

# Serving in the Household and the Imagination: The Brontës, Alcott, and the Interconnected Roles of a Neglected “Transatlantic” Female Figure

PAULA ALEXANDRA GUIMARÃES 

Tabitha Aykroyd, Martha Brown, Nancy and Sarah Garrs were just a few of the very many girls and women working as domestic servants in early Victorian Britain. The main purpose of this article is to analyze the precise context and conditions in which they were employed in Haworth Parsonage, where the Brontë sisters lived for most of their lives (1820–1855), and the influence that they had on the well-being of this famous family and on the imagination and literary activity of the sisters. Aspects connected with the following will be explored and problematized: the value and respect that the Brontës attributed to or showed these domestic laborers and their work, including sharing in their tasks and duties; brief but useful connections of these figures with the sisters’ own professional activities as middle-class women (namely, when serving as teachers and governesses themselves); and also comparison with some relevant literary representations of the figure and role of the “female servant” in the Brontës’ novels. A complementary purpose is of a more transatlantic nature: to compare their earlier British domestic context with Louisa May Alcott’s later American one, and their literary representations of the female servant with Alcott’s own extensive treatment of that neglected figure in some of her fictional works. The justification for this comparison does not lie so much in the known influence that the works written by the Brontës, in particular Charlotte’s, had on Alcott, but more in their sharing of very similar concerns as regards this topic, in spite of very specific (transatlantic) differences that can be revealing of their respective attitude towards servitude.

**Key words:** transatlantic service, Victorian, Brontës, Alcott, domestic fiction

## **Introduction**

The subject of service, and in particular domestic service, is conspicuously absent from most Victorian criticism on the Woman Question, and from the wider topic of women's employment in the period. However, "going out to service" was, by far, the most common situation for women on both sides of the Atlantic at this time, as is established in the first two sections of this article. In terms of both sociological research and literary criticism, a highly neglected (transatlantic) figure thus stands out: the female domestic servant (whether in the guise of maid, companion, or governess). My main purpose is to shed some informed light on the significance that this figure had in the lives and works of the famous Brontë sisters and to briefly compare it with the specific American experience of a later contemporary of theirs: Louisa May Alcott. Alcott constitutes an interesting New England case of a famous female novelist who not only closely experienced but also reflected on and wrote fiction about domestic service and servants. She was well aware of the professional dilemmas faced by her English counterparts, and in particular of Charlotte Brontë's earlier critical reflections on the nature of "women's work" in her novels. In order to develop the central comparison, I build mostly on the critical work of Christine Doyle (2000), Daniela Daniele (2003), Elizabeth Langland (2014), and Judith Shulevitz (2016), while Callie Martindale (2021) and Jelena Šesnić (2022) offer assessments that are more recent, though mostly complementary. My main argument in this article is that service was not only an inevitable fact but also an indispensable element in the respective development of the Brontës and of Alcott, as women and as artists. They both deeply suffered and profited from the experience of serving, which they ably transposed into their respective writings on the subject. But in order to detect eventual points of contact as well as specificities, in their cases, a preliminary analysis of the harsh realities of service and women's work in the period will be necessary.

## **Serving in the Victorian Period**

For this shorter section, the work of authors like Xuesheng You (2018), Jean Fernandez (2015), and Jenny Coleman (2013) may be of help in better understanding the realities of domestic service in Victorian Britain, namely by providing some relevant quantifiable evidence.

In the early Victorian period, female employment was restricted to a very narrow range of occupations that, in practice, were an extension into the public sphere of those tasks carried out in the household (You 3). As such, “women’s work” was generally thought to include domestic service, washing and laundry, needlework, and retailing (4). In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, domestic service jobs, such as housekeeping, charring, and washing accounted for a disproportionately large share of women’s employment. And, in 1891, they still represented more than sixty percent of women’s employment in the tertiary sector (3).

