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The Calling of Governess

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THE CALLING OF GOVERNESS

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English

by
Karissa Aryn Maust
May 2024

Accepted by:
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ABSTRACT

The governess is a widely discussed figure in literary criticism. However, the motivations that cause literary characters to engage in the profession of governess are not often talked about. This thesis discusses the three primary motivations that inspired women to become governesses—survival, duty, and calling. It begins with a historical discussion of the governess, then illustrates women’s reasons for engaging in this occupation, using literary figures from *Emma*, *Villette*, and *Jane Eyre* to do so. The thesis then ends with a discussion of the modern American teacher—how she differs from the governess but also shares the lack of appreciation for her work and the motivations for engaging in the work. The modern teacher also relates to the governess in the temporality of her position. This thesis inspires scholars to look at the motivations behind the stock figure of the governess and apply the same level of thought to the role of the current teacher.
DEDICATION

To Corban—you believed in this project before it was a concrete idea. Your encouragement and belief in me mean more than you know. Also, to my parents—thank you for encouraging my love of reading and words. You laid the foundation that made a work like this possible.
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THE CALLING OF GOVERNESS

In an 1847 example of an advertisement written to recommend herself to a potential employer, a young woman makes clear what matters to the position: “As Governess or companion—a lady, of high respectability, aged 24, of many years’ experience in tuition, has recently quitted a clergyman’s family, from whom she can produce satisfactory testimonials, wishes to meet with a re-engagement as above” (“Governess, Companion, and Housekeeper Ads”). Respectability is one of the most notable qualities described here; for a governess, being a respectable lady was the best way to recommend oneself for a job. Potential employers would not hire someone with a less than stellar reputation, and the governess was to have a direct influence on the employer’s children. The rest of the advertisement expounds on the governess’s reputable qualities—“She will be found confident to impart a solid English education, with French (speaking that language fluently), drawing, painting, dancing, singing. Rudiments of harp, and can finish pupils on pianoforte, and plain and ornamental needlework” (“Governess, Companion, and Housekeeper Ads”). A governess was to be a model of an accomplished lady that her pupils would look up to and emulate. Therefore, governesses, or those who wrote the advertisement for them, were careful to include every skill that they had that was in line with the public’s image of a respectable, accomplished lady, such as art and embroidery, French language proficiency, and the ability to play various instruments. Interestingly, it was usually a governess’s place to advertise herself; some advertisements seeking governesses exist, but the more likely course of action was to have the governess do the seeking of a position. Respectability dictated that, if possible, people not publicly decry their need for a governess, or fraternize with someone
from a lower class. Therefore, it was usually a governess’s responsibility to speak to a potential employer.

The figure of the governess is often taken for granted in modern literary criticism. She is seen as a character that exists solely to move the plot along. Jane Eyre is a widely studied literary governess, but teaching on the book largely centers on the nuances of the plot and themes such as love, religion, social class, and a sense of home and belonging. Rarely do literary scholars examine Jane’s motivations for being a governess and how they intersect with the book’s themes, simply accepting that she is one. Therefore, in my thesis, I seek to unsettle the static figure of the literary governess and explore her motivations for engaging in the profession.

When studying the figure of the governess and the reasons she might engage in the profession, three major motivations come to mind—survival, duty, and a sense of calling. Some women became governesses simply because no other respectable option was available to them, and they had to earn a living to survive. However, literary examples indicate that many women may have engaged in the governess profession because of a sense of duty or calling. At first glance, these two categories, duty and calling, may seem to oppose one another, since calling is associated with something a person deeply wants to do, while duty suggests a sense of obligation. However, Jane Eyre’s experience as governess, for example, reveals that these two reasons for becoming a governess can coexist, and often do. Throughout this thesis, I intend to prove that duty and calling are not separate reasons for engaging in the professions of teaching and governessing; a sense of deep responsibility and a deep desire to engage in a job can coexist, meaning that a job engaged in due to necessity is not devoid of fulfillment.
Survival is often a reason that a woman would become a governess, but what I intend to explore in this paper is the tension between duty and calling. A definition of duty is necessary when exploring the tension between calling and duty that arises in the governess profession. The word duty implies a sense of obligation to one’s occupation. Max Weber addresses the obligation involved in the definition of duty in his book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, in which Weber describes the changes brought about by Martin Luther’s Reformation: “The only way of living acceptably to God was not to surpass worldly morality in monastic asceticism, but solely through the fulfilment of the obligations imposed upon the individual by his position in the world. That was his calling” (40). Weber is discussing here that the idea of calling as something that could be fulfilled outside of the church was largely a Protestant notion, and it has close ties to a feeling of duty. In the case of the governess, as well as the modern day teacher, duty can often be a motivation to engage in one’s job. Duty is often what inspires a governess or teacher to keep putting in effort on difficult days, as seen in literary examples such as Jane Eyre. Duty is therefore essential to both teachers and governesses, even when a calling is present.

A definition of calling is also necessary to understand how duty and calling coexist, proving that duty does not counteract a person’s sense of fulfillment in their job. Another word for calling is vocation. In his book *Reimagining the Call to Teach: A Witness to Teachers and Teaching*, David Hansen provides the primary definition of calling/vocation that shapes this project. His definition reads as follows: “The Latin root of vocation, vocare, means ‘to call.’ It denotes a summons or bidding to be of service. It has been used to describe both secular and religious commitments” (2). Here, one can see that that the definition of calling/vocation is quite similar to the definition of duty and that it exists in both secular and religious contexts. While
they are not the same, these motivations for engaging in teaching and governess work can coexist. Calling, as described by Hansen, has a connotation of service. While his work does not directly apply to that of the governess, his examination of the calling that many teachers experience is applicable to this historical context because of the similar motivations teachers and governesses share for engaging in their work. He explains the purpose that a teacher feels when called to the work in the following manner: “If not in so many words, the teacher called to the work aspires to bring to life their potential fullness as a human being in conjunction in supporting students with doing the same” (Hansen 8). Calling and duty, then, are similar motivations for becoming a teacher (or governess).

