

THE FIGURE OF THE GOVERNESS IN VICTORIAN GOTHIC: A SYMBOL FOR CLASS AND GENDER TENSIONS IN VICTORIAN SOCIETY

A FIGURA DA GOVERNANTA NO GÓTICO VITORIANO: UM SÍMBOLO DAS TENSÕES DE GÊNERO E CLASSE NA SOCIEDADE VITORIANA

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ABSTRACT: The governess is a popular character in Gothic novels, being a recurrent protagonist in various texts and reflecting the reality of many female middle-class laborers throughout Victorian Britain. This paper analyses how the figure of the governess was developed in Gothic literature and how it became a symbol of society's tensions, especially regarding gender and class issues. As examples, we discuss the novels *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *The Turn of the Screw* (1898).

Keywords: Gothic Literature; Victorian Britain; governess.

RESUMO: A governanta é uma personagem popular em romances Góticos, sendo uma protagonista recorrente em diversos textos e refletindo a realidade de muitas trabalhadoras da classe média na Grã-Bretanha Vitoriana. Este artigo analisa como a figura da governanta desenvolveu-se na literatura Gótica e se tornou um símbolo de tensões sociais, especialmente no que diz respeito a questões de classe e gênero. Como exemplos, são explorados os romances *Jane Eyre* (1847) e *The Turn of the Screw* (1898).

Palavras-chave: Literatura Gótica; Grã-Bretanha Vitoriana; governanta.

The governess has been a popular figure in Gothic novels, featuring in a variety of texts. There is something in this character that, for some reason, attracts the interest of Gothic writers more than any other profession. Having a governess as a

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main character was a trend that reached its climax in Victorian Britain, with the rise of the occupation in real life: an overcrowded market widely discussed throughout society. According to M. Jeanne Peterson (1970), many journals and publications of the time covered the subject, to the point that one author once stated that those topics were so overly mentioned that readers became “wearied [...] with the incessant repetition of the dreary story of spirit-broken governesses” (PETERSON, 1970, p. 7). In fact, the difficult situation those women found themselves in was extensively used as writing material. They were present in so-called Victorian classics such as Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), William Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* (1847) and Henry James’s *The Turn of The Screw* (1898), as well as others less remembered nowadays but widely read back then. For example, Mary Martha Stewart’s *Caroline Mordaunt, or, The Governess* (1835), Julia Buckley’s *Emily, the Governess* (1836) and Miss Ross’s *The Governess; or, Politics in Private Life* (1836) were a success with the public. There was also a variety of anonymous novels, usually simply named *The Governess* (LECAROS, 2000). Often, these stories became associated with the Gothic movement, as is the case with *Jane Eyre* or *The Turn of the Screw*, because of thematic and ideological similarities — namely, what Alison Milbank (2002) defined as characteristics of the progressive Gothic and that are hereby associated with the role of the governess as well: “liberation, freedom from the past, and the critical role of the entrapped heroine” (MILBANK, 2002, p. 153). This paper analyzes how the figure of the governess in literature not only reflected the realities of many female middle-class laborers throughout Victorian Britain but especially how this character developed to become a symbol in Gothic literature of society’s gender and class tensions. In order to explore those topics, we take *Jane Eyre* and *The Turn of the Screw* as examples.

1. LIFE AND WORK OF A VICTORIAN GOVERNESS

One of the reasons the occupation of governess was such a pitiable one was its ambiguous social position. According to Victorian moral norms, a noble born lady was not supposed to work for her sustenance but have her needs provided by her patriarchal guardian, hence a middle-class educated woman earning wages was contradictory to that world view. According to Elizabeth Missing Sewell (1865 *apud* PETERSON, 1970, p. 13-14), the position of a gentlewoman tutor in a household was uncomfortable exactly because it was “undefined”, as “she is not a relation, not a guest, not a mistress, not a servant — but something made up of all” (p. 14), and “no one knows exactly how to treat her” (p. 14).

This fact led to a lack of consensus regarding how families should deal with their governesses. According to Susan F. Ridout’s *Letters to a Young Governess* (1840), some families shunned them from their social circle, while others required them to be present. The latter, which possibly was intended as a kindness, might actually prove harsher in reality: in that situation, should she talk or just observe? How should she dress? Was she allowed to eat together with the family? Ridout (1840) advised discretion in all cases, but those doubts seemed to consume British families and cause many insecurities in the minds of both employers and employees, who did not know how to adequately deal with one another.