Nonetheless, by the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Britain came to experience a “servant problem.” Discouraged by long working hours, limited freedom, and a subordinate status, women were now becoming increasingly reluctant to work as servants. For Xuesheng You, this meant that the middle- and upper-class employers often found female servants to be in short supply (5). However, domestic service remained by far the single most important employment destination for women throughout the time period. In fact, most unmarried women were employed in this occupation, which had a living-in requirement, making it particularly suited to them. As You explains, unmarried female servants were conventionally labelled “life-stage servants” because they left their parental home in their late teens to become domestic servants in other households, and they stayed in these positions until they married (6).

For Jenny Coleman, 19<sup>th</sup>-century domestic labor, in particular, was characterized not only by the allocation of menial tasks but also by the vast amount of work that was “generated by the lavish scale of consumption of the upper and aspiring middle classes” (22). The list of activities was not only long but also involved a multitude of time intensive and often physically demanding tasks. For Fernandez, domestic workers were also a class “restricted by routine and repetition” and one “widely denied access to history” (4–5). Thus, in a socially stratified society, where performing any type of manual labor could jeopardize “one’s eligibility to be received in polite society,” basic domestic routines were perceived as demeaning; besides, they could demand “a small army of domestic help” (Coleman 22). Namely, butler, groom, footman, lady’s maid, upper housemaid, kitchen-maid, and scullery-maid. In lower class households, female family members could either share the various tasks or engage a “maid-of-all-work” if additional assistance was demanded.

Coleman further explains that there was an evident level of specialization and a hierarchy within the occupations. She gives as an example the position of maid, which included several sub-categories based on the type of work (nursery maid, housemaid, kitchen maid, lady's maid, laundry maid, parlour maid, scullery maid, and so on) (23). But there were still other designations based on hierarchical position (head laundry maid, second or third laundry maid, single-handed laundry maid) or on "what part of the house the work was to be performed" (upper housemaid, under housemaid, upper laundry maid) (23). Advertising for the position of "general servant" carried the implication that "this was the only servant employed in the household" (23). Accordingly, the duties would, unless otherwise specified, potentially include cooking, cleaning and laundry work, caring for children, tending the garden and poultry, sewing, making soap and butter, and shopping (23).

Though socially distinct, a further example mentioned by Coleman is the position of governess. Curiously enough, for this more genteel serving job, the *Times* advertised positions for 14 different sub-categories. And these were designated

... according to either the hours of work (for example, morning governess, afternoon governess or daily governess), the specific type of work required (such as finishing governess, nursery governess or musical governess), the residential status of the position (resident governess, non-resident governess, visiting governess) or the nationality of the individual (English governess or German governess). (23)

Despite its higher social status, requiring a higher degree of education on the part of the female employee, governessing was included within the general designation of domestic labor, albeit one of a more specialized kind. This type of service allowed those middle-class women without marriage prospects or family support to still make a respectable living on their own.

## **Serving in Britain versus Serving in New England**

As Daniela Daniele suggests, there was a somewhat different understanding and attitude between New Englanders and British Victorians regarding domestic employment for women. While in New England the emphasis was on the intrinsic respectability and even desirability of domestic work for women of all classes, considering both moral and communal reasons, in the British (and general European) context, domestic service was understood as being menial and therefore suitable only for women of the lower classes (483-508).

Equally, the relationship between employer and employee on both sides of the Atlantic also tended, in some relevant cases, to be different. Being a servant in a New England American household (as Daniele suggests) sometimes implied being accepted as “a part of the family,” while in the English home (and elsewhere in America) servants were frequently reminded that they were outsiders (this was mostly true of the Irish servants in both countries) and should behave as such in performing their tasks. Fernandez states that servants were traditionally subject to fidelity and obedience through religious discourses, and “advice manuals such as *The Servant’s Behavior Book* counselled ... verbal restraint, if not outright silence” (5, 7).

Daniele suggests that in terms of remuneration, some New England Americans in particular thought that to be paid wages for mere domestic help was morally reprehensible, as well as undermined the spirit of middle-class solidarity they wished to promote (485–487). Louisa May Alcott's own experience, as presented in “How I Went Out to Service,” offers the alternative view. In fact, she and her family are so offended by the pittance she was paid for six weeks of work that they returned it to her employer.

