Chapter One

Governessing Gentility, Accompanying Apathy: Governesses and Companions

The most common and well-known occupation open to distressed gentlewomen, that is, women of the upper and middle classes, was governessing. Victorian fiction devotes a considerable space to the governess and sometimes tends to dramatize her plight. In many novels, she appears as a fringe character, mentioned only in passing. In some others, the governess is immortalized as in *Jane Eyre, Agnes Grey* and *Vanity Fair* where the governess appears as the heroine.

In comparison with other working women, the attention paid to governesses seems undeservedly great. Female domestic servants outnumbered the governess in England in 1831, in the ratio 30:1,\(^1\) which means that for every 30 servants, there was one governess. Yet the governess is given much more prominence in Victorian novels. This may, in part, be due to the notion of Victorian respectability where the impoverished but genteel governess may be an object of sympathy, even though grudgingly given, but the lower working class woman is best left ignored. It may also be due to the fact that many women novelists of the age had real life experience of governessing. With the pen in their hands, they could raise the problems faced by the governess. However, M. Jeanne Peterson in *The Victorian Governess: Status Incongruence in Family and Society* rightly points out that, ‘the suffering of the

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governess seems pale and singularly undramatic when compared with that of women in factories and mines’.  

Factory and mine workers may have had horrific working conditions but they were manual labourers, i.e. women of working classes and not distressed gentlewomen. The sufferings of an unfaithful nobleman’s wife appeal more to a refined audience than the miseries of a slave girl. The ‘us’ and ‘them’ divide may also help to understand this showering of attention on the governess. The governess could well be a part of ‘us’, a poor creature who has been brought up as a lady or almost one. Her concerns may strike a chord with many Victorian families. The reading public was well aware of some relative or cherished friend who was a governess or had been one. The governess is educated, accomplished, refined, and brought up as a lady, so she may as well be allowed to have feelings. The other women of the working class are part of the ‘them’ concept. They work because that is what they have been brought up to do. It is their lot in life. It is accepted that roughness is what they have faced and they are used to it and so they should not complain or, perhaps, that there is nothing extraordinary about their pain or suffering.

Governessing was an unorganized sector (like most other earning options for women) and so, in the initial years, we find little or no formal training being required of governesses. The primary qualification required for a governess was that she should be educated. In 1862 Maria Rye helped to form the Female Middle Class Emigration Society (FMCES). It ordained that only educated women could apply. Knowledge of cooking, baking, washing, needlework and housework was also required. Records showed that governesses sent abroad – away from English shores – were expected to assist in household chores. The Society also

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asked applicants to furnish two references from past employers to assess the position, character, strength, qualities and general suitableness of the applicant, besides two other references from personal friends. The records of the Society show that only the highly accomplished who were able to teach a wide range of subjects, such as French, German and sometimes Latin, music, singing and drawing, could command reasonable salaries. Most letters from these governesses to the Society show that the governess sent abroad often found herself in a harsh and hostile atmosphere with unruly children and rude parents. In a new land, the governess was utterly alone with a dim possibility of return. Those who had been advanced the passage money had to earn and pay off the loan first, (in itself, an extremely difficult task because of the poor wages which did not allow governesses to save much from their salaries) and then collect/save enough to travel back to England. When governesses fell ill, it could mean loss of income and also loss of accommodation. A governess sent to Australia speaks out against life there:

I do not use too strong a language when I say no one with the tastes, habits or feelings of a lady should ever come out to Australia. It may do for mediocre Governesses who can put up with roughness – or I should say vulgarity of mind, a great want of intellect, but I would never advise a lady to try it. I hate Australia and the Australians, I shall [be] with them but never of them. I would rather have 15 pounds per annum in London, than fifty pounds here.³

It was also reported that governesses frequently offered work for no pay, for the sake of accommodation. The governesses sent abroad also complained of the monotony of work, lack of recreation, intense loneliness and unprotectedness. Some governesses found themselves in uncongenial or intolerable family situations. Most governesses in Australia complained of the domestic work expected of them. Household chores were either viewed as a pleasant way of keeping oneself occupied or as a most resented imposition. English governesses in Australia sometimes found themselves located in an inaccessible part of the country, requiring about a week’s journey by coach and steamer from town and a relatively large amount of money for return fare. The stress of leaving family, friends, home, country (usually forever) and the trauma of adjusting to a new life caused many governesses to fall grievously ill.

Release from the unpleasantness of an exiled governess’ life came to a lucky few in the form of marriage as was the case with Louisa Geoghegan, an English Governess in Australia. She reports that after three and a half years of governessing in Australia, she had managed to save enough money to buy a piano and to go to live with her brother and to enter into a partnership with her sister, who already had a good school. During the next six months, she abandoned the idea of going to live with her brother and of the partnership with her sister, and instead she got married. Marriage offered release and relief from the drudgery and monotony of governessing in exile.

Governesses in exile complained of the monotony of life there. When a governess had spare time, she could only indulge in intellectual amusements. The hot and wet weather made walking impracticable most of the time. Many governesses found themselves in places where there were only tracks and no proper roads, so driving became inconvenient. A book, the
piano, or fancy and plain sewing were the sole amusements available to governesses. They had no visitors and no place to visit.

In the ‘governess-as-heroine’ novels, the distresses of the governess are highlighted. Many fictional heroines react strongly to governessing. In Jane Austen’s *Emma* (1815), Jane Fairfax, compares governessing to the slave trade. She calls ‘governess trade’ a sale of ‘human intellect’ much like the ‘slave trade’ which is a sale of ‘human flesh’. She also claims that ‘as to the greater misery of the victims [i.e. governesses and slaves], I do not know where it lies.’

It ought to be noted that Jane Fairfax, being an orphan (without any inheritance), had a ‘pitiable future’ and so it was predicted that she should be brought up for ‘educating others’. It harps on the idea that work for women was viewed as being a result of misfortune and poverty. Jane was not afraid of being unemployed for long as there were advertising offices in town to which she could apply and meet with some job offer that would be suitable. The date of publication of *Emma* shows that as early as 1815, there were advertising offices which were ready to publish advertisements from gentlewomen in straitened circumstances, and the job market was ready to fulfil their demand. Almost all affluent and refined Victorian families made uses of the services of a governess. M Jeanne Peterson rightly observes that the governess was displayed in the Victorian home as a symbol of economic power, breeding and station. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Lady Catherine is shocked to learn that the Bennet sisters had no governess and thinks that it reflects on their upbringing.

The qualifications required for a governess were varied and informally stated. In the literature of the period we find references to several qualities that were expected of an ideal

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governess. Neff Wanda in his *Victorian Working Women* writes that ‘the advertisements for governesses expose the impossible array of qualification expected’.\(^5\) Thackeray in *The Book of Snobs* mentions that qualification such as the knowledge of languages like English, French, German, Spanish, Italian, and the rudiments of Greek were necessary, along with the practice of elocution, Geography, Astronomy, Algebra (but only as far as quadratic equations), Ancient and Modern History, Botany, Geology and Mineralogy.

Agnes Grey prides herself on her ‘unshaken firmness, devoted diligence, unwearied perseverance, unceasing care’\(^6\) towards unruly and disobedient children whom she tries to control. However to command a higher salary, governesses had to be more accomplished and flaunt their ‘showy’ qualifications like knowledge of one or more foreign languages.