Jane Eyre reveals the tension between duty and calling that she faces when she seeks to find a new occupation; she feels that serving others is an obligation, but she also takes delight in her service. In her words, she finds meaning and a sense of living a purposeful life even in servitude. When Jane Eyre contemplates changing positions from a teacher at Lowood school to that of a governess, she articulates her reasoning for looking for a governess position in the following manner:

A new servitude! There is something in that…I know there is, because it does not sound too sweet; it is not like such words as Liberty, Excitement, Enjoyment: delightful sounds truly; but no more than sounds for me; and so hollow and fleeting that it is a mere waste of time to listen to them. Anyone may serve; I have served here eight years; now all I want is to serve elsewhere. Can I not get so much of my own will? Is not the thing feasible? Yes—yes—the end is not so difficult; if I had only a brain active enough to ferret out the means of attaining it. (Jane Eyre 81-82)
One can see that Jane feels compelled to serve; she discards words such as “Liberty, Excitement, Enjoyment” because she feels them to be unachievable. This could indicate that she wants to become a governess out of a sense of duty, calling, or both, since calling can feel like a sort of compulsion to a person who feels strongly that they must engage in the work, whether guided by personal or moral interest. In addition, the inclusion of “elsewhere” in the quote reveals the possibility of freedom that Jane could find in being a governess, though it is freedom of a limited sort; this inclusion also indicates the temporality of the governess position. The temporality could bring freedom because the governess is now free to find a new calling. Duty and calling, though seemingly contradictory, can be concurrent motivations for becoming a governess.

Jane Eyre experiences both duty and calling as motivations for becoming a governess. Cristobál Madero’s article “A Calling to Teach: What the Literature on Callings Tells Us about Approaches to Research the Calling to the Teaching Profession” reveals these simultaneous motivations since he explains different motivations for calling that I argue could have influenced Jane. He shows that calling can be defined in three different ways: “Three different people could understand the same type of work in three ways: from a God that he or she assumes is a calling (classical), a secular call that fulfills one’s own desires (modern), or a social need that operates as a source of the calling, which draws one into the work and fulfills the self (neoclassical)” (Madero 175). What Eyre describes as servitude could be seen as a modern sense of calling, a response to a sense of need that can also provide individual fulfillment, either concurrent with or separate from duty. Understanding Jane’s sense of calling in this way helps readers to further note the tension between calling and duty and the fact that these motivations are more similar than different. Jane Eyre reveals that she has a sense of calling to become a governess when she
discusses the delight she feels in Adèle’s progress as a pupil: “I felt a conscientious solitude for Adèle’s welfare and progress, and a quiet liking for her little self” (*Jane Eyre* 103). Eyre may well have started the job with a sense of duty, but this duty soon becomes intertwined with and nearly indistinguishable from a calling to help Adèle grow. Whether Jane’s calling here is from God or comes from a response to a social need is not fully clear. However, the important aspect of this anecdote is that it illustrates the fact that duty and calling can coexist as motivations for becoming a governess.

If the relationship between calling and duty was not valued during the time of the governess, that lack of value continues into the present. Madero, for example, explains that an individual sense of calling is not always valued in today’s workforce. He writes, “Indeed, the current phase of modernity has allowed the values of the market to enter all dimensions of human life. This context makes it difficult, to say the least, to acknowledge a calling from outside the self when it comes to work” (Madero 171). Many jobs that make a social difference do not fit into this category; consider many types of caretakers or people involved in helping professions, such as social workers, nursing assistants, and especially teachers. Though callings are not always valued, Madero insists that they still have a place in today’s world: “Human beings continue to use the label of calling to describe human activities because of the service they provide, perhaps even in a transcendental way, to those who embrace them… callings touch the nucleus of the self, where human beings can find meaning in their own free choices” (Madero 171). Here, Madero hits at the heart of calling; having a calling to engage in one’s job provides a sense of meaning and purpose even in the mundane tasks. He seems to suggest that many American workers today are pressured when choosing a job to find one that is seen as
prestigious or lucrative. Callings, then, still have value in a world in which some jobs are often not valued for their social impact.

A calling provides a sense of fulfillment for teachers and governesses, in both present and historical contexts. Madero concludes his article by further reflecting on what the concept of calling adds to the teaching profession and those involved in it:

No matter the developing or the developed world, most every place treats teaching as an undervalued profession…Understanding callings…offers a very compelling possibility…of the creation of a coherent narrative of the teaching profession in history. In this way, callings can function as a bridge, a key piece in teachers’ lives that connect current teachers to a wider ethos: a community of people with a calling to educate human beings for a world in need. (Madero 183)

Madero notes the benefits of callings for teachers even in a world where a calling is not always accepted as a valid reason for engaging in a profession, also bringing to mind the value of a calling for Jane Eyre in a time when governesses were undervalued. A sense of calling helps teachers to find fulfillment in their work and to consider the impact their work will have on the lives of others, particularly those they teach. Duty still compels the teacher and governess, however. As previously mentioned, the governess was required to uphold strict standards of decorum as a woman in 18th-19th century England; conduct manuals often laid out these standards. In her book *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, Nancy Armstrong describes the pervasiveness of these manuals: “So popular did these books become that by the second half of the eighteenth century, virtually everyone knew the ideal of womanhood they proposed”
In other words, these manuals laid out a way of life for women in Great Britain that governesses and all other women were expected to follow. The governess had to model these standards to pass them along to the young girls whom she taught. The very titles of popular conduct manuals at the time reveal the connection that duty had to the governess profession. Some sample titles include: The *Real Duty of a Woman, In the Education of a Daughter* (1750); and *The Whole Duty of Woman by a Lady: Written at the Desire of a Noble Lord* (1753). These titles reveal how strongly duty was tied to the work of a governess. The conduct manual entitled *The Whole Duty of Woman by a Lady: Written at the Desire of a Noble Lord* even shows that a woman felt obligated to write it. Armstrong writes about the aim these manuals had for their readers, saying, “the conduct books sought to define the practice of secular morality as the woman’s natural duty” (Armstrong 68). In other words, the manuals assert that a woman’s obligation and duty was to the home. Fulfilling this obligation meant that she would also fulfill her duty to the public, as she would shape young minds in her own image. The governess was one such woman invested in shaping these young minds. Armstrong’s discussion of conduct manuals reveals how duty often influenced the calling of a woman to be a governess.