In Britain (and elsewhere in America), wages in general (even if very low) were intrinsic to the hiring process, and going out to service was by far the major source of income and employment for lower class women. Lacking other skills, the majority of these women would otherwise be in danger of falling into utter destitution or else resorting to prostitution.

In terms of the origin or profile of these servants, there were certain minimum requirements on both sides, but in America, being Irish or Catholic was a poor recommendation that very often meant the applicant would not be considered. According to the so-called ‘Protestant ethos’ these groups were associated with negative stereotypes (such as untidiness and gossipy behavior) (Daniele 488–49). Though this type of religious prejudice could also be found in Britain, it did not seem to bother employers as much. But, in general, the status of the servant tended to be higher in America, where these women were seen not as “servants” but as “helpers.” And many, if not the majority (including Alcott herself), were even recruited from middle-class families within the neighborhood or in close proximity.

British families did not adopt this somewhat exceptional practice, not even those (including the Brontës) who usually incentivized their daughters to engage in charitable activities outside the home. This meant two different things: that to hire middle-class women helpers as domestic workers (a marked New England habit) was not an accepted practice in Britain; and that eventual help on their part was understood as being exclusively for the benefit of destitute people or families.

These differences appear to stem from a very distinct concept of service on both sides of the Atlantic at this time. However, as Daniele also stresses, with the increasing professionalization of labor activities, including domestic service later in the century, these differences, both in Britain and America, would be blurred. More idealized or traditional notions, namely within Transcendentalism, regarding not just the intrinsic moral value of domestic chores but also the essentialist role of women in society, tended gradually to disappear as the century neared its end. But Daniele's work on Louisa May Alcott strongly suggests that the writer, and her New England entourage, not only subscribed to those notions but also put them into practice.

## **Serving in the Brontë Household**

After Patrick Brontë moved from Thornton with his family in 1820, Haworth Parsonage became their new moorland home. Brontë, as a Church of England clergyman, was part of the middle classes, which meant that he could afford to employ at least one servant, typically a maid-of-all-work. However, with a large family and a busy parish to look after, Patrick Brontë frequently felt the need to hire at least two house-servants (Langland 297). This section mostly aims to detail the important role that these domestic workers played in the lives of the Brontës and how much they were valued by the family. Thus, the main focus will fall on the female workers themselves.

As many visitors personally witnessed, regarding its domestic arrangements, the Parsonage was always kept scrupulously clean, by both the servants and, later, by the Brontë sisters themselves. Though Mr. Brontë, the village's perpetual curate, had been constantly concerned by the filthy and unhealthy state of Haworth (contributing to the high mortality rate of its population), this was obviously not a problem within his household.

The first nurse whom Brontë hired was apparently dismissed soon after. She may have left simply because Aunt Branwell had arrived and could do her job. But she had allegedly “helped herself too often” to the beer they kept under lock and key in the cellar. Probably as a reprisal, the nurse blamed Brontë for the supposed listlessness of his children, saying it was caused by deliberate food (meat) deprivation (Barker 106–7).

Around 1817, after Charlotte’s birth, and because his wife, Maria, had three children (all under the age of three) to look after, Patrick had already taken steps to hire a housekeeper or nursemaid—and preferably someone who could fill both roles. He then applied to the Bradford School of Industry, a charity school in Kirkgate that “trained girls of poor parents in habits of industry” (Barker 71).

The school, according to Barker, had some sixty girls, attending either in the morning or in the afternoon. They were taught to sew, knit, and read (in that order); their clothes were provided for them “out of the proceeds of their own work” and, if they attended the parish church regularly, “learnt their collects and psalms, and always had their scissors and sheath, thimble and handkerchief to hand,” they would be rewarded (71–72). The obsessions of the school with “cropping hair short, forbidding any sort of personal adornment and meting out barbaric punishments for minor offences,” are strongly reminiscent of Lowood School in *Jane Eyre* (Barker 72).