Guardians differed vastly in what was considered to be the most essential qualification. An unknown lady replied to the advertisement given by Agnes Grey stating that, in her opinion, ‘next to an unimpeachable morality, a mild and cheerful temper and obliging disposition’ (p102) were the most essential requisites.

Jane Eyre, in her advertisement, mentioned that she was qualified to teach the usual branches of a good English education, together with French, Drawing and Music. She received a single response to it, which required her to give satisfactory references as to character and competency. She had to take formal leave from her boarding school at Lowwood and acquire a testimonial of character and capacity signed by the inspectors of that institution.

Rebecca Sharp in Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* can speak French ‘with purity’ and a ‘Parisian accent’ which was considered a rare accomplishment. She was a musician and a

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‘good linguist’. In Miss Pinkerton’s finishing school, Rebecca was employed to speak French with the junior students.

Another important prerequisite of a governess was that she should be ‘plain’ looking, homely, severe and unfeminine. A good looking, young governess could mean a threat to the order and patterning of an English home. The undefined relationship between the governess and the men in the household could get complicated by an attractive governess. M. Jeanne Peterson rightly observes that there was no easy courtesy, attraction, or flirtation between a gentleman and a governess because she was not his social equal. A gentleman could not treat the governess as his other female domestics either, because the governess was not entirely an inferior. Mrs Vincy in Middlemarch referred to Mary Garth as ‘a dreadful plain girl- more fit for a governess’.7 Rosamond Vincy, in the same novel, thought of the family governess, Miss Morgan, as ‘brown, dull and resigned’, and so she seemed ‘just the sort of person for a governess’. 8

Bea Howe states that by 1845, a governess could easily be distinguished by her pale depressed look and even her clothes which had become a uniform. The governess’s ‘cottage bonnet’, ‘her drab, all enveloping merino shawl’, her ‘worn out gloves’, her umbrella and carpet bag had all become sad symbols of her profession.9 The fictional Jane Eyre with her plain stuff dress and merino ‘pelisse’ with a grey silk for festive occasions represents an approved dress code for governesses. Mrs Jameson in her Memoirs and Essays (1860) tells the governess how to dress. She considers neatness and simplicity in dress as very essential and goes on to advise young governesses against over dressing and urges older governesses

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8 Ibid, p.171.
to pay more attention to their dressing. Charlotte Bronte in her letter to Mr William Smith Williams persuades him to allow his third daughter Louisa to go to Queen’s College in preparation for her career as governess. She counts Louisa’s prettiness as an advantage because children like it. Psychologically it may be true but this is one of the rare instances that we have where the good looks of a governess is seen as an advantage. Most fictional governesses were plain and this plainness was advantageous in reducing conflict about her status in the family and about her social position. A plain governess reduced the danger of tempting the susceptible male in the Victorian household. As she draws less attention to her person, she can be easily ignored when she is sitting apart in the drawing room or relegated to the nursery. Thackeray’s Becky Sharp in *Vanity Fair* has attractive eyes and easy pleasing manners. Her good looks aid in her schemes and she manages to create trouble in the family by marrying the younger son, Rawdon Crawley and she later even gets an offer of marriage from her employer, the father, Sir Pitt Crawley.

The case of Clara Mordaunt, the heroine of Lady Blessington’s *The Governess* (1839), shows the pitfalls of good looks in a governess. Clara aroused jealousy in her mistress on account of her pleasant looks and a more serious consequence of her attractiveness came in the form of a dishonourable proposal she received. Hercules Marsden cast his lustful eyes on her and asked her to be a companion to his mother for five hundred pounds (a handsome salary which was about ten times the average pay offered to a governess). Clara knew what accepting that proposal would entail and so she declined. This reveals how governesses and companions were in a vulnerable position in a family and could be exploited. Much later, in Marian Crawford’s *The Undesirable Governess* (1910), we find the mistress Lady Jane tired of governesses with pretty faces and scheming ways. She had
found the photograph of the previous governess in the pocket of her husband Colonel Follitt. She advertised for a governess who was ugly and undesirable (in the eyes of her husband and three grown up sons). If this insecurity plagues the mistress, it may be easily understood how a young, solitary, dependent governess would feel in a house full of men trying to make (or with a possibility of making) advances to her.

The classic governesses in fiction have mostly been plain to look at like Jane Eyre and Agnes Grey, and it has rather helped them in deflecting attention away from their bodies to the human being inside. Their plainness helped them to adjust more easily in the household, without threatening the peace and order of the family. Even when they are loved, it is more for their human attributes than for their charming looks. The Mr Rochesters and Mr Westons love their natures and do not fall in love blindly with their physical attributes. As the traditional private governess had to live in the house, day in and day out, for months and maybe years together, it would logically be better to have someone who would not be flamboyantly stylish, charming, witty, and attractive with an in-your-face approach, but rather a demure, unassuming person who would draw minimum male attention. From the example of Hyacinth Kirkpatrick (nee Clare) in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Wives and Daughters*, we gain some more reasons both in favour of and against the good looks of a governess. Hyacinth was ‘silky, soft and graceful as a Persian cat’ and her appealing ways made it easy for her to become a flirt. Her pupil, Little Molly, really liked her due to her looks, and Hyacinth’s charming manner gave her an unfair advantage as far as her work was concerned. It appears that Hyacinth was not intelligent or competent enough as a teacher but her young pupils were very fond of her. Her beautiful French accent was appreciated and her manner of

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sharing her love life (the proposals of marriage she received) with her pupils endeared her to them. They thought highly of her for treating them as her equals and confiding in them. Hyacinth’s flirtatious nature may be seen as an advantage in a chaperon as she centres male attention on herself leaving her young charges protected. Conversely, however, a flirt may encourage her pupils to follow in her footsteps.

The literature of the period seems to suggest that a plain looking governess (or even one not very conscious about her looks) may be more suited to her job and may devote more attention to her duties while a good looking governess may tempt the men in the house, share the colourful stories of her love life with her pupils, and may even set a bad example for young girls to emulate.

The visual representation, in paintings of the period, corroborates the view of severe looking, austere governesses. Richard Redgrave’s painting of a governess, originally entitled ‘The Poor Teacher’ (1844) shows the contrast between a governess and the young ladies of the household. While the governess sits demurely, dressed in a dark coloured gown, her disinterested charge looks out at, presumably her elder sisters, talking gaily to each other. The stark contrast between the governess’s forlorn looks, her downward gaze, her strict clothing and the other three girls’ happy and light coloured dresses and remarkable attitude, highlight how far removed the governess was from the centred sphere of leisured womanhood. In keeping with the ‘governess-as-heroine’ novels, this portrait foregrounds the governess making her look strikingly pretty despite her simplicity in attire, which was perhaps, more imaginary than historical. However, most visual records revealed an unattractive and ordinary looking governess.
The Governess originally called The Poor Teacher by Richard Redgrave, RA. 1844.

Victorian and Albert Museum, London.

Source: <http://www.victorianweb.org/painting/redgrave/paintings/2.jpg>
The qualifications required for being a governess may be informally stated or may be an impossible array of accomplishments but usually parents and guardians did not particularly seek a trained governess i.e. a lady trained professionally to be a governess. Some institutes and colleges, like Queen’s College, helped in training governesses but they were few in comparison with the large number of governesses who were ready to supply the demand. As with the question of girls’ education in general, it is seen that most employers would shudder at the thought of an erudite governess who might make their daughters ‘pedantic’. Mr Gibson was anxious about his daughter Molly becoming too learned: ‘Don’t teach Molly too much: she must sew, and read, and write and do her sums, but I want to keep her a child, and if I find more learning desirable for her, I’ll see about giving it to her myself.’\footnote{Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1999), p.29.} A father’s apprehension about ‘more learning’ destroying the innocence and child-like qualities of a girl are apparent here.

