelligence to rely on, her immediate concern would be maintaining social status through her limited labor and employment opportunities. Likewise, because *Emma* was published in 1815, Austen offers a window into the incredibly strict female standards that marked the pre-Victorian period. As the decades passed, teaching in standard elementary and secondary schools instead of as a private, in-home governess "was professional work with clear

standards of certification and pay” with the average salary for a female teacher rising to about £90 per year in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Perkin 165).

In *Jane Eyre*, published in 1847 (about thirty years after *Emma*), Charlotte Brontë continues to highlight and reinforce the governess’s socioeconomic concerns. Jane, the novel’s title character, spends her childhood and most of her teenage years at Lowood school studying and eventually teaching in the school herself. Jane wishes for “a new servitude” after living at Lowood for eight years, thinking to herself,

A new servitude! There is something in that... I know there is, because it does not sound too sweet. It is not like such words as Liberty, Excitement, Enjoyment: delightful sounds truly, but no more than sounds for me, and so hollow and fleeting that it is mere waste of time to listen to them. But Servitude! That must be matter of fact. (Brontë 101)

Jane clearly recognizes her social position and the necessity of taking up servitude for employment. She does not consider a route besides servitude as she is well-aware of the social expectations for a woman of her income level and status. In order to maintain her current, albeit not desirable, status as a single, educated woman, Jane had to take up a different teaching job. After advertising her services as a governess, she gets a single response from Thornfield Hall offering her “thirty pounds per annum,” which she decides to accept because “at Lowood [she] only got fifteen pounds per annum” (Brontë 104-105). Although this salary was on the high end of governess wages and was exceedingly good compared to the wages of factory workers and other lower class women, they were not truly livable. Scholar Edward Copeland worked to calculate these wages, saying “we take the average exchange rate between the pound and the dollar in 1972, of 2.5 dollars to the pound, in order to arrive in our own currency, which, in short, is twenty dollars to every Jane Austen pound” (162). Copeland’s calculations serve as a general

basis of comparison, especially since the pound would have different valuations by the time *Jane Eyre* was published. Thus, Jane and real women like her would have been making a minimum of about 600 dollars per year according to the 1972 conversion (if they were receiving a higher than usual salary), most of which “had been eaten up by the expenses of the millinery and hairdressing necessary to put in a genteel appearance in the parlor” (Copeland 163). In 2022, adjusted for inflation, this would equal out to around 4,000 dollars annually. These wages only covered the basic necessities required to look the “part” of the gentlewoman, a part which could ironically only be fulfilled by retaining the governess position. As with many real-life governesses of the time, Jane Eyre was faced with a choice of low wages and housing or poverty and loss of social status. These unpleasant options created the fear and anxiety that rooted a great number of governesses to their work.

Rochester likewise reinforces the difficult nature of governessing for low pay after he proposes to Jane and can reveal his true opinion about her situation. When Jane asks to continue teaching until they are married, he bluntly responds “You will give up your governessing slavery at once” (Brontë 316). Although he participated in the social system of hiring a governess and paying her the typical low wage, Rochester quite clearly disagrees with the practice when his future wife is associated with it. When he first hired Jane, he simply commissioned Mrs. Fairfax to find a governess for Adèle. There did not seem to be significant consideration of or reflection on what he later refers to as the enslavement of governesses. However, considering the strict social structure of the period, the only real way for Rochester to release Jane from her “governessing slavery” was to marry her. Even then, Mrs. Fairfax, the housekeeper, shows reluctance and nervousness regarding the unequal marriage, telling Jane, “I hope all will be right in the end, but believe me, you cannot be too careful. Try and keep Mr. Rochester at a distance:

distrust yourself as well as him. Gentlemen in his station are not accustomed to marry their governesses” (Brontë 310). The potential release from a low social status and wage slavery is laden with difficulty and social faux-pas. It appears that the governess is firmly rooted in her social status; she is damned if she refuses to teach, as she will become impoverished and lose her status as a lady, and she is damned if she marries a gentleman, as she will be breaking rigid nineteenth century social code built on fear of breaking deeply engrained social roles, including the belief that women and men should marry partners within their same social rank.

The governess’s fear of loss of social status and becoming impoverished is also seen in Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw*, published at the end of the period in 1898. The unnamed governess in the novella takes the position, which is strangely advertised and somewhat suspicious, because of the salary and status the job offered. At the beginning of the novella, a man named Douglas promises to tell a strange story told to him by his former governess, who he never names. This story begins with the unnamed woman accepting her position as governess, which is the basis for the strange events that occur in the story. The unnamed governess had the typical background of most other women who took up governessing:

The fact to be in possession of was therefore that his old friend, the youngest of several daughters of a poor country parson, had, at the age of twenty, on taking service for the first time in the schoolroom, come up to London, in trepidation, to answer in person an advertisement that had already placed her in brief correspondence with the advertiser.