The girl who was selected for the Brontës was Nancy Garrs, a thirteen-year old, and one of the twelve children of Richard Garrs of Westgate in Bradford. She was thus the first of remarkably few servants employed by the Brontës; and, like her successors, was devoted to them, remaining a loyal friend long after she had left their service. The young Brontës could be safely entrusted in her capable hands, while their parents were occupied in parish affairs (Barker 72).

Around 1819, Maria, with five children all under five years of age, could no longer manage with the help of only one nursery maid: “Nancy was therefore promoted to the position of cook and assistant housekeeper, and her younger sister Sarah, who had also been trained at the Bradford School of Industry, came to take her place as a nursemaid” (Barker 110). She not only washed and dressed the children, but also taught the girls how to sew. Sarah commented that, on Sunday evenings, “the servants joined the family for Bible study and catechism, and they were always treated as superiors in the presence of the children” (Barker 111).

Nancy, who had accompanied the family from Thornton, also provides a picture of the family's daily routine at the Parsonage during their first year there. She describes how she washed and dressed the children before they went to their father's study for prayers. Afterwards, she served them a "plain but abundant breakfast." The other servant, Sarah, taught the girls the rudiments of sewing and accompanied the children in walks on the moors (Dinsdale 20–21).

Around 1824, Patrick Brontë had found "a satisfactory solution regarding the care of his family": After sending his four daughters to the Clergy Daughters' School, in Cowan Bridge, he felt that Aunt Branwell could return home to Penzance and the Garrs girls could be dismissed (Barker 134). But this was not decided out of indifference to their respective fates. The fact was that Nancy had been engaged for some time and wanted to marry. And Sarah, the nursemaid, at his recommendation, "found a post travelling for two years with a wealthy widow and her daughter." However, after her mother's objection to that position, Sarah eventually became apprenticed to a dressmaker. Interestingly, in 1829, she married a William Newsome and, later, emigrated to the USA (Barker 134).

Both of the Garrs girls left with the affection of the whole Brontë family and remained devoted to them. Barker describes how Sarah even "took with her to America a lock of hair from each member of the family" (134). In 1855, Nancy would come back to Haworth, probably to attend Charlotte's funeral; and her sister, Sarah, who had emigrated to the States, wrote to Patrick from Iowa (785). These details establish that important affective ties remained between them.

To replace the Garrs girls, Patrick engaged a 53-year-old widow from Haworth, Tabitha Aykroyd. She was to remain with the family for the rest of her life and would even outlive all but Patrick and Charlotte (134). Tabby, who had been born in 1771, never married, and little is known of her life before she came to the Parsonage (Whitehead 84). According to many, Tabby "abounded in strong practical sense and shrewdness." The Brontë children gravitated towards "Tabby's kingdom," the kitchen—described as "a snug, warm, crooning place," in fact the warmest room in the Parsonage (Whitehead 83).

For the children, she would fulfil the roles of cook, cleaner, and crucially storyteller. She not only baked them cakes that they loved and gave them the hugs and praise that any young child needs; she also told them tales of Yorkshire folklore that had been passed down through the centuries: tales that the Irish



Patrick and Cornish Aunt Branwell would have been oblivious to. This legacy, as will be clearer further on, shows the extent to which the female domestic servant also played a crucial role in the children's emotional and imaginative development, namely as 'storytellers' in their own right.

When visiting Charlotte in 1833, Ellen Nussey noted some quaintness in the household. Even Tabby, "the faithful trustworthy old servant" was "very quaint in appearance." She was also extremely active, and still regarded it as her duty to accompany her "childer" when they walked any distance from home, if Branwell was unavailable as an escort. Intensely loyal to the Brontës, she always rebuffed the curious enquiries from the Haworth people who wished to know if they were not "fearfully larn'd," and refused to indulge in gossip (Barker 194). She was, thus, a true character.

However, Tabby had a terrible accident at the end of December 1836, when the family was reunited for Christmas. Going down to the village on an errand, "she slipped on a patch of ice and fell heavily. As it was dark, it was some time before she was found; she had completely shattered and dislocated her leg" (Barker 259). The sisters were very distressed and decided not only to take over all the domestic tasks of Tabby, but to nurse her themselves. In doing this, they went against Aunt Branwell's wishes that she be sent to a relative for recovery. Fortunately, due to their careful nursing, Tabby did eventually recover and was able to return to most of her household duties (Barker 259).