The governess profession was often one of loneliness, as governesses were looked down upon and had few social equals. Nora Gilbert writes about the hardships governesses of the time faced: “alienation…lay at the heart of the governesses’ perceived plight” (Gilbert 456). “The governess was often cut off from fellowship with peers, including other women. Gilbert continues to elaborate on the difficulties of being a governess, saying, “Because she found herself in a social standing abyss, ‘inferior’ to the family she worked for but ‘superior’ to her employer’s housemaids, cooks, footmen, et al., the governess’s free time was not uncommonly
spent on her own” (Gilbert 456). This prolonged alone time and social alienation would have been difficult for governesses; therefore, many of them turned to letter writing. Gilbert writes, “Almost all resident governesses relied on letter writing as their primary source of connection to the outside world, but many also expressed their thoughts and opinions in the form of journals, diaries, memoirs, advice manuals, essays, poems, and works of fiction” (456). Though governesses experienced vast amounts of loneliness, they used the meager resources they had to reach out to others. Gilbert continues, “As the public fascination with the governess figure grew throughout the first half of the century, more and more of these written efforts found their way into print, adding a new dynamic to the governess’s perception and reception within the Victorian world” (456). Gilbert notes that both literature written by governesses and about governesses was in demand during the Victorian era. She describes the Brontë sisters’ unique position to raise awareness of the governess’s plight: “There is, of course, nothing too remarkable about basing one’s fictional creations on one’s personal experiences. Yet I would argue that women working as governesses were placed in a particularly optimal position to pursue this kind of life writing. Many Victorian articles and advice manuals described the model governess in terms of her willingness to stay on the periphery” (Gilbert 463). Gilbert reveals here that a fundamental power imbalance exists in the governess’s relationships with others, but the governess, as the Brontës show, sought to take this power back by writing.

The governess novel emerged as a genre as a way to raise awareness of the governess’s hardships and the fact that she had to teach a certain brand of British respectability; foreign-born governesses in particular were often marginalized. In her article “A German Jane Eyre? Amely Bölte and the English Governess Novel,” Müller-Adams gives a brief history of the governess as
she has appeared in novels. She focuses specifically on the novels of Amely Bölte and what she has contributed to the figure of the governess. Amely Bölte is lauded alongside Brontë as a novelist who featured governesses in her works (Müller-Adams 104). Müller-Adams begins her article by describing the history of the governess novel and how it appeared on the literary scene: “Whereas fictional governesses can be traced back to the eighteenth century, novels featuring resident governesses and their relation to employers and pupils did not appear until the turn of the century” (Müller-Adams 105). Amely Bölte was one of these authors who wrote about resident governesses; like Brontë, she spent time as a governess herself (Müller-Adams 103). Bölte’s goal was to write governess novels that would be understood in a German context (Müller-Adams 103). As a political activist, she sought to not only raise awareness of the hardships governesses in general faced, but also of the particular difficulties that a foreign-born governess experienced (Müller-Adams 103). While sometimes a foreign-born governess was in demand, these women were often looked down upon when seeking to find a position in England, because they were not considered to be a proper British woman that could be an excellent example for a potential employer’s impressionable children.

Though often looked down upon, the governess was a needed figure due to the popularity of home education, especially for young girls, and the new notion that a respectable gentlewoman did not teach her own children. In her book *The Victorian Governess*, Kathryn Hughes discusses the prevalence of governesses that began at the end of the eighteenth century: “Her appearance at [the middle class family’s] table was a direct consequence of the increased wealth of the nation, epitomised by the success of industrialists and financiers, but shared by a growing middle class” (11). The growing wealth of British families explains how they could
afford a governess, but it does not fully explain their need for one. Hughes explains that the necessity for a governess came from the different expectations for a gentleman and a lady: “while the successful professional man could achieve the status of a gentleman through work, the opposite was increasingly true of his wife and daughters” (12). Daughters needed to stay home to learn to be a lady, and their mother could not educate them, as that would be a form of work. Therefore, governesses became an absolute necessity in the middle class home, teaching middle-class morality and respectability. Hughes discusses the importance of the governess’s role in the following manner: “Chosen as much for her moral as her intellectual qualities, the governess was responsible for the total welfare of her young charges. While she was competent to instruct in a wide range of academic subjects, her main task was to provide the round-the-clock moral and social supervision that her employer was unable to supply” (21). The governess was clearly an integral part of the home, filling in for the mother, who had to focus on the accomplishments that would make her a lady. Hughes continues, “Since ladyhood could only be absorbed from a suitably refined home environment, it was essential that the governess, as stand-in for her pupil’s mother, should be a gentlewoman” (21). Hughes undoubtedly establishes the growing need for middle-class families to employ a governess in the nineteenth century.

In many children’s books, the governess was a lauded figure, showing the prevalence of the governess in British homes and helping to influence this prevalence. In her article “Impeccable Governesses, Rational Dames, and Moral Mothers: Mary Wollstonecraft and the Female Tradition in Georgian Children’s Books,” Mitzi Myers writes about the influence children’s literature can have on women: “Because children's tales perform a variety of cultural functions, they are crammed with clues to changes in attitudes, values, and behavior” (33).
Children’s literature, which mothers also read, clearly had an influence on the number of governesses being employed. Myers also discusses how female writers found a market beginning in the late eighteenth century:

For with the late eighteenth-century expansion of the reading public (much of it more leisured middle-class women), female writers crowded into the juvenile market. Sharing their era's appetite for educational reform, this early generation of professional women found in children's books not just an outlet available to their sex, but a genuine vocation. In their capacity as surrogate mothers, these writing women testify to maternal and pedagogical power. (33)

Literature directed toward children and other women became an outlet for female writers, and it helped them to influence the public. Much of this influence helped to popularize having a governess in one’s home.

Knowing the history of the governess provides a picture of a woman who was both marginalized and lauded. She was appreciated for her contribution to society but not treated as an equal to those she helped. However, some governesses still found a measure of fulfillment in their work. In other words, they had a vocation, a concept which I wish to explore in the remainder of this paper.

Jane Eyre is a prime example of the tension that appears within the figure of the governess between survival, duty, and calling. As an unmarried woman, she must provide for herself. However, it is clear throughout the novel that she also seeks an occupation where she can
find fulfillment amid duty. Jane addresses the importance of independence in a woman’s life as she adjusts to spending all her time with Adèle:

Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts just as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, as precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex.