(James 4)

The governess is young, naïve, and quite willing to take a position with a wealthy family to gain status as a lady. Likewise, being a young woman away from her hometown and experiencing the world, she finds herself attracted to her employer, as “this prospective patron proved a

gentleman, a bachelor in the prime of life, such a figure as had never risen, save in a dream or an old novel, before a fluttered, anxious girl out of a Hampshire vicarage” (James 4). The fears and anxieties of young women poised to become governesses were quite high – they had to navigate the socioeconomic wiles of being middle class gentlewomen alongside their own fluctuating emotions and desires. The fantasy of being released from the “governessing slavery” by a wealthy employer was an attractive, yet near-impossible to fulfill, wish. In her article, Nora Gilbert discusses the fantasy of marrying out of employment. Unlike *Jane Eyre* and “the majority of other constituents of the ‘governess novel’ genre to which they belong, [where] the heroine is saved from the drudgery and intellectual stagnation of her work life via the conduit of marriage” (Gilbert 456), the unnamed governess is relieved of her duty to the mysterious children in the novella through her mental deterioration and eventual death of Miles, one of the children in her charge. In fact, she continues to work as a governess for many years, as the storyteller, Douglas, mentions that the unnamed governess “was a most charming person, but she was ten years older than I. She was my sister’s governess... It was long ago, and this episode was long before” (James 2). The unnamed governess, and many real women like her, could not realistically escape their positions through marriage to their wealthy master or suitor. Instead, the governess job held up the thin barrier between being a gentlewoman and facing destitution and social degradation.

The fear of poverty and social ostracization is further reinforced when James reveals the unnamed governess’s reasoning for accepting her position in the first place, despite the strange circumstances surrounding the family. The master admits “there had been for the two children at first a young lady whom they had had the misfortune to lose. She had done for them quite beautifully – she was a most respectable person – till her death, the great awkwardness of which

had, precisely, left no alternative but the [boarding] school for little Miles” (James 5). When pressed about the previous governess’s death, the master simply says “That will come out. I don’t anticipate” (James 5). Clearly, the circumstances of the position are strange. The master is not forthcoming with the details of his former governess’s position. However, the unnamed governess’s attraction to the master and the salary offered by him pushes her to accept, with Douglas stating:

She did wish to learn, and she did learn. You shall hear tomorrow what she learned. Meanwhile, of course, the prospect struck her as slightly grim. She was young, untried, nervous: it was a vision of serious duties and little company, of really great loneliness. She hesitated – took a couple of days to consult and consider. But the salary offered much exceeded her modest measure, and on a second interview she faced the music, she engaged. The moral of which was of course the seduction exercised by the splendid young man... She succumbed to it... She saw him only twice. (James 5-6)

The desire to achieve a higher salary, as well as her desires for the handsome master, drove the unnamed governess to accepting the position. Without taking the job, as Douglas claims, she would not surpass her “modest means,” and would not have a chance at raising her own social status. The fear of destitution overtook the governess’s fear of the unknown, the boring, and the serious, propelled by the unlikely fantasy of marriage and the eventual escape from the governess career.

## 4 Fear of redundancy/uselessness.

The limited career choices and employment opportunities offered to women in the nineteenth century, especially middle class women, also meant that, once women lost the ability to complete the duties required by their genteel jobs, they risked becoming useless. The usefulness of women became a topic of serious debate, enshrined in the essay “Why are Women Redundant?” written by William Rathbone Greg in 1869. Greg lays out the concerns over “the factory girls; then the distressed needlewomen; then aged and decayed governesses” (Greg 435-436) relying on employment and social aid instead of husbands to survive. He specifically complains about single and independent women:

...there is an enormous and increasing number of single women in the nation, a number quite disproportionate and quite abnormal; a number which, positively and relatively, is indicative of an unwholesome social state, and is both productive and prognostic of much wretchedness and wrong. There are hundreds of thousands of women – not to speak more largely still – scattered through all ranks, but proportionally most numerous in the middle and upper classes, – who have to earn their own living, instead of spending and husbanding the earnings of men; who, not having the natural duties and labours of wives and mothers, have to carve out artificial and painfully-sought occupations for themselves... (Greg 436)

The negative perception of single women, especially employed ones, stems from the disappointment at the unfulfilled “angel in the house” role of a pure, wholly domestic wife and mother. Greg’s dissatisfaction at the employed, single women of the upper and middle classes is quite clear: women of a certain status should not be filling roles outside of being a wife and

mother, lest they risk degrading the social system further. However, because the social roles were highly rigid in nineteenth century British society, women had limited options, especially upon retirement from their already small pool of employment opportunities.

