SEMANTIC CHANGE AND VICTORIAN GOVERNESS FICTION

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Abstract: This paper is part of a Cultural Studies thesis researching the contribution of 19th c. Governess writings to the social mutations regarding women's social role and education, by looking at stereotypes. In this context, the complex Employer–Employee relation between the "lady of the house" and the "Governess" needs to be studied in its language-related dimensions. The word "lady", formerly a precise denominator, transitioned to the semantically augmented and less precise word "lady" of the 19th c. This transition, expressed in newly coined phrases and in new usage contexts, reflects quintessential social changes. The word "Governess' names a social position at the core of Victorian social debate. It was used in collocation with certain determinant adjectives, carrying little information. This usage pattern is particularly relevant for the Victorian concepts of social interaction and social improvement. The research employs different Governess-related texts: advertisements, instructionals, letters, memoirs, children's books and fiction.

Keywords: Lady, lady of the house, Governess, stereotypization, Victorian fiction

1. Victorian coding of gender and class reflects in language

Victorian Governess-related texts make little sense in absence of background information related to the ideal of womanhood crystalized in the concept of the Victorian *lady*, and to the ambiguous status of the Victorian governess, the lady who had to earn her living in a world dominated by the ideology of *separate spheres*.

The most appropriate theoretical framework for my research is the one constructed in Patricia Ingham's 1996 study *The Language of Gender and Class. Transformation in Victorian Novel*, focusing on the codes of gender and class intertwining, as a typical ideological trait the age (Ingham 2003). Ingham begins by reaffirming Nead's position: "*The representation of women can never be contained within an investigation of gender; to examine gender is to embark on an historical analysis of power, which includes the formation of class*" (Nead 1988, 8 in Ingham 2003, 2) but amending it with Mary Poovey's observations that: "*…the 'standard' account of gender focusing round the middle-class ideal was:* "*both contested and always under construction; because it was always in the making, it was always open to revision, dispute and the emergence of oppositional formulations*" (Poovey 1988, 3 in Ingham 2003, 2). Based on this image of multiaccentuality, she introduced the dynamic concept of "*divisiveness* (and not division)" as the dynamic principle by which the general perception of a class was produced. Her research employed the concept of social class in its wider definition given by sociologists from Veblen (Veblen 2007) to Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1996), where the cultural capital and dynamics of each social cushion are accounted for. Ingham coined Poovey's concept of "*uneven developments*", employed by Poovey to describe the multiaccentuality of Victorian gender image construction to Bakhtin's formulation of the conditions for social communication: "*Every stage of the development of a society has its own special and restricted circle of items which alone have access to that society's attention and which are endowed with evaluative accentuation by that attention. Only*

items within that circle will achieve sign formulation by that attention and become objects in semiotic communication.″ (Matejka and Titunik 1986, 21–2 in Ingham 2003, 2-3). In other words, the ideological particularities of the Victorian gender construction can be deciphered in the uneven developments of meanings in pairs/ groups of supposedly symmetrical terms, as these asymmetries are the building blocks of ideology. At the center of Victorian collective semiosis regarding social order, Ingham places "*the sign of the 'womanly' woman*":

> "Ironically what gave imaginative power to the oppressors of the lower orders was the force attributed to the sign of the 'womanly' woman, who was represented, shaped, celebrated and offered as an aspirational model in every form of writing from the law and 'non-fictional' documents like conduct books to novels and poetry. She is powerfully present, as a standard for judging by, when inevitably absent from accounts of working-class. squalor or promiscuity. And the force of this sign is significant for more than representations of gender alone" (Ingham 2003, 21).

In a similar vein to Ingham′s research, Esther Godfrey's 2005 article *Jane Eyre, from Governess to Child Bride*, re-assessed the labor component in *Jane Eyre* in terms of gender-and-class, to explain the way in which the text reflects Victorian gender construction. She explained the entwining of gender and class as an ideological answer to the social pressure from below: "*… the corresponding polarization of male and female realms within the middle class can be read as the result of a larger societal anxiety about gender identities that emerged from the instability of working-class gender roles in the new social framework″* (Godfrey quotes Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna's particularly relevant 1843 report on miners named *The Perils of the Nation: An Appeal to the Legislature, The Clergy, and the Higher and Middle Classes*, where Tonna's extreme worries were focused on the presence of both sexes in the mine improperly clad, and not at all on the deadly working conditions). (Godfrey 2005, 854). In Godfrey′s opinion, "*the text* [of *Jane Eyre* - my note] *suggests that only the middle and upper classes can afford the costly performance of gender″* (Godfrey 2005, 856).

