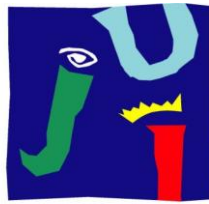


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**The Unacknowledged Nineteenth Century
Woman: The Portrayal of the Governess in
Victorian Literature**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction: The historical context of a governess	4
2. The governess in the Victorian novel	8
3. Literary analysis	10
3.1 <i>Becoming a governess</i>	10
3.2 <i>The governess in action</i>	11
3.3 <i>An alternative governess</i>	18
4. Conclusion	20
References	21

ABSTRACT

The Victorian era was characterised for being a period of changes not only in technology, politics and economy but also in society, primarily with the growth of the middle class. This fact enabled the proliferation of a group of ladies specialised in educating middle class children; or in other words, governesses. As a consequence, literature was influenced allowing the emergence of a new literary genre, the governess novel. The aim of this paper is, consequently, to analyse how those Victorian governesses were portrayed in fiction. In order to conduct this research, three novels; Agnes Grey, Jane Eyre and The Turn of the Screw, by three well-known Victorian writers; Anne Brontë, Charlotte Brontë and Henry James, were selected. Subsequently, these narratives have been examined bearing in mind the real conditions and struggles that governesses had to confront both in the public and private domain. Moreover, the introduction of fictitious facts related to governessing, which have made the novels more appealing to readers, has also been taken into account. This further analysis has revealed the existent similarities and dissimilarities between reality and fiction as well as the different points of view that writers wanted to present with their novels in relation to governessing.

Keywords: Victorian period, governess, Agnes Grey, Jane Eyre, The Turn of the Screw

1. INTRODUCTION: THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF A GOVERNESS

The aim of this dissertation is twofold; first, to describe how governesses lived and were treated in the public and private sphere during Victorian times, and second, to examine how this figure has been fictionalised through the works of three Victorian writers, Anne Brontë, Charlotte Brontë and Henry James. For this purpose, three novels by these three well-known nineteenth century writers which are representative of the fiction governess have been selected: *Agnes Grey*, *Jane Eyre* and *The Turn of the Screw*.

The Victorian era has always been considered the period in which Queen Victoria reigned (1837-1901). However, some historians claim that the term 'Victorian era' was used to designate the historical events occurred in the United Kingdom during the nineteenth century. For this reason, depending on the chosen criteria to determine the historical events, the dates may vary (Cortés, 1985).

In this way, by adopting a technological criterion, the Victorian era may have begun in 1830 with the railway and it might have ended in 1869 with the Red Flag Act abolition. By following a political criterion, the period may have begun in 1832 with the passing of the first electoral reform in which the British liberalism moved towards democracy, and it may have ended with the foundation of the Labour Party in the twentieth century which signified the end of the political monopoly of Tories (conservatives) and Whigs (liberals). Finally, considering economic aspects, the era may have begun in 1846 with the Corn Laws abolition in which the economy moved towards an unrestricted trade, and it may have ended in the early twentieth century with the crisis of the *laissez faire* (Cortés, 1985).

The Victorian period also introduced changes in society since it enabled the growth of the middle class and the enhancement in both the diet and the hygiene in the workplace, and consequently health was improved. Nevertheless, despite those beneficial changes in society, the gulf between social classes was emphasised, especially, in colonized countries (Cortés, 1985).

This growth of the middle class in the nineteenth century, and, particularly, the rise of the richest members of this social class wishing to imitate the upper classes in terms of children

instruction, allowed and encouraged the hiring of governesses as a symbol of wealth and social status (Metz, n.d.). Furthermore, having a governess implied that the lady of the house could commit herself to social duties instead of her children. However, in some households the figure of the governess was used to replace the missing mother. As a consequence of this proliferation of governesses, in 1861 there were 24,770 living in England and in Wales (Hughes, 2001).

The same circumstances that enabled the growth of the middle class, also contributed to the fall of this social class. When families faced this situation, the only alternative was to send their daughters to work as governesses so as to earn money. In the same way, when the father died leaving their family without a pension despite having a prestigious post as a merchant, surgeon, military or naval officer, civil/government servant, solicitor or clergyman, young women turned into governessing to support their families (Hughes, 2001).