Greg continues to detail the “issue” of single women and mentions the problem of old, retired governesses:

...women, more or less well educated, spending youth and middle life as governesses, living laboriously, yet perhaps not uncomfortably, but laying by nothing, and retiring to a lonely and destitute old age; and old maids, with just enough income to live upon, but wretched and deteriorating, their minds narrowing, and their hearts withering, because they have nothing to do, and none to love, cherish, and obey... only employment can fulfill the dreary void of an unshared existence. (Greg 436-437)

Ironically, in the pursuance of maintaining status and the avoidance of poverty, many women, upon losing their employment as governesses, were subjected to the very things they were running from. Nora Gilbert reminds her readers that, even considering her precarious social situation, “The governess, as a spinster who left her patriarchal household and actually worked for a living, served, therefore, as an even more menacing symbol of unencumbered femininity” (460). Women, especially employed ones, threatened the very threads that held together the fabric of the patriarchal British society. This fear of single, working women, then, stems from the very structure of the social hierarchy itself. Greg’s solution was twofold, as summarized by Perkin:

First, he advised single women to adopt the pleasing manners of expensive prostitutes in order to marry their way out of their “economic redundancy” (at the same time he advised men to marry earlier and settle for a modest style of life); secondly, he said single

women over thirty years of age should be sent to Canada, Australia or the United States, where there was a surplus of men and they would find husbands. (162)

Greg's solution to the "issue" of "useless" women in Britain was quite offensive, yet may have reflected the mindset of many men at the time. If British women could not be wives and mothers (unless they were lower class servants, of course), they were a drain on the nation. Thus, women, especially single, employed, middle and upper class women, feared becoming redundant if they did not eventually have a male partner to take care of them upon retirement. If they could not be useful, what could they be? As Greg grimly puts it, single women in Britain, with or without employment, are a "difficulty" (444) that must be addressed.

This sense of either being married, employed, or useless struck fear into the women of the period, especially unmarried and employed middle and upper class women. The fear of redundancy is seen in *Emma* concerning Emma's former governess, Miss Taylor, who becomes Mrs. Weston upon marrying and leaving the Woodhouse home. Emma laments the loss of her lifelong governess, thinking:

The want of Miss Taylor would be felt every hour of every day. She recalled her past kindness – the kindness, the affection of sixteen years – how she taught and had played with her from five years old – how she had devoted all her powers to attach and amuse her in health... A large debt of gratitude was owing here... Emma was aware that great must be a difference between a Mrs. Weston only half a mile from them, and a Miss Taylor in the house... (Austen 4-5)

In her description of "Miss Taylor," Emma depicts a surrogate mother, a woman who devoted all her time and attention to taking care of Emma and ensuring her proper development. Thus, the departure of Miss Taylor is akin to the loss of a parent. Interestingly, Miss Taylor was a pseudo-

wife and mother to the Woodhouses, yet, upon the redundancy of her employment (i.e., Emma becoming an adult who no longer needs a governess as a companion), her actual marriage to Mr. Weston severed the familial ties. Miss Taylor was even described as falling “little short of a mother in affection” (Austen 1) during her term of employment. If Miss Taylor did not become Mrs. Weston and find a man to marry her, she would have been asked to permanently live in the Woodhouse home as Emma’s single female companion. Mr. Woodhouse feels great pain over her marriage, stating, “Poor Miss Taylor! – I wish she were here again. What a pity that Mr. Weston ever thought of her!” (Austen 6). Mrs. Weston is put into a strange position – either, she becomes the mostly useless live-in companion of Emma, or she marries, leaving behind the child she spent sixteen years caring for as her own. Peterson highlights in her article that, in fact, “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” (13), meaning that the Woodhouses’ desire to continue to provide for Mrs. Weston was quite rare. To avoid redundancy, Mrs. Weston chooses the path of the angelic wife to Mr. Weston, as it is “...her time of life to be settled in a home of her own... to be secure of a comfortable provision” (Austen 9).

Similar to Mrs. Weston, Jane Fairfax shares the fearful possibility of governessing and working to avoid eventual redundancy. Jane’s aunt, Miss Bates, serves as a prime warning of what can happen when a genteel, yet poor woman, does not work and instead becomes redundant; she is depicted as not much more than a purposeless town gossip. In fact,

Miss Bates stood in the very worst predicament in the world for having much of the public favour; and she had no intellectual superiority to make atonement to herself, or

frighten those who may hate her, into outward respect. She had never boasted either beauty or cleverness. Her youth had passed without distinction. (Austen 18)