2. Ladies and governesses: linguistic aspects

2.1. Ladies vs. ladies: the male counterparts of the term *lady*

It was not until early modernity (*i.e.* the 1700's) that certain women who did not belong by birth or marriage to the titled gentry would be called *ladies*. These newly privileged members of the fair sex were raised above others not solely by birth, but also by their attachment to the "naturally" superior middle-class *moral code*. This gradual re-definition of social and moral standards is reflected by the semantic changes of the term *lady*. This re-definition also imposed another linguistic change: the male counterpart of this *lady* in its new acception was not the *lord*, but the *gentleman*, the term that named the masculine ideal of the age. The terms *lord* and *gentleman* had coexisted from the Middle Ages, initially without really being synonyms, and underwent different evolutions. Pairing the term *lady* with the term *gentleman* by successive semantic changes occurring in both terms did not restore the symmetry of the initial gendered pair of terms, *lady* and *lord*. This dissymmetry is a case of so-called "*uneven developments*" (Poovey 1988, 3-4), the basis upon which Victorian ideology can be researched as a system of signs governed by a particular syntax.

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The word *lady* started out in the English language as the symmetrical gendered counterpart of the word *lord*. The words *lord* and *lady* are of Old English origin and their original forms seem to pre-date proper social stratification. They were compound words including the ancestor of today's word *loaf,* and they expressed gender roles in relation with having loaves of bread. The Old English *hlæfdige* meant "one who kneads bread" and, respectively, *hlafweard* meant "one who guards the loaves". The pair of words gradually achieved their meaning of social titles, denoting "high social ranks", during the Middle Ages. From *hlafweard* came *hlaford*, meaning "master of a household, ruler, superior", followed by the forms *laverd* and *loverd*, attested in mid-13th c. manuscripts and, finally, the modern monosyllabic form, attested in the 14th c. The (+)"female" counterpart paralleled its evolution. From *hlæfdige* came the intermediate forms *lafdi*, *lavede* meaning "mistress of a household", "wife of a lord". It was first attested in writing around the year 1200, when it was already used with the meaning of "woman of superior position in society". As such, it would evolve into the less formal, but still deferential replacer of all female titles in direct speech, and of most female titles in writing. The derivative *ladily* is attested in the late 14th century, meaning that a standard of behavior was already attached to the semantic field of the term *lady*. This is also the time when a new meaning is added: "woman as an object of chivalrous love". This semantic enlargement of the term *lady* is probably achieved in contamination with the borrowed term *mistress,* its partial synonym as a "woman in superior position, in charge of a household", since its source, *maistresse*, was already a polysemic term in Old French. This new, more specialized meaning was not a democratization: as an object of chivalrous love, the *lady* remained a member of *nobility*. Placed before a woman's first name, the word *lady*, was, and still is, the deferential way of addressing any woman in possession of a title. The term *lady* was not appropriate for reference to a woman of unknown or lower status. Other formulas, like the term *goodie,* were in use for this purpose.