Because no one knew exactly how to treat them, governesses were relegated to a limbo: not really a servant, but also not really a lady. This mirrors a perceived ambiguity in relation to all women, as they were held, on one side, to an impossible angelic standard, and on the other, as depraved or deceivers. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979) identify that ambiguity as an overriding theme in women’s literature, as a “woman writer must examine, assimilate, and transcend the extreme

images of ‘angel’ and ‘monster’ which male authors have generated for her” (GILBERT; GUBAR, 1979, p. 17). In that way, the governesses’ specific situation also stands for a wider issue that affects all women. That is, the doubleness that Gilbert and Gubar identified as an overriding issue in women’s lives was present in an even more exaggerated manner in relation to the governess. Because of that, any woman could potentially either empathize with the governess-heroine’s trouble as they mirrored their own or reject her in an attempt to distance herself from what was perceived as a failure in moral standards. When portrayed more progressively, the governess represents the transgression (or attempt of transgression) of such conflicting gender roles; when portrayed more conservatively, she represents the fears and anxieties of those who are uncomfortable because of that transgressive behavior. Either way, both real life and literary wage-earning ladies face a tightrope in which they must balance themselves.

Charlotte Brontë’s protagonist Jane Eyre (*Jane Eyre*, 1996²) at first might seem like a role model governess, with her modesty, meekness, and sobriety. But that is not enough, and it does not stop others from frowning upon her. Ultimately, she cannot keep up with society’s expectations, because they are paradoxical and, as a complete and independent subject, her intellect and creative passion cannot be tamed down. The author, having been a governess herself, would have had a firsthand look at how these women were always stepping on eggshells, not knowing how they should behave. Even so, Jane Eyre is subject to cruelties from people who considered her as belonging to an inferior class. In the following scene, Mrs. Ingram and her daughter go on complaining about governesses, not minding that Jane is in the room:

‘You should hear Mama on the chapter about 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, Mama?’

[]

² Originally published in 1847.

'My dearest, don't mention governesses; the word makes me nervous. I have suffered a martyrdom from their incompetency and caprice; I thank Heaven I have now done with them!'

Mrs. Dent here bent over to the pious lady, and whispered something in her ear; I supposed from the answer elicited, it was a reminder that one of the anathematised race was present.

'*Tant pis*' said her ladyship, 'I hope it may do her good!' Then, in a lower tone, but still loud enough for me to hear, 'I noticed her; I am a judge of physiognomy, and in hers I see all the faults of her class.' (BRONTË, 1996, p. 145).

Indeed, there were many people who hated governesses. According to Elizabeth Eastlake (1848 *apud* PETERSON, 1970, p. 16-17) and Kathryn Hughes (2014), it was common for the servants to dislike such women, for although all of them were in a dependent position, gentlewomen working as tutors were considered superior in everything else among the working class. Peterson (1970, p. 17) concludes that such a lady-employee "usually had little power over the servants, and yet she was to be served by them. They resented her for acting like a lady, but would have criticized her for any other manner."

On the other hand, the hiring family was bound to see her as either an upstart or a degraded lady. Sarah Stickney Ellis (1843 *apud* PETERSON, 1970, p. 14) is an example of someone who thinks so, pointing out that "it is scarcely necessary in the present state of society to point out [...]the loss of character and influence occasioned by living below our station". Besides, there are suggestions in the literature, such as an *Edinburgh Review* 1859 article, that certain poor families were raising their daughters as governesses in an attempt at social climbing, which is portrayed in novels such as *Vanity Fair* (1847) and *Armadale* (1866) (PETERSON, 1970, p. 11). True or not, those rumours would certainly terrorize the upper classes. Looking at the big picture, that situation reflected fears and insecurities of the whole British middle class. Jason Long (2013) calculated a significant upward social mobility within a single generation in Victorian Britain, which generated a class of "new money". Certainly there was insecurity by the part of those as not truly belonging to high society, and by the part of

the traditional families for fear of being pulled below, of having their luxuries trivialized.

In that way, the governess finds herself displaced and isolated in the household, unable to fit in either with the family or with the servants. Her loneliness proved to be fertile ground for many works of fiction, and her presence became a trend especially in Gothic novels.