By not having significant enough beauty or intelligence to either get married or take up a position as a governess, Miss Bates was put into quite a strange predicament. Oftentimes, “Poor but genteel spinsters who did not emigrate often needed to earn a living not only for themselves but for dependents” (Perkin 163), and Miss Bates was no exception, in that she had to care for her “failing mother, and... endeavour to make a small income go as far as possible” (Austen 18). Miss Bates had the cultural capital but lacked the income needed to obtain a respected position. When Jane is offered a governess position with the Suckling family in Maple Grove, she is quite distraught over the idea of the job, but decides to accept, with Miss Bates saying, “this is such a situation as [Jane] cannot feel herself justified in declining” (Austen 362). With Miss Bates as a clear example of the consequences of lacking either significant employment or a husband as a low income woman, Jane has little choice. If she does not take the position, she risks becoming as redundant and pathetic as her aunt, especially since she is keeping her engagement to Frank Churchill a secret. Jane Fairfax and many real middle class women like her (although, it was unlikely that they had secret engagements to wealthy men who could pull them from the dregs of governessing at just the right time), had to avoid redundancy from the time they became young women by taking up proper employment as a governess. Still, though, the concerns over uselessness upon retirement or unemployment persisted, revealing the near-necessity for women to be married off or otherwise taken care of by a male figure when working was no longer an option.

Jane Eyre likewise faces her own struggles and fears over redundancy and eventual unemployment. Even with a governess position secured, maintaining employment proved to be

precarious in nature. Specifically, the social perception of governesses by their employers made their employment status unstable and always subject for termination. When Rochester entertains other wealthy families, the Ingram women go on a spiteful rant about their governesses and their apparent uselessness in the home to begin with. Blanche Ingram states, with Jane in the room, “You should hear mamma on the chapter of governesses; Mary and I have had, I should think, a dozen at least in our day; half of them detestable and the rest ridiculous, and all incubi – were they not, mamma?” (Brontë 206). Blanche highlights an important factor in the potential redundancy of governesses – the termination of their employment before they reached old age or tenure with the family. In *Emma*, Miss Taylor/Mrs. Weston was dearly loved when she worked in the home; Blanche Ingram reminds readers that not all governesses were adored or appreciated, and instead were considered redundant the moment they stepped foot in their employer’s home. Instead, many of them were viewed as “incubi,” folklore demons that suck the life out of women. This view of the governess as an incubus reinforces why they were at such constant risk for termination – they were sometimes seen as a drain on the household, especially to their female employers and young pupils. Peterson highlights this concern, stating that

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. (13)

The high turnover rate for governesses, then, reduced the significance of their position within the family home and reinforced their “incongruent social status” (Peterson 15). It seems that, even upon taking a position as a governess, a woman would be accepting the likelihood of becoming unemployed, unmarried, and/or redundant. However, with limited options for a financially

unstable young woman, the potential for failure was a better prospect than the *assurance* of failure.

Later in *Jane Eyre*, Rochester tests Jane's devotion to him by suggesting that, upon his marriage to Blanche Ingram, Jane will become a governess to five children far off in Ireland. While Rochester makes this statement to distress Jane, his insistence that Jane find new employment (as she is still young enough to continue to work) quickly reflects the precarious nature of the governess position, in that, upon the family finding a governess useless or redundant, she had no little to no safety net to fall back on. Rochester intimates this by saying, "I consider that when a dependent does her duty as well as you have done yours, she has a sort of claim upon her employer for any little assistance he can conveniently render her; indeed I have already, through my future mother-in-law, heard of a place that I think will suit" (Brontë 294). Rochester is a sort of anomaly through providing help for his now-redundant governess; employers were by no means obligated to assist their former employees with their job search. The problem of unemployed governesses became so significant that the Governesses' Benevolent Institution (GBI) was founded in 1843 to help unemployed governesses find work, and provide a place for them to live once they reached old age (Perkin 164). Brandon found that the GBI was quickly overwhelmed with applications from "those who, standing on the brink of destitution... hailed the establishment of the Institution as a message from Providence to save them from despair" (GBI Internal Reports qtd. Brandon 227). The concerns levied by these women were heartbreaking, yet common, with one governess saying she "saved nothing during twenty-six years of exertion, having supported her mother, three younger sisters, and a brother, and educated the four" and another who "lost the whole of her property, £6000, by the failure of a brother, and in consequence became a governess" (Brandon 228). The tragic state of these

destitute and redundant former governesses was a serious social ill, making the fears and anxieties of working women far from unfounded. For those like Jane Eyre who valued the family they worked for, the loss of these pseudo family members was also emotionally distressing. Jane laments the prospect of leaving, stating, “I grieve to leave Thornfield: I love Thornfield – I love it, because I have lived in it a full and delightful life – momentarily at least... and it strikes me with terror and anguish to feel I absolutely must be torn from you forever” (Brontë 296). The precarious employment status of a governess, whether she approved of her employer or not, led to an innate fear of redundancy. The news that a governess was obsolete could come at any moment in her career, dropping her onto the street and likely forcing her to request social aid from services like the GBI.