But soon, at the end of November 1839, Tabby would at last be obliged to leave them. The leg she had broken three years before "had become so badly ulcerated that she was too lame to work." She had bought a little house on Newell Hill with her sister, Susanna Wood, and "retired there very comfortably on her savings." The whole work of the household now devolved on Charlotte and Emily, including the hard task of putting the wet washing through a mangle. This work was apart from the help of an eleven-year-old servant girl, Martha Brown (the daughter of the Haworth sexton), who ran errands for them (Barker 259). Charlotte comments:

I manage the ironing and keep the rooms clean ... I excited Aunt's wrath very much by burning the clothes the first time I attempted to iron but I do better now. ... I am much happier black-leading the stoves—making the beds and sweeping the floors at home, than I should be living like a fine lady anywhere else. (Barker 259)

Charlotte thus proudly performed a role that she had learned from old Tabby's example and which could be considered as an important step in her own development. But around 1843–44, while Charlotte was still in Brussels, the Parsonage household was also being capably run by Emily. Though she had nominal assis-

tance from Tabby, who had returned in Charlotte's absence, the bulk of the work fell on her shoulders. By then, Tabby was too old and lame to be of much practical use, but she was very precious company for Emily while Patrick was busy (Barker 427)—as her writings would attest.

Tabby died on the same day that Charlotte, already terminally ill, made her will—17 February 1855. She was eighty-four years old and had been the Brontës' servant "in weal and woe" for over thirty years. To them, she was "like one of our own family." It fell to Arthur Nicholls, Charlotte's widower, to bury her in Haworth churchyard. She lies just over the wall from the Brontë Parsonage garden, in a fitting tribute to her contribution to both the domestic labor and the creative works of the Brontës and to their happiness.

The last servant, Martha Brown, known for her straightforwardness, would be a sad witness to Branwell's fits and death, as she was of Emily's decline and death; she also witnessed Charlotte's wedding to Arthur Nicholls, as well as her final demise. Whenever Charlotte was away from home, she always concluded her letters "I am dear Martha, your sincere friend, C. Brontë." For her faithful service, she received a legacy from Mr. Brontë, after whom she also looked when he was an invalid, and until his death. Later, she would accompany Nicholls on his retirement to Ireland.

Worn out after her labors running the house singlehandedly, while nursing Tabby and Charlotte, Martha had herself fallen ill. "As she could not be cared for in the Parsonage, she was sent to Leeds to Mrs Dean's alms-houses, where she was gradually restored to health" (Barker 785). In her absence, the household duties devolved on her younger sister, Eliza, who Patrick thought "very steady, and does her work very well" (785).

By a curious twist of fate, Martha died in January 1880, aged fifty-two, when she was on a visit to her family in Haworth, and was buried in the churchyard close to the Parsonage (Barker 785). The fact that both Tabby and Martha are buried close to the Brontës does seem to further enhance and symbolize their great importance as more than mere servants. Because of their unusual dedication to the family, they attained the status of friends if not that of close relatives.

## **Women Writers Going out to Service – The Brontës and Alcott**

The close connection that the Brontës had with the servants in their own household, and the additional experience of sharing the domestic chores with them, must have helped the sisters face the prospective need of going out to service themselves one day. After having dealt above with lower-class service, I explore in this section not only the possibilities of employment that were open to middle-class women in the period, like the Brontës and Louisa M. Alcott, but also these writers' own personal experiences in this specific context. The transatlantic or comparative approach that is introduced in this section allows for a more comprehensive view of how women writers on both sides of the Atlantic experienced and interpreted the topic of female service. As will be clear in their respective cases, providing service to others could assume very different guises.

Middle-class women who needed to work for a living typically became governesses in private families or schoolmistresses in academies for girls. However, even the sphere of women's teaching was quite circumscribed, partly because women's education was so limited, not going beyond a set of "showy accomplishments." The typical education of a girl (both in England and elsewhere) usually included French, music, singing, dancing, fancywork, and a little drawing (Langland, "Careers" 303).