2. GOTHIC LITERATURE AND THE APPEAL OF THE GOVERNESS

Somehow, the figure of the governess in all its ambiguities appealed to Gothic sensibilities. The governess-heroine is no better than an orphan, as she was abandoned by the financial security patriarchy claimed to offer. She is in a highly unstable position, frail and alone. She is admired but also frowned upon — sometimes an angel, sometimes a monster. Moreover, some of the circumstances of her life mirror certain Gothic tropes. She is possibly a demoted noble lady, and as such she fits the Gothic theme of tragic family downfall and must redeem herself from her family errors. She is also metaphorically entrapped in the domestic setting, and the house and its social structures become her Gothic castle. In order to better explore those Gothic characteristics, it is relevant to consider the origins of the genre, its key features and its development into Victorian Gothic.

According to David Punter and Glennis Byron (2004), Gothic literature originated around the late XVIII century, although it is hard to define its boundaries. Different critics have used different definitions, some following psychological themes such as repressed fears, others using certain tropes or motifs to characterize it. Early critics such as J.M.S. Tompkins, Eino Railo and Edith Birkhead considered Horace Walpole's 1764 novel, *The Castle of Otranto*, to be the first Gothic novel (PALUMBO, 1996). According to Palumbo (1996), *The Castle of Otranto* includes many

characteristics that have come to be associated with Gothic literature: the centrality of the castle as a “nearly animate edifice” (p. 04) with labyrinths and secret passages, a narrative of reclamation of a house to its original owners and the weight of history.

Another important author of XVIII century Gothic literature was Ann Radcliffe, whose books, according to Palumbo (1996), have solidified the form and narrative first proposed by Walpole. Radcliffe’s novels always followed a young heroine who starts off in a state of calm and, after tragedy occurs, has to deal with a tyrannical male, often in the stead of a parent figure. The heroine is then imprisoned in an isolated edifice, but is able to survive her trials by being morally superior and with more sensibility than those around her. She is finally able to marry and retrieve, in a certain form, the “idyllic domesticity” from where her story began (PALUMBO, 1996). Palumbo (1996, p. 07) states that Radcliffe’s most famous work, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), is “for better or worse, the epitome of the Gothic in its first incarnation”. One possible interpretation of Radcliffe’s novels and others that follow a similar plot pattern is that they denounce, albeit in a safe and veiled fashion, domestic tyranny and the abuses of patriarchy, as Palumbo (1996) suggests. On the other hand, it is also possible to see that the conclusion of the heroine’s arc with a happy marriage is more of a reconciliation with patriarchy than a break with the power system that caused her struggles, to begin with.

As stated by Punter and Byron (2004), this first period of Gothic literature in English ended sometime near the publication of either Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s *Frankenstein* in 1818 or Charles Robert Maturin’s *Melmoth the Wanderer* in 1820. The following period more or less coincides with the Victorian Era and is therefore called Victorian Gothic. Its main innovation in relation to previous texts was a “domestication” of the Gothic. While previous works were geographically and temporarily distanced from the reader, with the plots always happening in foreign lands in older times, Victorian Gothic novels bring the stories very close to home.

Popular Victorian Gothic writers included Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, Henry James and Anne, Charlotte and Emily Brontë. These authors often set their stories in Great Britain, either in urban scenarios or in rural manors. In that case, the literal Gothic castle is substituted by a metaphorical one, but the edification continues to be a central motif in the texts, a suffocating symbol of the character's struggles and inner prisons.

The connection between the domestic setting and a prison is something recurrent in Gothic literature. The castle is not only a physical structure not allowing the heroine to escape, but it also holds all the weight of the ancient domestic institutions. According to Anne Williams (1995, p. 44), the castle “represents man's culture, the arrangement of spaces in which this ‘Gothic’ action unfolds and the distribution of power that generates the plot”. As a culturally constructed edifice, the Gothic castle reflects ancient power struggles and socially defined hierarchies. When a woman is trapped in a domestic environment, it mirrors women's relegation to the domestic sphere as well as the fetters imposed by patriarchal society.

Because of its focus on domestic imprisonment, the figure of the governess fits right into those Gothic trends that were already being explored before the Victorian age. At first, governess novels in the early XIX century focused on morality and had educational purposes, but gradually governesses started to be depicted as “vulnerable women facing the struggles against their employers' inconsiderateness” (GRANELL, 2017, p. 8), what Lecaros (2000) described as a shift that occurred around the 1830s. Ignatius Nsaidzedze (2017) states that it was probably because of the precariousness of the status of unmarried middle-class women that the governess novel became popular, as a way to explore female roles in society. According to Hughes (2014), governesses started to appear more frequently as protagonists in the 1840s. In 1847, both Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and William Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* were first published and amply discussed in literary circles, which probably helped to cement

the popularity of the governess protagonist. It is interesting to note that Brontë's Jane Eyre and Thackeray's Rebecca Sharp are very contrasting characters — the first an example of morality, the latter a scheming and coldhearted woman wanting to ascend socially. Whereas Charlotte Brontë and her sisters wrote based on their own experiences working in family homes, Thackeray wrote based on popular stories that used to circulate back then (HUGHES, 2014). Even from its first installments, the governess protagonist proved to be very versatile, retaining her ambiguous status to the eyes of the public.