In James’s *The Turn of the Screw*, the unnamed governess also fears unemployment and uselessness. Most notably, she keeps the strange happenings around the estate to herself because her employer had requested her complete silence in order to satisfy him. His main condition was “that she should never trouble him – but never, never: neither appeal nor complain nor write about anything; only meet all questions herself, receive all moneys from his solicitor, take the whole thing over and let him alone” (James 6). The governess’s attraction to her employer alongside her fear of unemployment (as the position offered a high salary that exceeded her modest means) maintained her silence, even when the children’s behavior and the strange happenings around the home became too intense and frightening to ignore. In fact, the governess believes that the children are seeing ghosts around the estate just as she is, yet are cleverly obscuring their knowledge through feigning innocence. She thinks,

It was striking of the children, at all events, to kiss me inveterately with a kind of wild irrelevance and never to fail – one or the other – of the precious question that had helped

us through many a peril. “When do you think he *will* come? Don’t you think we *ought* to write?” – there was nothing like that inquiry, we found by experience, for carrying off an awkwardness. “He” of course was their uncle in Harley Street; and we lived in much profusion of the theory that he might at any moment arrive to mingle in our circle. (James 52)

The governess believes that the children use the idea of writing to their uncle as a distraction from their knowledge of the seemingly supernatural occurrences plaguing them all. She, however, found her usefulness and worthiness in her ability to ignore the children’s pleas to write to their absentee uncle. She states, “He never wrote to them – that may have been selfish, but it was a part of the flattery of his trust of me; for the way in which a man pays his highest tribute to a woman is apt to be but by the more festal celebration of one of the sacred laws of his comfort” (James 52). Her usefulness is defined by her ability to appease the master – if the governess breaks the master’s rules, surely she risks losing her employment and her so-desired favor from her employer. Most importantly, she feels that she is receiving honor and respect from her master by maintaining his comfort. Her desire to continue in her position, then, boils down to the fear of the loss of security and male acceptance. The governess’s proper fulfillment of her role entails an unquestioning loyalty to her male employer, lest she risk unemployment and redundancy.

The unnamed governess’s fear and anxieties over becoming redundant do not only stem from monetary and romantic concerns, but also from the behavior of her own pupils. Miles specifically causes this anxiety in his governess by pushing her to find a way to re-enroll him in the boarding school that he was mysteriously and unceremoniously expelled from. He tells her “You know, my dear, that for a fellow to be with a lady always–!” (James 54) and cuts himself

off, implying that being educated by and living around only women was useless for a boy of his age. Miles follows up this statement by saying "...after all, I'm a fellow, don't you see? that's – well, getting on," to which the governess thinks, "Oh, but I felt helpless!" (James 54). The unnamed governess is in quite a predicament here. On one hand, she is in charge of Miles as his caretaker and teacher. However, on the other hand, she is a woman, and a woman who is employed by his uncle. Miles has the social advantage of being both wealthy and male. In many ways, he is the master of the house, although the governess has a position that carries weight and authority, especially over other, more common servants like Mrs. Grose. Her feelings of helplessness, then, are not unfounded. She reflects, "He had got out of me that there was something I was much afraid of and that he should probably be able to make use of my fear to gain, for his own purpose, more freedom" (James 56). Miles had used his social superiority, even though he was a child, to render the authority of his governess useless. The sheer precariousness of a governess position is revealed in this simple moment. If the governess loses her already shaky authority and elevated social position within the employed ranks, she effectively becomes redundant. The fears of the unnamed governess and women like her, then, stem from the ability to become useless before they even reached retirement age. The idea of staying with a single family for a lifetime (like Miss Taylor in *Emma*, for instance) was quite a romantic, idealistic, unfulfilled dream for many governesses.

## **5 Fear of living alone and being without love.**

The fears of poverty, social isolation, and uselessness/redundancy were prevalent for governesses during the nineteenth century. However, the all-encompassing, overarching fear that plagued governesses was the fear of lovelessness and living alone without significant relationships or partnerships, especially with men. The lack of successful, close male relationships created the social ills that single, employed, middle class women faced. Without a man to support them, women faced poverty from their inability to work normal jobs without losing status because of the rigid patriarchal expectations of male employment and female domesticity. Likewise, because of these domestic, “angel in the house” expectations for women of the period, living alone and not being a wife and mother, at least for middle to upper class women, signaled redundancy and purposelessness. Without a romantic male partner, Perkins explains “Unmarried women without independent means often became the mainstay of aged parents or other relatives, being expected to remain utterly self-sacrificing for all who needed them” (160). Circumstances were even more dire for women without supportive families: “The consequences of remaining unmarried, for those who had no money and could not live with family members, were often economic hardship and social marginality” (Perkin 161). Even in Greg’s “Why Are Women Redundant?” essay, he condemns “the mistake of female celibacy in the educated classes” (Greg 449). It is important to note that Greg was not encouraging sex outside of marriage, but rather that a celibate, unmarried woman was not productive for the nation in terms of raising a family or running a household. This disdain for educated women remaining single and celibate permeated public thought in Britain, which can be seen in the romanticization of the exit from the governess position through marriage, especially in both

*Emma* and *Jane Eyre*. Alternately, James's *The Turn of the Screw* highlights the reality that most governesses worked, single and unmarried, until their positions ended. Interestingly, Marion Amies discusses that in Australian governess novels, "That the governess was sought as a bride is one measure of the degree to which her status incongruence was resolved in the colonies" (558). It appears that the population in the British homeland upheld the rigid social ideals far more than those residing in the colonies. For single, middle class governesses in Britain, the prospects of marrying to escape the drudgery of their employment and a lifetime of loneliness were much less bright.

