“Observe Everything, Disclose Nothing:” Governesses in Victorian Fiction
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Introduction

The term “governess” is somewhat more complicated than one would expect. *The Oxford English Dictionary* shows that it first entered the English language in the fifteenth century. A governess was “[a] woman who governs (e.g. a kingdom, province, a community, religious institution); a female governor or ruler.” This later changed into “[a] woman who has charge or control of a person, especially of a young one.” The meaning that most people would attribute to the word nowadays appeared in the eighteenth and nineteenth century: “A female teacher; an instructress; (chiefly) one so employed in a private household.” Despite the uniformity suggested by a dictionary, there existed a variety of governesses. “In mid-nineteenth century usage, the term ‘governess’ could refer to a woman who taught in a school, a woman who lived at home and travelled to her employer’s house to teach (called a ‘daily governess’), or a woman who lived in her employer’s home and who taught the children and served as a companion to them” (Peterson 8). The term becomes even more complicated by introducing such governesses as the nursery governess and the finishing governess. The general public was mostly interested in the governess who lived with her employers. According to Peterson, it is also essential that the governess should not be mixed up with the nursemaid or nanny, because the latter was regarded as a lower-class servant (23, n8).

However, their duties often overlapped, and there were parents that hired one person who functioned as both a nursemaid and governess, and who would not only teach pupils, but also take care of them. This means that there is no absolute definition attached to the word. The governess seems to be more of a variety of functions than an actual person. These functions include, among others, teaching children, accompanying them, and taking care of them. As will be seen, fiction also stretches the meaning of the word.

While the original meaning of the word may suggest otherwise, the Victorian governess did not have much power. Most governesses were educated, middle-class women
who had to work to make a living. They had a problematic position in society. They could be born in the same social class as their employers, but they depended on the salary they received from them, as did their lower-class servants. Their position was unclear and undefined, “[s]he is not a relation, not a guest, not a mistress, not a servant—but something made up of all. No one knows exactly how to treat her” (Sewell qtd. in Peterson 14). Because people did not know how to treat her, she had to cope with many trials; therefore, both literature and public debate represented her as a victim of wicked employers, impertinent men, and spoiled children. She was an ambiguous figure, however, and could also be represented as a danger: a madwoman, a corrupter of children, or a sexual predator.

At the time, the ideal for middle-class and upper-class women was marriage and children, and those who remained unmarried “were generally regarded as social failures, and treated with alternating pity and contempt” (Perkin 153). Normally, women would be financially supported by male relatives or husbands. Around the 1840s, however, the middle class had to deal with an economic crisis, and there seemed to be a growing number of middle-class women losing their financial support. After the Napoleonic wars, “[m]iddle-class writers attributed the flood of distressed gentlewomen to ‘the accidents of commercial and professional life’ to which the middle classes were subject” (Belloc; “Profession of the Teacher;” Eastlake qtd. in Peterson 10). There were other reasons as well (all related to the fact that it became much more difficult for these women to find a husband that could support them). The three most important were “the emigration of single men from England to the colonies, . . .the differential mortality rate which favored women, and . . .the tendency for men in the middle classes to marry later” (Banks and Banks qtd. in Peterson 10). Some unmarried middle-class women became writers, but most of them had to choose “between three underpaid and overcrowded occupations: governess (or teacher in a small private school), paid companion. . .or seamstress” (Perkin163-164). These were jobs that were considered
As a governess, a woman would be working inside the house, and “while it was paid employment. . .[t]he governess was doing something she might have done as a wife [and mother] under better circumstances” (Peterson 10). Because of all the prejudices that existed about her, she stimulated uneasiness and fascination among the respectable members of society. “There were about 25000 governesses in England in 1851, but there were over 750000 female domestic servants, not to mention women employed in industry” (Banks qtd. in Peterson 8). It was her special position that made the governess subject of the contemporary debate.

The treatment and function of the governess depended entirely upon her employers, and this meant that they were different in every household. Meanwhile, there were some signs that she was more often treated badly than the other way around. There existed not only the Governesses’ Benevolent Institution (GBI), founded in 1843, which was meant to improve the situation of the governess, but also many handbooks and manuals that explained to employers and governesses how they should treat each other and “cope with difficulties connected with the occupation” (Wadsö Lecaros 28). Two examples are Mary Maurice’s *Governess Life: its Trials, Duties and Encouragements* (1849) aimed at governesses (Kaye, par. 3), and Mrs L. Valentine’s *The Amenities of Home* (1886) aimed at employers (K. Hughes, 89). These manuals and handbooks varied in content. “In spite of the large number of governess manuals published in the nineteenth century, it is difficult to define the tasks and position of a governess exactly” (Wadsö Lecaros 39). In fiction, the governess novel developed as a genre, in which the innocent governess had to go through all sorts of hardships.

Cecilia Wadsö Lecaros examined roughly eighty-five Victorian novels in which the governess appeared (56, n1). Her survey pointed out that the Victorian governess novel can be regarded as a separate literary genre, and that it has a formula. She states that these novels were mostly written by women, and some of them, such as Anne and Charlotte Brontë and
Elizabeth Sewell, had actually experienced life as a governess or teacher (29). They knew what it was like to be a working middle-class woman. It is difficult to list characteristics of the genre, because there seem to be many different sorts of novels featuring the governess. Wadsö Lecaros explains that works belonging to the same genre do not have to have much in common. She uses the term “family resemblance” adapted from Ludwig Wittgenstein by Alistair Fowler, “representatives of a genre may. . .be regarded as making up a family whose septs and individual members are related in various ways, without necessarily having any single feature shared in common by all” (qtd. in Wadsö Lecaros 29). To illustrate this, it is important to know how the genre developed. In the eighteenth century, the character of the governess already appeared as a popular figure in books that focused upon education and female development (for instance, Sarah Fielding’s The Governess; or, Little Female Academy 1749). In the 1830s, the governess became a victim, and “themes such as sudden impoverishment, paternal insufficiency, and conflicts with nouveaux riches employers were introduced into the plot” (Wadsö Lecaros 31). The Governess; or, Politics in Private Life (1836) by Miss Ross and Lady Blessington’s The Governess (1839) focused on these problems and the social position of the governess. As a consequence, the governess appeared in public debate in the 1840s and 1850s. From then on, as Patricia Thomson declares, “[a]n allusion to a governess in a novel was. . .sure to arouse a stock emotional response in the minds of readers” (qtd. in Beaty 49).

In short, the formula created by Wadsö Lecaros consists of a governess that is a middle-class lady, or a pious clergyman’s daughter. To invoke sympathy, she was often described as being morally superior compared to her employers. Her life changes when her father dies or can no longer financially support her. She has no other family members or friends that can help her, and she has to find a family to work for as a governess. The governess is not prepared for work: she is raised for leisure. She then has to travel to her new
home, and this is a troublesome journey. She is received by the servants, who often do not
like her, because she presents herself as being better than them. The rooms of the governess
reflect how her employers see her. She could, for example, find her uncomfortable rooms far
away from the family. After the introduction, the novel focuses on the difficulties she
encounters with her employers, and her experiences with the children. If the governess is
lucky, she marries a local clergyman or a (foreign) tutor at the end of the book, and is saved
from the humiliations of a working life. The novels focused on the events outside the school
room, because this would enable the author to show readers that the situation of the governess
needed improvement (33-52). If an ingredient would not be present, this could also have a
meaning. “In the governess-novel genre, unpleasant accommodation seems to have been such
a stock ingredient that the opposite functions as a warning to the governess—and to the
reader—that appearances are deceptive in households that grant the governess a pleasant
room” (Wadsö Lecaros 41). These are families that are not what they seem and that hide a
dark secret. “Indeed, in such families it is not the governess, but a family member, who is
marginalized” (Wadsö Lecaros 41). This formula, as the findings of this thesis will point out,
is indeed present. The governess, thus far, seems to be a somewhat boring character, but this
turns out to be untrue. An important year for the governess-novel genre was 1847, when two
of the best governess novels were published, namely Vanity Fair by William Makepeace
Thackeray and Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë. These novels are a representation of how the
character of the governess would change in the following years. Brontë’s Jane is passionate
and independent, while Thackeray’s Becky Sharp is a lying and deceiving social climber.
Literary governesses could appear in all shapes and sizes. Brontë’s novel was special in
diverse ways, and one of them was the use of a governess in combination with the Gothic and
the supernatural.
In the second half of the nineteenth century, there occurred changes in literature that are important for this thesis. Firstly, the governess became a character in the genre of Sensation fiction. She was perfect for this, because “a governess could easily be portrayed as a woman of whom little, or even nothing, was known” (Wadsö Lecaros 31). Diverse authors made use of this idea: Ellen Wood wrote *East Lynne* (1861) and Mary Elizabeth Braddon wrote *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862). Employers also had secrets, however, and the governess could easily reveal them. This thesis will discuss two Sensation novels that do not only focus on the governess and her functions, but also on secrets and the supernatural, namely *The Woman in White* (1860) by Wilkie Collins and *Uncle Silas* (1864) by Sheridan Le Fanu.