*(Jane Eyre 104)*

Jane expresses a need to “exercise her faculties,” a phrase which is indicative of calling because it shows a need for fulfillment. This phrase also reveals the temporality of the governess position, but this temporality can add to the freedom of the governess. She can find freedom in a calling “to go elsewhere” *(Jane Eyre 81-82)*. In other words, a freedom exists in the imagined mobility of her position. Duty and calling can coexist, and calling can bring a sense of fulfillment to one’s occupation, as described by Jane in the above excerpt.

Governesses were often motivated by a sense of duty to take up their profession, as can be seen in many literary works featuring these women as characters. One important novel that illustrates this sense of duty is Jane Austen’s *Emma*. Though the protagonist of *Emma* is not a governess, Jane Fairfax, who is a near acquaintance of the protagonist, considers becoming one. She is not sure whether she will get married and is looking for a way to support herself;
becoming a governess is one of the few respectable options open to her. The novel highlights the motivations that might lead a woman to work as a governess.

*Emma* begins with the news that the eponymous heroine’s former governess is to be married; the novel thus opens with the sense that the position of a governess was best understood as temporary. Nevertheless, the narrator reveals at the beginning of Emma’s story that Emma’s governess was important to her development: “[Emma’s] mother had died too long ago for her to have more than an indistinct remembrance of her caresses, and her place had been supplied by an excellent woman as governess, who had fallen little short of a mother in affection” (Austen 55). This passage reveals to readers that Emma and her governess were quite close, also showing that it was possible for a governess to convey maternal qualities. A governess had a great deal of responsibility, especially in a household like Emma’s, where a mother was not present.

Regardless of her importance to Emma’s household, the narrator insists on the great advantage that leaving it will bring to a woman like Miss Taylor, describing her upcoming marriage as holding “every promise of happiness for [Emma’s] friend. Mr. Weston was a man of unexceptionable character, easy fortune, suitable age, and pleasant manners” (Austen 55-56). In other words, the novel begins by showing a governess leaving her position for a more advantageous situation. Though she is understandably sad at the loss of companionship she will experience due to Miss Taylor’s marriage, Emma herself remarks to her father that Miss Taylor is making a better life for herself: “you would not have Miss Taylor live with us for ever and bear all my odd humours, when she might have a house of her own?” (Austen 57). Emma recognizes that Miss Taylor’s marriage is helping her gain independence, and she reveals that she thinks that a governess position is not one that a women would stay in forever if she could find another
respected option, which meant an offer of marriage and independence in the form of her own space in which to reside.

Miss Taylor’s example reveals that a governess position was ideally temporary, as a respectable woman’s eventual goal was marriage. Until she could marry, the respectable governess would pass on conduct manual femininity to the young girls under her tutelage. This conduct manual femininity was designed to prepare young girls for marriage by showing them the qualities that it took to become a respectable woman. Mr. Knightley talks about how Miss Taylor’s situation with Emma prepared her for marriage: “You are better placed here; very fit for a wife, but not at all for a governess. But you were preparing yourself to be an excellent wife all the time you were at Hartfield. You might not give Emma such a complete education as your powers would seem to promise; but you were receiving a very good education from her, on the very matrimonial point of submitting your own will” (Austen 80). Mr. Knightley shows here that being a governess was usually a temporary situation for women hopefully preceding marriage. A governess who did not desire to get married or who saw being a governess as a calling likely passed along the principles of conduct manuals out of duty if she did not believe in them herself. Miss Taylor seemed to be happy as a governess, unlike many others of her time. However, until she had the opportunity to get married and have a house of her own, it is perhaps the best situation she can find and she makes the most of it. Mr. Knightley reflects on this fact by describing how he feels Miss Taylor has placed herself in a better situation. He responds to Emma’s father lamenting Miss Taylor’s marriage in the following manner: “Poor Mr. and Miss Woodhouse, if you please; but I cannot possibly say ‘poor Miss Taylor.’ I have a great regard for you and Emma; but when it comes to the question of dependence or independence! —At any
rate, it must be better to have one to please, than two” (Austen 59). Mr. Knightley agrees with
Emma that marriage should be the eventual goal of governesses because marriage allows a
greater sense of independence and often gives a woman access to property. This was the
prevailing opinion about the situation of the governess at the time.

Miss Taylor did find fulfillment in the work, though, as evidenced by her connection to
Emma. The narrator describes Miss Taylor’s sorrow over leaving Emma in the following
manner: “She knew that at times she must be missed; and could not think, without pain, of
Emma’s losing a single pleasure, or suffering an hour’s ennui, from the want of her
companionableness” (Austen 65). Miss Taylor’s affection for Emma does not change after she
gets married, as she is a frequent visitor at Hartfield. Miss Taylor’s care for Emma after her
marriage is evident in the following response of hers to Mr. Knightley, who is criticizing Emma
for her relationship with Harriet: “With all dear Emma’s faults, she is an excellent creature.
Where shall we see a better daughter, a kinder sister, or a truer friend?” (Austen 81). Miss
Taylor’s affection for Emma shows that she had a sense of fulfillment in her work as a governess
because she enjoyed the work.

While Miss Taylor looks to leave the governess profession, Jane Fairfax looks to enter it,
though she makes it clear that she does so against her will and judgment. One of the most
shocking passages from *Emma* regarding governesses comes from Jane Fairfax as she imagines
herself seeking a governess position. Jane reveals that although governesses needed to have
respectable qualities, they were not always viewed as respectable by society. She describes the
places in town that will help her to find a position as a governess as “Offices for the sale—not
quite of human flesh—but of human intellect” (Austen, *Emma* 271). Jane continues her
somewhat grotesque analogy by clarifying that the slave trade and the governess trade are
“widely different certainly as to the guilt of those who carry it on; but as to the greater misery of
the victims, I know not where it lies” (Austen, *Emma* 271). Jane’s description of the governess
profession as a form of slavery gets to the heart of what many imagine the position of governess
to be. Many governesses engaged in the profession because it was one of the few respectable job
options open to them, but they were not always treated like respectable women. They had to pass
down middle-class respectability to the girls under their tutelage, but they were still seen as
lower than the women they worked for. Though the comparison of the misery of governesses and
the misery of enslaved people is horrendous because it diminishes the cruelty of slavery, Jane
Fairfax’s main point holds true, that the governess was required to pass down ideals of
respectability that were not necessarily considered pertinent to her; teaching these ideals and
being marginalized by the family that she worked for was a sure recipe to make a governess
miserable, even if she liked other aspects of her job. Jane’s description of the governess trade
shows that the governess profession was often viewed as a duty to pass on respectability that
amounted to servitude to those who defined respectability, which is how Jane Eyre describes it.

