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FROM GOVERNESS TO WIFE: HOW WOMEN ON THE FRINGE OF SOCIETY  
UPSET AND RESTORE VICTORIAN HOMES

by

Elsa C. Torgersen

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

English

Approved:

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UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY  
Logan, Utah

2021

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## ABSTRACT

From Governess to Wife: How Women on The Fringe of Society

Upset and Restore Victorian Homes

by

Elsa Torgersen, Master of Arts

Utah State University, 2021

Major Professor: Brian McCuskey  
Department: English

In middle-class Victorian homes, wives were responsible for the care of the home, the raising of children, and the maintenance and upward mobility of her family's social standing. She was the heart of the home and her purity and commitment to the home would not only affect her family, but also society. Yet the women who were qualified according to societal standards were a small group, carefully chosen to maintain the standards of society. In the novels *Bleak House* and *Jane Eyre*, the authors push back against strict societal expectations. They ask the audience to consider if women should be qualified for this role based on their actions, not their social status. Utilizing the role of the governess, they support the importance of the angel in the home while subverting the belief that only women of a certain social standing are qualified to repair homes.

(43 pages)

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Elsa C. Torgersen

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## Introduction

In the sensation novel *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), the secret fears regarding governesses are played out in true Victorian form. Lady Audley, a governess turned society wife, is the angelic figure of the novel and one whom “[e]very one loved, admired, and praised” (Braddon 11). Yet it is later revealed that the angelic Lady Audley has a dark, secret past. The daughter of a poor retired soldier, she had abandoned her first husband and child, bigamously married Lord Audley, and then attempted to murder her first husband upon his return from his fortune-seeking. The primary question of the novel soon is focused on Lady Audley’s mental sanity, and though the reader may not ever receive the answer, they can easily see the damage inflicted by the untrustworthy governess-turned-wife as she destroys anything or anyone that stands in her way. In the end, her husband and her unlawful husband are left alone and the home she should have redeemed is “shut up” (Braddon 379). Through the character of Lady Audley, the author condones and rationalizes the fears of Victorian society. Governesses were not made to be wives and they are figures who cannot be trusted. Lady Audley’s beauty and accomplishments hid her troubled past and her permanent acceptance into the house as its mistress proved to be its demise. The novel asks readers to carefully judge their governesses and to keep them at an arm’s length because they are not women to be trusted: their training and skills cannot redeem their low status. Only through this segregation can society maintain its equilibrium as individuals are forced to remain in their social caste.

As middle-class society grew, the need and fears surrounding governesses grew and popular sensation fiction such as *Lady Audley's Secret* and *East Lynne* capitalized on

these worries. They played into the narrative that a governess was “a sort of necessary evil, as one whom the parents would fain be without, but they cannot” (Maurice 33). Yet these sensational novels would receive pushback from two of the great British literary figures of the 19<sup>th</sup> century—Charles Dickens and Charlotte Brontë. Both *Jane Eyre* and *Bleak House* utilize the role of the governess not to play upon the fears regarding governesses but to critique class identity and the privileges associated with an individual’s social class.

The issues of class identity are present throughout both novels as the two primary heroines are women from classes fit only to be governesses, not wives. Yet the governess role is fraught with conflict for these women who are seeking permanence in their lives. Jane Eyre, the eponymous character of *Jane Eyre*, falls in love with her master, but is stopped from pursuing marriage or any other relationship with Rochester because of her status. When Blanche Ingram, a lady suitable for Rochester’s station and class, is brought to Thornfield Hall to see her suitability for marriage, Jane quips that “[i]t surprised me when I first discovered that such was his intention: I had thought him a man unlikely to be influenced by motives so commonplace in his choice of a wife” (Brontë 209). Status and connection dictated relationships and marriages, not love. Jane, who has fallen in love with Mr. Rochester, realizes that love may not be enough in the face of social status. These “commonplace” motives were believed to guarantee a happy and prosperous society, both in marriage and in the home.

Through carefully aligned marriages, a suitable “angel” would be brought into a home. This angel became the woman of the home who “upholds and sustains marriage” (Hoffman 265), thereby sustaining the home. A “successful marriage was the basis for

what was considered the model bourgeois domestic circumstance of the nineteenth century” (Hoffman 265). If marriage was this important to the maintenance and success of a home, then men would search for women who maintained or improved their social standing. Women could not be chosen for something as fickle as love when upward mobility or at least maintenance of a certain social status was on the line. A wife was so important to a husband’s success that “a successful marriage to an appropriate wife was an important way by which a husband could confirm and demonstrate his ‘arrival’ as it were, his newly-found economic and social accomplishments” (Hoffman 265). In a world where opportunities and privileges were driven by class, the choice of a wife could guarantee the success or failure of a man and his home. Jane’s quip that Rochester’s choice of bride seems shallow certainly endears the reader to Jane’s plight but fails to admit that Rochester was merely playing the game according to long-established rules. A wife of status guaranteed a happy, successful, and thriving home. Marriage for love, which brought an unsuitable wife into the most important role in the home (as seen in *East Lynne* and *Lady Audley’s Secret*), brought only disaster.

Yet this “angel” who brings vitality and success to a home is the figure that both Brontë and Dickens support. They do not, however, support the selection of a wife based solely on status. Brontë and Dickens utilize the novel to upset the expectation that only well-established women of appropriate status and social class were qualified and worthy to be angels in the home. They introduce their heroines, Jane Eyre and Esther Summerson, and use them to repair broken homes. On their separate paths, Jane and Esther both make the same moves as they establish the ultimate goals of Victorian marriage: stable homes.

They both seek to prove that the elusive angel of the household was a position that should not be determined by status and wealth, but by deeds and commitment. Choosing a wife from the fringes of society was unacceptable, so the authors utilize the well-established pseudo-mother figure of the governess to place their worthy heroines into their homes. The only way that they can show the worth and value of a woman who is outside of acceptable social elite is to insert them into the home in the position of the pseudo-mother, the governess. Once the governess was established in the home, she could then repair the home that had been damaged by existing angels. Through a comparison of these two novels, it becomes apparent that the authors use the governess to reveal the fallibility of status-driven angels. Carefully, the authors prove that pedigrees and wealth do not guarantee healthy and stable homes, but commitment to the home will guarantee its success.