Another genre that emerged at the same time was the Victorian ghost story. These two genres often included elements of the Gothic as part of the Gothic revival. The governess appeared to be a popular character in these ghost stories as well. This thesis will thus also include Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), “At Chrighton Abbey” (1871) by Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and “The Old Nurse’s Story” (1852) by Elizabeth Gaskell. These works show a variety of governesses, governess-like figures, and characters who function as governesses. While these characters seem completely different, they have a couple of characteristics in common. They are victims of Victorian society and they are struggling with their position, but at the same time, they are perceived as dangerous. The governess in *Uncle Silas* has a secret of her own, while in the other texts, the characters discover a dark family secret with the help of the supernatural. The governess is an outsider in the house, and she lurks everywhere, keeping her eyes and ears open for the family secrets and scandals. With the confusing treatment she received and the lonely and isolated life she led, she could easily become an angry and frustrated woman. She could not only reveal the secrets, desires, and problems of the Victorian middle and upper class, but her own desires and (sexual) frustrations could also lead to her seducing employers or other male family members, and it could even cause
hysteria, hypochondria, and nervous irritability (K. Hughes, 118). The governess could also encounter problems with the children, she could be a bad teacher, or a social climber, and these are only some of the dangers that were attributed to the governess. In general, the governess was a suspicious figure ready to spoil her employer’s happy family life. Including certain characteristics of the governess novel in other genres, such as the Sensation novel and ghost story “was to some extent a way of reaching specific groups of readers” (Wadsö Lecaros 30).

In all texts dealt with in this thesis the governess and the supernatural are both present. Beaty observes that *Jane Eyre* has not only characteristics of the governess novel, but is also heavily influenced by the Gothic (60). Other authors were inspired by “the motif of the ‘deserted wing,’ housing an imprisoned spouse, with an account of the fortunes of a governess” (Wadsö Lecaros 41). The combination of the governess and the supernatural can be accounted for in several ways. For those readers who did not believe in the supernatural, it would mean that the isolation, loneliness, (sexual) frustration, and humiliation that go with the job caused hallucinations of some sort. Thus, in 1859, Harriet Martineau stated that governesses were “one of the largest single occupational groups to be found in insane asylums” (qtd. in Peterson 17). If one takes the supernatural as real, there exists another explanation. The governess, in her position, resembles a ghost: she is marginalised in household and society. She inhabits a space between her employers and the servants, instead of the living and the dead. She wanders through the house and her contact with the servants and children make her aware of family ghosts and secrets. According to Maud in *Uncle Silas*, “[t]here is not an old house in England of which the servants and young people who live in it do not cherish some traditions of the ghostly” (Le Fanu 28). Servants and children seem to be open to the supernatural. “If servants could leak secrets out of the house, they were also conduits from the regions beyond the home, bringing in with them. . . alien culture, ancient
rural beliefs, folklore, superstitions and oral traditions. . .” (Lynch, The Victorian 70). According to Briggs, children are also ideal witnesses of the supernatural, because of their “lack of preconceptions, natural animism and intuitive response” (149). Through them, the governess would know more than she ought to know about her employers. Aspects of the governess novel could thus easily be used in Sensation fiction, ghost stories, and other genres. These genres all give the reader an insight into Victorian society. This also counts for Uncle Silas, The Woman in White, The Turn of the Screw, “The Old Nurse’s Story,” and “At Chrighton Abbey.” In the position of the governess, it was difficult to decide what to do with ghostly apparitions and the revelation of family secrets. While the governess might feel a victim of the supernatural, often the ghosts are only interested in her as a medium. The governess was thus more a victim of society and its members than of the supernatural. The works in this thesis show the position of the governess in society, and the governess as a character that reveals, with the help of the supernatural, what is hidden behind the façade of respectable Victorian society.
Chapter 1: The Social Position of the Governess in Fact and Fiction

As stated in the introduction, the Victorian governess was often seen as a victim and this was reflected in literature. There was no one who could provide for her, and her family lost their social status because she became a governess. The governess chose this profession because she had few other choices, but this did not mean that she was educated for it. In 1858, Bessie Rayner Parkes wrote in the *English Woman’s Journal* that there was probably not one reader who has not “some relative or cherished friend either actually engaged in teaching, or having formerly been so engaged. . .” (qtd. in K. Hughes, 27). This meant that every middle-class woman could one day become a governess. The first step would be to try and find a position. A position at the house of relatives, friends, or acquaintances was preferable to a position in an unknown household. When she was hired as a private governess, the difficulties started to get worse. It was her position in the household and society that made her an outsider and caused problems. If the governess belonged to the same social class as her employers and she was paid by them, this would not do the relationship between the governess, the family, and the rest of the household any good. In *The Turn of the Screw* and Braddon’s “At Chrighton Abbey” the governesses start to realise their difficult position in society and the household, and what it really means to be a governess. They start to understand their marginal position. In James’s story, the governess encounters her ghostly predecessor, and discovers that they have more in common than she thought. In Braddon’s text, Sarah Chrighton is invited by her cousin Fanny to stay at Chrighton Abbey, after she has worked for families in Vienna and St Petersburg. She has been quite happy abroad, but when she returns to her family in England, she realises that her family is not as hospitable as she thought.

The governess was a liminal figure. In her function as child minder, she would have little contact with adults of her own class. In some cases, she had to look after the children for the entire day, and they would sleep in her room.
This means that she did not have much privacy or spare time. If she did, would she be allowed to be in the company of her employers? In the nineteenth century, the middle-class family began to see privacy as a very important aspect of family life (Mitchell 141). Besides, what if someone would mistake the governess for a niece, or, even worse, a daughter? If she was allowed in the drawing room, this was often uncomfortable, because “[d]rawing room conversations about the governess served to bring her into public ‘view.’” If she was foreign, her exotic history might be discussed. Even complaining about a governess was a way of ‘showing her off’” (Peterson 9). The governess also encountered problems with salary. The functions she performed could also be performed by the mother, and as a consequence, she was often underpaid. The Governesses’ Benevolent Institution could help a little; however, the governess always feared becoming unemployed. A fear servants often did not share, because their position and function in the household was clear.

Servants appear to be present in almost every story or novel that includes a governess, and in the genre of the governess novel they are often not very friendly. This seems to reflect reality, and servants made the governess feel she was a victim. They often disliked her for acting like a lady, while they believed she belonged to their social class. Journalist Lady Eastlake observed, “[t]he servants invariably detest her, for she is a dependant like themselves, and yet, for all that, as much their superior in other respects as the family they both serve” (qtd. in Peterson 17). A concrete example can be found in the description of a real governess:

On asking for Lady G., the footman said he would see if her ladyship was disengaged, and he left me standing in the hall; three more men servants presently made their appearance, they each stared, and the one out of livery asked me what I wanted. I said I had an appointment with Lady G. He said I might wait, but in so rough a manner, that my courage began to fail me. (Riofrey qtd. in K. Hughes, 125)
Servants are also essential characters in ghost stories and Sensation fiction. *The Turn of the Screw* has Peter Quint and Mrs Grose, “At Chrighton Abbey” has the characters of the old butler Truefold and the housekeeper Mrs Marjorum, and *Uncle Silas* has Mrs Rusk, Branston, Wyat, and Mary Quince. In “The Old Nurse’s Story” there are James and Dorothy and in *The Woman in White* there are Louis, Fanny, and Margaret. Interestingly, most of these servants welcome the governess with open arms. They almost seem to function as another bad omen. Not only her relationship with the servants, but also her relationship with other members of the household was complex.

The relationship between the governess and the children could differ immensely. The idea of the governess as a hag, “who smacked and snapped and was . . . old, plain and sexually denying” (K. Hughes, 130) still existed. As a consequence, many governesses became victims of the impudent and (physical) mistreatment of their pupils. In 1799, Hannah More expressed the Christian view that a child was born with Original Sin, “[i]t is a fundamental error to consider children as innocent beings, whose little weaknesses may perhaps want some correction, rather than as beings who bring into the world a corrupt nature and evil dispositions, which it should be the great end of education to rectify” (Perkin 11). This idea is the opposite of that other, well-known, sentimental idea of the Victorian child as “innocent, spontaneous, appealing and naturally good” (Mitchell 148). Rosamond in “The Old Nurse’s Story” and Maud in *Uncle Silas* seem to be innocent, while the children in *The Turn of the Screw* are more ambiguous. While governesses were often mistreated, there were also children that formed a strong bond with their governess and nanny, who sometimes functioned as surrogate mothers. Mary Lutyens wrote, “Nanny was my life. . .Mother was a goddess” (qtd. in Perkin 15). To another child, the word “mother” “conveyed absolutely nothing. . .but a name for the beautifully scented and dressed lady, whose silk petticoats rustled as she walked and whose fingers glittered with jewels” (qtd. in K Hughes, 130).
The children’s behaviour would often mirror that of their parents. The relationship between the mother and the governess was difficult. Seeing the lady of the house, would constantly remind the governess of her status as social failure, but while marriage and children were the ultimate goal for most women, taking care of them was an entirely different matter. It took time, and this meant less time for leisure, visitors, and charity. A solution would be taking a nanny and/or a governess. “Upper-class children were usually confined to the east wing or nursery floor of a large house, so they did not intrude on adult life” (Perkin 13). Mother was thus sometimes seen as a goddess or princess. “Nanny, meanwhile, was a good witch, full of healing magic, who ruled over the comforting realm of the body” (K. Hughes, 130). The role of the governess was that of the evil witch. For the lady of the house, children that loved their governess were a disgrace. In her biography of Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell writes about the time when one of Brontë’s pupils threw stones at her.