3. *THE TURN OF THE SCREW* AND CLASS ISSUES

That same ambiguity is something that haunts Henry James's protagonist in *The Turn of The Screw* (2016³) as she tries to hold on to her more elevated social position. This story, written in the end of the Victorian age, differs from others by being more of a commentary on the popular governess novels that reached their climax a few decades before than being a governess novel *per se*. The character is known merely as "the governess", indicating that she can be read as a symbol of all the other women in her craft that were popular protagonists in previous books and that her role can be associated with all the traits commonly given to her predecessors.

James's Governess often implies how she feels like the lady of Bly mansion in the absence of the real owner. She thinks she is in power and in control, and is constantly reinforcing to herself her superiority over the servants and Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, the late valet and governess of Bly that come back to haunt it. Many times, though, it is visible that she is not the lady of the house, she is not in control, and she feels closer than she would like to admit to the characters she considers her inferiors.

³ Originally published in 1898.

Her constant need of internal reassurance proves her inner conflicts regarding her true place in society.

Besides, the apparition of the ghosts in certain passages reveals her class insecurities: more than once Quint is seen looking at her from outside the window, the position of one who wants to come in and join their society; a “base menial”, as she calls him, who wants to partake in the family life. When describing Quint to the housekeeper, the Governess says that he wears fancy clothes, but she is certain — she does not know how — that they are not his own, and the women come to the conclusion that he must be using the lord’s clothes. She even strangely describes him as looking like an actor — that is, someone who is pretending to be something he is not. Possibly, he is threatening because, without being “privately bred” like the Governess, he still thrives and wants to join a society she feels entitled to.

Miss Jessel, unlike Quint, came from a background similar to the Governess’s, but she acted below her station by being associated with the valet. With Miss Jessel, the Governess seems to have a strange mirroring relationship: sometimes she is seen doing the same gestures in the same places Jessel has done them before, while also being completely sure the latter is depraved and evil. For example, once the Governess sees the ghost of Miss Jessel at her desk and is afraid she belongs there more than herself: “Dark as midnight in her black dress, her haggard beauty and her unutterable woe, she had looked at me long enough to appear to say that her right to sit at my table was as good as mine to sit at hers. While these instants lasted, indeed, I had the extraordinary chill of feeling that it was I who was the intruder.” (JAMES, 2016, p. 59).

All those instances reflect the main character’s fear of being degraded like Miss Jessel and at the same time her need of proudly reinforcing her identity as a superior. According to Andrea Gencheva (2015, p. 78), she “needs to be careful where she treads, in order not to be aligned with the likes of her predecessor”.

One reason she could feel so threatened of degradation would be because of her situation as a wage-earner and not a listless dependent as she was educated to be. Among all the other themes approached in *The Turn of The Screw*, the fear of social class disruption can be seen as an important one and even could be interpreted as one of the reasons of the apparition of the ghosts in the Governess's traumatized mind. James's protagonist reflects how real life governesses were stuck in an in-between state — not quite a lady, not really a servant — and how hard it was for them to retain their social status as middle-class women.

4. JANE EYRE AND GENDER ISSUES

Another aspect in Victorian society's insecurities besides the purely monetary factor is, in general, the role of women in patriarchal society and, more specifically, the question of female labor. According to Ignatius Nsaidzedze (2017), the beginning of an organized fight for women's rights dates back to Victorian times, and overall it was a period of turbulence regarding the image of women, often described as the "angel in the house" but sometimes unable to keep to the domestic sphere. During that period, the concept of "separate spheres" was popularized, asserting that men were better fit for the public sphere and that women should be relegated to the private or domestic sphere (NSAIDZEDZE, 2017). Nevertheless, the question of female employment could not be avoided anymore, with the need of working force demanded by the Industrial Revolution and the lack of males caused by the Napoleonic Wars and emigration to the colonies (PETERSON, 1970, p. 10). Although women working in domestic jobs was already something common for the lower classes, the discussion started to catch fire with women in factories and middle-class women also becoming wage-earners. This was probably one of the reasons why the topic of governesses became so widely mentioned in British media. With 25,000 supposedly middle-class and well-educated

women working as domestic tutors in England in 1851, the increase in female labor could not be denied anymore, as it often was the case regarding lower class servants and factory workers. (PETERSON, 1970; HUGHES, 2014).