‘Showy’ or fashionable accomplishments were desired but too much learning or scholarly outlook may make a girl too intellectual (which hinted at masculinity). A girl’s feminine charms were to be accentuated by her accomplishments but her value in the marriage market may well have declined due to her ‘pedantic’ learning. In Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, Mary is satirized and caricatured on account of her learning and her tendency to show it off. The eminent Victorian writer, Mrs Jameson, was against institutes that would train girls for teaching. She likens a trained teacher to a ‘machine’. An educated and well trained teacher was looked upon with scepticism. Employers were happy with homely education and little or no training. Neff Wanda points out that the training the Bronte sisters received was probably typical of that of many girls of their profession. After
elementary study at home, they went to Cowan’s Bridge School where they studied history, geography, the use of globes, grammar, writing, arithmetic, needlework and housework. They were also trained in music and drawing. A clergyman’s daughter who had gained experience by teaching her numerous younger siblings was considered to be sufficiently trained to be a good governess.

There were three main types of girls’ schools during the major part of the nineteenth century. The first was the high end fashionable finishing school for young ladies like Miss Pinkerton’s Academy in Vanity Fair; the second type was the humbler country school which could be attended by the daughters of local tradesmen and farmers. The third type was the charitable institution of which Lowood in Jane Eyre is the most obvious and horrific example. It was considered a sign of social superiority to be educated at home. The patronizing Osbornes in Vanity Fair were educated at home whereas Amelia Sedley went to Miss Pinkerton’s. Finishing schools helped to polish and groom young girls to become governesses or even to make their debut in society. Girls from such schools could boast of fashionable accomplishments like music, painting, and the use of foreign languages. The humbler country school helped to infuse morality and a reasonable amount of education. In Austen’s Emma, Harriet Smith was educated in such a school and her father was a tradesman. The charitable institutions churned out a series of friendless, penniless though well taught, governesses. Most of these Lowood type governesses must have been able to endure patiently the suffering inflicted on them by spoilt children and indifferent parents as they were used to harsh language, strict discipline and a bitter ambience in their former schools. In that sense, Jane Eyre was fortunate to find a pupil like Adele who was not spoilt or troublesome and a master like Mr Rochester who was considerate. Mr Rochester’s
potential fiancée, Blanche Ingram, had advised him to put Adele in a school, obviously with a desire to be rid of her at home. To his response that he could not afford a school, she had insisted that a school would work out to be much cheaper than a governess with her salary, her board and her lodging. This difference in opinion could have arisen from the varied ideas of a school. Mr Rochester may have meant the up market expensive finishing schools like Pinkerton’s Academy in *Vanity Fair* whereas Blanche Ingram may have been referring to a humble country school like Miss Goddard’s school in *Emma*, a kind of old-fashioned boarding school where girls could attain a little education without the ‘danger’ of returning as ‘prodigies’.

A governess was responsible for the overall development of her pupil. Agnes Grey realizes that while the governess, ‘lives in obscurity herself, the pupils’ virtues and defects will be open to every eye’. Not only was the governess responsible for the academic improvement of her pupil but also for her pupil’s moral, emotional, spiritual and social enhancement. The governess was to instruct her pupils in music, dance, painting, sewing, and all social graces. When we see disobedient, rioting children who made the governess cringe, we are also aware of the fact that the governess is implicitly accountable for all their boisterousness.

Teaching young children proved quite demanding, for the governess had to restrain their unruly behaviour and then proceed to give her lessons. In her first situation with the Bloomfields, young and inexperienced Agnes Grey had to be a slave to the children. She had to run, walk, or stand in the garden according to their wishes. To get them into the

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12 Detailed analysis of the various types of schools is provided in Katharine West, *Chapter of Governesses*, pp.131-133.

schoolroom she had to run after them and catch them. Agnes laments: ‘the task of instruction was as arduous for the body as the mind’.

As the governess lived with the children, she was expected to inculcate discipline, good virtues and acceptable social behaviour in them. In a sense, she was required to fulfill the traditional mother’s role. It is easy to fathom to whom the credit would go to for ‘well brought up’ children, whereas the governess would inevitably be blamed for unruly behaviour in her pupils. From morning to night, a governess was to decide on the routine of her pupils. Sadly, she often became a victim of their whims. Instead of telling them when to sit down with books, she would be ordered to wake up early to teach them or stay up late to complete some of their assigned tasks. Agnes Grey would be called up by her pupils at 5.30 a.m. It is a clear indicator of the fact that the governess was not accorded the authority which she was expected to exercise to discipline her pupils.

Constant supervision of their pupils seems to be a common duty of the governesses. They had to chaperone their pupils to church or accompany them on their walks and social visits but class barriers were invisibly drawn between the governess and her pupils. If the governess had young girls as her pupils, she could not walk with them arm-in-arm or talk freely with them as a friend, she had to walk a step behind. Agnes Grey naturally finds it unacceptable and disagreeable. Agnes felt ignored and unnoticed by her pupils and their friends. She makes her case clearly:

it was disagreeable to walk beside them, as if listening to what they said, or wishing to be thought one of them, while they talked over me or across; and if their eyes, in speaking, chanced to fall on me, it seemed as if they looked on

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14 Ibid, p.52.
vacancy – as if they either did not see me or were very desirous to make it appear so.\textsuperscript{15}

Walking behind did not seem a good option either, as it appeared to acknowledge the governess’ own (social) inferiority.

Governessing, being an unorganized sector, included varied tasks which a governess could be asked to undertake. A nursery governess was also expected to do the washing, dressing and taking care of the clothes of children.

If her pupils were very young, a governess had to take on the task of mothering them. The crib of a six year old pupil Mary Ann was to be placed in the room of the governess Agnes Grey. Agnes was to overlook her washing and dressing and was also responsible for her clothes. Mary Ann was to pass from the care of the nursery maid to the governess. This did not seem to be an uncommon practice.

When her pupils happened to be young ladies, she had to be their chaperone, companion, guide, instructor as well as a victim of their whims. Agnes Grey was forced to complete the unfinished drawings of her pupils, copy some piece of music for them, or do some other similar work in her leisure hours. She was asked not to go to church or, when in church, to sit with her back to the pulpit, and for six weeks she was not ‘taken’ for walks with her pupils as the elder Miss Murray was trying to flirt and catch the attention of the curate Mr. Weston; hence she tried to prevent Agnes from seeing him and tried to rupture their acquaintance. A young governess could suffer from this disadvantage of being treated as a cornered rival, if she was not much older than her pupils. Miss Murray was young, beautiful and captivating. She had several admirers yet even after she became engaged, she relished the idea of ‘fixing’ Mr. Weston, which is, making him fall in love with her and

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, p.167.
making her an offer of marriage. She could sense a growing tenderness in Mr. Weston for the
governess, so she tried and almost gained success in parting them.