Brontë decides not to tell the mother:

From that time, she began to gain influence over all, more or less, according to their different characters; and as she insensibly gained their affection, her own interest in them was increasing. But one day, at the children’s dinner, the small truant of the stable-yard, in a little demonstrative gush, said, putting his hand in hers, ‘I love ‘ou, Miss Brontë.’ Whereupon, the mother exclaimed before all children, ‘Love the governess, my dear!’ (186-187)

It is clear that the relationship between mothers, governesses, and children was extremely complex.

The relationship between the governess, male employers, and men in general, was even more complicated. A gentleman could not treat her as an equal nor as a servant. She was often a victim of their rude behaviour. One reason for this was the fact that it was possible for male members of the household to talk quite freely with her about the children without “too
great a fear of impropriety” (K. Hughes, 122). Besides the male members of the household, male servants also sometimes felt they had the right to talk and act towards the governess as if she was one of their own class. Of course, the governess perceived herself as belonging to the class of her employers. The governess was a failure and a taboo because she was not a wife and mother. “Doctors stepped in to reinforce the negative associations of spinsterhood by characterising it as an unnatural state of affairs for any woman over thirty and one which gave rise to a range of physical and emotional ailments” (Vicinus qtd. in K. Hughes, 118). The governess became a victim of the idea of the “Victorian governess as dry, old and ugly, an embodiment of frustrated emotional and sexual desire” (K. Hughes, 118). Because she could not find a husband, she would try and seduce her employers or other male relatives. In reality, governesses were not always old, ugly, and frustrated. This did not mean, however, that she received protection or a chaperone, because it was also believed that no one would wish to deprive her of her honour (K. Hughes, 135). As mentioned before, this was not true, and the governess did receive unwanted male attention. Nevertheless, marrying a governess was impossible, and in 1859, the English Woman’s Journal published an article titled “The Governess Question.” It said that “another siege of Troy would scarcely occasion more commotion – the anger, the scorn, the vituperation lavished on the artful creature” (qtd. in K. Hughes, 122). While an affair between a married man and a governess was bad, involvement with a bachelor would be worse, because “as a lady she retained the right to a wedding ring in return for her sexual favours” (K. Hughes, 122). Marrying a governess would mean that the whole family lost their status. If the governess would be harassed, the chance existed that she would keep it a secret. After all, she needed the money and the shelter.

To avoid complicated class conflicts, the governess could leave the country for the colonies or the Continent. “[F]oreign life is far more favourable to a governess’s happiness. In its less stringent domestic habits, the company of a teacher, for she is nothing more abroad, is
no interruption—often an acquisition” (Lady Eastlake qtd. in Peterson 20). The governess would still have to cope with difficult situations, but abroad her function and position were more clear and she avoided an embarrassing situation for her family. The disadvantage was losing one’s position in society, for as far as the governess had one. She had to “resign herself to her loss of her place in English society” (Peterson 20). A foreign governess in England also had some advantages: she could teach a language, and by hiring her one could also avoid the difficulties concerning position. Elizabeth Sewell wrote, “[b]ut most important, foreigners are less tenacious of their dignity. . .largely because of their ignorance of English customs” (qtd. in Peterson 19). In short, a foreign governess would not complain about her treatment, because she did not know the class system and customs. A foreign governess was even more of an outsider than an English governess. Hiring a foreign governess was not always a good idea, however, as can be read in Uncle Silas: Madame de la Rougierre causes more trouble than any English governess ever could.

In The Turn of the Screw, the governess tries to form a family with orphans Flora and Miles at the beautiful estate of Bly. The governess has no name, and thus remains a representation of the governess in general. She is “the youngest of several daughters of a poor country parson” (James 85), and she needs to find a position to earn money for her family. She is in doubt about taking the job, but “the salary offered much exceeded her modest measure. . .” (87). Further on in the story, the governess receives “disturbing letters from home, where things were not going well” (106). Bell writes, “[w]hen, in the middle of the story, she tells us she has received bad news from home we can imagine that this news concerns her family’s economic difficulties” (Classes, Sex 101). Henry James chose a governess as observer and it is clear that he was aware of the situation of the Victorian governess. He wrote about her as a moral conservator, “an exquisite, an almost unconscious instrument of influence to a special end – to that of embodying, for her young companions, a
precious ripe tradition” (qtd. in Bell, Class, Sex 97). The governess in the story also sees herself as such, and others, such as Douglas, describe her as charming and most agreeable (James 83). She seems to be a perfectly good and innocent governess, someone who is impressed by her mysterious and handsome employer, “a gentleman, a bachelor in the prime of life, such a figure as had never risen, save in a dream or an old novel, before a fluttered, anxious girl out of a Hampshire vicarage” (85). Bell argues that the master does not want her to contact him, because he is afraid she will fall in love with him (Meaning 224). This is not one of those novels in which the governess marries her employer. When he takes her hand, one of the listeners, a woman, asks, “[b]ut was that all her reward?” (88). It was, and he does not want her to contact him anymore. Bell writes that he, “represents what is now inaccessible to the governess – the glamor of affluent upper-class life” (Class, Sex 102). The governess has already become a victim of society, and will never recover her status.

Soon, the governess and the children, who spend most of their time together, are frightened by the appearance of the ghosts of Miss Jessel, the former governess, and Peter Quint, the master’s valet. Through the relationship between Miss Jessel and Quint, the governess starts to realise the position of the governess in general, and her own position in particular. She realises what it means if she would cross class boundaries. She saw what happened to Miss Jessel and knows she can never marry her employer. Quint functions as a double for the master: “That the governess can see the Master as Quint or that Quint is his double is an acknowledgment from somewhere in the Governess’s own mind, perhaps, but certainly in James’s, of the menace of the Master” (Bell, Class, Sex 104). Miles can be seen as a double of his uncle, and he also knows that a governess is not appropriate companionship for someone of his sex and class. Mrs Grose, the housekeeper, tells the governess that she “will be carried away by the little gentleman!” (91) in clothes made by his uncle’s tailor. Later in the story, the governess starts to comprehend that the boy’s “whole title to independence,
the rights of his sex and situation. . .” start to work on him (James 153). He wants more freedom and starts acting and talking as “an intellectual equal” (165). “You know, my dear, that for a fellow to be with a lady *always*... Ah, of course she’s a jolly, ‘perfect’ lady; but, after all, I’m a fellow, don’t you see?” (153-54). Bell explains that Miles talks like “a man who wants a change of mistresses...” (Class, Sex 109). He wants his own sort and social class. The governess is a good lady, but no marriage material. Miles is not only a double of his uncle, but also of Peter Quint. The governess suspects him of having a secret bond “with this satanic representative of his uncle” (Bell, Class, Sex 108). The governess believes that the children are possessed by the evil spirits, and are therefore taking over their qualities. Miles, Quint, and the master all seduce governesses and leave them afterwards. The governess realises that she is one of them.

If Miles resembles his uncle and Quint, than the governess would resemble Miss Jessel and Flora: “She completes the symmetry that poses her in contrast with Miss Jessel as Miles is posed in contrast with Quint on opposite sides of the governess and the Master” (Bell, Class, Sex 111). When the governess and Mrs Grose look for Flora, the governess believes that Flora has used the boat to go over the lake, “all alone—that child?” (James 172) asks Mrs Grose, but the governess states, “she’s not alone, and at such times she’s not a child: she’s an old, old woman” (172). “Flora is, in a word, Miss Jessel, and potentially therefore the governess herself. . .” (Bell, Class, Sex 112). When the governess sees Miss Jessel across the lake, Flora either does not see anything or, and this is what the governess believes, pretends not to see the ghost, and this was, “a stroke that somehow converted the little girl herself into the very presence that could make me quail” (James 175). The governess starts to doubt her sanity, but also starts to realise that she is very similar to Miss Jessel:

_Dishonoured and tragic,. . .Dark as midnight in her black dress, her haggard beauty and her unutterable woe, she had looked at me long enough to appear to say that her_
right to sit at my table was as good as mine to sit at hers. While these instants lasted
indeed I had the extraordinary chill of a feeling that it was I who was the intruder.

(James 159)

The governess observes that she resembles Miss Jessel in her role as victimised governess.
She discovers “a hidden female presence. . .the ghost of her broken predecessor, who, like the
cruel and mad Bertha Rochester, is a projection of herself” (Bell, Class, Sex 114). James also
realised that the governess was a moral educator, victim, and danger all at the same time.
“James’s doubling imagination, which has split two figures into six, is rooted in society’s
splintered vision of the Governess. On the one hand his Governess is that guardian of
morality, that providential pilgrim whom the early governess novel celebrated. . .But her
doubt of herself is just as evident throughout her narrative” (Bell, Class, Sex 113-114).

Sarah Chrighton in Braddon’s “At Chrighton Abbey” is also a victimised governess.
She is the daughter of the rector of Chrighton parish: a “distant cousin of the reigning Squire”
(Braddon 163). As many others, she has to start working after the death of her father, “[h]is
death left me utterly unprovided for, and I was fain to go out into the bleak unknown world,
and earn my living in a position of dependence—a dreadful thing for a Chrighton to be
obliged to do” (163). There is no one else to help or support her: her mother is already death
and her brother is in the Indian Civil Service. The dreadful thing she has to do affects the
social status of the whole family. Sarah realises that going abroad is her only option:

Out of respect for the traditions and prejudices of my race, I made it my business to
seek employment abroad, where the degradation of one solitary Chrighton was not
so likely to inflict shame upon the ancient house to which I belonged. Happily for
myself, I had been carefully educated, and had industriously cultivated the usual
modern accomplishments in the calm retirement of the Vicarage. (163)
By staying, she will not only be badly treated by her employers due to her social status, but also degrade the rest of the family. After some years, Sarah is invited by her cousin Fanny to return to England and stay at Chrighton Abbey.