### **The Angel in the House**

The concept of the “Angel in the House” came from a famous poem by Coventry Patmore. In the poem, he “idealized women as devoted, docile wives and mothers; paragons of domesticity, virtue and humility” (“Coventry Patmore’s Poem”). Key lines from Patmore’s poem indicated the expectation of what the wife would do:

Man must be pleased; but him to please

Is woman’s pleasure...

Whose each impatient word provokes

Another, not from her, but him;

While she, too gentle even to force

His penitence by kind replies,...

At any time, she's still his wife,

Dearly devoted to his arms;

She loves with love that cannot tire... ("Coventry Patmore's Poem" 5-6)

In the poem, the wife continually offers her support and care to the husband, sacrificing her own feelings and desires. While this was a poem written by a man about his wife, this ideal was not one abhorred by women. In fact, a contemporary guide for women entitled *Mothers and Governesses* (1847), discusses these same principles at length. The female author even tells her readers that "[t]he living principles of a mother's life, should be self-forgetfulness, and self-denial, and in a truly Christian mother's life, they will be so, and she will educate her family, by the same rules, which influence her own conduct (Maurice 10). If a woman wanted to be a Victorian Angel and ensure the success and stability of her home and family, she embraced these principles. Self-sacrifice guaranteed the vitality of the home and society, not selfishness.

The duties of middle-class wives extended beyond selflessness and into all areas of household management. They must "properly organize and run a household, including employees, while at the same time giving a proper education to their children" (Ciocoi-Pop 69). These weighty expectations meant that women were carefully chosen in order to ensure that they could perform their role well and fulfill all the responsibilities associated with their position as "angel" of the home.

Societal beliefs limited the number of women who were qualified to fulfill this position because of the training, both implicit and explicit, middle-class girls received.

"A lower-class wife, a working girl, would not be sufficiently conversant with the

signifiers of middle-class life to guarantee her husband's place in society" (Langland 291). Women who were raised to be middle-class and upper-class wives had received years of training to fulfill this position. The best tutors and governesses were acquired to teach them, while years of exposure to the carefully orchestrated and strenuous world of middle and upper-class gave them the implicit training needed to guarantee the success of their homes. Lower-class women were perceived as incapable of filling these roles, and that belief extended to women who fell outside of all social rankings: the governess.

The Victorian Angel was a woman who was unrivalled in the eyes of society for her commitment to home and family and her role in the success of her home and society. She was a complicated figure who devoted her life to her family in order to provide stability to her home. Yet in her devotion to every aspect of household management, family, and husband, things fell through the cracks. The most notable sacrifice in her devotion to home were the very people that would continue the success of the family long after she had passed: her children. As her duties of wife consumed her, the rearing of the children and their education—traditionally responsibilities left to the mother—fell to another individual. This woman would assume the role of mother to the children and become an important part of the household success as the "pseudo-mother."

### **The Governess**

The pseudo-mother of the home assumed responsibility for the children as the mother's many duties directed her attentions elsewhere. The contemporary guide for women stated that the governess was an important figure and "[s]uch a parent will regard her governess, as her fellow-helper, as one who is working with her, for the highest ends,

even the immortal well-being of her offspring. Nor will she ever consider herself, as released from the deepest obligations to her” (Maurice 10). In an ideal Victorian household, the governess and mother are two women in the household who are one in purpose. They work together to ensure the success of the children as future representatives of the home. Yet this ideal that the governess and wife can work together as mothers to the same children is paradoxical. The governess assumes the role of mother without receiving any of the benefits of the title of wife. Her success as a pseudo-mother to these children will always be temporary. The title of wife, elusive and seemingly impossible to gain as a governess, is the only role that guarantees a permanent home. Thus, the two roles, mother and governess, are always at odds with another because a home does not need two mothers.

Despite this tension, the governess still entered the home because the demands placed on the Angel were simply too excessive. These demands necessitated the governess truly assume the role of mother with only the promise of room and board, a small annual salary, and no permanent position. In one letter to the editor from the 14 January 1892 *Morning Post*, the author quotes a recent advertisement for a governess who will be expected to take “sole charge of four children” between the ages of 6 to 11 for the generous sum of 16 pound per annum. Sadly, the author points out that it is likely the governess will be “mother and nurse or maid, ... seamstress... even dressmaker....” (“The Wages”). Contemporary critics were even aware of the hypocrisy of the role of the governess. The choice of describing this advertised position as assuming the responsibility of “mother” and then including other descriptors that traditionally fall

under a mothering role clarify what Victorians saw the governess doing in the household: mothering for a small fee.

Though the title of governess brought with it the responsibilities of mothering, it did not bring with it the security of the title of wife. After the pseudo-mother had raised the children, she was let go and left to rely on her pitiful wages to sustain her life.

It is no wonder that so many of our well-educated women, after training some of the most important families in the land, find themselves penniless and homeless when their services are no longer required by an age that likes to fag (sic) out the young teacher with the combined duties of mother, governess, nurse, and seamstress, all in one, for the pitiful sum of £16 a year. (“The Wages”).

This contemporary critique realizes the harsh reality of a governess’ life. Though she assumes the role of mother, the absence of the title of wife always results in her expulsion. If she was a wife, she would always have a home. As a governess, her may homes are always temporary. One advertisement for governess mentioned in the 14 September 1880 “Scraps from the Comic Journals” in *Reynold’s Newspaper* said she “will be [in] a good home for many years.” Despite initially seeming generous, the advertisement exposes the very issue of the position of the governess. Many years is not *all* her years. The governess will always be asked to leave because a household does not need two mothers.

Despite the attempts to paint the governess as an important and valued helping hand in the middle-class home (Maurice 10), the governess was a temporary and mistrusted figure. This was especially true in “representations of the governess” and behind these “representations” was “[t]he mid-Victorian fear [was] that the governess

could not protect middle-class values because she could not be trusted to regulate her own sexuality” (Poovey 131). An unmarried woman, potentially of marriageable age, was a risk in a household. Would she corrupt her young charges with her supposed blatant sexuality? Would she lure marriageable men or even married men into her arms, ungoverned and undisciplined by anyone? While “this marriage plot was far more common in literature than in life” (Gilbert 459), the fear of these eligible, yet ineligible women corrupting a home because they could not “regulate their own sexuality” was real.