Originally, being a *gentleman* was a question of status, not of social rank. Until the 14th c., the relationship between the term *lord* and the term *gentleman* reflected the *nobilus* vs. *generosus* organization of meanings originating in Latin. The term *gentleman* designated someone literally "well-bred", but who could not claim a rank in the nobility. After that, it underwent semantic changes twice. First, in Late Middle English the term *gentleman* started being used in ways blurring the boundaries of this semantic relationship, so that, by the 16th c., it got to designate the lowest rank of the English gentry. (A *gentleman* would now display his rank, through a coat of arms, and his allegiance to a code of honor, through dueling. Dueling for the sake of honor was often a more certain sign of someone's gentlemanly rank than the coat of arms, which could have been - and often was - a forgery in those times.) In the late 1500s, William Harrison wrote that: *"gentlemen be those whom their race and blood, or at the least their virtues, do make noble and known"* (Harrison, Edelen 1994, 113) and, from then on, the term retains this semantic ambiguity. The second set of semantic changes started with the modernization process taking place in society between 1700 and 1900. From "well-bred" and even "noble" (a meaning where it could pair the word *lady* without disparities), *gentleman* came to mean simply "acceptable to good society". This new meaning of the word de-emphasized social status, placing the accent on the code of conduct linked to the status. Doctors, merchants and (certain types of) lawyers could now be considered *gentlemen* if they possessed the right combination of "position", "education" and "manners". ". As Dr. Christine Berberich points out in her 1988 book, The Image of the

English Gentleman in Twentieth-Century Literature. Englishness and Nostalgia, the most relevant documents of this semantic change are the successive editions of the *Encyclopædia Britannica,* which oscillate between the two meanings. In the 8th edition, the entry *"Gentleman"* finally gives both meanings, also adding that: *"By courtesy this title is generally accorded to all persons above the rank of common tradesmen when their manners are indicative of a certain amount of refinement and intelligence."* (Berberich 2007, 9). This definition of the term *gentleman*, is also present in the 11th edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* (published between 1910 and 1922), which I consulted. (*E.B.*, XI: 604-5). This *gentleman* is the male counterpart of the Victorian *lady.* We find her defined in 1861 as a *"woman whose manners and sensibilities befit her for high rank in society."* (*E.B.*, XVI: 61-2).

Unlike the traditional *lord - lady* pair, the Victorian *lady - gentleman* pair is a clear case of uneven developments, in the sense that Poovey gave this concept (*see above*). Patricia Ingham does not fail to notice the difference between a *"title accorded… when manners are indicative of…"*, and *"manners… befit for …rank in society."* She summarizes the situation, also noting that the *democratic aspiration* promised by the term *gentleman* is absent in the connotations of the term *lady*:

> *"The term 'lady', though it might seem to be a parallel term, is not equally significant in this period. The limitations on women's roles in society meant that there was not a class of achievers aspiring to a name they felt themselves to have earned. The name 'lady' was socially aspired to, instead of the only semi-polite usage person, but unqualified 'woman', unlike man, was in conversation an offensive description, indicating the lowest possible status."* (Ingham 2003, 111)

The symmetric pair *lady - lord* is the gendered expression of privilege through rank, whereas the dissymmetric pair *lady – gentleman* expresses far more than just gender and -class: it is an expression of the Victorian ideology of *separate spheres*. As Mary Poovey points out: *" …instead of being articulated upon 'inherited class position in the form of noblesse oblige, virtue was increasingly articulated upon gender in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries… As superintendents of the domestic sphere, [middle-class] women were represented as protecting, and increasingly incarnating virtue."* (Poovey 1988, 10)

2.2. Victorian ideals *ladies*: the *lady of the house* vs. the *lady of leisure*

The word *lady* appears in two phrases that still bring the Victorian Era immediately to mind. One of them is *the lady of the house*; the other is *a lady of leisure*. The first one refers to social *status* (though not directly to social *rank* or *class*), and the other one is, more or less directly, a reference to a *lifestyle*, based on *material status*. The phrase *lady of the house* revitalized an old meaning of the term *lady*, similar to one of the early meanings of the term *mistress*. Both phrases *mistress of the house* and *lady of the house* had circulated but, as the term *mistress* specialized to mean primarily a "female lover outside wedlock" - a status hardly acceptable to the Victorian morals -, the meaning was taken over by the term *lady*. To be seen as *gentlemen* and *ladies*, a family needed to afford their women staying at home and, ideally, not having any contacts with the world of gaining a livelihood. It was obvious that, to be *the lady of the house*, one needed to manage a house; but to be the angel of the house, i.e. a *"true" lady*, one needed more than that. This Victorian concept of *lady* was linked to a particular concept of *house management,* which had little to do with the initial loaves. When the standardized portrait