She is received by the servants: the butler Truefold and the housekeeper Mrs Marjoroom. This indicates that the family sees her more as a servant than as a family member (Wadsö Lecaros 38-39). Surprisingly, most of the servants are glad to see Sarah after such a long time. The old butler insists upon helping Sarah with her portmanteau, “an act of unusual condescension, the full force of which was felt by his subordinates” (165). Lynch writes that this shows, “Sarah’s warm but precarious place in the Chrighton household” (Braddon 247).

The servants, as will be seen, are also essential in the supernatural aspect of the story. After she has dined alone, Fanny comes to greet her, and says that she only just heard of Sarah’s arrival. The reader might wonder if this is true. Fanny seems to be very hospitable, “‘Remember, Sarah, this house is always to be your home, whenever you have need of one.’

‘My dear cousin! And you are not ashamed of me, who have eaten the bread of strangers?’

‘Ashamed of you! No, my love; I admire your industry and spirit’” (Braddon 168).

The opposite seems to be true, however, they did not help her when she needed it the most: they let her become a governess.

According to herself, Sarah resembles the stereotypical governess, who is plain, old, and ugly:

I was three-and-thirty years of age. Youth was quite gone; beauty I had never possessed; and I was content to think of myself as a confirmed old maid, a quiet spectator of life’s great drama, disturbed by no feverish desire for an active part in the play. I had a disposition to which this kind of passive existence is easy. There was no wasting fire in my veins. Simple duties, rare and simple pleasures, filled up my sum of life. The dear ones who had given a special charm and brightness to my existence were
gone. Nothing could recall them, and without them actual happiness seemed impossible to me. Everything had a subdued and neutral tint; life at its best was calm and colourless, like a grey sunless day in early autumn, serene but joyless. (Braddon 165)

Sarah’s appearance is also quite colourless:

I arranged my hair in its usual simple fashion, and put on a dark-grey silk dress, trimmed with some fine old black lace that have been given to me by the Baroness—an unobtrusive demi-toilette, adapted to any occasion. . . One glance at the looking-glass convinced me that there was nothing dowdy in my appearance. . . (167)

While her clothes may not be dowdy, Sarah is definitely not as beautiful or colourfoul as the other female characters. Fanny is “still remarkably handsome,” (167), Julia is “undeniably handsome” (169), and her two younger cousins are “[t]wo pretty girls in blue crape” (169).

In the text, Sarah does not have to deal with angry mothers, spoiled children, or impertinent husbands. While there are no literal mother and father, there are two characters who can function as such: her cousin Edward and his fiancée Julia Tremaine. When Sarah sees Edward for the first time with his, “dark eyes and crisp waving brown hair” (Braddon 168), it is clear that she feel attracted to him. Julia does not hide her disdain towards Sarah, and surveys her, “curiously from head to foot, and it seemed to me as if I could read the condemnatory summing-up—‘A frump, and a poor relation’. . .” (169). Edward, on the other hand, is very happy to see her, “[He] suddenly seized both my hands, and gave me so hearty and loving a welcome, that he almost brought the tears ‘up from my heart into my eyes’” (169). She finds him “all that was admirable” (171), and cannot understand why he would want to marry Julia. Edward forces Julia to be nice to Sarah, and it is clear that Julia is jealous, as jealous as a wife who sees her husband flirting with the governess.
At Chrighton Abbey, a place which reminds Sarah, “of some weird palace in a German legend. . .” (Braddon 165) she sees the apparition of a hunting-party. The ghosts are connected to a family curse. “Death in some form or other — on too many occasions a violent death— had come between the heir and his inheritance” (170). Sarah is “an utter unbeliever in all ghostly things. . .” but now she is scared, “[l]ittle superstitious as I might be, a cold sweat stood out upon my forehead, and I trembled in every limb” (178). She decides to “[take] counsel with some one who knew the secrets of Chrighton Abbey” (178): Mrs Marjorum. The housekeeper tells Sarah the story of the old Squire whose son died from a fall of his horse. The ghosts are a sign that someone in the family will die, in this case Edward. The family does not know about the ghosts, and Sarah is not supposed to tell them. Sarah, as a governess, sees the omen, “because she can break through class reserve and turn to the servants below stairs to uncover the meaning of the spectral warning” (Lynch, Braddon 247). Sarah does warn Julia to stop Edward from going hunting. Julia exclaims, “you don’t mean to tell me that you believe in such nonsense—ghosts and omens, an old woman’s folly like that!” (Braddon 182). She decides not to believe Sarah, and Edward dies in a hunting accident. He could have been saved, if Julia would not have been so narrow-minded and listened to Sarah and Mrs Marjorum. Sarah is not the sort of person Julia takes seriously.

The family seems to be cursed for their lack of hospitality towards Sarah, and if Julia had become the new lady of the house, charity would no longer be important (Lynch, Braddon 248). When Sarah and some other members of the family provide the poor of the parish with gifts, “Miss Tremaine coolly declined any share in these pleasant duties. ‘I don’t like poor people. . . I never can get on with them, or they with me. I am not simpatica, I suppose. . .And again, what is the use of visiting them? It is only an inducement to them to become hypocrites’” (Braddon 173). A servant can provide them with what they need: “In that case, there need be no cringing on the one side, and no endurance on the other” (173). Sarah,
on the other hand, enjoys giving these gifts to the poor and seeing how happy it makes them. This also has to do with the fact that governesses often felt a connection to the poor and weak of society, because they inhabited the margins of society themselves. Julia functions as the opposite of the governess heroine to show the governess’s moral superiority. As Lynch explains, Sarah is not afraid to admit that she believes the housekeeper’s story about the ghosts, which indicates her social status, but also that she is not afraid to cross class boundaries, while Julia will never risk such a humiliation (Braddon 248). Braddon seems to see Edward’s death as a punishment for those members of the higher classes who are not charitable and hospitable towards those who need it (Lynch, Braddon 248). There is no romantic relationship between Sarah and Edward, but it is clear that Edward would have been better off marrying Sarah. This could never happen because of Sarah’s position as a governess. After Edward’s death, Julia feels guilty, and becomes an “angel of mercy” for the poor (Braddon 188). This story is ghost story, but even more a story about the governess as a victim of society and its members. “As a mediator between seemingly superstitious servants, the impoverished community and family tragedy, Sarah operates as a ghostly familiar figure who signals what is ‘hidden’ and difficult in Victorian idealism” (Lynch, The Victorian 78). This idea of the governess as revealing what should have been hidden will return in the next chapter.

As a working middle-class woman, the governess had a difficult position in the household and society. The problems the real and literary governesses encountered seem to be influenced by the way in which Victorian society and its members saw her. She did not only experience difficulties with the practical aspects of her job, such as her functions, salary, and accommodation, but also with the family she worked for. Her employers saw her presence as a nuisance and as a status symbol at the same time, and the relationship between governesses, servants, children, mothers, and fathers was extremely complicated. The servants saw the
governess as an equal, while she saw herself as a lady. The lady of the house would regard her as a social failure, and did not want the governess and the children to become too attached to each other; meanwhile, the governess spent more time with the children than their own mother. Contemporary ideas about class and a woman’s role in society transformed the governess into a stereotype. The governess was represented as sexually frustrated old maid ready to lure away the man of the house. Reality shows that this could also happen the other way around. Governesses received unwanted attention from family members and servants. To escape some of these problems, the governess could go abroad, although she would lose her social status forever, as becomes clear in “At Chtrighton Abbey.” Sarah and the governess in The Turn of the Screw are confronted with their liminal position. These governesses are ghostly figures and outsiders, with a position somewhere between servants and employers. These middle-class characters realise that they will never belong to respectable society again. When she encounters the ghost of Miss Jessel, and learns from the housekeeper that this woman started a relationship with a man from a different social class, the governess in James’s work becomes aware of the fact that while Miss Jessel is punished because she was supposed to be a lady, Quint could do whatever he wanted. Quint, but also the master, and Miles, all seduce governesses without many consequences. The governess knows that she is in the same miserable position. Miss Jessel changed from moral educator to sinner by crossing class boundaries and corrupting the children, and the nameless governess might be doing the same. After all, she feels attracted to the children’s uncle and she is overprotecting them. In Braddon’s ghost story, Sarah is not a victim of the supernatural, but of the prejudices of society and her upper-class family. When she returns to England, she understands that her position in society and family is gone, and that she can never return to it. This position between servants and family makes her able to unravel the secret warning of a group of ghosts. The family is cursed and punished for their inhospitality towards Sarah, while she
shows her moral superiority by trying to save her cousin and helping the poor. So, while the governess in *The Turn of the Screw* seems to change from moral educator to corrupter, the governess in Braddon’s story shows that although she is a governess, she can still act like a lady. The characters in these two texts show different ways of coping with their precarious situation.
Chapter 2: Dignity in Danger: Fictional Governesses and Domestic Secrets