An 823-word long advertisement from the 15 January 1849 *The Morning Post* was the focus of contemporary satire. The lengthy soliloquy seeks a teacher and “mother,” but with excessive restrictions. The author clarifies that he is looking for an older lady and will only settle for a chaperoned younger girl, because a young, single, unchaperoned governess might:

induce mutual attachment, [and] the gentleman, . . . desires to engage a governess of advanced age rather than run a risk (if risk there be) of increasing the responsibilities of his position, and prejudice the prospects of the little girls by a marriage resulting, perhaps, in a large family of children, deriving no provision, present or prospective, from their mother. (“Wanted, A Governess.”)

The motives behind the gentleman’s pickiness is the fear that regular interactions with a young, single, and ultimately eligible and worthy young woman might result in marriage that will prove socially damning to him and his children. The governess is capable of “mothering” his children, but to become a mother and *wife* is out of the question because of her social status.

Sadly, the “governess, in the majority of instances, is looked upon as a sort of necessary evil, as one whom the parents would fain be without, but they cannot” (Maurice 33). The role of the governess and the angel of the home are in conflict. While the idea that the angel “will regard her governess, as her fellow-helper” (Maurice 10) is ideal, the women are both trying to complete the same job and her very existence in the household upsets the home.

The governess was expected to mother middle-class women who would guarantee the continued success and distinct separation of the middle class from the lower class (Poovey 128). They would teach women to be wives and mothers, future pillars of middle-class society, while they were denied that opportunity. While Brontë and Dickens support the stability of the middle-class, they also support the removal of such rigid social qualifications to receive the role of mother (Poovey 127). They both ask the reader if the only women who are qualified to be mothers are women who already exist in the middle-class structures, or if women who exist on the fringe of society can prove themselves worthy of both the title of mother *and* wife. The governess provides the perfect entrance for these unlikely heroines into the home and the perfect opportunity for them to prove they are worthy of the title of *wife*.

### **Women on the Margins of Society**

Jane and Esther are destined for the role of governess because of their social status. Esther Summerson is raised as an orphan by her aunt, and she was led to believe her parents are dead, while they are in fact both living. Sadly, her mother has also been led to believe that Esther is dead. Her aunt is a strict, pious woman who fails to show any

true affection for Esther simply because she is illegitimate. Esther writes that her aunt, “with no desire or willingness *that I should live* [emphasis added], reared me in rigid secrecy,” (Dickens 583).

Like Esther, Jane Eyre has been left in the care of an aunt who has no affection for her because Jane’s uncle was frequently kind to Jane, his orphaned niece (Brontë 259-260). Unfortunately, his death turns the cards against Jane, and her story begins as she suffers with the repercussions of his death. When Jane returns to her aunt’s bedside shortly before she passes away, Mrs. Reed reveals that Jane was “[s]uch a burden to be left on my hands” (Brontë 259). Her actions stemmed from jealousy, as her husband “used to nurse it [Jane] and notice it as if it had been his own: more, indeed, than he ever noticed his own at that age” (Brontë 259). Mrs. Reed begins to take out her quiet anger on the young girl whom she views as a burden and a threat to her own children’s success. Though Jane should have also been included and received these benefits that would prepare her for marriage, Jane’s very existence within the home threatens to disrupt Mrs. Reed’s carefully ordered world and presents potential future competition for her daughters, so she must constantly put Jane in her place.

The treatment of Esther and Jane has roots in very real Victorian fears. For Esther, the stain of her illegitimate blood dictates that she cannot be allowed to taint those around her, especially girl who will one day be the mistresses of stable, legitimate homes in society. As the flesh and blood of a corruptible woman, she might spread corruption wherever she goes because she is innately corrupt. Esther is removed from all associations beyond those the necessary interactions. One heartbreaking example is when Esther is invited to a party, and her aunt “wrote a stiff letter declining for me, and I never

went. I never went out at all” (Dickens 29). Esther is kept to the house and from any potential friendships that may form at her school. She is subjected to societal expectations of what must be done with illegitimate children: “obscurity, emigration, or death” (Pinchbeck 316). Young Esther is kept removed from much of society and she is only allowed to expand her circle of friends (and therefore influence) when she is much older and after she has proven herself “nobler” than her tainted blood.

Jane’s treatment is different because her “sin” is different. While Esther is tainted by her parentage, Jane was born to a middle-class family and is the ward of an established middle-class family. Yet her treatment is pitiful to say the least, because:

Jane appears as a threat to the other characters. Either because she is an intruder from outside the community, because she is an enigma, or because her ideas are threatening, the other characters marginalize Jane in order to dismiss her or her ideas and thereby transform her into something non-threatening. (Peters 57)

While Peters does not mention social status and competition as one of the reasons Jane is ostracized, these two factors play a role in her treatment in the Reed household. While Jane’s parents were poor, her mother was of a higher social standing and that was a favorable technicality. With careful guidance and schooling, and her father’s poor status was surmountable. Yet this technicality was not enough for Mrs. Reed. As she talks with Jane before her death, Mrs. Reed confesses she lied to Jane’s paternal uncle simply because she “disliked... [Jane] too fixedly and thoroughly ever to lend a hand in lifting... [Jane] to prosperity” (Brontë 267). Jane had easily succeeded in securing her uncle’s affections as a young girl *and* a potential fortune (an incredible asset for Victorian marriages). In Mrs. Reed’s eyes, the rise of Jane meant the fall of her daughters. So, Mrs.

Reed carefully ostracized Jane, hoping to ensure the success of her thoroughly middle-class daughters.

### **Lowood and Greenleaf: Governess Training Schools**

The threats Esther and Jane pose to others play a heavy role in their upbringing and prospects. Their removal from society and their families set them on a path towards the role of a governess. As their peers of better social standing are sent to school to be trained to be eligible mothers, Jane and Esther are sent to school to be trained to be pseudo-mothers who will train the daughters and sons of the middle-class to be good productive members of society. Both Jane and Esther are evaluated before they are sent to school, seemingly to determine if they are even worthy to become governesses. Jane is evaluated by Mr. Brocklehurst, the school administrator, once while Esther is evaluated twice by Mr. Jarndyce, her future fiancée.