of the "true" *lady* was summarized in the phrase *the angel of the house*, the accent moved from *efficient household management* to *insuring the moral standards* of the house. *Ladies* were primarily defined as the specializing "guardians of propriety" in their families. However, the poetic substitution worked backwards, as well; the word *lady* was charged with the representation of a whole set of domestic moral prescriptions. Unlike before, a woman did not need to possess a title to be acknowledged as a *lady*. Instead, she needed to conform to a set of behavioral prescriptions designed to develop her "natural womanly instincts". While signaling a democratic switch, this particular semantic change was a means of social segregation through language, as well. The term *lady* now also designated a number of women who did not possess a title; but it efficiently excluded large numbers of women from being seen as "womanly" at all. In the strongly polarized Victorian society, connecting the idea of *femininity* to that of the *private sphere* excluded many women from the idea of *gender*, while constructing, in fact, a *class*-based social separation. "Proper" Victorian femininity depended "naturally" on the *gentleman,* who possessed a House, and who would keep the female members of his family outside any damaging contacts with the lucrative world.

The female typology summarized in the phrase *lady of leisure* was at the core of a certain preoccupation (and double standard) of the time. Though employed nowadays to explain the changing social projections regarding gender (and class) during the last decades of the 19th c., the phrase *lady of leisure* was merely an accidental occurrence in the literary production of any decade of the Victorian Era. Yet the word *leisure* would be a traditional presence in non-fictional discourses aimed at defining female identity. Middle-class Victorians were somewhat split upon leisure. At the top of the upper middle-class were those who could mingle effectively with the upper classes, because they could afford a lifestyle completely similar to that of the titled gentry. In their case, leisure was less gendered than in the case of the lower middle-class cushions, who made efforts to emulate with the powerful and the wealthy - chiefly by educating their sons properly, by keeping the female members of their families from paid work, and by hiring specialized household staff. Here *leisure* acquired gendered connotations, because it was unequally distributed between the two sexes. These *gentlemen*, who made up the majority of the middle-class, had to mix leisure with work. This gender-related disparity regarding leisure was traditionally absent in nobility and also absent in the well-off. The author of the 1858 article titled *"Female Education in the Middle Classes"*, a feminist publication, defined the difference between a *Lady* and a *lady* as follows:

> *"like the lady of rank (Lady), she is above engaging in industrial pursuits; and she even pities the lot of her sex laboring ranks, that women must share in theses the lot of man; but she forgets that for woman to find happiness in a life of ease, it is requisite that man in the same rank be equally exempts from toil. Unlike the lady of rank, the lady of the middle class is left alone during the day. Her husband, her suitor, her brother, her friend – in place of accompanying her in her visits, or in her other efforts to occupy a day of leisure, is busy at his desk, engrossed in his industrial avocations"* (*The English Woman's Journal* 1, no. 2 (1858), 224).

The 18th century conduct books placed *leisure* in a particular semantic relation with *idleness.* Many upstart and successful members of the middle-class came from denominations and ideologies that frowned upon *idleness*, always described in Biblical terms, as the prelude to moral decay. Two types of non-fictional discourse revolving around female identity were concerned with placing *leisure* and *idleness* in relation. Authors of conduct books endeavored to create a gap, if not an opposition between the

two terms, while looking for appropriate solutions for young women. They emphasized the need for carefully managed, well-organized social activities aimed at distinguishing leisure from pure idleness. On the other hand, proto-feminist writings concerned with women's condition denounced the two concepts as being, in fact synonyms, with prescribed female leisure being no more than a mask for idleness, a facilitator of moral decadence. While *leisure* had clearly been perceived by men with intellectual pursuits like Samuel Johnson as substantially different from *idleness* (see the famous quote), in the case of upper middle-class women, leisure management, more than household management was a problem. The impure world of money and idleness were two different perils to the moral health of women, the guardians of the nation's moral health.