The nature of the duties of a governess was not clearly defined. Apart from the
holistic development of her pupils, she was expected to be generally useful to her employers.
Needlework was a much assigned task and in her leisure hours, or presumably at night, the
governess was expected to complete much of her sewing. In *Middlemarch* the family
governess was asked to help with Rosamond Vincy’s trousseau. In *Wives and Daughters*,
Lady Cumnor used the governess Clare as her secretary and she was irresponsible enough to
call away Clare during the hours of study in the schoolroom. Later in the novel, her daughter
accuses her on this account and blames her mother (and thankfully not the governess) for her
being the most ‘ill informed girl’ in London. Here, at least, the grown up pupil realizes in
retrospect that the fault lay with the mother, for interrupting the lessons, and not with the
governess. Thackeray’s Becky Sharp is perhaps one of the most ‘useful’ representations of
governesses in fiction. She ‘wrote Sir Pitt’s letters, did his business, managed his accounts –
had the upper hand of the whole house’.¹⁶ Being clever, Becky realized that she would have
to make herself ‘agreeable’ to her employers. She did not in the least resent these additional
duties as it helped her to gain power in the household by giving the impression that she was
almost indispensable to her employer.

In her advisory book, *Womankind*, Charlotte Yonge speaks out for the cause of
governesses. She tries to guide both employers and governesses about their attitudes and
roles. She speaks against the tendency of sentimentalizing the situation of the governess. She
reasons: ‘She [i.e. the governess] is a lady with a profession just as much as a barrister is a
gentleman with a profession. The profession is to teach the children and supply the place of

the mother when she is engaged.’ 17 She also wishes the governess to be sensitive and alert to her surroundings. Instead of wallowing in self-pity, or suffering from neglect, the governess is asked not to impose her presence on visitors if they wish for privacy and to be prepared to assist in entertaining them if the ladies of the house so desire. Similarly Yonge advises mothers to supervise the schoolroom, both to help and oversee the governess’ work and to build a deeper bond with the children.

A governess was usually never made to feel ‘at home’ in her employer’s house. She was acutely aware of the fact that she was not one of them, not a family member, not a guest, not a relation, not a friend, not an acquaintance, and not even a servant. This isolated her within the family as she could not mingle as an equal with anyone. The isolation of the governess was further deepened by the restrictions imposed upon her by her employers. Most employers expressly prohibited or discouraged visitors and ‘followers’ (admirers). Though sometimes visitors were allowed, but they were often rudely treated. 18 Agnes Grey was disallowed visitors at the Murray house and she had no opportunities of making friends in the neighbourhood. Though Mr. Weston took an interest in her, he would not have been welcomed to pay her a visit at her employer’s home. Clare in Wives and Daughters was generally allowed visitors once a month. In Dickens’ Martin Chuzzlewit, when Tom Pinch came to see his sister, he was insulted by the porter and also by her employers. In the case of orphans like Jane Eyre, isolation was compounded by the fact that they did not have relatives or friends who could come over to meet them. In Trollope’s The Eustace Diamonds the mistress Lady Fawn did not allow any governess to entertain a ‘follower’ or receive attentions from an admirer in her house. This may be due to her protective motherly instincts.

17 Charlotte Yonge, Womankind (London: Mozley and Smith, 1876), pp.34-35.
and sense of responsibility but she also suspected that a governess in love could not discharge her duties diligently. So Lady Fawn tells Frank Greystock not to pay any visits to their governess, Lucy Morris, of whom he was quite fond. Frank proposes to Lucy, then has an affair with Lady Eustace, but finally returns to Lucy, who forgives him and they get married. In Lucy we get a glimpse of the governess who was admired and loved, not just by the man who married her but also by the family she was employed in. In a reversal of Agnes Grey’s situation, here we see that it is the governess Lucy who is attractive while her pupils and their elder sisters are all plain. It is commendable that seven ordinary looking young women between the ages of twenty seven and thirteen did not dislike the presence of a lovely governess unlike the Ugly sisters who hated Cinderella. Instead, they sympathized with her throughout her developing romance and even escorted her at her wedding.¹⁹ Neither did they exhibit petty jealousy nor did they try to flirt with Frank. They did not seek to break off the Frank-Lucy involvement unlike Rosalie Murray who had attempted this in Agnes’s case.

The problems faced by a governess in her workplace, that is, the home of her employer, were compounded by her employer’s attitude towards her and the uneasy relationship she often shared with them. In the Bloomfield residence, refined and mild Agnes suffers from the coarseness of her employer’s temperament. At the first meeting with her little pupils, Agnes felt that she was under ‘unpleasant restraint’ due to the presence of their mother. Mrs. Bloomfield may be excused for this presence, even for lavishing undeserved praise on her children in their introduction to the governess, but she is seen to over-indulge them throughout. She struck Agnes as being ‘cold, grave and forbidding’.²⁰ When her child

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¹⁹ For a detailed analysis, see Katharine West, *Chapter of Governesses*, p.145.

²⁰ Anne Bronte, *Agnes Grey*, p.43.
was naughty, the mother chose to scold the governess and hold her responsible for every lapse of socially acceptable behaviour on the part of the pupils.

Mothers expressed shock and bewilderment if children became fond of the governess. Clara Mordaunt, in Lady Blessington’s *The Governess* (1839), is told by one of her pupils that her mother had informed them that the governesses were ‘never ladies’, they were only ‘useful’ in teaching young people how to ‘behave as ladies’. Charlotte Bronte recounts her personal experience of how a mother recoiled in horror when she saw her son being affectionate the governess: ‘Love the governess, my dear!’ 21 The mother instilled the idea that warmth towards the governess was not only preposterous but also disdainful.

Fictional evidence suggests that most governesses were not generally treated with respect. They faced neglect, mild scorn, disdain, pity, mental anguish and sometimes even physical cruelty (such as the Bloomfield children subjected Agnes Grey to). The porter warned Lady Blessington’s Clare Mordaunt that the children would ‘worry’ her worse than ‘a cat did a rat’ and it turned out to be true.

The governess heroine in fiction speaks out for her rights as a human being. In most such novels, she is a woman first and a governess later. The theme of social humiliation pervades these novels. In this context, it is pertinent to recall that in 1864 John Ruskin expressed his indignation at employers for their behaviour towards governesses:

> what reverence do you show to the teachers you have chosen? Is a girl likely to think her own conduct, or her own intellect, of much importance, when you trust the entire formation of her character, moral and intellectual, to a person whom you let your servants treat with less respect than they do your housekeeper (as if the soul of your child were a less charge than jams and

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groceries), and whom you yourself think you confer an honour upon by letting her sometimes sit in the drawing room in the evening?22

Perhaps one of the reasons why a governess was in an isolated position in the Victorian household was the fact that though she was expected to be a ‘lady’, she had to work in another man’s family and more what was more unpardonable was that she accepted remuneration for her work. These two aspects of being a lady and an employee were nearly irreconcilable. For Elizabeth Eastlake the quintessential English governess was one who was: ‘our equal in birth, manners and education, but our inferior in worldly wealth.’23

Though the governess technically had the status of a ‘lady’, but working to make ends meet and accepting payment for her work lowered her position in society. The issue was further problematized by the wages offered to a governess. A lady who was expected to be superior in birth, mind, manners and education, was offered a salary which was usually lower than that of a housekeeper or a ladies’ maid.24 Keeping the desperate need of the distressed gentlewoman in mind, it is easy to understand why such wages were accepted. This economic exploitation of governesses was facilitated by a scenario where supply (of governesses) exceeded the demand (for governesses). The only offer that came to Jane Eyre was that of thirty pounds from Mrs. Fairfax, the housekeeper of Mr. Rochester. Agnes Grey received twenty five pounds per annum in the Bloomfield household and, later, fifty pounds in the Murray household for undertaking the care of older girls nearer her age. Alice Madden in Gissing’s The Odd Women gets sixteen pounds as nursery governess. The average salary of a governess could range from twenty pounds to forty five pounds a year. With her meagre

22 Speech at Town Hall in Manchester, quoted in Martha Vicinus, Suffer and Be Still, p.12.
23 Quarterly Review (Dec, 1848), quoted in Martha Vicinus, Suffer and Be Still p.10.
24 Mrs Sewell (in 1865) equated the salary of a nursery governess with that of a ladies’ maid, that of an ordinary governess with that of a footman, a highly educated governess with that of a coachman or butler. Based on Banks, Prosperity pp.80-81., Wanda, p.158.
salary, a governess could barely dress presentably, so it followed that there was no opportunity to save money for illness, unemployment, retirement or old age.