The exchange between Mr. Brocklehurst and Jane heavily influences her experience at Lowood. Jane is evaluated poorly by Mr. Brocklehurst based on Mrs. Reed's opinions. She wrote to him and informed him that "this little girl has not quite the character and disposition I could wish" (Brontë 38) and her summation of the situation is readily accepted. Mrs. Reed then asks that she be trained "in a manner suiting her prospects... to be made useful, to be kept humble (Brontë 39). Her aunt clearly seeks to remove her from the privileges of middle-class birth and resign her to a position of "humility." Jane even remarks that her aunt "was already obliterating hope from the new phase of existence which she destined me to enter" (Brontë 39). The role of a governess is the perfect position for an unwanted, poor relation. Jane will enter a world where she

can contribute to society in established homes, but where her threat to other more established middle-class girls will be minimized, including her threat towards her cousins' success.

Esther Summerson is evaluated on many different occasions, but her first evaluation takes place by Mr. Jarndyce's solicitor, Mr. Kenge. The first evaluation is very brief and one of the more confusing moments of the book. Mr. Kenge asks her to take off her bonnet and he looks her over and tells her aunt, "Yes!" (Dickens 32). This exchange seems to place Esther in a favorable light for Mr. Kenge and he later reveals that Mr. Jarndyce had sent him to offer to take guardianship of Esther (Dickens 35). Only after Kenge has approved of Esther is the reason behind his visit shared with her. What is confusing is the criteria: Kenge merely looks over Esther. It could leave the reader to assume she was being evaluated for physical attractiveness—something that does not seem important for the role of a governess in the house. Traditionally, the governess disappeared into the background and beauty was not a good combination for a woman who was already walking a fine line because of concerns over her ability to guard her sexuality.

These evaluations are utilized to place these girls in the roles that have been determined for them by their caretakers. In both cases, the guardians utilize other individuals to validate the choices they have made for their wards. Mrs. Reed uses Mr. Brocklehurst's opinion (even though she heavily influences his evaluation through her pernicious lies) to soften her discomfort. Mr. Jarndyce uses Mr. Kenge to provide a surface level-evaluation of Esther as to whether she is even worth attempting to save. Jane is only subjected to one primary "evaluation" because she must be determined to be

wicked enough to deserve a demotion from wife to governess. Esther will be evaluated multiple times along her journey because she carries the stain of illegitimacy. Her evaluations are to determine if she cannot ruin those around her through her inherent corruption.

For both Jane and Esther, their experiences at school reveal their worthiness to be placed in a home. Esther only talks briefly of her schooling, mentioning how dearly she has been loved at Greenleaf—presumably because of her caring ministrations in her governess-teacher role. This love is reinforced by the sadness brought on by her departure (Dickens 41) but Esther remarks that she is surprised by all these fond farewells and then she tries to “tell them... how good they had all been to me” (Dickens 41). Even with her disbelief in her ability to “do some good” as her aunt exhorted her, these friendships are just one piece of evidence that Esther has something good to offer the world.

Jane’s initial experience at school is much more challenging than Esther’s and occupies a significant amount of time. Mrs. Reed’s words prove a significant hurdle for Jane to overcome as Mr. Brocklehurst uses them against her at school (Brontë 76). Jane must fight against this slander and through the guidance of a friend and teacher, she overcomes the labels. Jane does devote more time to her experience at school, but her experience is summarized differently than Esther. She does not mention much about friendships, only sharing her experiences with Helen and Miss Temple, and the influence they have on her life. Her friendship with Helen ends with Helen’s untimely death, while her friendship with Miss Temple is cut short by Miss Temple’s marriage. Jane simply says of her time at Lowood, “during these eight years my life was uniform, but not unhappy, because it was not inactive” (Brontë 95). Esther’s experience at her school is

full of love, while Jane only mentions that her time was “uniform” and “not inactive.”

For Esther, the school has filled her need for love and acceptance, while Jane still seeks for something more than an interminable position as a teacher at a school.

### **The Victorian Angels**

Once Jane and Esther received the training necessary to provide for themselves in the future, they became eligible to become a part of a Victorian household, but only as a temporary fixture. Jane and Esther would move from home to home, likely to remain governesses their entire lives. Yet the novel becomes the way for Dickens and Brontë to test societal conventions and Jane and Esther’s futures, while still adhering to the spirit of the angel in the home. One critic wrote that Dickens:

Though not in the extreme, like most of the Victorians,... Dickens believed that a woman needed to be the ‘Angel of the House’, devoting her life to housekeeping and child rearing. Hence, the analysis of Dickens’ female characters should be based on the guidelines concerning the social standing and perception of women’s role in society throughout the Victorian era.... (Yildirim 116)

Dickens believed in the Victorian Angel and this is reflected in the figure of Esther, but he is stuck by societal rigidity. Esther is the perfect Victorian Angel, but her illegitimate status is a concern. But Dickens believes in the figure of the Victorian Angel and he does not want to destroy the figure, just expand *who* can fulfill the role. So, Dickens and Brontë both pose the question of what happens if the established angels in the home failed in their roles? Both novels take their governesses to homes that have experienced the chaos that was thought to ensue in the absence of a redeeming angel. The women of

the house, or the lack of one, in one case, have long-lasting effects and ramifications on the stories. But the novels ask the crucial question: can a pseudo-mother resolve the problem?

In *Jane Eyre* the failure of the Thornfield household comes as a result of the failure of the first angel. Rochester's first marriage is arranged by conniving parents, but Bertha's legitimate status and social standing did not provide the necessary stability needed within the household. Part of this is attributed to her hereditary madness, but Rochester also says he "was not sure of the existence of one virtue in her nature: I marked neither modesty, nor benevolence, nor candour, nor refinement in her mind or manners" (Brontë 342). His description of her contradicts the description of the angel she was supposed to be in the Thornfield home. Instead of the selfless, virtuous angel who devoted her heart and soul to the household, he realized he married a woman who would leave him without "a quiet or settled household" (Brontë 343). The absence of a peaceful house, mentioned so casually by Rochester, reveals the destruction that can be caused in a household by an angel who is qualified to fulfill that role, but who lacks the qualities of an angel. His marriage is so caustic that he returns to England to hide from the reality of his "sullied name" and "filthy burden" (Brontë 345). Denying the existence of his wife, he goes throughout Europe searching for "a good and intelligent woman... a contrast to the fury I left" (Brontë 347). Despite the damage Bertha has wreaked on his home, his persistence in searching for an angel reveals his understanding that an angel is necessary for a successful home and his desire to repair his own home.