There were several ways to become a governess. One of the procedures was to find a favourable position within the family network. If this option was unsuitable, school contacts could also contribute in the search for a governessing situation. Nonetheless, if both connections were unable to provide an appropriate post, the prospective governess had to make herself known either by putting a card in some public places such as libraries, or as a last resort, by publishing an advertisement in the local or national newspaper (Hughes, 2001). In those advertisements, the potential governess described her education, abilities and previous professional experience. The majority of hired governesses possessed language skills, especially in French, and dexterity in music or art. Alternatively, employers could also publish an advertisement in the newspaper seeking for a governess for their children (The British Library, 2017).

In some elevated households, various governesses were employed so as to fulfil their children's needs during their development. Consequently, there was a governess for boys and girls aged from four to eight whose duty was to teach them read and write. When children reached the age of eight, boys were sent to school, whereas girls continued their education at home with a preparatory governess who taught English, history, French and other abilities. Finally, when girls were in their teens, they were sent to a boarding school or completed their education with a 'finishing governess'. Nevertheless, this differentiation disappeared in

practice because the ages of the pupils varied and the governess was required to teach all age groups (Hughes, 2001).

Apart from teaching the basics of a language, history or geography, the governess also taught drawing, sewing or playing the piano. The governess was responsible for the children's moral education too, therefore, they read the Bible and said the prayers together (Hughes, n.d.). In addition, when the pupils reached the adolescence, the education was not centred in the schoolroom but outside due to the fact that they visited the local poor and the governess adopted the role of friend (Hughes, 2001).

Nevertheless, the presence of the governess in the household represented a risk in the family because she spent most of the time with the children (Metz, n.d.). The governess had to display her affection towards the children whose parents were emotionally absent or, on the contrary, face rivalry if parents were involved in their children's development (Hughes, 2001). For this reason, children took advantage of the governess powerlessness and tormented her by ignoring her or by destroying her belongings. As a result of the parents' indifference and her nervousness, she punished the children (Allingham, 2000).

Another difficult issue that the governess had to face was to which social class within the household she belonged to since she was not considered a servant nor a family member, thus, enhancing her loneliness. The governess was sometimes unjustly mistaken for a lady's maid because of her well-educated manners and her knowledge about social conventions (Metz, n.d.). Subsequently, the relationship with the servants of the house was uneasy. For instance, footmen were against having to open the door to a woman who could be considered at the same level as them, or the lady's maid grudged the governess' claims to be considered a lady. In the same way, the situation became worse when she had to accompany her employers into society. As an employee with no defined social status, she remained as an invisible woman because of her lack of experience in the situation (Hughes, 2001).

Not only had the governess to confront her problems within the household, but also with the image portrayed by society. The governess was seen as a spinster, thus, contributing to that image of plain vulnerable woman with a frustrated sexual desire, comparing herself with the figure of the prostitute. However, while prostitution was considered a vice which corrupted morality since males had to find it outside the respectable society, governessing was seen as a

work in which girls were pushed into the domestic sphere from the world of the streets. Moreover, both professions were characterised for representing the opposite of an ideal mother and wife. Despite these comparisons, some governesses ended marrying men with the same social status such as curates or special instructors (Hughes, 2001).

The life as governess within a household finished when the pupils were eighteen and decided to 'come out' to society. Consequently, some governesses decided to open a school on their own or to advertise again so as to continue earning money. Moreover, life as governess was short because after thirty, it was difficult to find an appropriate situation. Therefore some governesses were forced to retirement at the age of thirty-five and some of them had to continue working due to the lack of savings (Hughes, 2001).

2. THE GOVERNESS IN THE VICTORIAN NOVEL

The significant increase on governesses during Victorian times led to the appearance of the governess as a fiction character. As a consequence, two perspectives were developed in order to depict this figure in Victorian literature. On the one hand, in the early years of the nineteenth century, governess novels had an educational intention representing governessing as a respected work as it may be observed in *The Good French Governess* written by Maria Edgeworth in 1801. On the other hand, a change in perception from the 1830s onwards appeared since governesses were depicted as vulnerable women facing the struggles against their employers' inconsiderateness like Norah Vanstone in *No Name* by Wilkie Collins (Wadsö-Lecaros, 2000).