Despite being a more genteel occupation, governing usually entailed physical drudgery and emotional battery: "The governess had no constituency within the household: she was marooned as on an island, neither the equal of the family nor clearly beneath them, as were the other servants" (Langland 304). In June 1839, Charlotte perfectly captured this situation in a letter to Emily: "I see now more clearly than I have ever done before that a private governess has no existence, is not considered as a living rational being except as connected with the wearisome duties she has to fulfil" (qtd. in Langland 304).

However, the other alternative—being a schoolmistress, proved no better for Emily and Charlotte. If even the reserved Emily taught briefly (at Law Hill), this was a position Charlotte would describe, in a letter to Ellen Nussey, as "slavery." It seems the misanthropic Emily once told her students that she preferred the school dog to them. In her turn, Charlotte held two teaching positions, first at Roe Head and later in Brussels, but she did not hide the fact that she loathed teaching (Langland 304). Though her first teaching job lasted three years, she deemed the work "wretched bondage" and the students "fat-headed oafs." Next, she and Anne tried governing. But during Charlotte's first attempt (it lasted two months), she

discovered to her horror that she had been reduced to a “glorified nanny.” Charlotte and Emily both taught for the second time at the Pensionnat Heger in Brussels, where they were also students. Emily quit her foreign post after a couple of months and moved back into the Parsonage, becoming the family housekeeper. Charlotte hung on a year longer, but back home, she toyed with the idea of starting a school in the Parsonage with Emily and Anne. Eventually, Anne managed to hold her second governess post for five years.

Although middle-class, the Brontë sisters anticipated with no pleasure the usual route for genteel, educated women: teaching—either as a mistress in a school or as a governess in a private home. Their brother Branwell, as a man, had more options, having even attempted (without success) a career as a portrait painter. In Charlotte’s novel *Shirley*, the class conventions that proscribe meaningful work and confine middle-class women to the domestic sphere are demonstrated in Caroline Helstone’s anguished existence in her uncle’s rectory. Like Jane and Agnes (Anne’s protagonist in *Agnes Grey*), the only project she can frame that holds out any prospect of relief is to “take a situation,” to be a governess (Langland 305).

Essentially, the sisters felt that fully serving in these occupations prevented them from engaging in what they enjoyed the most—writing. Inspired by the prospect of employing her talents as a writer, the twenty-year-old Charlotte even sought support from England’s Poet Laureate, Robert Southey. But his reply was characteristically disheartening: “Literature cannot be the business of a woman’s life”; and, in answering his letter, Charlotte revealed the inner conflicts it provoked: “... sometimes when I’m teaching or sewing I would rather be reading or writing: but I try to deny myself” (qtd. in Langland 306).

But it was precisely those “forays into the marketplace of female labor” that, according to Judith Shulevitz, provided the Brontës with their best material. And this working experience would also come to have a great influence on the writing of women like Louisa May Alcott. Shulevitz states that “had Charlotte been in possession of three hundred pounds a year” (as Virginia Woolf had wished), she could never have written novels “that startled her readers, with their frank depiction of middle-class women’s working conditions, and that continue to edify those of us who also have to earn our own living.” Shulevitz thinks, as Alcott herself did (Doyle 2000), that in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, Brontë put her “work history” to spectacular use. She expressed her outrage at the degraded status of governesses and teachers, condemning the isolation and vulnerability of a woman who goes into the world to make her own way.

The issue of work, whether for pay or for mere duty, is thus a constant in the writings of the Brontës. And, for Shulevitz, the Brontës explored more than just “the kind of drudgery that paid in their fiction. They also filled their stories with the kind that didn’t.” For example, Deborah Lutz (2015) calls attention to the mixed meanings of 19<sup>th</sup>-century housework in the sisters’ lives and novels, especially needlework, with which ladies were expected to “keep their hands busy” at all times. Charlotte was indignant when her first mistress “demanded that she add sewing to child care, requiring her to make doll clothes and stitch hems on sheets”; Caroline Helstone, in Charlotte’s *Shirley*, is “wearied to distraction by having to embroider and mend stockings all day” (see Shulevitz).