His European search proves futile, and as Rochester rides back to Thornfield, he stumbles across Jane and is injured in a fall from his horse. Jane offers to help him and Rochester senses that the fortune of his household has changed. He says of this exchange:

something new – a fresh sap and sense – stole into my frame. It was well I had learnt that this elf must return to me – that it belonged to my house down below – or I could not have felt it pass away... without singular regret. (Brontë 350)

In an instant Jane, the pseudo-mother of Rochester's home, completely unknown to him at this point, begins to save him. She has already succeeded in "improv[ing]" Adèle (Brontë 137), her first step in repairing Thornfield. But the angel's duties included both the children and the husband, and Jane's offer of help extends her redemption to Rochester. Rochester's search for an angel of the home has taken him all over Europe, but it leads him back to a governess who has already proven her ability to perform in this role. The solution to his problem had been deposited in his lap and she proves to be a woman who has the qualifications and qualities desired by an angel.

While the novels have many similarities, one of the primary differences between them is the existing angel. Rochester's home has been tainted by an angel who was brought in only because of her money and connections, not her ability to stabilize her home. The negative impact of a fallen angel is obvious, but Dickens takes a different approach to the issue. Jarndyce does not have an angel in the household—not even one hidden or one who has died. Bleak House has long been occupied by a single man, so what would the story have to do with the angel in the house?

Upon Jane's arrival at Thornfield, she is immediately integrated into the household, her testing before she arrives at the home limited to the single interview with

Mr. Brocklehurst. Yet Esther has to prove, again and again, that she is even worthy to assume the role of governess because of her illegitimate blood. Her first test takes place not long after her aunt's death. As Esther is being sent to school, Mr. Jarndyce appears in the coach to evaluate her personally instead of sending Mr. Kenge. Jarndyce offers her a plum-cake, which Esther rejects because "they are too rich for me" (Dickens 38). This evaluation is subtle and has far deeper implications. Esther has been tainted by her parent's illegitimate relationship and welcoming her into a household is potentially dangerous. Can an illegitimate woman be trusted to maintain the middle-class values that are vital for the continuation of middle-class society or will she corrupt those around her? This small evaluation is an opportunity for Esther to prove that she can deny her wants and desires.

At Greenleaf, Esther is tested to see if she will corrupt those around her. When she arrives at Greenleaf is taught that she will "have to depend, by-and-by, on my qualifications as a governess" (Dickens 39). Esther's realization that she will not be provided a living and must thrive and succeed as a governess is another indicator of her worthiness. At this revelation she does not give up, instead choosing to commit herself to her new profession. She says, "I was not only instructed in everything that was taught at Greenleaf, but was very soon engaged in helping to instruct others" (Dickens 39). Her training would qualify her to be a governess, just like all of the other girls who passed through the school, while her commitment to the future that has been chosen for her qualifies her to instruct others. This responsibility to teach others implies that she is worthy to teach children in a home as their pseudo-mother because she is tasked with teaching the future teachers.

Esther again proves her worthiness to be a governess and to teach other governesses, but she still has additional tests to endure. During her six years at Greenleaf, Esther writes Jarndyce multiple times to thank him for his patronage, receiving generic responses in return. One November she receives a letter informing her that Mr. Jarndyce is looking for a companion for his ward (Dickens 40). This is a careful move on Jarndyce's part to invite an angel into his home, but he still wants to test her commitment to the home. Jarndyce recognizes that not just any woman can be an angel, so he tests Esther again and again to see if she possesses the qualities that make an angel.

When Esther receives the letter, it tells her simply: "We have arrnged [arranged] for your being forded, carriage free... to London (sic)" (Dickens 40). Esther is not asked if she is interested in becoming a companion to Jarndyce's ward or if this is a convenient time for her, giving her only five days warning. So, what will Esther do? She is always eager to prove her worthiness and Jarndyce recognizes this. The angel of the household must be self-sacrificing and if Esther is to be Jarndyce's angel, she must be willing to sacrifice again for his needs. Esther is faced with the choice to disobey orders or comply. And like an angel, Esther simply packs her bags and meets the carriage to London, silently sacrificing herself without complaint. She simply says, "it was so gracious in that Father who had not forgotten me, to have made my orphan way so smooth and easy" (Dickens 41). While her orphaned way has been greatly improved because of Jarndyce's patronage, it is not an action merely made from pure benevolence. Jarndyce expects an angel in return and Esther has proven her worthiness again and again.

## A New Angel

Dickens's belief that women should be in the home to ensure its success is clear in *Bleak House*. He offers several examples of households or individuals who have been affected by the lack of a proper angel in the home. One of the most noticeable examples is the infamous Jellyby household. Esther spends her first night in London there and she finds a household torn apart. Mrs. Jellyby is completely devoted to her "African duties" (Dickens 52), trying to fix the world around her, and sending her own home into ruin because of neglect.

Ada, who is sent with Esther to the Jellybys, says, "[h]ow curious of my cousin Jarndyce to send us here" (Dickens 58). Her exposure to this home by Jarndyce is not happenstance. He wants Esther to see the importance of the angel, so he places her in a household with a distracted angel. Esther observes the situation around her and attempts to be kind, but Ada, Jarndyce's niece, strikes at the heart of Esther's role. She blatantly says, "you would make a home out of even this house" (Dickens 58). As Esther tries to restore the Jellyby home in some degree, she fulfills the desire of Jarndyce's heart and proves again that she is worthy of the role of angel. Esther's careful ministrations to the family prove that devotion is what makes an angel, not status alone. Jarndyce's visual lesson also reveals his desire for a home, not a structure of four walls and bricks. He wants Esther to see the disarray and confusion that exists in a home torn apart by conflicting priorities. Then, he wants her to come and commit to him and Bleak House.

Upon Esther's arrival at Bleak House, she is shown her room and begins to unpack when she is brought a very symbolic set of keys. When she inquires as to what the keys are, the maid explains that they are the housekeeping keys (Dickens 88-89). The

gift of the keys immediately upon her arrival at Bleak House reveal that Esther has always been intended to be the mistress of Bleak House. She has proven repeatedly that she embodies the ideals of the angel of the house. Jarndyce needs Esther to save his home and all who will reside there. Jarndyce will never fully ask this of her—even his proposal is sent through a letter—and instead he gives Esther the responsibilities and duties of an angel without first seeking her *by-your-leave*. Yet Jarndyce’s failure to ask Esther what she wants leads to a miscommunication that will almost permanently affect the course of the novel. As she goes to bed that first night at Bleak House, she says to herself, ““Esther, Esther, Esther! Duty, my dear!” (Dickens 103).