Emulating with the symbolic side of the upper class' public life, the Victorian middle-class *lady* was meant to be the chief *ornament* of a household more or less filled with servants where men were often absent. Her (theorized upon) function as "general of the household" was at best secondary to that, with girls being married without much knowledge regarding house management, whenever such an attitude could be afforded. Towards the bottom of middle-class lifestyle arrangements, women had to contribute actively to the family's income, ideally in proper and discrete ways. The uneven developments are once again present: while a *gentleman of leisure* was a male acknowledged as successful, a *lady of leisure* was a well-married, potentially idle female. In both cases, leisure was a token of a *gentleman*'s success in society. At the same time, the political discourse of the rising middle-class was denouncing the upper classes as non-productive, I.e., purely *ornamenta*l. Between these boundaries, the "naturally delicate" Victorian *ladies* were to engage in prescribed types of non-lucrative activities, in prescribed ways. Organizing social gatherings and charity fitted this pattern best.

To the second half of the 19th century, the term *leisure* evolved into the label of a carefully designed system of rules for behaviors and activities specific to the well-offs in general, and to women in particular. In addition, in the second half of the 19th c. the word *leisure* graduated from advice books to sociological metalanguage, culminating with the work of American researcher Thorstein Veblen, *The Leisure Class*.

While the ideal expressed through the phrase *lady of the house*, that of the domestic *angel*, was competing (and winning certain battles) against the *great/ grand lady* (i.e. the *Lady*, or the fashionable female socialite), the concept underlying the expression *lady of leisure* blurs the differences between the aristocrats and the upper middle-class, while meeting a mixed response of rejection/ emulation within the lower middle class. This phrase does net express a part in a competition between the upper class aristocrats and the upward bourgeoisie, but a hierarchy of emulation within a society where position is defined in relation to money.

3. Governesses: the inacceptable equals

3.1. Confusion

Feminist researchers of the Victorian Era emphasized the inadequacies of the term *governess*. Firstly, because it belonged to the list of gendered pairs of terms naming social functions, where the female term had undergone semantic degradation (like *lady* and *mistress*). (see Kochman-Haladyj 2007, 209-15). Secondly, because *governess* would function like an *umbrella-term* at the very time when the Governess' Plight was focusing social attention. In her notorious 1972 article *"The Victorian Governess. Status*

Incongruence in Family and Society", Jean Peterson noticed that: *"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 […], or a woman who lived in her employer's home and who taught the children and served as a companion to them."* (Peterson 2013, 4)

"The designation 'governess,' then, does not help us understand what specialty areas a woman had mastered, what methods, or in what surroundings she taught her pupils. Women professionally involved in teaching in public and private schools, those visiting private residences to teach for a specified number of hours a day, others giving lessons in their own homes, and still another contingent who boarded in their employers' houses for the purpose of administering a home-schoolroom are all encompassed by the one blanket term" (Rescher 1999, 5-6).

Sarah Fielding's 1749 novel *The Governess; or, The Little Female Academy* used the term in its meaning of "school mistress" and her literary formula would be cloned multiple times, always keeping the character and the meaning of the term. Etymology can shed light upon the original ambiguity of the education-related information carried by the term *governess*. The gendered term *governess* came from the Old French term *governeresse* "female ruler or administrator", borrowed in the form *governouresse* and shortened in the late 14th century to its modern form (Klein 1971, 348). While in the middle 15th century the term meant a "female ruler," its new meaning of a "female teacher in private home" was not attested in writings before 1712. Instead, *mistress,* the female term of another gendered pair, evolved from the Old French term *maistresse,* also borrowing its multiple meanings. (Klein 1971, 507). Its meaning of "female teacher, governess" (evident in the collocation *school mistress*, appears already in 14th century manuscripts, wile 15th century writings also attest the "woman who employs others/ has authority over servants". After that, the word undergoes moral degradation, acquiring its meaning of "kept woman of a married man" in both languages. This is where the term *governess*, also undergoing (milder) social degradation of meaning (Kochman-Haladyj 2007, 209-15) would emulate.