Jane Fairfax, a woman seeking a governess position in the novel *Emma*, looks for such a
position because it is one of the few respectable options open to her. However, Emma’s reaction
to finding out Jane is looking for such a position is one of incredulity, since she believes
marriage is the most respectable option. Upon finding out about a secret engagement between
Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax, Emma utters the following: “Jane actually on the point of
going as governess! What could he mean by such horrible indelicacy? To suffer her to engage
herself—to suffer her to even think of such a measure!” (Austen 342). Emma is lamenting the
impropriety of Frank Churchill in allowing Jane to take on a governess position while she was engaged to him; Emma believed a governess position was above Jane’s station because she was soon to be a married woman in a respectable family, furthering the notion introduced by the conduct manuals that a respectable wife did not educate children and showing that being a respectable wife was the only respectable goal for bourgeois women of this time.

The governess had to model for those under her tutelage what it meant to be a respectable British woman. Miss Taylor certainly did so with Emma. Readers can also see evidence of this fact in the way that Emma treated Jane Fairfax. Clearly, Emma thought Jane was too accomplished for a governess, as evidenced by her jealousy of Jane’s skills on the pianoforte and her criticism of Jane’s reserve. Emma thought Jane was trying to rise above her rank, in a sense; however, she is also appalled that Frank Churchill would let Jane apply for a governess position when the couple is about to be married. Because of her deep concern for propriety and rank, which reflects the opinion of many women during this time, Emma looks down on Jane for seeking a governess position. Jane herself recognizes the duty that often leads to women taking on a governess position. The mistreatment that several women faced in this position meant that many women would only be drawn to the profession out of necessity. Being a governess was one of the few respectable positions at the time for a working woman. The novel *Emma* shows readers the necessity and sense of duty that prompted women like Jane Fairfax to seek out such a position and it shows the mistreatment numerous governesses faced and why they may not be called to the work.

Though *Emma* shows how women often became governesses due to necessity, *Villette* provides an example of what a calling to the work of governess may have looked like. This novel
chronicles the life and professions of Lucy Snowe, who moves from the fictional country of Labassecour (representative of France) to England. She has numerous occupations throughout the novel. She cares for an elderly woman, watches over her employer Madame Beck’s children, and eventually becomes a teacher at a Pensionnat in the Rue Fossette. One occupation that she is adamant she will never hold, however, is that of a governess. Her sentiments about the governess profession, unlike those articulated in *Emma*, open the possibility that being a governess could be a profession a woman could find deep fulfillment in, though Snowe is adamant that such will not be the case for her.

Snowe’s beliefs about the governess profession and the concept of calling alerts readers to the fact that, though being a governess often resulted from duty, this profession was not devoid of fulfillment. Snowe reveals her feelings about the profession when she is approached by the father of Paulina Mary, a young girl whom she lived with for a time, to be her governess and companion. She claims, “I had not that vocation. I could teach; I could give lessons; but to be either a private governess or a companion was unnatural to me. Rather than fill the former post in any great house, I would deliberately have taken a housemaid’s place…I would have made shirts, and starved” (*Jane Eyre* 330). When approached to fill this post, she vehemently refuses. Her reasoning? She claims not to have the calling to be a governess. She notes that she did not have that vocation, a word that indicates Snowe does not view becoming a governess as a pursuit worth taking up. When vocation is discussed in a modern context, it is often used to mean an occupation that a person feels they were created or destined to occupy. Though Snowe refuses the post of governess, Brontë’s *Villette* suggests to its readers that being a governess was a role in which many women could find a sense of purpose due to their ability to provide for themselves,
opening a way for readers to think about how the occupation could be a calling even as Snowe indicates that it is not a vocation for her.

Snowe’s concept of calling was likely tied to her Protestant faith, though she could have also been trying to excuse herself from the position of governess in claiming she did not have that vocation (Villette 330). Throughout the novel Villette, Snowe frequently reflects on her faith and references the Bible, illuminating that she holds her faith in high regard. The references to Snowe’s faith are reflective of Brontë’s own Protestant upbringing and faith, and many have claimed that Brontë modeled Snowe after herself. In her article “Why Lucy Doesn’t Care: Migration and Emotional Labor in Villette,” for example, Talia Schaffer notes, “Charlotte Brontë herself knew the stress of emotional labor and drew on her own teaching experience in imagining Lucy Snowe’s struggles” (Schaffer 86). Lucy Snowe’s mental health is nearly a direct reflection of Brontë’s mental health. Schaffer goes on to note the specific stresses that caregiving caused for Brontë (Schaffer 86). She writes, “If [Brontë] steals a moment for herself she is a nuisance. But showing exhaustion or depression was not permitted. When Brontë seemed downcast, her employer scolded her” (Schaffer 86). This inability to express her emotions caused Brontë to be silent about her struggles and impacted her creation of Lucy Snowe, who modeled Brontë’s faith. By including Snowe’s assertion that she “had not that vocation [of governess,]” Brontë indicates that being a governess requires a sense of calling. In the terms of her Protestant faith, this calling is a sign from God that Snowe is not fit for the profession of governess. She could also be using the idea of a calling as an excuse, however. Not wanting the role herself, she pretends to imagine that it is appropriate only for those selected to take it on.
One prevalent imagined problem with the position of governess is the degree to which one’s life becomes not one’s own. Snowe in particular sheds light on the difficulties governesses faced in terms of privacy; her refusal to be “a private governess or companion” seems to come from the constant need to be available for her potential pupil (Villette 330). Governesses faced a lack of privacy, as they lived in the homes where they worked. Even when they were done teaching for the day, they were never truly away from the work. Readers can discern that Snowe was not rejecting teaching, as she later becomes a teacher; it was the lack of independence and the need to constantly be on call that she was eschewing in saying that she did not want to be a private companion or governess.