Under the circumstances, it is not surprising that several governesses found themselves destitute in old age. This insecurity was one of the most potent hazards of governessing. There was no job security for a governess. She lived with the perpetual fear of her services being terminated. Employers did not have to provide a reasonable ground for discharging a governess and seldom do we find a notice being served to a governess before firing her. If Mr. Rochester, under his fiancée, Miss Blanche Ingram’s influence, had decided to send Adele to school, Jane Eyre would have lost her job (and a roof over her head) through no fault of hers. If Jane had been sent packing without prior notice, being an orphan without helpful relatives to depend upon, she would find herself destitute. Agnes Grey was called in one evening nearing the end of May, and told calmly that after Midsummer her services would no longer be required. The reason given to her was that the children had made little improvement since her arrival. Agnes was accused of lacking the firmness and care required to subdue and control them. It is worth noting that Agnes had received no warning about her dismissal or about her unsatisfactory performance before, and it came as an utter shock to her. Though the children were really troublesome, Agnes had not wished to give up her job but to continue in her efforts to civilize, train and educate them. She even believed that she had brought about a little change in them. But she was unceremoniously dismissed. In Gissing’s *The Odd Women*, Alice Madden suffers the usual fate of a nursery governess as she loses her job when the children are sent to school.

The Governess’ Benevolent Institution could only offer a little hope for a very limited number of governesses in the form of small annuities for retired governesses. Even prior to
retirement, a governess could be out of work due to illness, inability to discharge her duties satisfactorily, the pupils being sent to school, the whims of her employers and such reasons. An out-of-work governess could advertise again for a ‘situation’ or face the prospect of charity. Florence Nightingale operated the reorganized Institution for the Care of the Sick Gentlewomen in Distressed Circumstances in 1853. She told her father that governesses formed the largest group of her patients as the Home was ‘the cheapest lodging’ they could find. Not only were governesses faced with the prospect of destitution and of living on charity, they were also found in asylums and as patients of hysteria. The employers were not concerned about the mental and emotional health of the governess, in fact in the private life of the governess. If the psychoanalysts are to be believed, then the work conditions (which, in the case of the governess, is her living condition) were such as to produce in them loneliness, isolation, sexual starvation and repression of all kinds which might erupt in cruelty and sadism, though we do not get to witness such tensions in standard governess literature. This may be attributed to the notion of Victorian prudery which did not permit such public admissions. Later, in Conrad’s *Chance* (1913), we encounter one of the first accounts of a psychopathic governess who shows evidence of these strains. Katharine West calls this ‘the occupational mental disease of a governess’. Her lonely life and her full time engagement with, sometimes, socially or culturally or morally inferior pupils and their families also endangered her mental health. In the Murray household, Agnes fears that the constant association with her wayward, spoilt and unscrupulous pupils could lower her intellectual and spiritual qualities: ‘I trembled lest my very moral perceptions should become

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25 See Katharine West, *Chapter of Governesses*, p.162.
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.’  

Another effect of the occupation is seen in Alice Madden (in Gissing’s *The Odd Women*) who tended to corpulence as a result of the sedentary lifestyle. She also suffers from regular headaches and back aches. Apart from these physical ailments, a governess also had to undergo the strain of living for years together, among coarse, uncultivated and unrefined people, in their house, adapting to their way of speech, witnessing their deeds which may subtly, gradually and sadly influence her and cause degeneration in her standards. Mrs Gaskell, in *Wives and Daughters*, likens the job of ‘governessing in Russia’ to ‘taking the veil’ and even more shockingly to a ‘lady like form of suicide’.

It may be difficult to state what a governess suffered most from. She definitely felt like the ‘other’ in the household of her employer and even in the society around her. Sally Shuttleworth points out that Jane Eyre writes as an outsider who longs to be included and yet whose ‘self definition’ and ‘sense of self worth stems precisely from her position of exclusion and sense of difference.’ As the ‘other’, the governess seldom has an opportunity to make friends as she had few social equals. Employers in a neighbourhood may not have encouraged friendship among governesses as private affairs of a family may pass on to another through such a friendship. As most governesses were not free to choose their leisure hours, fixing up time for informal meetings between governesses of different families may have been difficult. Agnes Grey mourns: ‘I seldom could look upon an hour as entirely my

27 Anne Bronte, *Agnes Grey*, p.156.
own, since, where everything was left to the caprices of Miss Matilda and her sister, there could be no order or regularity.’

Besides, in the same neighbourhood, the pupils of different families may not be of the same age group, so governesses could not possibly take them along and force them to interact while they had their tea parties. Also a governess was very often saddled with extra household chores like sewing or making covers or washing, which would take up much of her leisure hours making it difficult to keep up such an acquaintance. Any particular neighbourhood may not have many governesses similar in age, taste and temperament, who could mingle and become friends. We know that governesses were judged on the progress and behaviour of their pupils, so a possibility of competition and rivalry among governesses cannot be ruled out.

M. Jeanne Peterson calls the governess a ‘standard furnishing’ in many a fictional Victorian home. The governess was often used as a symbol of ‘economic power, breeding and station’. This is illustrated in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* where Lady Catherine de Bourgh is almost scandalized to learn that the five Bennet sisters have been brought up at home without a governess. She assumes that their mother, Mrs. Bennet, must have been ‘quite a slave’ to their education – in the absence of a governess. When Elizabeth refutes the idea, Lady Catherine assumes that their education must have suffered. Elizabeth has to partly concede this as they were denied the constant supervision of a governess and she admits that those sisters who ‘chose’ to be ‘idle’ remained so. Lady Catherine’s reply is a pertinent comment on the role of a governess as she says that a governess could be entrusted to prevent such idleness. She makes a strong claim for a governess as she states that ‘nobody but a

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30 Anne Bronte, *Agnes Grey*, p.159.
governess’ could provide a steady and regular instruction. Influential people like Lady Catherine could act as good references for young ladies looking for situations. She boasts of getting five young girls ‘well placed out’.