The governess was not only a victim, but she also represented danger. As mentioned before, she was sometimes seen as a sexual predator, and these loose sexual morals were connected to the idea of the governess as corrupting her pupils. Mary Maurice was one of the proponents of this idea. Maurice was an educationist and an active member of the Governesses’ Benevolent Institution (Kaye, par. 1,3). In Governess Life: its Trials, Duties and Encouragements, she writes about governesses who made themselves necessary “to the comfort of the father. . .or the sons were in some instances objects of notice and flirtation, or when occasion offered, visitors at the house” (qtd. in K. Hughes, 126). To the pupils, “instead of guarding their minds in innocence and purity, [she] has become their corrupter – she has been the first to lead and to initiate into sin to suggest and carry on intrigues, and finally to be the instrument of destroying the peace of families. . .” (qtd. in K. Hughes, 126). What could also destroy the peace of families was that the governess would not hesitate to reveal family secrets. The governess could also have her own secrets, because no one knew what her life was like before she became a governess. She could expose the truth behind the seemingly perfect lives of the Victorian upper and middle class. The governess and secrets is a prominent theme in Uncle Silas by Sheridan Le Fanu, James’s The Turn of the Screw, and “The Old Nurse’s Story” by Elizabeth Gaskell. In Uncle Silas, it is the governess who has a secret, while in the two other works the governess slowly, with the help of the supernatural, discovers the dark secrets of the Victorian private sphere. The governess encountering the supernatural was a problem. Servants were allowed to believe and talk about the supernatural: it was part of their heritage, but the governess was a lady, and she was not supposed to see or believe in apparitions.

In her article “A House That Tries to Be Haunted: Ghostly Narratives in Popular Film and Television,” Emily D. Edwards focuses on ghost stories on screen, but her comments can easily be applied to literary ghost stories as well. She writes about the ghost story as domestic
melodrama: it is about revealing “family skeletons” (91). She mentions two motives for hauntings, “one ghost is angry and vengeful; the other ghost is loving and protective. Neither ghost can rest in peace until living characters learn the full story of domestic deceit and murder” (91). As an example she mentions one of the film versions of The Turn of the Screw: The Innocents (1961). The formula of these stories is a “domestic melodrama shrouded in the mystique of the supernatural” (Edwards 92). Setting is very important, and “[t]he murky interiors of the old estate house, hidden passageways of the castle, the sealed off rooms and attics are physical representations of family secrets” (Edwards 92). The secrets must be revealed and sometimes the living “are doomed to repeat a tragic past unless they can learn from the ghost’s situation” (Edwards 92). All works discussed in this chapter are domestic melodramas with a supernatural atmosphere.

The literary genres that can be connected to Uncle Silas are diverse. Le Fanu wrote in his preface that he was against “the promiscuous application of the term ‘sensation’ . . .” (3). He was an admirer of the English romances by Sir Walter Scott, and he saw in his own work characteristics of this genre. In the introduction to the novel, it becomes clear that reviewers were divided. Le Fanu’s second cousin, Lady Caroline Norton, wrote in The Times that it was a Sensation novel, because “‘nothing is related which might not have happened, and the most absolute consistency is maintained in the different characters described’” (qtd. in Sage xii). She saw Sensation fiction as realism and Le Fanu’s work as realistic. Besides the English romance and the Sensation novel, a reviewer in The Saturday Review saw it as a Gothic novel (Sage xiii). It cannot be denied that the text contains elements of the Sensation novel, such as its dealing with secrets of the higher classes of society. Sensation novels became popular at the beginning of the 1860s. The genre had its origins “in the less-than-respectable quarters of lower-class literature” (W. Hughes, 6) such as the so-called penny dreadfuls. The word itself indicates its physical effect, such hair standing on end. It developed out of the melodrama and
crime report, and was titled after Sensation theatre. Henry James, who uses its conventions in *The Turn of the Screw*, wrote about Sensation fiction as “those most mysterious of mysteries, the mysteries which are at our own doors” (qtd. in W. Hughes, 7). While the Gothic novel focused on the unknown and the exotic, Sensation fiction focused on what was familiar. It often included a respectable middle-class or upper-class hero or heroine with a domestic secret, for example Lady Isabel Carlyle in Wood’s *East Lynne*. She leaves her husband for another man and later returns as a disfigured governess to look after her own children (Purchase 190). The novels also included violence, crime, romance, and sexuality. Other themes in the Sensation novel were adultery, murder, blackmail, lost identity, and madness. The latter one is important because, “[t]he line between sanity and insanity was, indeed, a precarious one in the nineteenth century, and sensation fiction reflected – and to some degree exploited- the uncertainty and fear this created” (Purchase 188-189), and it plays an important role in *The Woman in White*. It was “wild yet domestic” (Dickens qtd. in W. Hughes, 16). The influence on female readers was criticised, because Sensation heroines were not always the stereotypical domestic angel. A good example is the heroine in *Lady Audley’s Secret* or Marian Halcombe in *The Woman in White*. Sensation fiction “illuminated a bourgeois world which was haunted by its own desires” (Purchase 190). In the beginning of *Uncle Silas*, its protagonist Maud states:

> Why is it that this form of ambition – curiosity – which entered into the temptation of our first parent, is so specially hard to resist? Knowledge is power – and power of some sort or another is the secret lust of human souls; and there is, beside the sense of exploration, the undefinable interest of a story, and above all, something forbidden, to stimulate the contumacious appetite. (Le Fanu 19)

She is right in saying that knowledge is power, and the governess in this story, Madame de la Rougierre, uses this knowledge as power.
In this text, the governess is seen through the eyes of her pupil, and it is the governess who has a secret and tries to keep up appearances. Madame, however, is clearly the devil in disguise. When Maud first sees her, she is an outsider, “[o]n a sudden, on the grass before me, stood an odd figure – a very tall woman in grey draperies, nearly white under the moon, courtesy extraordinary low, and rather fantastically” (Le Fanu 24). The governess is described as a ghost, and seems to fit in with some of the other ghosts that haunt the estate of Knowl. Maud will later describe the governess with words as *apparition*, *evil spirit*, and *ghost*. Maud is scared, “[t]he large-featured, smirking phantom, saluting me so oddly in the moonlight, retained ever after its peculiar and unpleasant hold upon my nerves” (26). According to Mrs Rusk, the housekeeper, Madame is not natural because she is foreign. “I hate them Frenchwomen; they’re not natural, I think. I gave her supper in my room. She eats like a wolf, she does, the great rawboned hannimal. . . I felt a’most like little Red Riding-Hood. . .” (26).

Madame is also a woman of whom little is known. At the time, foreigners were looked down upon, but being from France was worse, because, “[t]here was a general perception that the French governess was likely to be sexually aggressive in her dealings with the men of the house, to initiate her pupils into all sorts of unspecified ‘sin’, to dress too well, to lie and possibly to steal” (K. Hughes, 106). In *Mothers and Governesses* (1847), Maurice wrote that hiring a French governess would be like opening a “wide flood-gate to frivolity, vanity, and sin” (qtd. in K. Hughes, 106). This is all represented in Madame de la Rougriere, who is “duplicitous, grotesque, alcoholic, foreign, and gender-ambiguous” (Mangum 214), and her name seems to reflect this. *Rougriere* resembles the English word *rogue*. *Rouge* is the French word for red, but it is also used to describe the powder used by women to put on their cheeks. Madame’s name does not only show that she is a villain, but it also emphasises her preoccupation with her appearance. Mrs Rusk calls her Madame de la Rougepot: “She does know how to paint up the ninety-nines – she does, the old cat” (Le Fanu 38). Madame also
has a large mirror and is interested in the latest fashion. This was not considered appropriate for a governess.

*Uncle Silas* is full of secrets. The name of the family estate is Knowl: very similar to the word *know*, but Maud does not know a lot. She does not know her own father, who is an “oddity” (10), her mysterious uncle Silas, or her new governess. In public, Madame acts affectionately, but in private she is pure evil. To the father she is the epitome of the pathetic, poor governess, but to Maud, the servants, and Maud’s cousin Lady Monica Knollys, she is “unknowable, alien, and capable of ruthless violence in the service of her employer’s desire that she not only teach, but also morally and socially indoctrinate the young” (Mangum 217). The governess haunts the house and listens at the father’s keyhole. When Maud tells her she does not know anything about her father’s will, Madame becomes aggressive, “[y]ou do know, and you must tell, petite dur-tête, or I will break a your leettle finger.” With which words she seized that joint, and laughing spitefully, she twisted in suddenly back” (Le Fanu 37). The story shows the different contemporary perspectives on the governess. The father, a man, sees her as the victim, and this also means that he lets her, a woman, take control over the estate, and this causes trouble. The women see Madame as a threat. A threat that is both exotic and foreign, but also domestic, because she is so close to Maud. This is why Lady Knollys tells Maud to be on her guard: “Observe everything, disclose nothing – do you see?” (80). “Ironically, the advice she offers Maud could just as easily be advice to any governess regarding her employers. . .” (Mangum 225). Mangum also explains that Le Fanu created “a fractious domestic world in which intimacy incites conflict and privacy conceals torture” (214). In the end, it turns out that Madame is an agent of Maud’s uncle Silas in a plan to kill her for her inheritance. Eventually, however, it is Madame who is murdered by Silas and his son Dudley. After drinking a glass of claret, she falls asleep, being smashed to death by a hammer-like instrument, and letting out “an unnatural shriek, beginning small and swelling
for two or three seconds into a yell such as are imagined in haunted houses. . .” (Le Fanu 435). The way in which the governess has used and tortured Maud, and the way in which she destroyed the family, “argues for a reassessment of governesses’ roles in the dissemination of knowledge, the nature of that knowledge, and its uses in the novel as well as in the private spaces of Victorian upper- and middle-class culture” (Mangum 223). Madame is punished for destroying a family, while Maud is happily married and gives birth to a son. Maud is rewarded with a family.