This fact led to the emergence and development of a new literary genre known as the governess novel. The protagonist of those novels was portrayed either as an orphan whose economic circumstances pushed her into governessing, or as a middle-class woman with no choice but to become a governess due to her family's bankruptcy (Hughes, 2001). In the majority of those narratives, the protagonist experienced a personal and psychological growth; thus, considering them also as examples of *Bildungsromans*. In addition, the degrading treatment that governesses suffered in real life was portrayed in fiction as a consequence of the governess alienation in society since they did belong neither to the household servants nor to the family. Consequently, a large number of novels emphasised the existent female rivalry between the mother, the nurse and the governess as well as with other servants (Wadsö-Lecaros, 2005).

This need for writing about governesses together with the process of feminisation that literature was experiencing at the time, enabled the introduction into the world of literature to both the female reader and writer. For the female reader, the governess embodied the sense of independence that a woman in more favourable circumstances could not accomplish. Accordingly, for the female writer, the figure of the governess was used to share her personal experience. Therefore, the governess in fiction represented a way of escaping since she could give her the appropriate and decent success which was unfulfilled in real life (Hughes, 2001).

The two most representative examples of this type of governess novel were *Agnes Grey* by Anne Brontë and *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë. The former, on the one hand, published in 1847, tells the story of Agnes Grey, the younger daughter of a clergyman, obliged to become a governess due to her family economic situation. In her new post she experiences negative feelings from the two families who employed her since governessing was not considered a respectable profession at the time. In addition, adopting a simple style, the author used the novel as a means to criticise society and the situation of governesses from a personal perspective, though it might not be seen as an autobiography (White, 1999). On the other hand, the latter was also published in 1847 and narrates the story of Jane Eyre from her infancy to adulthood. Jane is an orphan, who after spending her childhood in a boarding school, decides to become a governess so as to discover the outside world. During this time as governess, she experiences the awakening of new feelings and emotions which lead to the perfect ending by breaking social constraints, an inappropriate thing, in turn, for a real governess in Victorian times. However, the author finds ways to present this ending in an acceptable manner for a traditional readership. Moreover, due to her natural and spontaneous writing style, the novel introduces the main protagonist as an independent woman epitomising the feminist Victorian heroine (Davies, 2006).

Additionally, some features of the governess novel genre were also used in other literature genres such as the sensation and detective novels. In these works, writers benefited from the mystery that sometimes surrounded the governess so as to create an enigmatic character distancing her from the prototypical governess story (Wadsö-Lecaros, 2000). One clear example of this can be found in Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*. Considered a ghost story, the novel focuses on a governess who begins to see unknown figures, later identified as ghosts, which may be real or a fantasy, though it remains unclear. Consequently, the author perfectly depicts that mystery throughout the novel leading to an unsatisfied ending which questions if the whole story has been really told (James, 2011).

3. LITERARY ANALYSIS

To better examine how the character of the governess was depicted in Victorian literature, the three aforementioned and explained novels (*Jane Eyre*, *Agnes Grey* and *The Turn of the Screw*) have been analysed bearing in mind the adverse circumstances and conditions that a real governess had to face at the time. In addition, some fictional events placed in the novels so as to support the development of the narrative have also been considered.

3.1. *Becoming a governess*

As it has been already explained, one of the reasons whereby a middle class lady was compelled to enter the world of governessing was the economic situation. As a consequence, due to a shipwreck transporting the family fortune, Agnes Grey decides to become a governess: “I wish I could do something. [...] I should like to be a governess” (A. Brontë, 1999, p.9). However, there also existed another group of ladies without any financial support who, unluckily, were destined for governessing due to their personal circumstances. This is the case of Jane Eyre who, after eight years teaching at Lowood, decides to achieve liberty through governessing: “A new servitude! There is something in that. [...] Any one may serve: I have served here eight years; now all I want is to serve elsewhere” (C. Brontë, 2006, p.102).