Snowe expresses the difficulties foreign governesses and teachers faced in England, further emphasizing why she may not have felt called to the work. She finds herself in a foreign country after her former employer has died, and she expresses her distress at her situation when trying to convey to a cabman where to send her trunk, containing all her earthly possessions: “How difficult, how oppressive, how puzzling seemed my plight! In London for the first time; at an inn for the first time; tired with traveling; confused with darkness; palsied with cold; unfurnished with either experience or advice to tell me how to act, and yet—to act obliged” (Villette 51). She was exhausted, having just arrived in a foreign country in which communicating to others required extreme effort. Her distress here is at her unfamiliar surroundings, likely exacerbated by the lack of privacy she knew she was about to encounter in her job. She continues by discussing the difficulties a teacher and governess faced in general.

No other time is Snowe’s inability to express her grief in an unfamiliar environment clearer than when she falls ill while the children of the pensionnat are on a break; her experience
here shows the isolation governesses and teachers faced. Privacy was what Snowe wished for, not solitude. Snowe, alone in the dormitory, expresses the following thoughts: “Motive there was none why I should recover or wish to live; and yet quite unendurable was the pitiless and haughty voice in which Death challenged me to engage his unknown terrors” (Villette 177). Snowe is clearly experiencing symptoms of depression or melancholy here, likely worsened by her solitary state. She has few people to confide in even when all the inhabitants and teachers of the pensionnat are present, and her sorrow is deepened when she is physically alone. One can clearly see from her inner dialogue and demeanor that being alone in a new country, especially in her occupation, has taken a toll on Snowe, both mentally and physically.

Though teaching was at first a difficult experience for her, Snowe shows that it is preferable to the work of being a governess that she rejects so readily. One source of Snowe’s satisfaction is the independence teaching affords her: “Madame Beck and I, without assimilating, understood each other well. I was not her companion, nor her children’s governess; she left me free: she tied me to nothing—not to herself—not even to her interests” (Villette 331). Teaching provides her an independence that being a governess, in Snowe’s imagination, would make impossible.

Snowe also finds fulfillment in her interactions with her pupils, especially, Ginevra Fanshawe. Snowe becomes Ginevra’s confidante and tries to guide her not only in her studies but also in her life. She inquires about Ginevra’s beau, saying, “Wishing to get a more definite idea of this love-stricken M. Isidore, whose position seemed to me of the least secure, I requested her to favour me with a personal description” (Villette 95). This encounter reveals that Snowe cared about her students as people; she inquired about their personal lives so she could guide them. Her
exchange with Ginevra shows she felt fulfilled by her work as a teacher. Snowe’s interactions with Ginevra are not always positive, but Ginevra’s teasing prompts her to accept and articulate her calling. At one point in the novel, Ginevra is ridiculing Snowe for her lack of connections and her lowly place in society. She goads Snowe by asking repeatedly who she is and if she is “anybody” (*Villette* 342). Snowe replies, “Yes, I am a rising character: once an old lady’s companion, then a nursery-governess, now a schoolteacher” (*Villette* 342). Snowe clearly identifies herself with her occupations here. Her self-identification as a teacher shows that she has pride in the work.

The satisfaction Snowe found in her work as a teacher develops the possibility that a woman could be called to be a governess; though, in Snowe’s case, she was called to be a teacher. I return to Max Weber to explain why this fulfillment Snowe felt when teaching was indicative of calling. He explains the origin of the term calling in the following manner:

> Like the meaning of the word, the idea is new, a product of the Reformation…. It is true that certain suggestions of the positive valuation of routine activity in the world, which is contained in this conception of the calling, had already existed in the Middle Ages, and even in late Hellenistic antiquity. We shall speak of that later. But at least one thing was unquestionably new: the valuation of the fulfilment of duty in worldly affairs as the highest form which the moral activity of the individual could assume. This it was which inevitably gave every-day worldly activity a religious significance, and which first created the conception of a calling in this sense (Weber 40).
The value of calling in professions outside of the church emerged from the Protestant Reformation; as a devout Protestant, Snowe would have believed heartily in this concept of calling. The fulfillment she found in teaching was a true sign that she felt called to the work.

Snowe is adamant that she does not have a calling to be a governess. However, her articulation of the concept of calling helps readers to understand what it means to be called to a certain occupation. Snowe shows that though she is not called to become a governess, she is called to teach; she finds great fulfillment in the work. *Villette* helps to develop a concept of calling that can be applied to the governess profession as well as teaching in both the historical and modern context.

*Villette* illuminates the possibility that a woman could find fulfillment in being a governess; *Jane Eyre* shows what this calling looks like in action. Often considered the quintessential governess novel, *Jane Eyre* is lauded by teachers worldwide as an example of the governess and the conditions which she faced. Turning to this novel for examples of how a woman could feel fulfilled in a governess position makes sense because it is a well-known novel with plenty of governess anecdotes to draw from. Jane finds a satisfaction in her work which not every governess did, one which cements the concept of calling I am developing in this thesis.

Jane shows a longing for intellectual freedom and freedom to follow her own will in many moments during her childhood; this longing for freedom is a foreshadowing of why she chooses to look for a governess position. Her desire for freedom is ironic, as being a governess is not often associated with freedom, but Jane proves that it can be. She expresses a need to “exercise her faculties” and explains this as a need that all women have and should strive for
(Jane Eyre 104). Jane discusses the way she would use books as an escape, as a way of reaching for the freedom denied her: “Each picture told a story; mysterious often to my undeveloped understanding and imperfect feelings, yet ever profoundly interesting: as interesting as the tales Bessie sometimes narrated on winter evenings (Jane Eyre 9). This glimpse into Jane’s mind reveals that stories were a means of freedom for Jane, who did not have access to an education. Her cousin John is incensed when he finds out that Jane has been borrowing the family’s books, stating, “You have no business to take our books; you are a dependant, mama says; you have no money; your father left you none; you ought to beg, and not to live here with gentleman’s children like us…Now I’ll teach you to rummage my bookshelves…Go and stand by the door, out of the way of the mirror and the windows” (Jane Eyre 10). Right after saying this, he throws the book at Jane to punish her. John’s statement to Jane and his abusive behavior reveals that she was not welcome at Gateshead; she was viewed as a burden and not allowed many freedoms, even the simple freedom of reading the family books. This scene shows the conditions which prompted Jane to find freedom in education and later, the governess profession.