Throughout the novel Esther relies upon this sense of duty to comfort her in the choices and decisions she makes. It is one of the deciding factors in her acceptance of Jarndyce’s marriage proposal. Jarndyce has chosen her to be his angel, but Esther is fulfilling the duty out of a sense of obligation, not out of choice. Furthermore, Jarndyce is not seen as the appropriate choice for Esther because he is,

too old for her, [but] Esther had appropriately dreamed as a child that Jarndyce was her father; and her later habit of sitting by his side during the evening, talking and playing backgammon, suggests ministrations to an aging parent. (Broderick and Grant 257)

This critique of Esther and Jarndyce’s relationship is not only appropriate, but crucial to the story. Esther is indeed treated as the illegitimate child or ward of Jarndyce for much of her life, and his sudden attentions to her as a wife are unexpected. Indeed, Esther expresses surprise at her growing responsibilities and his expression of love towards her. Esther only intended to “do some good” in the home but she slowly grows to realize that

her prospects depend on her ability to perceive of Jarndyce as a potential husband. Eventually it becomes clear that Esther must perform the role forced on her in the household she does not permanently desire. However, is an angel forced into a home equal to an angel who has chosen to be there? Esther has the qualifications to be an angel. But if the quality that is most important for an angel is commitment to the home, will this commitment be enough as different opportunities arise?

Jane's story takes a different path because she goes to a home that has an angel, but one who has can no longer fulfill that role because of her mental health. Rochester wanders Europe, seeking temporary angels, and finally returns to England, where Jane gradually begins to restore him and his home. Slowly, Rochester begins to get to know Jane, observing her and conversing with her. Throughout this process, he begins to realize the vast difference between Jane and his first wife, and he wants something more. He tells Jane:

I have found *you*. You are my sympathy – my better self – my good *angel* [emphasis added].... It was because I felt and knew this, that I resolved to marry you. To tell me that I had already a wife is empty mockery: you know now that I had but a hideous demon. (Brontë 353)

Rochester is explicitly clear that he wants to marry Jane. Paradoxically, he directly refers to her as his angel, the very thing that will redeem him, in the same moment he resolves to marry her illegally. So devastating is the damage done on him and his household by his fallen angel that Rochester is willing to bypass mortal and moral law to restore an angel in his household. He also calls his living wife a “demon,” a figure who is the exact opposite of an angel.

While he looks down upon his wife and goes so far as to call her “demon” the actions of Rochester are the farthest thing from heavenly in obtaining an angel. He goes so far as to illegally obtain an angel for his home, first attempting to marry Jane bigamously, without her knowledge. Then, when his attempts at this illegal, bigamous marriage are foiled, he attempts to invite Jane into a common-law marriage. He asks her “to accept my pledge of fidelity and to give me yours” (Brontë 353). This desire to unite with Jane and to have her save him and his house is so deep that Rochester wants an illegal angel in his home. He knows that Jane can redeem him, but his attempts at establishing an illegal angel raise to mind the question, is an illegal angel better than a true angel of the home?

For both male leads of these stories, they are so eager to have established Victorian Angels in their homes that they go to extreme lengths to establish one. Jarndyce finds a girl on the fringe of society and coerces her into the role of his angel, relying upon her intrinsic sense of duty to ensure she won't leave. Rochester takes a different approach, taking the already-established governess at his home and attempting to establish her by any means, legal or illegal. When legal means don't work, Rochester relies on the deep love that Jane has for him to attempt to persuade her to fall from grace for him.

### **The Importance of Angels**

The importance of the Victorian Angel to Dickens and Brontë is very clear. They carefully orchestrate their heroines to this position, but they still are changing the

position. This is a move that other authors have done as well. One critic of the Victorian Angel writes that,

Nonetheless, there have been authors... who have chosen to explode the myth of the Angel in the House and her happy if very confining ending.... some authors, mainly but not exclusively women, have subverted antiquated plot structures, opened up their endings in counter-traditional ways, and given their female characters less angelic demeanors, more alternatives, and a stronger voice with which to articulate their own destinies and champion their own authenticity.

(Hoffman 266)

Dickens and Brontë support the position of the angel, but they are focused on “subverting” the societal expectations that their angels must be solidly middle-class women. They are not simply trying to illustrate the power of the angel in the home (and her effect on those outside of the home). They are trying to show that these women, one who is hanging on the lowest rung of the middle-class ladder with one hand, and the other who doesn’t even have a place in society because of her illegitimate blood, are worthy of being angels in the home. They are attempting to turn the elusive angel position on its head by establishing two women first as governesses, and once they have proven their mettle, as wives. With this understanding that Brontë and Dickens are trying to “subvert” and support the angel, the actions of Jane and Esther become vital. Everything they do, both big and small, provide evidence for the reader that these women are worthy of a happy ending, even if their birth did not allow them that privilege.

Esther goes to great lengths to repair the damage done in many homes from the absence of an angel or as the result of fallen angels. One critic looks at Esther as a

character who brings “equity” to the story: “the equity of Esther Summerson is an everyday ethic of practical engagement with, and correction of, injustice arising from the rigid perpetuation of rules, formalities, and other norms” (Watts 47). While the critic is focusing on Esther’s assistance with the case of Lady Dedlock and Jarndyce v. Jarndyce, the principle applies to her role as an angel. She not only assists in Jarndyce’s home in caring for Ada and Richard and encouraging their future marriage, she also mothers both Ada and Richard (despite being close in age to both). She becomes the peacemaker and intermediary in the Jellyby home, taking special care of Caddy as she moves from daughter to the wife of Mr. Turveydrop, the younger. She takes care of the young Jo, who has been left alone in the world and when his illness spread to the house, she devotes herself to taking care of Charley until she falls ill herself. She does all she can to comfort Lady Dedlock upon her confession that she is Esther’s mother. And as the novel continues, Esther assists here and there, always looking out for others, and spreading her angelic influence throughout, repairing homes.

While Esther’s angelic influence is seen so blatantly throughout the novel, Jane’s influence is far more limited, but still important. In the melodrama of a gothic romance, Jane saves Rochester from his wife’s attempt to burn him as he slumbers, and he remarks that “I have a pleasure of owing you so immense a debt [my life]” (Brontë 170). As Rochester’s wife begins to act out more violently, she deliberately places the other characters in the novel in mortal danger. Yet the consistent character through all these scenes is Jane. As the “demon” seeks to destroy the very lives of the house she was tasked to preserve, the angel steps in and saves them from death. Not only does she save Rochester, but she even saves the life of Bertha’s brother after Bertha has attacked him.