If common themes of more progressive Gothic novels were “liberation, freedom from the past, and the critical role of the entrapped heroine” (MILBANK, 2002, p. 153), it is natural that those who decided to embrace those changes in the female role would see in the Gothic a resonance to their ideologies. Those who opposed it, on the other hand, would take these Gothic ideas and, through a psychological point of view, use them to describe individual issues instead of social ones, depoliticizing them, as described by Alison Milbank (2002). In both cases, the portrayal of the Gothic heroine was in agreement with the instabilities of the female figure in Victorian society and served as a tool for her author to support, reject or even show ambiguity in relation to those new female roles.

In that way, the progressive Gothic heroine as seen by Milbank and the governess heroine overlap thematically: both have an unclear role in society, where they seek to move forward and be free of the shackles of their past by finding their way in patriarchal society and its oppression, as represented by the house. Besides, in a maybe more superficial but more literal way, both are female, young, unmarried, alone and pitiable. Because of that, the Gothic heroine was, so many times, a governess.

An example of that can be seen in *Jane Eyre's* protagonist. According to Susan M. Gilbert and Sandra Gubar (1979), Jane represents female creative forces and also rage at patriarchal oppression. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, the authors state that the mad and imprisoned Bertha Mason personifies Jane's rage, rebellion and desire that she is forced to repress. Whereas Jane is plain, little and “more sedate” (GILBERT; GUBAR, 1979, p. 314), her double is as big as Mr. Rochester, physically his equal in his masculine virility. When Jane is in Thornfield's battlements feeling lonely, trapped or

longing for freedom, Bertha answers with a “low, slow ha! ha!” or “eccentric murmurs” (BRONTË, 1996, loc. 1838). Bertha’s actions are what Jane secretly wants to do. For example, when Rochester tells Jane of his past sexual transgressions, Bertha sets fire to his bed, or when Jane is doubtful about her upcoming wedding, Bertha tears up the wedding gown. The contrast between the two characters represents the difference between internal passion and external presentation to society, dividing the subject into an uncomfortable, dubious situation. The contradictions in Jane reflect the contradictions in the figure of the governess, and Jane’s character development might signal an attempt to conciliate or learn to live with them. The encounter of Jane and Bertha is a critical point in the novel, in which the protagonist confronts “her own imprisoned ‘hunger, rebellion and rage’” (GILBERT; GUBAR, 1979, p. 339). It is by confronting her double that Jane can grow as an independent person.

Jane’s ambiguous situation in the household, as well as society in general, is the root of all her troubles. In order to remediate it, she longs for power and independence. In her first attempted marriage with Mr. Rochester, the power balance is heavily on his side: he is her employer, male, twenty years older, way more experienced, physically stronger and rich while she has almost no money. In the end of the novel, though, they are able to successfully marry and Jane, through the time she has spent outside of his influence, could gather enough resources to make the situation more favorable to her side: even though she is still a “girl-bride”, this time she has more experience, is the owner of a significant amount of money, and finds her beloved physically dependent on her. On finding Mr. Rochester blind and without his right hand, instead of sadness for his tragedy, she strangely expresses content, even saying she prefers this new situation by uttering the following words:

‘I love you better now, when I can really be useful to you, than I did in your state of proud independence, when you disdained every part but that of the giver and protector.’

‘Hitherto I have hated to be helped — to be led: henceforth, I feel, I shall hate it no more...’ (BRONTË, 1996, p. 376).

In that way, although by strange means, Jane expresses her desire to have a more useful role in their relationship and Mr. Rochester, at least at that moment, expresses his acceptance. She was able to, without breaking the patriarchal nature of their relationship, leave the position of complete submission that had made her anxious when she was a governess and he was her master.

Overall, the figure of the governess, although used to represent real life women who were in an unhappy position, found its popularity for it was able to appeal to larger portions of society. The middle class and families who did not have a traditional, wealthy surname would sympathize with her social uncertainty, her feeling of belonging nowhere. Also, many women would feel represented by the Gothic governess-heroine struggling to make the best out of her oppressive situation, stuck to the house and the domestic sphere but still unable to satisfy society. The governess, especially as seen in Victorian Gothic stories, became a symbol and a way to treat and cope with trends that were overwhelmingly large portions of society in XIX century Britain.

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