3.2. Effacement and Derogation

Elizabeth Dana Rescher argued that the noun *governess* gave no clue of social class: "*[…] the word could refer to the lower-middle-class woman who worked in the nursery. It could equally well identify a London banker's Paris-educated daughter who was employed to "finish," or put the final social polish on a pupil's education"* (Rescher 1999, 5). Her observation prompted me to look at the most usual determinatives that collocate with/ explain the term *governess.* Besides its meaning of "a school teacher", it could mean: a *daily* governess; a *private* governess, a *resident* governess; a *nursery* governess; a *preparatory* governess; a *finishing* governess; a *companion* governess. Indeed, of these seven determinatives usually collocating with the term *governess*, four would rather convey Employer-related information, rather than giving much information on the Employee. 3 determinatives: *private*, *resident*, *daily* refer to the governess' abode, with Rescher noting that *private* and *resident*, interchangeable in the era, could also refer to school mistresses, in particular contexts (Rescher 1999, 6-7). Between the *private/ resident* governess and the *daily* governess the practical differences were small, as the latter was expected to come in early and do various chores *all day long.* Hence, the resident governess informed on the Employer ability to offer housing. The attribute of

companion-ship was similarly relevant of the Employer's status. Finally, as Jeanne Peterson put it: *"The governess was […] an indicator of the extent to which a man's wife was truly a lady of leisure"* (Peterson 2013, 5).

More directly related to the job, the determinatives *nursery*, *preparatory* and, respectively, *finishing* applied to the term *governess* related the job to the *age of the charges*. Since they implied different types of *objectives*, they also conveyed *status-related information*. Nursery governesses represented the lowest point of the job and education-related female activists of the time criticized employing families for not employing *nursery governesses* for activities sufficiently distinguished from those performed by nannies. Such arrangements were detrimental to governesses who, unlike working class nannies, were lower middle-class *ladies*, forced to perform babysitting and to help with the chores around the nursery besides lessons. Activists would fight this situation by advocating the professionalization of *nursery governesses* and the importance of early education. *Preparatory* governesses formed the usual entrance point and the bulk in the job. The best remunerated *finishing governesses* were expected to polish their pupils' social skills, and represented the topmost segment of the profession. They came from better-off families, personal experiences allowing them to become proficient educators and companions.

Finally, Victorian authors often have their well-off characters voice their views of *governesses* by employing collective nouns like: *tribe*, *race*, *class* - with evident derogatory connotations. This way language was used as a means to enlarge the gap between the leisured Employer and her uncanny Employee. Linguistic evidence proves that, while enjoying the prestige of hiring a governess, middle-class families felt the need to place this needy equal specifically among the servants.

4. Conclusions

During the Victorian Era, the governess was the typical working lady, with her status being perceived as a contradiction in terms. Semantically, the relationship between the lady of the house and the governess revolved essentially around the newer meanings of the term lady. The term lady functioned as a segregating social label, despite its acquiring of socially inclusive meanings to some extent. The combination carried a potential for tension: the term lady could denote "social origin", "education", and/or one's "present social status" (if the latter was a recent acquisition) in the case of an Employer. Governesses were ladies by "birth and/or education" as a rule. Nouveau riches were exposed to hiring someone who had formerly been their social superior. However, the governess's notional/ former status of a lady mattered only insofar as it added to the prestige of her Employer. The frequently used Victorian phrase lady of the house was mutually exclusive with the entire semantic field of "employment". The phrase lady of the house is, in the case of this relationship, the linguistic solution for the term lady to name only the Employer, with its capacity of naming the Employee being restricted. At the lower end of this social relationship, the term governess, expressing the Employee's role, is a product of significant semantic degradation. Moreover, it is employed in ways meant to emphasize the Employer and diminish the Employee. These linguistic aspects are consistent with the lady's theorized moral duty of mistrust, an encouragement of active social discrimination which was, in fact, money-based.

The study of how the particular middle-class female relationship between the lady of the house and the governess was put into language is particularly important to

sociologists and cultural researchers. Firstly, it highlights both the hierarchies and the tensions inside the Victorian social group of middle-class women. Secondly, it explains away the alien homogeneity of governess texts as different as advertisements, instructionals, magazine articles, memoirs and novels of the time. Thirdly, it highlights an important reason why the Victorian proto-feminist texts read so much as a self-undermining discourse today.

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