*The Turn of the Screw* is an ambiguous story that is about secrets. On Saturday the 12th of January 1895, James wrote in his notebook that he heard a story from the Archbishop of Canterbury, who heard it from an unknown lady:

> [T]he story of the young children (indefinite number and age) left to the care of servants in an old country-house, through the death, presumably, of parents. The servants, wicked and depraved, corrupt and deprave the children; the children are bad, full of evil, to a sinister degree. The servants *die* (the story vague about the way of it) and their apparitions, figures, return to haunt the house *and* children, to whom they seem to beckon, whom they invite and solicit,. . . so that the children may destroy themselves, lose themselves, by responding, by getting into their power. . . It is all obscure and imperfect, the picture, the story, but there is a suggestion of strangely gruesome effect in it. The story to be told—tolerably obviously—by an outside spectator, observer. (178-179)

James wanted to keep the obscurity of the story. In the preface to the New York Edition, he wrote that he wanted to create a world in which “nothing is right save as we rightly imagine it” (171). His aim was thus to create a tale in which almost everything is unclear, until the reader fills in the gaps. He was clear about the ghosts being pure evil, however, and “[o]nly make the reader’s general vision of evil intense enough. . . and his own experience, his own
imagination, his own sympathy (with the children) and horror (of their false friends) will supply him quite sufficiently with all the particulars” (176). The ambiguity of the story seems to be its strength. The ghosts reveal secrets: the reality below the beautiful surface. Their affair is the most important secret at Bly, where, initially, there seems to be “no uncomfortable legend. . .” (James 115). After seeing the ghost of Quint for the first time, the governess wonders, “[w]as there a ‘secret’ at Bly—a mystery of Udolpho or an insane, an unmentionable relative kept in unsuspected confinement?” (James 103).

The story also plays with ambiguity concerning the governess and children. The governess is nameless, which does not only mean that she represents the governess in general, but it also emphasises her own obscurity and ambiguity. At first, the governess and the children are described as good and innocent, but whether they really are remains unknown. The children are described as “beautiful,” “adorable,” and “innocent.” Miles is an angel, and “a beautiful little boy” (James 106), and Flora is beautiful “with the deep, sweet serenity indeed of one of Raphael’s holy infants. . .” (91). Before the governess sees Quint for the second time, she searched for a pair of gloves “that had required three stitches and that had received them—with a publicity perhaps not edifying —while I sat with the children at their tea. . .” (106). Hadley remarks that before her final encounter with Quint, “the governess is knitting: and we remember that one of the worst condemnations she and Mrs Grose have ever actually articulated of that ‘horror of horrors’ Miss Jessel is that she goes outside without a hat. . .” (53). James creates a quiet, domestic environment. Dignity, respectability, and even holiness seem to be very important here, while at the same time, ghostly visitors appear. It shows what lies beneath a respectable exterior. At this moment, the governess is the opposite of her wicked predecessor Miss Jessel, but is the nameless governess really innocent? One might wonder what Miss Jessel died of, “of so much respectability?” (James 87).
The governess’s fear is that the children are corrupted by the spectres, because they were exposed to the ghost’s sexual relationship. The children live a sheltered life at Bly. Miles is send home from school, because, according to the governess, “he was only too fine and fair for the little horrid, unclean school-world. . .” (105). Due to the idea of children as innocent and pure, they were often kept away from the harsh realities of life: “It was partly to protect—or create—this innocence that nursery children were separated from the adult world. Many facts of life (economic facts as well as moral and sexual information) for the first time were considered unsuitable for children” (Mitchell 148). The governess believes in children as innocent and pure, instead of children as carriers of Original Sin. This means that the governess does not need to guide them, even if she sees herself as their moral educator. This view can be traced back to the ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau:

His greatest achievement consisted in drawing attention to childhood as a period of life in which mankind is very close to the natural state. . .innocence was the child’s essential quality. Therefore, he came to the conclusion that children must be brought up as naturally as possible. . . Rousseau maintains the child’s natural innocence and kindness, which is menaced by social institutions like family, school, church, and state. . .(Kümmerling-Meibauer 184-185)

Flora’s name even reflects this natural innocence. Soon, however, the governess changes her opinion about her pupils. She wonders why Miles cannot go back to school and she believes that the children are possessed by the evil spirits; although, they pretend not to see them. Whether the children are deceiving the governess or the other way around does not become clear. James saw the governess as moral educator, but he knew that she was ambiguous. He could have been influenced by contemporary views on governesses and madness. In 1834, physiologist Andrew Combe wrote in The Principles of Physiology Applied to the Preservation of Health and to the Improvement of Physical and Mental Education about the
governess and how she sometimes lived in isolation from the family she worked for. He believed that unhappiness and madness “are unintentionally caused by this cold and inconsiderate treatment” (qtd. in Bell, Class, Sex 116, n11). The governess believes the children are deceiving her, and her language and attitude changes, “[t]he little wretches denied it with all the added volume of their sociability and their tenderness. . .” (James 150). Hadley states that this is “the language of the gothic, of violence interiorised, domesticated; of the suffering underside of reasonableness and respectability; and of the vision of the madwoman in Jane Eyre” (53).

The relationship between Quint and Miss Jessel should have remained a secret, because it would corrupt the children, but also because of their different social classes. A governess was a lady, and it is “a transgression of social boundaries if she, a lady, has had an affair with Quint, who was no gentleman” (Bell, Class, Sex 106). The governess asks Mrs Grose to clarify the relationship between Miss Jessel and Quint:

‘Come, there was something between them.’ ‘There was everything.’

‘In spite of the difference—?’

‘Oh, of their rank, their condition’—she brought it woefully out. ‘She was a lady.’

I turned it over; I again saw. ‘Yes—she was a lady.’

‘And he so dreadfully below,’ said Mrs Grose. . . .‘The fellow was a hound.’ . . . ‘He did what he wished.’ ‘With her?’ ‘With them all.’. . . ‘It must have been also what she wished.’ Mrs Grose’s face signified that it had been indeed, but she said at the same time: ‘Poor woman—she paid for it!’ (James 123-124)

Mrs Grose does not know what Miss Jessel died of, but she does know why the woman left: “She couldn’t have stayed. Fancy it here—for a governess!” (124). This could be read as Miss Jessel being pregnant, because “[w]hat anomaly could have been more shocking than a pregnant governess? Has the displaced gentlewoman justified Victorian anxiety about her
precarious ladyhood – anxiety which anticipated the transformation of this guardian of sexual propriety into the illustration of sin?” (Bell, Class, Sex 106). The problem is that this is an assumption. The story remains ambiguous. Why was Miles sent home from school? Was there a sexual relationship between the children and Miss Jessel and Quint? Did the children see any sexual intimacy? Are the ghosts real? Is the governess a threat? What did Miss Jessel die of? Readers must fill in these gaps themselves. In the end, it is clear that the secret affair between the governess and the valet forms the starting point of a revelation of many more secrets.

In Elizabeth Gaskell’s “The Old Nurse’s Story,” Hester, a nursemaid, feels strongly connected to a child that is haunted by a ghost. This is, again, an example of a domestic melodrama that includes a character with governess functions, and the supernatural. Hester is not born in the middle class, but she is a girl in the village school whose parents “were very respectable, though they might be poor” (Gaskell 1). She and the child in her care, Miss Rosamond, move to Furnivall Manor House to live with an old relative, named Miss Grace Furnivall. The house harbours a dark secret in the “east wing, which was never opened, and whither we never thought of going” (5). On stormy nights, Hester can hear someone playing the organ in the hall, and Rosamond is beckoned by a ghost child, a girl, “oh, she was so pretty and so sweet, I could not choose but go” (10). Like a detective, Hester is trying to unravel the domestic secret. The footman, James, and his wife Dorothy, are not willing to reveal anything, but Bessy the kitchen-maid is. Hester tells, “[s]o then I tried Bessy, though I had always held my head rather above her, as I was evened to James and Dorothy, and she was little better than their servant” (Gaskell 6-7). Bessy claims that “folks did say, it was the old lord playing on the great organ in the hall, just as he used to do when he was alive. . .” (7). Dorothy knows she cannot hide the secret any longer, and Hester receives the last pieces of the puzzle. The old lord and his daughters Grace and Maude were proud, haughty people.
Both sisters fell in love with a foreign musician, who married Maude without her father’s consent, and she bore him a daughter at a local farm. The musician also starts to flirt with Grace, and soon the sisters are estranged from one another. The musician leaves them both, and Maude secretly takes her daughter with her in the east wing. Grace decides to tell their father, who banishes Maude and her daughter from the house to die in the snow. The ghost child is trying to lure Rosamond to the ghost of her mother, so that she can have a living child again (Gaskell 13-16). On the same evening as the original occurrence, the ghosts appear out of the east wing to re-enact the event. Grace cries out, “[o]h, father! father! spare the little innocent child!” (18), but this does not change anything. Miss Grace, “was carried to her bed that night never to rise again. She lay with her face to the wall muttering low but muttering alway: Alas! alas! what is done in youth can never be undone in age!” (18).