In Austen's *Emma*, the fear of loneliness and lack of specifically male companionship is seen in the deteriorating mental state of Jane Fairfax. Her relationship with Frank Churchill is hidden from the community, reinforcing her status as a single woman with limited social mobility or opportunity outside of governess employment. While Jane has ample female companionship, she is deeply unsatisfied with her life prospects, especially when Frank ridicules her and cozies up to Emma in an effort to conceal their engagement. Jane becomes quite distraught over the stress of the situation, especially regarding Frank's behavior. She escapes a party, telling Emma,

I am fatigued; but it is not the sort of fatigue – quick walking will refresh me. – Miss Woodhouse, we all know at times what it is to be wearied in spirits. Mine, I confess, are exhausted. The greatest kindness you can show me, will be to let me have my own way, and only say that I am gone when it is necessary. (Austen 343)

Jane's relationship with Frank causes her a great deal of stress and anxiety, further heightening her fears over becoming a governess. Frank's flippancy towards Jane Fairfax and perceived liking of Emma reinforces her fear of living without male love, support, and companionship.

When it seems inevitable that Jane will be leaving for her governess position in the near future, Emma tries to visit her, thinking “It was a more pressing concern to show attention to Jane Fairfax, whose prospects were closing” (Austen 369). In Emma’s own thoughts, Jane’s prospects for a fulfilling life were closing in front of everyone’s eyes. Jane recognizes this reality and refuses to see Emma; in fact, Miss Bates has to speak for Jane, who will not see her in person, nor communicate via letter. Miss Bates claims “Indeed, the truth was, that poor dear Jane could not bear to see any body – any body at all...” (Austen 370). While Jane Fairfax does not get the ability to speak for herself during these moments of great distress, it can be inferred that her fear and anxiety stem from both accepting a governess position she does not want to have, and from the mistreatment from Frank Churchill, her only avenue out of lifelong, unsatisfying employment. Jane’s lack of a proper voice may likewise be a technique by Austen to reveal Jane’s lack of agency in her circumstances; she cannot change her position in life in a satisfying or purely independent manner. Frank reinforces Jane’s anger at his mistreatment, writing to Mrs. Weston: “I reached Highbury, and saw how ill I had made her. Do not pity me till you see her wan, sick looks” (Austen 419). While the reader does not get to hear Jane’s true feelings in her own words, her fears and anxieties are revealed through the claims of those closest to her.

When Emma learns of the secret engagement between Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill, she is less surprised at their unequal social standings in terms of wealth, but instead at Frank’s willingness to allow Jane to accept a governess position in the first place. Emma exclaims, “Good God... Jane actually on the point of going as a governess! What could he mean by such horrible indelicacy? To suffer her to engage herself – to suffer to even think of such a measure!” (Austen 377). Emma’s shock is rooted in the social perception of the single, lonely governess whose life is dedicated to her charges and the wishes of her employer. The idea of a governess is

simply incompatible with significant male attention or marriage. Mrs. Weston defends Frank, claiming that accepting the governess position “was a private resolution of [Jane’s], not communicated to him – or at least not communicated in a way to carry conviction... and it was the discovery of what she was doing, of this very project of hers, which determined him to come forward at once...” (Austen 377). To Frank, then, the prospect of Jane becoming a governess effectively meant losing her once and for all. Because of Frank’s mistreatment, however, Jane was prepared to swear off the potential for a serious, romantic relationship and instead embrace the loneliness and servitude offered by the governess position. Her willingness to refuse a more comfortable life to maintain her own dignity and self-respect reveals Jane to be both introspective and highly aware of the limited opportunities afforded to a woman of her status. For women like Jane who either did not have financially supportive male connections (father, husband, brother, etc.) or had to break ties with the men that could support them, employment became a necessary evil, leading to an oftentimes lonely and celibate life spent in the company of other women, as seen with Jane’s spinster aunt, Miss Bates.