Jane finds refuge from the world and independence in books and education. After the incident where John throws the book at Jane, Jane gets in trouble because she retaliates (Jane Eyre 10). The lady’s maid berates her for what she has done to “your young master,” and Jane asks why John is her master (Jane Eyre 12). The lady’s maid replies, “you are less than a servant, for you do nothing for your keep. There, sit down, and think over your wickedness” (Jane Eyre 12). Once again, Jane is trapped. Education comes to promise freedom, though, when Mr. Lloyd, a doctor engaged to examine Jane after the “nervous breakdown” she shows in retaliation against John, suggests she attend school. Jane reacts to school with trepidation at first: “I scarcely knew
what school was; Bessie sometimes spoke of it as a place where young ladies sat in the stocks, wore backboards, and were expected to be exceedingly genteel and precise…and if Bessie’s accounts of school discipline…were somewhat appalling, her details of certain accomplishments attained by these same young ladies were, I thought, equally attractive” (Jane Eyre 24). Jane shows here that she was nervous about going to school; however, it is at school that she begins to find the freedom and fulfillment she has been searching for.

Jane begins to see the appeal of going to school as she thinks on it further. She muses, “…school would be a complete change: it implied a long journey, a separation from Gateshead, an entrance into a new life” (Jane Eyre 24). It is here that Jane begins to see how school may bring her the freedom she desires, and she states that she should “indeed like to go to school” (Jane Eyre 24). Mr. Lloyd, the doctor, alludes to the endless possibilities that await her at Lowood with the following statement: “Well, well; who knows what may happen?” (Jane Eyre 24). Jane begins to see that a life of freedom, which she has not known before, could be before her when she begins school.

The next stage of life which instilled in Jane a desire and a calling to teach was her experience at Lowood school; she finds a role model for her future teaching in Miss Temple. At first her experience regarding school is difficult, as she expected; some teachers, as well as the owner of the school, Mr. Brocklehurst, are unkind. Miss Temple is a kind teacher who models a sense of calling regarding teaching for Jane. Jane’s friend Helen Burns expostulates on the good qualities of Miss Temple: “Miss Temple is full of goodness; it pains her to be severe to anyone, even the worst in the school: she sees my errors, and tells me of them gently; and, if I do anything worthy of praise, she gives me my meed liberally” (Jane Eyre 53). Helen shows here
that Miss Temple is a teacher dedicated to her craft; she is generous and kind to her students, correcting them gently when they need to be corrected. This is the mark of a teacher called to teaching, one who is willing to both discipline and encourage in moderation because she wishes to accomplish what is best for the students.

Miss Temple is a wonderful example of a teacher who goes beyond mere duty to her students; she stands up to Mr. Brocklehurst, the director of the school and advocates for their needs, thus showing a calling that coexists with her duty because she loves her job and finds fulfillment in it. She becomes an example for Jane. In one instance, Mr. Brocklehurst inquires why a lunch of bread and cheese has been purchased on two separate occasions, as these meals were not allotted for in the budget (Jane Eyre 60). Miss Temple replies to his inquiry with the following: “I must be responsible for the circumstance, sir…the breakfast was so ill-prepared that the pupils could not possibly eat it; and I dared not allow them remain fasting until dinner time” (Jane Eyre 60). In giving the girls these lunches, Miss Temple knows that the fastidious Mr. Brocklehurst may well reprimand her. However, Miss Temple went above and beyond her duty. A sign of a teacher who has a calling is one who cares for the emotional and physical needs of her students; she cares about them as people, not just as learners.

Jane is inspired by the faithful efforts of Miss Temple in fulfilling her calling; Jane develops a calling and becomes a teacher at Lowood school. Her calling is clear in the care she shows her students that goes beyond mere duty. Her commitment to social change for her students is what Madero would term a neoclassical sense of calling (175). Though he is speaking about modern teachers, the ideas about calling and the categories with which he defines them aptly express the different reasons a governess may have engaged in the profession, since these
terms denote callings both inside and outside the church. A new director takes hold of the school and changes it for the better. Brontë writes the following about Jane’s thoughts on the matter: “The school, thus improved, became a truly useful and noble institution. I remained an inmate of its walls, after its regeneration, for eight years: six as pupil, and two as teacher; and in both capacities I bear my testimony to its value and importance” (Jane Eyre 80). Jane shows here her social commitment to the school. She continues by describing the value she finds in her work as teacher: “During these eight years my life was uniform: but not unhappy, because it was not inactive. I had the means of an excellent education placed within my reach…In time I rose to be the first girl of the first class; then I invested with the office of teacher; which I discharged with zeal for two years…” (Jane Eyre 80). The zeal that Eyre describes in completing her job intimates a sense of calling because it shows that she felt fulfilled in the work and that she would enjoy applying herself fully to it. She also shows a real care for her students the way Miss Temple does. Jane Eyre’s process of discovering her calling shows that a calling can derive from different motivations or sources but be a calling, nonetheless.

Jane’s calling extends from teaching to the governess profession. As described earlier, she found great fulfillment in her work as Adèle’s governess. The praise of both Rochester and Mrs. Fairfax reveals Jane’s skill as a governess. Jane thanks Rochester for his praise in the following manner: “Sir, you have now given me my ‘cadeau;’ I am obliged to you: it is the meed teachers most covet—praise of their pupils’ progress” (Jane Eyre 115). The words ‘cadeau’ and meed indicate that Jane feels Rochester’s praise is a gift. While she is appreciative of this gift, her use of these words also reveals that she does not feel this praise is necessary. Her comment is said in a joking manner. Meed means compensation, but the tone of Jane’s statement makes clear the
fact that she does not need Rochester’s praise to perform well in her job. Mrs. Fairfax also expresses that Jane does her job well, saying Jane has been “a kind and careful teacher to Adèle” (Jane Eyre 116). Mrs. Fairfax’s evaluation of Jane’s work shows she goes beyond mere duty as a governess, indicating that she has a calling to engage in the work. Jane desires to do well as a governess because she is called to the work, not because she expects a reward.