And, yet, as Shulevitz observes, sewing also gives Brontë characters a pretext for thinking their own thoughts without being censured for idleness: “As a governess, Jane Eyre hides behind her stitching when she wants to watch rather than talk.” Anne’s Agnes Grey, another governess, “is happiest sewing with her sister by the fire at home.” The Brontë sisters liked to sew together too, while they discussed their works in progress, just as they had as children. Shulevitz thus suggests that “the sisters hid their subversiveness behind housewifery.”

To investigate the comparative differences of female service in the United States versus Britain, I will briefly delve into corresponding representations in the United States of America. In Christine Doyle’s book on the powerful transatlantic connections between Charlotte Brontë and Louisa May Alcott (2000), she argues that there were many similarities in their respective life circumstances, namely the lack of social opportunities for women due to poverty and the dread of the confines of home. She reminds us that Alcott herself took jobs at various times as a seamstress and even as a domestic servant; and she also served briefly as a Civil War nurse (7–8). This may be one of the reasons why, according to Doyle, she was so interested in reading about the experiences that the Brontës and their female characters had in this respect.

Doyle points out that “One personal problem for both women was that of inadequate financial support ... which eventually catapulted both women into the position of female breadwinners,” both working as teachers and governesses “out of a sense of family duty and the desire for economic independence,” but neither relishing either of these careers (11). Doyle notes that “both writers protest the limitations their respective societies place upon women’s work,” but while Brontë’s novels indicate little hope of changing the situation, Alcott proposes (for her characters and herself) “many more options for women’s work besides governesses or teacher” (13).

The combination of class concerns and moral concerns tended to complicate middle-class attitudes regarding governesses; families demanded women who were beyond reproach morally. However, as Doyle remarks, “governesses were women whom no one knew how to treat” because they “existed in some nebulous place above the level of servant but below the level of family” (146).

Doyle makes the important point that the less defined class structure in America enabled early 19<sup>th</sup>-century culture to emphasize, and women to contemplate, more universal opportunities: “[American] women could move in and out of the labor force with no particular societal sanctions, a mobility that class divisions in England would not have allowed” (148). Besides, “a variety of professions opened up to American women far earlier than they did in England” (149). Alcott herself could enjoy a life of much greater activity and variety: not just attending the theatre and acting, but participating in abolitionist and women’s rights meetings (Doyle 9–10).

In her pertinent article on Louisa May Alcott and domestic help in Victorian America (2003), Daniele addresses a new social subject: the young woman of the lower middle class serving as a domestic helper. And she argues that, during her life, Alcott “was always torn between the duty of using her pen to fight the moral devaluation of genteel service and the necessity to accept the new waged occupations available in genteel homes” (482). Sophie Gilbert (2018) suggests that because of her father’s failure to provide for his genteel family, Alcott knew stark deprivation on a daily basis; and she was aware that a similar dilemma had also been presented in Charlotte Brontë’s writings.

However, Alcott’s situation was somewhat different: Although offered by her family as a reluctant “helping girl” in her teens, she apparently never openly disdained the most humble services, in particular, if they involved a transcendentalist community or sisterhood, as in her novel *Work*. But she also never “cast any veils” over the menial aspects of hired service and the abuses of genteel domestics (namely, in her autobiographical tale “How I Went Out to Service,” where she denounces the exploitation to which she was subjected).

It is also through Alcott’s work that Daniele detects “the transformation of housekeeping from a family occupation—occasionally extended to neighbors—to a hired service” (483). Domestic work had become not only more demanding but also more demeaning for American girls, due to the joint phenomena of immigration (of an unskilled Irish labor force) and the proletarianization of work, which devalued the more competent middle-class housewifery. This change, occurring in the second half of the century (after the American Civil

War), disrupted those genteel women's idealized notion of a shared, communal type of work that promoted a "sisterhood" instead of a "servitude." Many genteel women (like the Beecher sisters) even campaigned for the abolition of waged service and rejected the term "servant" in favor of "helper" (485).