Hester has revealed a secret that includes a tyrannical father, hateful sisters, pride, a “dark foreigner” (Gaskell 14), and an unknown marriage and child. While this is a story about the supernatural, family love and the absents of it, are the most important themes. Gaskell “is not concerned with the mystic or the visionary; she retains, even in this context, her distrust of them; she is concerned with the deadly consequences of such passions as jealously, anger and hatred” (Duthie 140). The interior of the house not only represents the family secret, but also “the internal world of Grace, its present owner, who is continually haunted by tempestuous winds and restless ghosts” (Marroni 126). Miss Rosamond is saved from the ghosts “by the strength of the nurse’s love” (Duthie 141). Grace could never show love towards her sister, and, even worse, towards her little niece. How could one not feel love towards an innocent child? As Edwards writes, “an individual’s greed or lust conflicts with domestic values of the family, and results in the victimization of children” (93). In a society that stresses the importance of family values, Grace has committed a sin for which she has to suffer her entire life without ever knowing God’s grace. She has betrayed her own sister and
niece, because she was proud and could not feel any motherly or sisterly love (Dickerson 118).

The governess having secrets or revealing secrets created fear. In *Uncle Silas*, *The Turn of the Screw*, and “The Old Nurse’s Story” this fear is inherent to the plot. The supernatural is only a way of making the governess expose what is hidden, and these stories can thus be categorised as domestic melodramas. Le Fanu created a Sensation novel that is special in that it shows the point of view of the pupil, instead of the governess. It reflects on the different Victorian perspectives that existed about the governess. The French governess Madame de la Rouggierre is the victimised governess, but also the vain, alcoholic, and aggressive foreigner. In this case, the former perspective turns out to be a façade. Madame is dangerous, and she can easily destroy family happiness. In the end, it is Maud who receives this happiness, while Madame is punished for her crimes. While *Uncle Silas* answers many of the questions it raises, *The Turn of the Screw* creates more. It is not only about the secret affair between Miss Jessel and Peter Quint, but also about the secrets that surround the governess and the children. Are the children innocent or corrupted? Is the governess innocent or corrupted? These are only two of the questions that are never answered. The governess tries to keep up appearances, but she finds herself discovering things about her predecessor, the children, and herself that she would have preferred not to know. In “The Old Nurse’s Story,” the family secret is solved by a nursemaid whose ward is haunted by a ghost child. With the help of this ghost child and the servants, Hester discovers the secret of the Furnivall family. As in the other texts mentioned in this chapter, the supernatural is not the most important aspect of the story. They are not stories about the dead, but about the living and the secrets they keep from one another.
Chapter 3: A Proliferation of Governesses: *The Woman in White*

*The Woman in White* by Wilkie Collins is the perfect example of a novel that contains many governesses, and sheds light on the situation, function, and position of the governess. It includes a governess and two other characters whose situation and functions make them governesses. It can thus be said that it is the epitome of the governess novel. It is also a novel about dark domestic secrets. There is a hint of the supernatural in the form of Anne Catherick, or the woman in white, who haunts the story like a spectre by appearing and disappearing again. The relationships between Laura and Walter and Fosco and Marian add to the story relationships that cross class boundaries. These are all examples of topics that could be found in many governess novels as well as ghost stories and Sensation fiction.

There is one real governess in the novel: Mrs. Vesey. She is Laura’s former governess. She is “the personification of human composure, and female amiability,” and she possesses “all the cardinal virtues, and counting for nothing” (Collins 48). She is a passive character in a literal and figurative way. “Mrs. Vesey sat through life” and Walter sees her as never being actually alive (48). Walter himself is in many ways similar to the figure of the governess, and has the functions of a male governess. Bourne Taylor describes Walter as, “a domesticated artist, a landscape painter dependent on teaching, a male governess figure, drained of social and sexual meaning or effectiveness, who can live almost invisibly at the heart of the patron’s family” (108). As a drawing master, Walter is no match for any of the wealthy young ladies he teaches, and he realises this when he thinks about his feelings for Laura:

> I should have remembered my position, and have put myself secretly on my guard. I did so; but not till it was too late. All the discretion, all the experience, which had availed me with other women, and secured me against other temptations, failed me with her. It had been my profession, for years past, to be in this close contact with young girls of all ages, and of all orders of beauty. I had accepted the position as part...
of my calling in life; I had trained myself to leave all the sympathies natural to my age in my employer’s outer hall, as coolly as I left my umbrella there before I went upstairs. I had long since learnt to understand, composedly and as a matter of course, that my situation in life was considered a guarantee against any of my female pupils feeling more than the most ordinary interest in me, and that I was admitted among beautiful and captivating women, much as a harmless domestic animal is admitted among them. (Collins 65-66)

In the beginning, Walter has no clear social position, because he has no job, and he is financially dependent on others:

For my own poor part, the fading summer left me out of health, out of spirits, and, if the truth must be told, out of money as well. During the past year, I had not managed my professional resources as carefully as usual; and my extravagance now limited me to the prospect of spending the autumn economically between my mother’s cottage at Hampstead, and my own chambers in town. (Collins 10)

When he finally finds a situation, it is through his friend Professor Pesca. It is a job as a drawing-master for Laura Fairlie and Marian Halcombe at Limmeridge House. Walter is also “a man whose own class and gender identity is presented from the outset as being extremely unstable” (Pykett 126). He is a feminine character, and this makes him even more similar to the governess. When Marian tells him Laura is already engaged, she says that he must forget her, “[c]rush it! . . .Here, where you first saw her, crush it! Don’t shrink under it like a woman. Tear it out; trample it under foot like a man!” (Collins 73). It is only in Central America that he learns to be a man, and finds the courage to fight Sir Percival and Count Fosco, who have more social power than him. Afterwards, Walter finds himself in a clearer social position: he is married and has a job again, but he will never belong to his wife’s social
class. He will always remain connected to the middle class, and it is his son who becomes the heir of Limmeridge.

The second governess figure is Marian. She is an orphan and a spinster. She is also poor and (financially) dependent on Laura and Mr. Fairlie. These were all images attributed to the governess. She also had the function of a governess. She takes care of her half-sister Laura, who is the heiress of Limmeridge House. Laura is the conventional Victorian heroine: beautiful, innocent, and passive. She is also childlike, as can be seen in the way in which the other characters describe her. She admits to Walter that she is not very good at drawing, and “[s]he made the confession very prettily and simply, and, with quaint, childish earnestness, drew the sketch-book away close to her own side of the table” (Collins 54). Later, Walter states that Laure spoke, “as a child might have spoken; she showed me her thoughts as a child might have shown them” (437-438). Marian writes, “Laura has preserved, far more perfectly than most people do in later life, the child’s subtle faculty of knowing a friend by instinct. . .” (201-202). She needs the advice and guidance of Marian. Marian is taking care of a sister who is not only of a higher social class, but is also still a child, and this reinforces the idea of Marian as a governess. Similar to Walter, she crosses gender boundaries. When Walter first sees her, he admires “the rare beauty of her form” (Collins 34), but when he sees her face, he is shocked, because of her, “large, firm, masculine mouth and jaw. . .” and her moustache (35). She is also masculine because of her intellect and “wanting in those feminine attractions of gentleness and pliability, without which the beauty of the handsomest woman alive is beauty incomplete” (35). Marian receives the admirations of Count Fosco, but remains unmarried, and spends her time with Laura and Walter. The poor, ugly, spinster, who cannot find a husband was, as mentioned earlier in this thesis, a stereotypical image of the governess. Marian says to Walter, “[i]n short, she [Laura] is an angel; and I am—Try some of that marmalade, Mr. Hartright, and finish the sentence, in the name of female propriety, for
yourself” (37). The idea of an alter ego or double has been used in combination with the governess more often. Not only in *Jane Eyre*, but also in “At Chrighton Abbey,” and *The Turn of the Screw*. Marian is lucky to have a family she can rely on, because one of the few options for a respectable single woman “was to find a place under a relative’s roof where, depending on the circumstances, she might act as unpaid housekeeper, companion or nurse” (K. Hughes, 117). In the beginning of the text, while she helps Walter, Marian functions as a companion to Laura. This was also the function of one of those governesses who remained with one family for a long time:

As adolescent girls prepared to leave the schoolroom, it fell to the governess to coach them in the intricate systems of etiquette and protocol that they would need to negotiate the social world. . .the governess was assigned the additional role of sexual policewoman, whose job it was to guard the boundaries between the chaste domestic world and the unregulated sexuality of the streets. (K. Hughes, 134)

Marian has to guide her sister through everything, and her gender hybridity makes her both, “Laura’s girlish confidante and Walter’s detective side-kick” (Reynolds and Humble 54).