Due to their different social background, the method used to obtain a position as governess also differs. On the one hand, thanks to her family influences and relatives, Agnes starts working as governess for the Bloomfields: “My dear, kind mother began to look out for a situation for me. She wrote to my father’s relations. [...] It was decreed that I should take charge of the young family of a certain Mrs. Bloomfield; whom my kind, prim aunt Grey had known in her youth” (A. Brontë, 1999, p. 10). On the other hand, Jane has no other alternative but to publish an advertisement in the newspaper which will be replied by Mrs Fairfax, housekeeper of Thornfield Hall:

A young lady accustomed to tuition [...] is desirous of meeting with a situation in a private family where the children are under fourteen. [...] She is qualified to teach the usual branches of a good English education, together with French, Drawing, and Music.” [...] Address, J.E., Post-office, Lowton, —shire. (C. Brontë, 2006, p. 103)

Nonetheless, Agnes also uses this method the second time she searches for a post before becoming the Murrays' governess: "Meantime, I searched, with great interest, the advertising columns of the newspapers, and wrote answers to every 'Wanted a Governess' that appeared at all eligible. [...] At length, she advised me to put an advertisement, myself, in the paper" (A. Brontë, 1999, p. 43).

Despite those prior differences, both ladies experiment and describe the same feelings since a new unknown stage in their lives is going to commence, thus, Agnes states "As we drove along, my spirits revived again, and I turned, with pleasure, to the contemplation of the new life upon which I was entering" (A. Brontë, 1999, p.13), whereas Jane declares "I was too much excited. A phase of my life was closing to-night, a new one opening to-morrow: impossible to slumber in the interval; I must watch feverishly while the change was being accomplished" (C. Brontë, 2006, pp.106-107).

3.2. *The governess in action*

Once Agnes and Jane obtain a position in a family, they have to deal with the constant struggles within the household and within society as their status as governesses is not limited to any social class.

Concerning the household, governesses have to manage the uneasy relationship established with the servants, the children and the employers. First of all, even though it was believed that the introduction of the governess to the household increased the rivalry with the nurse, Agnes and Jane encounter exactly the opposite. Agnes sees in the nurse the only person with whom empathise: "The only person in the house who had any real sympathy for me was the nurse; for she had suffered like afflictions, though in a smaller degree" (A. Brontë, 1999, p.34). Similarly, Jane finds in the nurse the assistance she often needs so as to take care of Adèle: "When dusk actually closed, and when Adèle left me to go and play in the nursery with Sophie, I did most keenly desire it" (C. Brontë, 2006, p.183). Nevertheless, a distinction in terms of equality is made with the other servants of the household since governesses do not belong to the servants or to the family: "The servants, seeing in what little estimation the governess was held by both parents and children, regulated their behaviour by the same standard. [...] They entirely neglected my comfort, despised my requests, and slighted my directions" (A. Brontë, 1999, p.56). As a consequence of this rejection, the governess also

modifies her behaviour with the servants: “Leah is a nice girl to be sure, and John and his wife are very decent people; but then you see they are only servants, and one can’t converse with them on terms of equality: one must keep them at due distance, for fear of losing one’s authority” (C. Brontë, 2006, p.115).

Secondly, though the essential and mandatory duty of a governess is to educate children, occasionally this task hardens as a result of the children’s attitude towards their governess. In this way, the Bloomfields’ children take advantage of Agnes’ vulnerability and decide to misbehave in her first experience as governess:

The children had all come up from dinner, loudly declaring that they meant ‘to be naughty;’ and they had well kept their resolution. [...] I had got Tom pinned up in a corner. [...] Meantime, Fanny had possessed herself of my work-bag, and was rifling its contents. [...] ‘Burn it, Fanny!’ cried Tom. [...] Mary Ann, throw her desk out of the window!’ cried he: and my precious desk [...] was about to be precipitated from the three-storey window. (A. Brontë, 1999, p.29)

Furthermore, in the case of Agnes, Tom’s irreverent attitude is boosted by his uncle: “But it was not for that I disliked his coming, so much as for the harm he did the children—encouraging all their evil propensities, and undoing in a few minutes the little good it had taken me months of labour to achieve” (A. Brontë, 1999, p.35).