The fear of loneliness and living without male support permeates the plot of *Jane Eyre*. From the beginning of the novel, it becomes quite clear what life can be like if a woman’s family were to pass away and leave her without an inheritance. Jane must live with the Reed family, comprised of her aunt and cousins who mistreat her. She reflects on this, thinking “It must have been most irksome to [Mrs. Reed to] find herself bound by a hard-wrung pledge to stand in the stead of a parent to a strange child she could not love, and to see an uncongenial alien permanently intruded on her own family group” (Brontë 18). Jane began her life as an outsider, which only became further reinforced upon accepting a governess position under her master and eventual lover, Rochester. By falling in love with Rochester, Jane breaks the social code of the

period quite blatantly. In her article, Jeanne M. Peterson reinforces the unequal relationship between gentlemen and their employees:

There was no easy courtesy, attraction, or flirtation between a gentleman and a governess, because she was not his social equal. The pattern of relations between gentlemen and their female domestics was not fitting either, because the governess was not entirely an inferior. Reared and educated with the same values as her employers and their guests, the governess was the first to be aware of the incongruities of her social position. (17)

The incongruous relationship between a governess and her master created a complex dynamic. The governess was a young, educated woman living in the family home, one a man could easily see as a potential romantic partner. However, the severe social implications of a governess and her employer forming a romantic partnership made the potential for a relationship highly unlikely, exacerbating the sense of loneliness of governesses. Jane even berates herself earlier in the novel for assuming Rochester could show interest in a woman like her, thinking, “It does good to no woman to be flattered by her superior, who cannot possibly intend to marry her; and it is madness in all women to let a secret love kindle within them, which, if unreturned and unknown, must devour the life that feeds it” (Brontë 188). Jane must remind herself that the most likely outcome for a woman of her social status is loneliness and permanent romantic separation from her employer, who could easily pursue women of his status with inheritances. This makes Jane’s engagement and eventual marriage to Rochester quite fictional and fantastical in nature, which Gilbert touches on:

this marriage plot was far more common in literature than in life; as a general rule, the governess was looked upon as subordinate rather than as a prospective partner by the

eligible bachelors of the family by whom she was employed, and found herself indefinitely banished to the liminal space of spinsterhood. (459)

The “liminal space of spinsterhood” is a space in-between social acceptance and ostracization. An unmarried, employed woman is placed in an inaccessible category of female, yet undesirable because of her social standing. The liminality of spinsterhood was isolating, and was a future that was feared by many governesses.

Even later in the novel, when Jane tells the housekeeper Mrs. Fairfax about her unlikely engagement to Rochester, Mrs. Fairfax is wary about the marriage. She tells Jane “I hope all will be right in the end, but believe me, you cannot be too careful. Try and keep Mr. Rochester at a distance: distrust yourself as well as him. Gentlemen in his station are not accustomed to marry their governesses” (Brontë 310). Because of her social and employment status, Jane is almost doomed to loneliness and a lack of significant male relationships. Even when she finds love, it is “incorrect” by British standards, reinforcing the loneliness and liminality, or social precariousness, of the governess position. In fact, as Gilbert explains, “Many Victorian articles and advice manuals described the model governess in terms of her willingness to stay on the periphery; to serve as an impartial observer rather than an active participant; to accept the fact that she would only ever be an outside looking in” (463). Loneliness, then, became a part of the job description. The fear of further loneliness and isolation, especially since men could release them from their oftentimes arduous and mentally taxing employment, dominated the minds of many single, middle class, employed women. The servitude that governesses performed did not end with marriage, though. When Jane marries a weak and injured Rochester at the end of the novel, she finds herself knee-deep in responsibility, stating, “I meant to become [Adèle’s] governess once more, but I soon found this impracticable; my time and cares were now required

by another – my husband needed them all” (Brontë 526). Although marriage is an escape from loneliness, a woman’s responsibilities, as seen in Jane’s continued hard work, never lessen. In the avoidance of isolation and pursuance of love, women stayed in the domestic sphere, always working within the confines of the home and family.

*The Turn of the Screw* does not honor the romantic trope of the governess marrying an eligible bachelor; instead, the unnamed governess is intensely lonely throughout the novella, and does not escape from her employment via marriage. Her relationship with her bachelor master does not go anywhere, and she grows to be increasingly manic and afraid the longer she is alone and in charge at Bly House. Her suspicions of the children knowing the potential secrets of the manor cloud her brain, with her musing “I used to wonder how my little charges could help guessing that I thought strange things about them; and the circumstance that these things only made them more interesting was not by itself a direct aid to keeping them in the dark” (James 37). Considering that the unnamed governess is the only true authority figure at Bly, and that she does not have another person to properly confide in, her isolation and loneliness can only exacerbate her feelings of suspicion and fear regarding the children’s supposed strange behavior and knowledge of supernatural happenings. She later wonders,

How can I retrace the strange steps of my obsession? There were times of our being together when I would have been ready to swear that, literally, in my presence, but with my direct sense of it closed, they had visitors who were known and were welcome... The little wretches denied it with all the added volume of their sociability and their tenderness. (James 51)