Functioning as the ‘other’, Agnes Grey resents the treatment meted out to her by the neighbours, friends and acquaintances of her pupils. Her presence was never acknowledged and no one ‘stooped’ to the level of talking to her. She states bitterly:

Mr Hatfield never spoke to me, neither did Sir Hugh nor Lady Meltham nor Mr Harry or Miss Meltham, nor Mr Green nor his sisters, nor any lady or gentleman who frequented that church: nor, in fact, anyone that visited at Horton Lodge.32

It was the plight of the governess that even the servants (supposedly her social inferiors) looked down upon her. The housekeeper, Mrs Blenkinsop, in Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* tells the maid: ‘I don’t trust them governesses… they give themselves the hairs and hupstarts of the ladies, and their wages is no better than you nor me.’33 Another servant in that household, John, behaves rudely with Becky Sharp when he goes to drop her because her connection with his employers’ family was broken off and also because she had not tipped the servants on her departure. He tauntingly reminds her of the old gowns of his lady, Miss Amelia, which Becky had received but which were expected to have gone to the lady’s maid. He derides governesses in general as ‘a bad lot’ pointing out the trifling attitude of the servants to the governesses.

If the governess managed to win the children’s affection (in itself, a rare achievement) and the mother’s confidence, it provoked the jealousy of the maid as seen in

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Maria Edgeworth’s *The Good French Governess*. Katharine West concludes that such jealousy was common in Victorian households where several maids, nurses or housekeepers resented the influence of the governess. In Gaskell’s *Wives and Daughters*, the governess Miss Eyre aroused jealousy in the old nurse. It could, in part, be ascribed to the feeling of being cornered by the governess; the old nurse may have felt that her space/role was being usurped by the governess. The manservant’s contempt for Ruth Pinch in Dickens’s *Martin Chuzzlewit* is another example of the unfair treatment being meted out to governesses.

Servants may not have been able to appreciate the value of education and educators or to distinguish between a servant girl of their class and a refined lady fallen on hard times; but employers in particular and society in general was to be blamed for the degrading state of affairs where a servant could, and often would, treat a governess with derision. Had employers shown concern and a little respect towards their governess, had they treated goveresses well or listened to the governess’s complaints and rebuked the servants for their rudeness, servants would have shown more consideration for the feelings of the governess.

Poverty further problematised the governess’s predicament. She was paid so miserably that she could not dress presentably, leave alone, impressively. Governesses were associated with their pale and sad looks, homely cottage bonnets, dull merino shawls and threadbare gloves. She received little sympathy (by society, her employers and their servants) and was held in contempt for her drabness. The representation of a severe, unfeminine, strict, reserved disciplinarian (who is a ‘bore’ to any man) could be attributed to several factors. Being isolated by the employer’s family and by society, a governess would have little choice but to remain quiet (as she hardly had any company to talk to). No one expected her to speak or to participate in social gatherings and in the gossip of her employers’ circle. Agnes Grey
and her pupils, the Murray girls, almost belonged to the same age group but instead of finding companions in them, Agnes was ordered about by them and treated as a rival for the attentions of Mr Weston. In most cases, circumstances forced the governess to adopt a ‘cold, rigid, apathetic exterior’ as a survival strategy. This ‘estrangement’ from her ‘real character’ is termed ‘painful’ by Lucy Snowe in Villette.

This constant ‘othering’ led to isolation and loneliness. It comes as no surprise that young girls and distressed gentlewomen did not find comfort in governessing. It helps to explain Gwendolen’s horror and distaste at the thought that she might have to become a governess in Daniel Deronda. In Charlotte Bronte’s Jane Eyre, St John Rivers speaks of governessing as earning the ‘dependant’s crust’ while living among strangers. When he offers Jane an opportunity to teach in a humble country school with a salary of thirty pounds a year, she is content and prefers it to governessing. She considers teaching in such a school as ‘plodding’ but she likes the independence associated with it and, ‘the fear of servitude with strangers entered my [i.e. her] soul like iron, [though] it was not ignoble – not unworthy, not mentally degrading.’

Jane contrasts school teaching with governessing and finds the latter more servile and degrading. Jane realizes that goveresses were only ‘humble dependents’ whose innate excellence were neither sought nor acknowledged; only their ‘acquired accomplishments’ were noted just like, ‘the skill of the cook or the taste of their waiting woman’. Jane’s observations do not follow from her experiences with Mr Rochester at Thornfield. He always behaved courteously with her and showed consideration for her but probably because Jane fell in love with him, she could not typify him as the usual employer. His friends like Miss Ingram perhaps offered her a glimpse of how governesses

were spoken of and how they were treated generally in other households. Blanche Ingram
dismissed the whole tribe in a word, branding them a ‘nuisance’. One evening in Mr
Rochester’s house, the talk turns to governesses whom the guests had known. Out of the
dozen governesses the Ingrams had, Blanche labels half as ‘detestable’ and others as
‘ridiculous’. She clubs all her governesses together and calls them ‘incubi’. The discussion
reveals how pupils bullied and harassed their governess, beat them up, or spread malicious
rumours about them. Her mother claims to have, ‘suffered a martyrdom from their
incompetency and caprice’.

Even before this house party, Jane had been apprehensive about her role as governess
as she first entered Thornfield. She was pleasantly surprised when she was treated as a
‘visitor’ on her arrival, instead of receiving the ‘coldness’ and ‘stiffness’ that she had
anticipated and heard of. Jane feels protective towards her pupil Adele and thinks of her as a
‘lonely, little orphan’ as she is abandoned by her French opera-girl mother and disowned by
Rochester. Jane prefers her little pupil’s dependence on her rather than face the prospect of
encountering the tantrums of a ‘spoilt pet’ of a rich family. The chord of loneliness binds the
Jane-Adele relationship and both seemed ‘content’ in each other’s company. Straight from
the charitable institution, Lowood, to Thornfield, it is uncertain where Jane could have
picked up her ideas about the treatment meted out to governesses. It could be from seniors
and fellow sufferers in Lowood but it is also likely that she had read some of the available
governess literature of the time and come to her own conclusions. This speculation cannot be
conclusively established, but in some later works such a hint of the influence of governess-
literature on a governess is palpable. Miss Bracy in Charlotte M Yonge’s *The Daisy Chain*
(1856) seems to have been influenced by governess-literature. Her morbidly sensitive and

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easily humiliated temperament appears to be an offshoot of the classic downtrodden governess in governess-literature. Agnes Grey’s early enthusiasm and idealism about enjoying the tutorship of young children (she loved children), about braving the world outside the home and about trying out and proving her ‘unused faculties’ as well as about supporting her family, might be an outcome of her innocence and sheltered life, but it could also stem from reading the success story of some governess in a book like Maria Edgeworth’s *A Good French Governess*. As her illusory happiness gets shattered, Agnes finds the ‘governess yoke’ heavy and burdensome. The initially cold and haughty, then insolent and overbearing attitude of her pupil Rosalie Murray towards her governess was grounded on two reasons: first, Agnes was a ‘hireling’ in her household and, second, Agnes was only a poor curate’s daughter. Being economically dependent and from a modest background were causes enough for an arrogant pupil to despise her governess. Agnes seeks relief from the ‘weary monotony’ and the ‘lonely drudgery’ of her governess life. She is pained by the fact that she has no friend, no sympathizer, no one to share her thoughts and feelings with. Her social intercourse was limited to Nancy Brown, an old invalid in the Murray neighbourhood.