In her second experience as governess, Agnes also encounters difficulties with the children but to a lesser extent. In this case she does not deal with misbehaviour but with one of the lady’s reproaches for not being with her: “‘Miss Grey, whatever have you been about? I’ve had tea half an hour ago, and had to make it myself, and drink it all alone! I wish you would come in sooner!’ [...] ‘I didn’t think of the shower.’ [...] ‘No, of course; you were under shelter yourself, and you never thought of other people.’” (A. Brontë, 1999, p.81)

Thirdly, even though the parents wish the best education for their children, they are the first ones to harshly judge their governess since their children are flawless: “Mrs. Bloomfield further enlightened me on the subject of her children’s dispositions and acquirements, and on what they were to learn, and how they were to be managed, and cautioned me to mention their

defects to no one but herself” (A. Brontë, 1999, p.18). Therefore, they blame the governess for everything their children do: “‘Miss Grey,’ said he, [...] ‘I am surprised that you should allow them to dirty their clothes in that manner! Don’t you see how Miss Bloomfield has soiled her frock? And that Master Bloomfield’s socks are quite wet? And both of them without gloves? Dear, dear! Let me request that in future you will keep them decent at least!’” (A. Brontë, 1999, p.20).

Despite all this bitter criticism, Agnes and Jane are determined to accomplish their duties since governessing is the only way they have to earn a living. On the one hand, Agnes acknowledges with resignation her duty: “I must go with them, wherever they chose to lead me. I must run, walk, or stand, exactly as it suited their fancy. [...] But there was no remedy; either I must follow them, or keep entirely apart from them, and thus appear neglectful of my charge” (A. Brontë, 1999, p.19). However, regardless her endurance, she starts to see the adversities of governessing as a result of their employers’ and children’s behaviour: “I knew the difficulties I had to contend with were great; but I knew [...] unremitting patience and perseverance could overcome them. [...] But either the children were so incorrigible, the parents so unreasonable, or myself so mistaken in my views. [...] The task of instruction was as arduous for the body as the mind” (A. Brontë, 1999, p.23). As a consequence, despite her loneliness she declares that she would “indeed be happy in a house full of enemies, if I had but one friend, who truly, deeply, and faithfully loved me” (A. Brontë, 1999, p. 128).

On the other hand, Jane is pleased with her pupil as a result of not having any problem. Therefore, she focuses all her attention on her education: “My pupil was a lively child, who had been spoilt and indulged, and therefore was sometimes wayward; but as she was committed entirely to my care, and no injudicious interference from any quarter ever thwarted my plans for her improvement, she soon forgot her little freaks, and became obedient and teachable” (C. Brontë, 2006, p.128).

Regarding society, governessing is not considered an honourable employment, especially, for a middle class lady as Agnes: “At that moment my father entered and the subject of our discussion was explained to him. ‘What, my little Agnes a governess!’ cried he. [...] ‘No, no! Afflicted as we are, surely we are not brought to that pass yet’” (A. Brontë, 1999, p.9). In addition, due to that existent rejection in society, governesses are treated as invisible people

both outdoors and indoors. When Agnes accompanies the Misses Murrays in their walks, she feels ignored by her companions:

Whether I walked with the young ladies or rode with their parents, depended upon their own capricious will. [...] When I did walk, the first half of journey was generally a great nuisance to me. As none of the before-mentioned ladies and gentlemen ever noticed me [...] and if their eyes, in speaking, chanced to fall on me, it seemed as if they looked on vacancy— as if they either did not see me, or were very desirous to make it appear so. (A. Brontë, 1999, p.82)

Similarly, Jane is also invisible within the household, especially in front of visitors: “I sit in the shade—if any shade there be in this brilliantly-lit apartment; the window-curtain half hides me” (C. Brontë, 2006, p.202).