Her ability to preserve life is another sign that she is worthy to be an angel, and when she flees from Thornfield, everything changes. After Jane flees, Rochester tries to find her but is unsuccessful. Slowly, “he grew savage – quite savage on his disappointment: he never was a wild man, but he got dangerous after he lost her” (Brontë 479). The regression of Rochester into a “wild man” is the first example of the power that Jane had as an angel in the home. As Rochester’s current angel had truly fallen, when his desired angel left, he transformed to become like his fallen angel. Brontë illustrates perfectly that the fallen angel will succeed in destroying the home unless an angel is there. The fallen angel was unworthy of her position, but Jane’s actions in preserving life show how worthiness to be the angel.

The novels are upset slowly and gradually and both Jane and Esther are unaware that their good works will earn them the favored position of wife to those they love best. They have these moments where they seem to realize that the possibilities of a permanent house and home of their own choosing will forever be denied them because of their status. They believe that they will be resigned to the governess role, while other less-worthy women receive all that they desire.

Before Jane is sought after as a wife, Rochester brings another woman to the house to test: the beautiful Blanche Ingram. As Jane and Rochester had begun to form a friendship, Jane begins to feel for him but on Blanche’s arrival, she privately berates herself. She is quite cruel to herself, belittling herself through names like, “[p]oor stupid dupe” and “indigent and insignificant plebeian” (Brontë 180). These terms are exactly what society perceived of her: someone who was not worthy of a relationship with an established middle-class man. She reminds herself of what Blanche brings to the potential

marriage, and all that Jane offers is a “Portrait of a Governess, disconnected, poor, and plain” (Brontë 180). Jane sees herself as society perceives her: she is a governess, and she always will be. She labels herself permanently as such and because of this she deems herself not worthy of Rochester’s affection. This takes place after Jane has saved Rochester’s life and even her heroics in saving Rochester do not seem enough to make her worthy of his love. She surrenders hope and succumbs to the false reality that she cannot have happiness because she is a governess.

The pain that Jane feels on Blanche’s arrival is deepened as she begins to realize that Blanche is a woman unworthy of the privileges she is given because of her status.

Jane remarks that:

[Blanche] was very showy, but she was not genuine: she had a fine person, many brilliant attainments; but her mind was poor, her heart barren by nature: nothing bloomed spontaneously on that soil; no unforced natural fruit delighted by its freshness. She was not good;... tenderness and truth were not in her. Too often she betrayed this, by the undue vent she gave to a spiteful antipathy she had conceived against little Adèle: pushing her away...; sometimes ordering her from the room, and always treating her with coldness and acrimony. (Brontë 208)

Jane recognizes that the angel Rochester wants to bring into the home is a woman who is unworthy of that position. Her specific use of words like “barren” and “nothing bloomed” illustrate the inability of Blanche to bring life to a home. Contrasting this with Jane saving Rochester and helping Adèle to blossom, Blanche seems an extremely poor choice for a wife. But society sought Victorian Angels by status, not by worthiness. Until Brontë can fully upset that reality, Jane will be left to watch Rochester make a second mistake.

Jane is far closer to a Victorian Angel than Blanche will ever be, but it does not matter because she is still just a governess.

While Jane has to confront with another angel that Rochester seeks to bring into the home, Esther has to balance other's expectations with her own desires. She is qualified to be the Victorian Angel and she acts as one throughout much of the novel. After the fellow wards of Jarndyce, Richard and Ada, fall in love, Esther is subjected to her future as a guardian angel: "I was to live with them afterwards; I was to keep all the keys of their house; *I was to be made happy for ever and a day* [emphasis added]" (Dickens 215). Esther does not say she will be happy, but that she was to be *made* happy—her happiness will be forced upon her by others. This self-sacrifice is crucial for the Victorian Angel and as she guarantees the happiness and success of Richard and Ada's home, she will be denied one of her own because of status. She does not see herself as worthy of a home of her own, the cruel results of an illegitimate heritage and the training as a governess.

As Jarndyce desires her for his wife, Esther will have to confront the reality that she can preserve Jarndyce's home but only at the loss of her own desires. Thus enters Mr. Woodcourt into Esther's story. She comments offhandedly about "a gentleman of dark complexion – a young surgeon. He was rather reserved, but I thought him very sensible and agreeable" (Dickens 214). For a woman who is devoted to her home, Woodcourt begins to appear in her story frequently, revealing that self-sacrificing, equitable Esther might have her own desires. She mentions that he was at a dinner party she attended (Dickens 237), that he is going on a trip to as a ship's physician (Dickens 277), and even that he left flowers for Esther (Dickens 280). But simply mentioning Woodcourt is not

enough to determine that Esther wants. Finally, Esther admits that if Woodcourt had loved her and if he had “told me that he loved me, before he went away... I should have been glad of it” (Dickens 570). Every small mention of Woodcourt in connection with this revelation, that she “should have been glad of” a profession of his love, finally reveals to the reader what Esther wants. Loving Woodcourt wasn’t something that would be done to her. Esther takes full ownership of this feeling because she finally says, “*I* [emphasis added] should have been glad of it.”

As Jane realizes that her desire to be with Rochester is impossible, Esther’s desire to be with Woodcourt is also an impossibility. While Jane is explicit that her situation arises from class differences, Esther hides the real reason beyond the visage of a scarred face. The reality is that she wants to pursue a relationship with Woodcourt, but duty will keep her on the path that has been chosen for her:

As we gradually begin to understand, she has great doubts about her right to love and marry, and she accepts with misgiving the role of an affectionate spectator of other people’s attachments. There is a buried but potent feeling that the “sin” of being illegitimate makes her unfit for romantic love. (Zwerdling 431)

Jane sees herself as unworthy of love because of her position as a governess, while Esther sees herself as unworthy because of her illegitimate blood. For her, the governess position is not temporary or transitory. This is the only position that she can obtain. Marrying Jarndyce will not provide her with true love but will instead provide her with a permanent home. Choosing her own home is something that Esther simply will not do because of her illegitimate blood. She will accept what has been offered and she reminds herself that: “[w]hen you are the mistress of Bleak House, you are to be cheerful as a

bird. In fact, you are always to be cheerful; so let us begin for once and for all”

(Dickens 692).