After Walter returns from Central America, the two sisters and he start living together in London. Here, Marian becomes the housekeeper. As Cohen writes, “[t]here is never any possibility that Laura will roll up her sleeves and help Marian, nor that Walter would be anything but horrified if she were to try” (142). It is interesting to note that in the light of class Marian and Walter could have easily married, because men who were likely to marry governesses “were those visiting masters who arrived once a week to provide specialist instruction in music or languages. . .and were perceived to enjoy a similar social standing” (K. Hughes, 141). Walter is such a man, but Walter and Marian never seem to see more than a friend in each other. For Marian, remaining unmarried gives her the possibility to live a relatively independent life.
In his novel, Collins challenges the idea of the respectable and comfortable middle-class Victorian home, and while *The Woman in White* is set in the domestic sphere, it is no longer a haven of peace, “[i]n many sensation novels, the middle-class home, which in the domestic novel (and in the cultural imaginary) was a haven of tranquility and a refuge from the harsh world of commerce and the unruly world of the urban streets, was more likely to be the source and scene of violence, intrigue, and crime” (Pykett 88-89). The setting is no longer exotic, but the story revolves around “middle-class families (or the relations between middle-class and aristocratic families) in domestic settings in the English countryside, the suburbs, or the ‘respectable’ areas of towns” (Pykett 88). Walter is part of such a safe, domestic environment, until he meets Anne for the first time, and his whole life starts to change, “[i]t was like a dream. Was I Walter Hartright? Was this the well-known, uneventful road, where holiday people strolled on Sundays? Had I really left, little more than an hour since, the quiet, decent, conventionally-domestic atmosphere of my mother’s cottage?” (Collins 27). He goes from living a conventional middle-class life to one of false identities, crime, and madness.

The role of the supernatural is not as apparent in this work as it was in the aforementioned texts, but it can still be said to be present in the character of Anne Catherick, who is described as a spectre that can be found drifting through the story. When Walter meets Anne for the first time, he states, “[t]here, in the middle of the broad, bright high-road – there, as if it had that moment sprung out of the earth or dropped from the heaven – stood the figure of a solitary Woman, dressed from head to foot in white garments. . .” (Collins 23-24). Walter is startled by “the suddenness with which this extraordinary apparition stood before me, in the dead of night and in that lonely place. . .” (24). One time, Anne is mistaken for a ghost by a little boy named Jacob. He saw her “[a]way yander, in t’ kirkyard – where a ghaist ought to be” (87), while she is only there to clean to grave of her beloved Mrs. Fairlie. Anne does not only look like a ghost, but she also has a similar function to the ghosts already mentioned. She
is trying to reveal Sir Percival’s dark secret, and she is perceived as knowing more about it than any of the other characters. She even has a foreseeing dream about Sir Percival’s marriage to Laura, and her dream becomes reality. After Anne’s death, Walter writes, “[s]o the ghostly figure which has haunted these pages as it haunted my life, goes down into the impenetrable Gloom. Like a Shadow she first came to me, in the loneliness of the night. Like a Shadow she passes away, in the loneliness of the dead” (Collins 555). While Anna may not be a literal ghost, she is described as such, and her function in the story is similar to that of the ghosts in other stories.

Another reoccurring theme in works that deal with governesses is the undesirable (sexual) relationship between members of different social classes:

The fascination with cross-class sexual liaisons evident in Basil and The Woman in White was one which Collins retained throughout his career, and he repeatedly represented sexual attraction as ‘a state of mind’ (as he puts in in The Guilty River, 1886) which rendered his characters ‘insensible to the distinctions that separate the classes in England.’ . . .(qtd. in Pykett 115-116)

Laura belongs to the upper class, while Walter is a member of the middle class. As stated before, Laura is very childlike, and Walter also treats her as such. This is emphasised when she recovers from a mental collapse. She tells Walter “I am so useless – I am such a burden on both of you,” she answered, with a weary, hopeless sigh. ‘You work and get money, Walter; and Marian helps you. Why is there nothing I can do? You will end in liking Marian better than you like me – you will, because I am so helpless! Oh, don’t, don’t treat me like a child!” (Collins 478) He does treat her like a child, however, he encourages her to make drawings and tells her they will be sold. In reality, Marian hides them, and he pays Laura with his own money (Cohen 142). This emphasises the fact that Walter married his pupil. In a way, this relationship resembles the one between the aristocratic Maude Furnivall and the foreign
musician in Gaskell’s “The Old Nurse’s Story.” There is another relationship that crosses class boundaries: the relationship between Marian and Count Fosco. He is married and a member of the upper class, and she is poor, and while they never admit it to each other, they are attracted to one another. It is a relationship similar to what could have existed between a governess and her employer. Fosco writes, “[u]nder happier circumstances how worthy I should have been of Miss Halcombe – how worthy Miss Halcombe would have been of ME” (Collins 337). While they are not from the same class, they are equal in intelligence. Marian does not want to feel attracted to this villain, but she does, because, as she writes, “[h]e flatters my vanity, by talking to me as seriously and sensibly as if I was a man” (222). She realises it is only flattery, but still admires him. He writes about her as an “[a]dmirable woman!” (336) and “[a]t sixty, I worshipped her with the volcanic ardour of eighteen” (599). It is this fatal attraction that enables Marian and Walter to defeat Fosco.

*The Woman in White* is a Sensation novel that includes three governesses: a passive one and two more active characters. Walter is a middle-class art tutor and Marian is Laura’s poor half-sister and perpetual companion. They both do not have a clear social position, they are financially dependent on others, and they cross gender boundaries. As in the previous texts, this one also challenges the idea of respectable Victorian society. Walter and Marian, with the help of Anne Catherick, solve the mystery surrounding Sir Percival. Sir Percival is not a baron or Sir Percival at all. Sir Percival does not exist. He was the child of unmarried parents. Count Fosco calls England “the land of domestic happiness” (Collins 599), but he knows that the opposite is true. The relationship between members of different social classes, as could be seen in *The Turn of the Screw* and “The Old Nurse’s Story,” is also present in the relationship between middle-class Walter and upper-class Laura and between the aristocratic Count Fosco and Marian. These relationships represent relationships between governess and pupil in the case of Walter and Laura and between governess and employer in the case of
Marian and Count Fosco. *The Woman in White* is thus in many ways similar to the texts already discussed, but it also shows interesting deviations. There is a governess without a function, and one of the others is a male governess.
Conclusion

This thesis suggests that while the character may initially be seen as boring, the governess is much more than a teacher. By exaggerating aspects of the lives of real governesses, the authors transform a liminal character into a central one. Victorian fiction used the governess as a means of reflecting on the complex attitudes that existed about governesses, and as a means of highlighting aspects of Victorian society. It is exactly her function and her difficult position that make this character such an excellent agent of revelation. The character evolved from one in novels about education and development, into a victim of, among others, poverty and inhospitable employers, and became a subject of the contemporary debate. She was also seen as an ambiguous figure, and someone of whom little was known. This made her a villain in Sensation novels such as Uncle Silas, and she became a character in ghost stories such as The Turn of the Screw, “At Chrighton Abbey,” and “The Old Nurse’s Story.” The Woman in White shows that the functions of the governess could also be fulfilled by men.

The texts in this thesis portray the governess in contrasting ways. She was a victim in The Turn of the Screw and “At Chrighton Abbey.” In contrast, in Uncle Silas, Madame de la Rouggierie is described as a threat to family and society. The governess was criticised because of her ambiguous position as a working middle-class woman, and her relationship with the family and servants was complicated. She attracted the label of, among others, corrupter of children, ugly and frustrated spinster, sexual predator, social climber, and madwoman. It was often after she started her new occupation that the governess realised how distressing her situation was.

Because of her position, the governess is used as a medium by the supernatural, as she unravels the reality behind the respectable façade of Victorian middle-class and upper-class society. The ghosts do not only make the governess aware of her position, but also help her to reveal dark family secrets. Isolated country houses harboured many secrets that could easily
destroy the peace and happiness of its inhabitants. The texts are thus more domestic melodramas than ghost stories. James created a story full of secrets. He wrote about a calm, domestic surface with a whole other world underneath it. In “The Old Nurse’s Story,” Hester discovers a family secret with the help of the supernatural and the servants. This is a story about a seemingly quiet old lady, who harbours a dark secret and an enormous sense of guilt. *The Woman in White* contains all the themes (domestic secrets, the supernatural, relationships that cross class boundaries) discussed so far. The novel also contains the most governesses: Mrs. Vesey, Walter, and Marian. Both Walter and Marian are unmarried and depend on others. Together, they do not only try to discover the secret of the seemingly respectable and upper-class character of Sir Percival, but also their own position in society. These stories represent Victorian society with its respectable surface, and its secrets underneath.

The texts mentioned in this thesis are not simply entertainment: they are not just ghost stories or Sensation novels, but they create a picture of Victorian society and the situation of the governess that turns out to be revealing. In the first chapter, it can be seen that the real world influences fiction concerning the social position of the governess. The works do not only give insight into the situation of the governess, but what the governess discovers is often even more shocking: secret marriages and children, undesirable sexual relationships, murder, and madness do not belong in a respectable society. The second chapter shows that fiction tells about the real world. Fact and fiction are thus inseparable. In her position, the governess was a perfect character to discover what should be hidden. These authors have discovered that such a character as the governess is an interesting way of exposing aspects of society that were considered taboo. This means that fiction can give more insight into society than society itself. Consequently, the works sketch a more realistic picture of Victorian society than contemporary readers might expect.
Works Cited