The loneliness of a governess’s life made her sometimes yearn for action and adventure. Jane Eyre’s chance encounter with a man on horseback, who meets with an accident by slipping on a sheet of ice, adds some much needed drama to her mundane existence. Back home in her ‘lonely room’, she feels that she has returned to her life of ‘stagnation’. She mourns the ‘viewless fetters of a uniform and too still existence’.\(^{37}\) Its dullness and stillness perhaps ensure security but, being a young woman full of vitality, she

\(^{37}\) Ibid, p.117.
longs for ‘the storms of an uncertain, struggling life’.\textsuperscript{38} She finds her present surroundings gloomy. It shows how thwarted a governess’s passions could get in some situations, how loneliness might drive her to desperation though canonical Victorian fiction refrains from depiction of such desperation. Jane Eyre had powerful passions but even more strong principles with which she governed them. The task of controlling, overpowering and subduing children could tell upon the health of a governess as it happened in the case of Agnes Grey. She had served the Bloomfields for a few months when, on returning home, her mother remarked that she looked a good deal ‘paler and thinner’ and Agnes attributed it to her ‘constant state of agitation and anxiety all day long’.\textsuperscript{39} In his essay \textit{Lucy Snowe and the Good Governess} (1967), R. A. Colby does not use too strong a language when he calls the governess as ‘educated servant’.\textsuperscript{40} In a discussion with Mrs Gaskell, Charlotte Bronte once said that ‘none but those who had been in the position of a governess could ever realize the dark side of “respectable” human nature’.\textsuperscript{41}

A fate similar to that of the governess belonged to the companion. The companion in Victorian fiction differs primarily from the governess in her duties as she was not responsible for ‘educating’ anyone nor for inculcating values or for the general upbringing of her wards. What she did share with the governess were her pangs of loneliness, isolation and of living in her employer’s house, trying to think of it as her home but acutely aware that it could never be a home to her. Like the governess, she is an ‘outsider’, the ‘other’ in the household, who is not a relative, not a guest, not a servant and definitely not a part of the family. In comparison

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid, p.118.
\textsuperscript{39} Anne Bronte, \textit{Agnes Grey}, p.89.
\textsuperscript{41} Elizabeth Gaskell, \textit{The Life of Charlotte Bronte}, pp.154-55.
with the governess, we see that the companion has been too sketchily portrayed, with no major companion-as-heroine novel. Usually the companion functions as a fringe character who is mentioned in passing. Her feelings, suffering or dilemma are never analysed or brought into focus. A companion was usually meant to give company to or attend to an invalid or elderly person. In Gissing’s *The Odd Women*, Virginia Madden gets accepted as a companion by a gentlewoman at Weston-super-Mare for a payment of twelve pounds a year. Her health gets damaged ‘by attendance upon an exacting invalid’ and in ‘profitless study’ at night.\(^{42}\) Virginia was zealous about studying ecclesiastical history but knew well that such study would never increase her value as ‘companion’. Erudition was not a professional requirement for a companion nor was it preferred. Ironically, in Virginia’s case, instead of becoming erudite, this incessant study undermined her health. It led to irreparable ‘mental lassitude’. As companion, it was her duty to read novels aloud for the lady by whom she was employed. She was supposed to read out novels at the rate of a volume a day. It effected such a change in her mental prowess that she was forced to give up her devotion to the solid study of literature. She found that serious study either began to induce sleep or bring on a headache. She kept herself occupied with reading light books from the lending library. The sordidness of a companion’s life may be gauged from the fact that Virginia had lived with the ‘trying’ Mrs Carr for three years (though she had repeatedly wished to leave, she could not as Mrs Carr had ‘begged’ her not to ‘desert’ her) and could only finally leave when Mrs Carr died. From one invalid’s room to another, listening to moans and groans, till the invalid expired (which could be any day), a sense of job uncertainty always haunted the companion. Moreover, living on for days, months and even years with someone, and then to watch that person die, must have been an unsettling, if not horrific, experience for a companion. If the

Companion happened to form a basic human attachment for the invalid, she would be sure to suffer from the final scenes at the death bed of the invalid.

Companions for the ailing elderly invalids were more common, but a companion might have played that role to any adult, even a young or middle aged woman who might require someone to share her loneliness with. In Hardy’s *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Lucetta offers Elizabeth-Jane an opportunity of living in her house ‘partly as house keeper, partly as companion’. It shows that, like the duties of a governess, a companion also had varied and usually not well defined tasks assigned to her. A governess to children may have been required to play the role of companion to some other family member like Thackeray’s governess Becky Sharp who played both side roles of companion and nurse to Miss Crawley.

Theoretically, the classic governess was a resident teacher, so teaching, escorting and guiding her pupils were her primary concerns but the companion could be asked to amuse her mistress in any manner the mistress willed. This need not be specifically stated at the time of appointment. Her job responsibility, being more diffused, required her to be accomplished (much like the governess). Being academically sound was not mandatory but a pleasing personality, expert enunciation skills (required for reading), good voice (i.e. ability to sing), play the piano, neat handwriting (to write letters for her mistress and maintain correspondence with friends and acquaintances), and proficient mathematical ability (to keep her accounts) were presumably necessary. Even as Elizabeth-Jane eagerly accepts the offer made by Lucetta – as she longs to be independent and was looking for a place away from Henchard’s home where she had begun to feel unwanted and unwelcome – she enumerates her defects which make her unsuitable for her engagement as companion. She mentions that she is not accomplished, that she sometimes utters rural words unthinkingly and

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acknowledges painfully that she ‘accidentally learned to write round hand instead of ladies’.

It appears that ladies with fancy accomplishments like the ability to paint, knowledge of foreign languages, proficiency in playing musical instruments, an adept ear for music, and a good singing voice were sought after to become both governesses and companions. A companion was expected to be a lady both in her sense of dress and in her speech habits. Elizabeth-Jane’s utterance of rural words reveals a lack of sufficient exposure to genteel society and also a lack of grooming. Understandably, a ‘ladies hand’ was required in writing beautiful letters to keep up correspondences and also in maintaining ledger books/accounts. Lucetta does not mind any of Elizabeth-Jane’s deficiencies probably due to three reasons. Lucetta was not a lady proper herself; she had suddenly become an heiress, and so she may be classed as *nouveaux riche*. Second, she was moved by Elizabeth-Jane’s distress and her simplicity. Third, Lucetta was keen to have Henchard’s daughter in her home to enable Henchard to make visits to his daughter there, and thus afford him an excuse to woo her socially. Elizabeth-Jane ‘joyfully’ takes up the prospect of living with a fashionable, rich and impressive woman like Lucetta as a means of escape from the ‘unbearable’ life with her father Henchard. His indifference and coldness on being told of her impending departure prompts her to give him a vague idea about her future whereabouts and her reasons for going away. She says evasively that she had heard ‘of an opportunity of getting more cultivated and finished, and being less idle’ and that she could live in a household where she could have the ‘advantages of study’ and get to see ‘refined life’. Elizabeth-Jane does not name her employer, or her job profile or even the house where she is going to live. It is implied that

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44 Ibid, p.129.
she felt that Lucetta, her future employer, was a refined lady and that, as her companion, she would be able to get herself groomed and polished. She imagined that as a companion to a young woman, she would get more time to study and get more cultivated. Significantly, she agrees to live with Lucetta even before asking for her name. Both employer and employee were eager to begin living in the same house for their own personal reasons. Elizabeth-Jane wanted to be out of Henchard’s house where she felt unwelcome and Lucetta felt lonely in her new and spacious house which she found ‘hollow and dismal’. Hence she expressed her desire for the living presence of a companion. It underlines one of the most important reasons for hiring a companion – to overcome loneliness and boredom.