The governess’s loneliness and lack of a significant relationship drives her deeper into mistrust and dread. However, she is further doomed to isolation by her agreement to not bother or

correspond with the master under any circumstances. Even when Mrs. Grose begs the governess to write to the master, she reacts with surprise:

I quickly rose, and I think I must have shown her a queerer face than ever yet. “You see me asking him for a visit?” No, with her eyes on my face she evidently couldn’t. Instead of it even – as a woman reads another – she could see what I myself saw: his derision, his amusement, his contempt for the breakdown of my resignation at being left alone and for the fine machinery I had set in motion to attract his attention to my slighted charms. She didn’t know – no one knew – how proud I had been to serve him and to stick to our terms. (James 49)

The last thing that the governess wants to do is look pathetic or lonely in front of her employer; she would rather face solitude and suffering than reveal the difficulty of her position and upset him. Thus, though governesses feared loneliness and accepted the position to avoid spinsterhood, isolation and seclusion was, ironically, a part of the job itself. The lack of proper male affection placed the women in their positions, and, unfortunately, only male affection could release them from said position.

The key to release a governess from her employment and social liminality was *proper* male attention. Improper male attention could further damn a governess to her already-isolated status and make it worse. Mrs. Grose tells the unnamed governess about an inappropriate relationship between Miss Jessel, the former governess, and Peter Quint, the former valet (and a rumored bad influence) as the root of great issues at Bly. The unnamed governess and Mrs. Grose have a conversation:

“Of what did [Jessel] die? Come, there was something between them.”

“There was everything.”

“In spite of the difference –?”

“Oh, of their rank, their condition” – she brought it woefully out. “She was a lady... And he so dreadfully below... Poor woman – she paid for it!” (James 32)

By becoming romantically involved with Quint, Miss Jessel fell below her social rank and debased herself. Though she fought the loneliness and solitude of her socially precarious position with pursuing romance with a man, the man in question was even lower than her, making the match incredibly distasteful. Notably, Mrs. Grose calls Miss Jessel “a lady,” which distinguishes her from Quint, who Mrs. Grose later refers to as “a hound” (James 32). Governesses in Miss Jessel’s position had to navigate confusing social expectations; on one hand, they could not marry “upwards” by pursuing an eligible, wealthy bachelor, and on the other hand, they could not pursue men who were socially outcast. Governesses existed in such a liminal space that there were truly no men on their direct level. Therefore, the loneliness feared by governesses oftentimes was entirely unavoidable, as the social structure in nineteenth century England simply did not allow for them to *have* an equal in rank. To ensure further isolation of the governess, Peterson points out, “the denial of a governess’s womanliness – her sexuality – was another mode of reducing conflict” (18). If a governess’s sexuality was ignored, then she could stay in her lonely, socially outcast space. However, because this was such a common tactic, the fear of loneliness was only further reinforced in single, middle class women of the time. The clutches of employment and spinsterhood seemed nearly impossible to escape from.

## 6 Conclusion

The Nineteenth-Century British society's values of economic superiority, high status, strict social roles, and necessity of male support created severe anxiety and fear in women who, by way of not meeting one or all of these social expectations, risked severe judgment and loss of reputation and comfort. The strictness of British society promoted fear and anxiety in all women, but especially those who were single and middle class, as they were placed at an immediate disadvantage; they were not fulfilling essential female social expectations from birth. The fears of middle class women hit fever pitch with governesses, exemplified in *Emma*, *Jane Eyre*, and *The Turn of the Screw*. Without significant male support, many women, like Jane Fairfax, Jane Eyre, and the unnamed governess, faced poverty, social ostracization, redundancy, and a life single and alone, leading to intense anxiety and mental strain. While Jane Fairfax and Jane Eyre are saved from their governess career paths by way of marriage and fortune, women like the unnamed governess were not so lucky. Unfortunately, many of the anxieties displayed by these characters regarding a life of governessing were not unfounded, as seen in the high number of real-life women who needed assistance from the GBI, or who lived as redundant spinsters once they were no longer useful to their employers. The fictional representations of governesses served to illuminate the experiences of real governesses and employed women during the nineteenth century and show patterns of fears, worries, and concerns. By contextualizing history alongside fiction, the values and rules of British society become far clearer, and likewise work to communicate the likely emotional states of women in this particular station of life. The voices of governesses and employed women like them were often not allowed to be loud enough to be heard, which highlights the importance of fiction as a sort of megaphone for the concerns of

women during the period. The governess's fantasy of being whisked away and becoming an "angel in the house" was, more often than not, just that – a fantasy. This fantasy is quite revealing of the perceived value of women in nineteenth-century England. Without male support or companionship, women were only valued for the assistance they could provide. Once their usefulness was lessened, the realm of possibilities for a regular woman quickly narrowed, reinforcing and solidifying the fears and anxieties faced by these fictional characters and the real lives of the women they reflect in *Emma*, *Jane Eyre*, and *The Turn of the Screw*.

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