Governesses have also to tolerate what their own employers and guests think about governessing. Agnes converses with Mrs Murray who expresses her personal opinion about governesses: “When we wish to decide upon the merits of a governess, we naturally look at the young ladies she professes to have educated, and judge accordingly. The judicious governess knows this: she knows that, while she lives in obscurity herself, her pupils’ virtues and defects will be open to every eye; and that, unless she loses sight of herself in their cultivation, she need not hope for success” (A. Brontë, 1999, p.118). Jane also witnesses a conversation about how dreadful the experience of having been educated by a governess has been:

‘You should hear mama 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, mama?’ [...] ‘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!’ [...] ‘I have just one word to say of the whole tribe; they are a nuisance.’ (C. Brontë, 2006, p.205)

Nevertheless, despite all this unbearable suffering, authors provide governesses with the only weapon capable of lessening and changing everything, love. At first, this feeling arouses as

something odd due to the fact that governesses are not expected to fall in love. In addition, it is considered an immoral behaviour due to the existent Puritanism in society. For this reason, Agnes, on the one hand, describes this awakening of feelings as an emotional release beyond her control: “I trembled lest my very moral perceptions should become deadened, my distinctions of right and wrong confounded, and all my better faculties be sunk, at last, beneath the baneful influence of such a mode of life” (A. Brontë, 1999, p.77). On the other hand, Jane also sees in love the liberation that heals her inner pain: “The ease of his manner freed me from painful restraint: the friendly frankness, as correct as cordial, with which he treated me, drew me to him” (C. Brontë, 2006, p.171).

Despite being aware of the same feeling, there exists a difference in the way both protagonists experience it. On the one hand, Agnes feels inhibited when she dares to imagine herself as Mr Weston’s partner because she considers she has not right to conceive it regardless her pure love for him: ““He can make a home too, if he pleases; and, doubtless, he will please some time. God grant the partner of that home may be worthy of his choice, and make it a happy one— such a home as he deserves to have! And how delightful it would be to—’ But no matter what I thought” (A. Brontë, 1999, p.86). In addition, Agnes blames herself for deluding herself into thinking that Mr Weston is interested in her: ““What a fool you must be,’ said my head to my heart, or my sterner to my softer self; — ‘how could you ever dream that he would write to you? What grounds have you for such a hope— or that he will see you, or give himself any trouble about you— or even think of you again?’ ‘What grounds?’” (A. Brontë, 1999, p.130).

On the other hand, from the very beginning Jane does not reject that feeling towards Mr Rochester: “And was Mr. Rochester now ugly in my eyes? No, reader: gratitude, and many associations, all pleasurable and genial, made his face the object I best liked to see; his presence in a room was more cheering than the brightest fire” (C. Brontë, 2006, p.172). However, the same way as Agnes, Jane also blames herself for deluding herself when Mr Rochester leaves Thornfield Hall for several days: ““You,’ I said, ‘a favourite with Mr. Rochester? You gifted with the power of pleasing him? You of importance to him in any way? Go! Your folly sickens me’” (C. Brontë, 2006, p.186).

Notwithstanding, although Jane acknowledges that Mr Rochester may marry Miss Ingram, her doubts vanished once they are together: “Never had he called me more frequently to his presence; never been kinder to me when there—and, alas! Never had I loved him so well” (C. Brontë, 2006, p.285). Therefore, when she is determined to leave Thornfield House and Mr Rochester forever, the conversation turns into a true love confession:

‘I grieve to leave Thornfield: I love Thornfield.’ [...] ‘Where do you see the necessity? [...] In what shape?’ ‘In the shape of Miss Ingram; a noble and beautiful woman,—your bride.’ ‘My bride! What bride? I have no bride!’ ‘But you will have.’ ‘Yes;—I will!—I will!’ [...] ‘Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong!—I have as much soul as you,—and full as much heart! [...] It is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God’s feet, equal,—as we are!’ ‘As we are!’ repeated Mr. Rochester—‘so,’ he added [...] gathering me to his breast, pressing his lips on my lips: ‘so, Jane!’ [...] ‘Your bride stands between us.’ [...] ‘My bride is here, [...] because my equal is here, and my likeness. Jane, will you marry me?’ (C. Brontë, 2006, pp.292-294)

Nonetheless, despite the fact that love represents the governess’ liberation and reduction of suffering, it is its main trigger as a result of the obstacles that need to be surmounted. In *Agnes Grey*, when the Misses Murray realise Agnes’ increasing interest for Mr Weston, they take advantage and try to make Agnes jealous by talking about him:

‘I mean to take up Mr. Weston instead of Mr. Hatfield,’ [...] ‘If you mean Mr. Weston to be one of your victims,’ said I, with affected indifference, ‘you will have to make such overtures yourself that you will find it difficult to draw back when he asks you to fulfil the expectations you have raised.’ ‘I don’t suppose he will ask me to marry him, nor should I desire it: that would be rather too much presumption! But I intend him to feel my power.’ (A. Brontë, 1999, p.106)

They also forbid her visits to Nancy because they know that she meets Mr Weston there. Moreover, she is not allowed to see him at church since her position has been occupied by Miss Murray and she must return home in the carriage with her employers instead of her

pupils: “I could not even see him at church: for Miss Murray [...] chose to take possession of that corner in the family pew which had been mine ever since I came. [...] Now, also, I never walked home with my pupils: they said their mamma thought it did not look well to see three people out of the family walking, and only two going in the carriage. [...] I knew these were false excuses. [...] And in the afternoons, during those six memorable weeks, I never went to church at all” (A. Brontë, 1999, p.111).

As a consequence, despite being hurt by the treatment received, Agnes does not succumb to these obstacles: “I could think of him day and night; and I could feel that he was worthy to be thought of. Nobody knew him as I did; nobody could appreciate him as I did; nobody could love him as I— could, if I might: but there was the evil” (A. Brontë, 1999, p.114).

In *Jane Eyre*, however, the main obstacle to overcome; omitting Mr Rochester’s secret marriage, is the social issue. Due to their social differences, Mrs Fairfax doubts about Jane and Mr Rochester’s marriage: “‘Equality of position and fortune is often advisable in such cases; and there are twenty years of difference in your ages. [...] Is it really for love he is going to marry you?’ she asked! [...] ‘Gentlemen in his station are not accustomed to marry their governesses’” (C. Brontë, 2006, pp.305-306).

Regardless those difficulties, both writers give their heroines their deserved happy ending. On the one hand, Agnes marries Edward Weston when she abandons her position as governess to start a school with her mother, “I became the wife of Edward Weston; and never have found cause to repent it, and am certain that I never shall” (Brontë, 1999, p.153). On the other hand, Jane announces her marriage with Edward Rochester, after receiving an inheritance which makes them now equals in terms of social class, with one of the most famous quotations in the novel: “Reader, I married him” (C. Brontë, 2006, p.517).

Finally, another important point in the depiction of the governess life is how governessing ends. In the case of Agnes, she faces two different causes that make her abandon her position. In her first experience as governess she is dismissed by the Bloomfields: “She assured me that my character and general conduct were unexceptionable; but the children had made so little improvement since my arrival that Mr. Bloomfield and she felt it their duty to seek some other mode of instruction” (A. Brontë, 1999, p.39). Secondly, in her experience with the

Murrays, she ends governessing to open a school with her mother as a result of her father's death and consequently financial problems.

In the case of Jane, she has to abandon her position as governess because she cannot bear the situation after discovering that Mr Rochester is already married. Therefore, she must look for another teaching position: “I must leave Adèle and Thornfield. I must part with you for my whole life: I must begin a new existence among strange faces and strange scenes. [...] Sir, your wife is living. [...] If I lived with you as you desire, I should then be your mistress” (C. Brontë, 2006, p.350).

3.3. An alternative governess

As it has been examined, Agnes Grey and Jane Eyre epitomise the Victorian governess heroine in their homonymous novels. However, *The Turn of the Screw* maintains certain aspects typical of a classic governess story though it provides a different approach to governessing.

The introduction of the supernatural alienates the story from the standard governess novel turning it into a ghost novel. In addition, the character of the governess is used as a means to reinforce that perfect phantasmagorical scenery since little is known about her past and her identity is not revealed.

In the novel, the governess witnesses two apparitions corresponding to Quint, the previous valet: “He was in one of the angles, the one away from the house, very erect, as it struck me, and with both hands on the ledge. [...] Yes, I had the sharpest sense that during this transit he never took his eyes from me, and I can see at this moment the way his hand, as he went, passed from one of the crenellations to the next” (James, 2011, p.28), and to Miss Jessel, the former governess: “Suddenly, in these circumstances, I became aware that, on the other side of the Sea of Azof, we had an interested spectator” (James, 2011, p.49). These two apparitions play an important role in the novel since the main action is based on their interaction with the rest of the characters, especially with the children: “‘She'll be above.’ [...] ‘No; she's at a distance.’ [...] ‘She's with *her*?’ ‘She's with *her*!’ I declared. ‘We must find them.’ [...] ‘And where's Master Miles?’ ‘Oh, *He's* with Quint. They're in the schoolroom’ (James, 2011, p.115).