Jane Eyre has a calling to be both a teacher and a governess. She chooses the roles that will help her to feel the most fulfilled at each point in time. Returning to a passage quoted earlier helps to show how she discovered her calling:

A new servitude! There is something in that…I know there is, because it does not sound too sweet; it is not like such words as Liberty, Excitement, Enjoyment: delightful sounds truly; but no more than sounds for me; and so hollow and fleeting that it is a mere waste of time to listen to them. Anyone may serve; I have served here eight years; now all I want is to serve elsewhere. Can I not get so much of my own will? Is not the thing feasible? Yes—yes—the end is not so difficult; if I had only a brain active enough to ferret out the means of attaining it (Jane Eyre 81-82).

This passage highlights how Jane could find great joy, fulfillment, and even a calling in a profession that some engaged in as a matter of necessity. She found meaning in a life that aided those under her tutelage, and she became a governess due to personal choice; she truly found a way to “exercise her faculties” (Jane Eyre 104). She obtains her own will by finding a governess position as described in the preceding passage. She is an example of a governess who finds
fulfillment in the profession that is concurrent with duty, and thus, she shows that that one can indeed be called to be a governess.

Throughout this thesis, I have explored the primary motivations that women had for becoming governesses—survival, duty, and calling. The novels *Emma* and *Villette* provide examples of the ways calling and duty can coexist. The example of Miss Taylor in particular shows that being a governess was usually meant to be a temporary position. *Villette* opens the possibility that a governess could be called to the work, though Snowe eschews this calling. However, the fulfillment that Jane Eyre finds in teaching and governess work shows that having a calling to be a governess is possible because Jane lives it. Knowing this, I wish to discuss the modern teaching profession and how calling is an integral part of it, though it sometimes shares the temporality of the governess profession.

Teachers in the modern American context often see teaching as a vocation and a calling. David Hansen articulates how he defines the difference between a job and a calling; this distinction is crucial to my research: “a job is an activity that provides sustenance or survival. Jobs perform highly repetitive tasks whose content is not defined by those performing them. Vocations are often sources of sustenance and survival, too, but they go beyond jobs in terms of both personal autonomy and personal significance” (13). Teachers who are called to their work, by this logic, find a sense of independence and personal meaning in their work. Hansen continues by explaining another important characteristic of a calling; he quotes Logan Smith, who writes that a test to determine whether one has a vocation “is the love of the drudgery it involves” (182). In other words, a teacher with a vocation will find value in even the mundane
tasks of teaching. Hansen further notes what sets apart someone with a call to teach from those who merely engage in the task for survival:

It means the person is disposed to be attentive to detail and nuance, to develop perceptivity and sensitivity. Nor is it to romanticize the “drudgery”—the need to address details. Rather, it is to emphasize that the quotidian obligations of teaching are not a distraction from the vocation, but constitute part of the main event itself, the locus where all the individual steps one takes add up to both the teacher one becomes and the influence one has on students. (19)

Hansen puts great emphasis on the way that each of a teacher’s individual actions, even the ones that seem mundane, constitute the influence a teacher has on their students. Many teachers cite this sense of influence as a factor that gives their teaching meaning and helps to define their calling to the work.

A sense of influence on their students, autonomy, and fulfillment in the work are the most common reasons teachers identify their teaching as a calling. David Hansen quotes multiple teachers who feel they are called to the work. Hansen cites Earl, an 11th grade English teacher, on the sense of autonomy that he seeks to impart in his students and finds himself because of being called to teach: “So part of the deal is—yeah, somehow recognizing they can be persons here [Earl’s emphasis]. And finding ways that give them opportunities to affirm their self-worth. To affirm their sense of autonomy. To make them agents in the process of learning instead of receptacles” (106). Earl shows that autonomy is a key part of being called to teach; it benefits both teacher and student. Jane Eyre finds this autonomy for herself, and she encourages Adèle to
find this sense of autonomy. To illustrate Jane’s encouragement of Adèle, Rochester notes, “I have examined Adèle, and find you have taken great pains with her: she is not bright, she has not talents; yet, in a short time she has made much improvement” (Jane Eyre 115). Rochester sees that Jane goes above mere duty in her encouragement of her pupil. A calling to teaching, then, involves caring about students’ well-being and finding personal fulfillment in the work as well as finding a sense of independence through the work.

Despite this sense of personal calling, however, teachers in America are currently leaving the profession in droves. TikTok creator Devin Siebold discusses these statistics: “A survey released last year by the National Education Association found that 55% of educators want to leave teaching earlier than they originally planned.” The teaching profession is quickly taking on the temporality that the governess profession once embodied; lack of independence and appreciation by their employers are reasons that both the governess and modern teachers have left their respective professions. The popular hashtag #teacherquittok is providing a way for former teachers to speak up about the reasons that they have left teaching. One video posted with this hashtag by creator Nichole Meyers sums up the motivations behind teachers finding other jobs: “When people say, oh, teachers are quitting because they’re not getting paid enough, no, some of us maybe, but we go into this profession knowing we’re not going to make [any money]. And that’s a risk we’re willing to take. But I have reached a point in my career where the risk is no longer worth the reward.” As Nichole summarizes so succinctly, teachers find fulfillment and a calling in their occupation, but sometimes not even that is worth the mental toll that it would take on a teacher to stay. However, the temporality of the teaching position can give teachers the freedom to find a new calling.
A calling, otherwise known as a vocation, is not devoid of duty; duty and calling can coexist as reasons for engaging in an occupation. This fact can be seen through examples of modern teachers and literary examples of the governess. Both governesses and teachers have needed a sense of autonomy in their work to define it as a calling; readers see Lucy Snowe and Jane Eyre reaching for independence when searching for a calling. These women also found fulfillment in their work and satisfaction in their pupils’ progress. Knowing what defines a calling to teach/be a governess provides meaning to those searching for fulfillment in their work today and outlines a way to find this sense of fulfillment; this knowledge gives value to professions not always valued by society. Teachers of today can learn from Snowe and Eyre what a calling to teach truly means; it implies a sense of fulfillment in one’s work and a desire to impact students positively. Massive reforms need to be made in the current American school system, but examining the calling of the governess and how it intersects with duty can provide teachers with a sense of meaning in an occupation that often is undervalued, even if their position as teacher is temporary.
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