In the relationship between Lucetta and Elizabeth-Jane, the latter, though younger would play the part of the ‘sage’, the counsellor and the comforter. The companion, perhaps even more than the governess, was subject to the whims and moods of her employer. On days when Lucetta wishes Elizabeth-Jane to be away from the house, she assigns varied outdoor tasks to her like ordering and buying miscellaneous items and even tells her to visit the Museum to ensure that Lucetta is alone at home the entire morning. An employer could be easily rid of the companion whenever she willed, but a companion could not choose to stay at home, or go out whenever she wished. Having made arrangements for being alone, Lucetta waits for Henchard who fails to turn up but she gets amply compensated by the arrival of Farfrae. This meeting between Lucetta and Farfrae leaves a lasting impression on both of them, culminating in their marriage. Meanwhile Farfrae conveniently forgets that he had first come to that house to court Elizabeth-Jane.

Lucetta chooses to make use of Elizabeth-Jane as it suits her. When Lucetta learns of the estranged relationship between Henchard and his daughter, she feels that Elizabeth’s
presence might make Henchard hesitant about visiting her. Perceiving her companion’s presence as an obstacle in furthering her relationship with Henchard, Lucetta wants to be rid of Elizabeth-Jane (though she likes her company). After Farfrae’s visit, Lucetta’s feelings get altered, and she thinks of keeping Elizabeth-Jane as a deterrent to Henchard’s visits! This only highlights the vulnerability of a companion’s position. She was exposed to the whims and schemes of her employer and again, like the governess, could lose her job through no fault of hers. Another striking resemblance emerges in the fate of the young governess and young companion who belong to the same age group as her pupil or her charge. Both Agnes Grey (governess to teenage Murray girls) and Elizabeth-Jane (companion to a slightly older Lucetta) are treated by their pupils/employer as rivals vying for the attention of the same man. Agne’s happiness was not marred because Mr Weston could see through Rosalie Murray’s designs and flirtations (besides, Rosalie did not have any intention of marrying him, she just wanted to make him fall in love with her). However, Elizabeth-Jane lost Mr Farfrae to her employer Lucetta who was wealthier, more experienced and a more enigmatical woman of the world. Enamoured by Lucetta’s wealth and flamboyant style, Farfrae forgot his liking for Elizabeth-Jane’s simplicity and his intention of marrying her as he had earlier found her ‘pleasing, thrifty and satisfactory in every way’.  

The chances of marriage for both governesses and companions were slim. The incongruous social position allowed for very few social equals with whom the governess could settle into domesticity. In Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*, Miss Crawley supposes that the governess Becky Sharp has lost her heart to ‘some apothecary, or house-steward, or painter or young curate’, suggesting the limited choices available to a governess. A cook or

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46 Hardy, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, p.147.
47 Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, p.190.
housemaid belonged to a well defined class and could marry from her own class, unlike the
governess who could not sink beneath her class to marry a coachman or gardener. Being a
paid employee, she could not aspire to the male members of her employer’s social circle. In
rare cases, the governess in fiction would break through these barriers and marry her
employer or his son as is seen in the case of Jane Eyre (who married her employer) and
Thackeray’s Becky Sharp (who married her employer’s son). Emma’s beloved governess
Miss Taylor discharged her duty diligently, watched her pupil grow into a fine woman, then
married Mr Weston and started a family of her own. Agnes Grey marries a curate to form the
proverbial happy ending, while Hyacinth Kirkpatrick (nee Clare) in Wives and Daughters
marries twice. The second time she is fortunate enough to marry a widowed doctor.
Katharine West rightly concludes that several governesses may have lost their hearts where
there was no hope of an honourable requital. It follows that governesses may also have been
vulnerable to the attentions of the male members in the family whom they would have to take
pains to avoid. The perpetual strain of living in the margins of a family unit without the hope
of ever being included in it or of having such a family of her own must have been a cause of
great unhappiness and even despair.

West analyses sensitively the irony of a governess’s thwarted passions:

The fonder a girl was of children, the more she must long for children of her
own. The more she wished to be the mistress of a house with her own things
in it, the more she was oppressed by other people’s possessions. The more she
loved society, the more lonely she felt. The fonder she let herself grow of her
charges and her parents, the more she hated leaving them.48

48 Katharine West, The Chapter of Governesses, pp.84-85.
This constant living with but of not belonging, engaging with but not being allowed to get involved in, wishing to be a part of and wishing to be accepted but being denied, caused not just isolation and loneliness but also could make the governess feel marginalized and othered. West finds it ‘odd’ that none of the fictional governesses were hurt by their failure to win the love of their pupils. Social convention decreed (and mothers made sure of it) that there should be no love and affection between the governess and her pupils. A governess was denied a natural woman’s life and her aspirations and feelings were trampled upon on a daily basis. Under the circumstances, she had too many things to hurt her. Not winning the love of her pupils was not her personal failure but a social norm, so it did not oppress her much.

The companion shared the same predicament of isolation and loneliness. The gloominess of a companion’s life may have been greater than that of a governess as she did not have young pupils who might at times enliven her days with their playful banter or incessant questions. A companion to an elderly, cripple or invalid would have to bear almost constant moans and embittered complaints. A governess to young ladies might be relieved by listening to colourful accounts of balls and social gatherings which her pupils had attended or by watching her young pupil’s budding romance with some gentleman, but a companion confined to a sick room or a library was denied such lively respite. Curiously Mary Garth in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* preferred nursing an old ill-tempered man, Peter Featherstone, to being a governess. Mrs. Vincy suspected her of being after the old man’s money and thought that she was ‘more fit’ to be a governess on account of her ‘dreadful, plain’ looks. Mary cites conscientious scruples for not wanting to be a governess. She believed that any hardship was better than pretending to do what one was paid for and not being able to do it
well. This shows a rare instance of a girl doubting her merit as a potential governess and concerned about accepting remuneration for an ill performed job.

The real life correspondences of governesses with Female Middle Class Emigration Society and the fictional evidence both reveal that often the dream of a governess was to start a school of her own, a sign of freedom from slavery in another’s house. The Bronte sisters also dreamed of starting their own school. The prospects of marriage being bleak, a fairy tale romance was not a realistic goal for most governesses in real life though in the governess-as-heroine novels such Cinderella endings were depicted perhaps for the neat happy ending and even, in part, as a reflection of wish fulfillment.

In looking at a fictional representation of Victorian working women, governesses appear to be the most dominant type. Their feelings, anxieties, humiliations and suffering have been delved into in detail. Critics who view these governess novels as ‘overdramatized accounts of pauperized gentlewomen’ seem not to acknowledge her plight or to find it pale in comparison with other working women like labourers in factories and mines. Admittedly, the governess was more sheltered in her physical circumstances, but to claim that she did not suffer enough, is being unfair to her. To engage in a debate on which kind of suffering is more dreadful - physical torture or mental trauma/ psychological breakdown - would be irrelevant and counterproductive.

In our postmodern world view, where non cathartic feelings like loneliness and boredom take centre stage, we are perhaps more sensitized to the governess and the companion’s plight, their sense of being othered, their marginalization both in the household and in the society. From the concerns of the governess and companion, we next shift our gaze to the school teachers and literary women of the age.

49 M Jeanne Peterson, *The Victorian Governess: Status Incongruence in Family and Society*, p.3.