### **Happy Endings**

It is the ending of the stories that Brontë and Dickens are finally able to both upset and support the role of the angel of the home. They take their heroines through the arduous process of training to be governesses, which is the only way they will be eligible to enter homes in need of angels. Jane and Esther repeatedly prove their worthiness to fulfill these roles. They must endure the arduous process of watching their own desires slip down the drain because they are deemed to be unworthy by society. But the world of novels is the place where they can find happiness and where the authors can teach the readers that worthiness, not status is what should determine eligibility to be an angel.

In the final pages of the novels is when both women are subjected to the ultimate tests. Jane has run away from Thornfield and she is given the opportunity to leave the role of the angel to determine her own destiny. One critic agrees with this, pointing out:

After Jane leaves Thornfield, she proves her moral worth and her love for Rochester by wandering alone on the moors and continuing to love Rochester even after she finds a happy home at Marsh End and receives a new offer of marriage. Only after Jane inherits her fortune and discovers sympathetic cousins can she return to Rochester and marry him without causing readers to fear for her life. (England 120)

Jane proves her merit by returning to the home that houses both her love and her demon.

Ignorant of everything that has happened, it is far more likely that Jane will return to a

broken home. She will return to a home that can never fully accept her because the role of angel has already been filled. But she returns and in this very act of coming to check after her home without the promise of even a temporary position there, Jane provides the ultimate proof that she is worthy to be an angel in the home.

For Esther, her path is different, but just like Jane she remains faithful and committed to the home she has been assigned. When Mr. Jarndyce proposes to her via letter, she makes the decision to sacrifice herself for the good of Bleak House. She kisses her housekeeping keys and then she burns the flowers that Woodcourt had given her (Dickens 692-693). The burning of those flowers is a deeply symbolic act of her conscious decision to abandon her own desires for the good of Bleak House. When she is escorted home by Woodcourt and he confesses his love, she says to him, "I am not free to think of [your love]" (Dickens 938). Esther denies herself of the desires of her heart when she says that she is "not free" but her wording of the phrase hints at what she really wants. She does not confess to Woodcourt that she is in love with Jarndyce. She only says that she is "not free." Esther is not free to choose what she wants because she has made the conscious choice to marry out of duty. As she denies her one chance at true love is when Esther reveals she is truly worthy of the role of angel.

As Jane and Esther pass their final tests, the authors finally succeed in upsetting the angel of the home by establishing more worthy angels. They have proven again and again that their angels are worthy and committed to the home, which is what the angel embodies. Their qualifications as governesses gave them the opportunity to prove that they possessed the qualities of an angel and, more importantly, that they were willing to

act upon them. Yet it is only through the upsetting of the homes that they can prove their merit, and at last be given their rewards.

Jane returns to find Rochester injured, Thornfield destroyed, and new home that is very much in need of repair from an angel. Rochester asks Jane to marry him (legally this time) and she agrees again and again, despite his reminders that he is “a poor blind man, whom you will have to lead about by the hand” and “a crippled man, twenty years older than you, whom you will have to wait on” (Brontë 499). In looking on this exchange and Jane’s decision to return to Rochester, one critique seems appropriate: “Jane resigns herself to the domestic sphere... as wife... exchange[ing] her former child-rearing position as a paid governess with the new unpaid feminine status of mother” (Godfrey 868). This critique misses the heart of what is driving Jane back to Rochester. This is best seen when Rochester says that Jane “delight[s] in sacrifice,” hinting that Jane only stays because of an affinity for martyrdom, she says:

Sacrifice! What do I sacrifice? Famine for food, expectation for content. To be privileged to put my arms round what I value – to press my lips to what I love – to repose on what I trust; is that to make a sacrifice? If so, then certainly I delight in sacrifice. (Brontë 499)

For Jane, her sacrifice is non-existent because she is finally allowed to have what she wants. Her love for Rochester is what took her back to him, even when it was not likely she could be with him. There is no “resignation” in this exchange. This is not something that Jane does because she has no other choice. She chooses Rochester and even if she only gets half a man, Jane wants Rochester. In this sweet exchange, Jane reveals what is

most important in being an angel. Duty, commitment, and sacrifice makes an angel, but love is what makes an angel bloom.

Like Jane, Esther's commitment and sacrifice is rewarded and she is given the desire of her heart. Jarndyce takes her to a home and in a sharp shift from fiancée, Jarndyce tells Esther to "lie lightly, confidently, here my child... I am your guardian and your father now" (Dickens 964). This change is one that Esther could not have predicted. She had promised herself to him and to his home. But Jarndyce realized that in so diligently desiring a wife for his home, he would deprive Esther of something she had earned—her happiness.

It is revealed that when Woodcourt proposed, Jarndyce was aware of it and had created a final test in that situation for Esther. But when Esther sacrifices herself for his home, Jarndyce has an unexpected change in heart. He says, "I had no doubt of your being contented and happy with me, being so dutiful and so devoted; but I saw with whom you could be happier" (Dickens 964). Esther had been willing to give her youth and heart to someone who was past the prime and Jarndyce recognized this. And for the first time, Jarndyce does what a father should do for his child. He provides her legitimization and a chance at happiness. He tells her that "this is Bleak House. This day I give this house its little mistress..." (Dickens 965). Not only does he provide Esther a home, but he facilitates that final piece of her happiness: "[Jarndyce] rose, and raised me with him. We were no longer alone. My husband – I have called him by that name full seven happy years now – stood at my side" (Dickens 965). Like Jane, Esther chose the stability and sanctity of her home. But Jarndyce provides Esther her happiness and desire and revitalizes Bleak House. With Jarndyce and Esther, Bleak House would have likely

died. But in the happy union of Esther and Woodcourt, Bleak House will have another chance.

Both Jane and Esther truly become the angels, a role both did not expect or ever hope to receive because of their status. Angels were determined by status and wealth, not deeds. But Dickens and Brontë use the governess to show how society has become corrupt by the titled and wealthy and absent angels. Through the figures of Esther and Jane they show that desire and training and commitment is what qualifies a woman to be an angel, not her pedigree. Commitment to the home is what matters and that makes any woman, even pseudo-mother governesses, qualified and capable of fulfilling that role. Any woman can be that angel—in any class, in any family.

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