Nevertheless, as it has been mentioned before, the narrative shares some important traits with the governess novel. First of all, in the same way Agnes and Jane experience a mix of feelings about starting a new life as governesses, the anonymous governess in *The Turn of the Screw* also expresses a similar thought at the beginning of the narrative: “I had at all events a couple of very bad days – found myself doubtful again, felt indeed sure I had made a mistake. [...] I suppose I had expected, or had dreaded, something so melancholy that what greeted me was a good surprise” (James, 2011, p.10).

As mentioned above, another important element in the governess novel is the relationships that she establishes with the children, the employers and the rest of the household. Concerning the children, the governess in this novel does not encounter any problem in terms of behaviour but quite the opposite: “They gave me so little trouble – they were of a gentleness so extraordinary” (James, 2011, p.24). Secondly, her relationship with the master is inexistent as a consequence of his absence: “‘He’ of course was their uncle in Harley Street; [...] he never wrote to them –that may have been selfish, but it was a part of the flattery of his trust of me” (James, 2011, p.91).

Regarding her relation with the other servants, in the novel only one servant is mentioned, Mrs Grose. Despite what has been said about servants and governesses, they have a harmonious relationship: “She held me there a moment, then whisked up her apron again with her detached hand. ‘Would you mind, miss, if I used the freedom–’ ‘To kiss me? No!’ I took the good creature in my arms and, after we had embraced like sisters, felt still more fortified and indignant” (James, 2011, p.23).

Finally, the theme of forbidden love is also present in the novel as a result of the uneasy relationship that Miss Jessel and Quint had when they were alive:

‘Miss Jessel – *was* infamous. [...] They were both infamous.’[...] ‘Come, there was something between them.’ ‘There was everything.’ ‘In spite of the difference –?’ ‘Oh, of their rank, their condition. [...] *She* was a lady.’ [...] ‘Yes –she was a lady.’ ‘And he so dreadfully below. [...] The fellow was a hound. [...] I’ve never seen one like him. He did what he wished.’ (James, 2011, pp.54-55)

4. CONCLUSION

Governesses were recurrent characters in fiction during the nineteenth century as a consequence of their extended proliferation in real life. For this reason, many Victorian authors depicted their plight both within the public and private domain in their novels. As it has been reviewed, three of the main instances of the governess genre were Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey*, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*. Those narratives provide readers with distinct perspectives regarding the situation of governesses at the time owing to the fact that each of them aimed at highlighting different aspects.

First of all, with *Agnes Grey*, Anne Brontë underlines and criticises the terrible conditions under which real governesses had to work. Therefore, Anne Brontë shapes her Victorian heroine as a brave determined lady who matures throughout the novel and with whom real governesses could sympathise. Secondly, Charlotte Brontë focuses her attention on social issues as a result of establishing an unattainable love relationship between the protagonist and her employer. As a consequence of using this illusory loving fact, Charlotte Brontë gives her Victorian heroine an ending more typical of a fairy tale than of real life. Nevertheless, Charlotte Brontë also depicts the situation of governesses, but in a less judgemental way than her sister Anne. Thirdly, Henry James does not delve excessively into the situation of governesses since his protagonist is only used as a tool to reinforce his ghost story. On the other hand, James makes use of certain characteristic features of a governess to embody his protagonist in order to build a believable character.

Nonetheless, through these different representations of the governess in fiction, a detailed insight into their nature, their hopes and their main difficulties may be grasped. Namely, the differences between social classes, the pressure exerted from the male employer, the difficulty of establishing a love relationship and the mistreatment received from children and employers

Accordingly, the different insights provided by the novels help readers to create an image of how governesses could have lived during Victorian times. However, it should also be borne in mind that these writers took the liberty of including some uncommon developments in relation to governesses to make their narratives more appealing to readers.

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