## **Serving in the Brontës' and Alcott's Imagination**

Around 1829, when Charlotte and Branwell were beginning to chronicle their fantasy world (Glass Town), she registered the following daily routine: "While I write this I am in the kitchen [sic] of the parsonage ... Taby the servant [sic] is washing up after Breakfast and Anne ... is ... looking at some cakes which Tabby has been Baking for us. Emily is in the parlour brushing it ..." But also in the diary papers of Emily and Anne, one can find the following statement: "The Gondals are discovering the interior of Gaaldine. Sally Mosley is washing in the back Kitchen [sic]" (Dinsdale 21).

These early notes suggest that the sisters slipped from the worlds of their imagination to the real (domestic) events taking place at the Parsonage. From the very beginning, the activities of writing and engaging in domestic chores were, for them, closely connected (see Guimarães). Tabby, in her broad Yorkshire dialect, would tell them tales of ghosts, goblins and fairies, or feys as they were called in that area; they roamed the moors and would sometimes swap children for fey changelings. These wild stories enthralled Anne, Charlotte, and especially Emily, and their influence upon *Wuthering Heights* is plain to see (where Tabby is an obvious model for the narrator Nelly Dean).

The Brontë sisters were expected to carry out a share of the household chores, and Emily in particular was often to be found in the kitchen assisting Tabby and acting as housekeeper after Aunt Branwell's death in 1842. Baking the bread and working in the kitchen allowed Emily the mental freedom to focus on her writing. And domestic routine also figured largely in her writing, the details of which she used to great effect. We might think, for example of *Wuthering Heights*, where as David Daiches puts it, "Here is the world the author has lived in and carefully observed. The fire, the hearth, the dishes, the porridge, are a guarantee of authenticity ... throughout the novel the homely and familiar and the wild and extravagant go together" (qtd. in Dinsdale 23).

The novels of Charlotte and Anne also include many references to needlework. “Plain” sewing, including the making and repairing of household linen and clothing, was often delegated to servants while “fancy” work, including embroidery, was one of the accomplishments expected of a gentlewoman (Dinsdale 23). In their writing, the sisters demonstrate familiarity with both branches of needlework. Plain sewing was an essential skill in a household where money was not plentiful, and it was considered to be something of a discipline. Aunt Branwell used it to keep the girls sewing charity clothing, maintaining that this work was not for the good of the recipients, but for the sewers. The parsonage collection includes samplers worked by the younger sisters, attesting to the years spent stitching under Aunt Branwell’s supervision (Dinsdale 24).

Although servants do not seem to play prominent roles in the Brontë fiction, their presence always serves as a marker of the protagonists’ middle-class status. For example, when Jane Eyre accepts the very modest post of village schoolmistress at Morton, she is granted the services of a little orphan girl who functions as a “handmaid.” The exception to this lack of prominence is, of course, the servant Nelly Dean in *Wuthering Heights*. Nelly narrates most of the actual story and figures in the evolution of the plot. Her pragmatic, commonsensical approach to events lends credibility to an unworldly tale, even if her approach seriously limits her ability to understand the tale she tells. Further, her servant status allows her both unique access to all the characters (a necessity for the narrative) and the ability to illuminate the class tensions that exist in it (Heathcliff’s outsider status in relation to the landed gentry). Yet, because Nelly is a servant and peripheral to the action, the novel’s events leave her own situation essentially untransformed (see also Langland on “Class”).

In *Jane Eyre*, Brontë uses her servant characters in a variety of ways. For example, while the Reeds’ housekeeper brings terror and rejection on young Jane, the nursemaid teaches Jane to love and nurture without neglecting discipline. The fictional housekeeper was most often a widow, and Mrs. Fairfax falls under the category of the widowed older lady. She is the one who responds to Jane’s advertisement and hires her. But it is also Mrs. Fairfax who warns Jane before her wedding to Rochester that she should not trust him. Stern and disapproving, she signifies the distress and turmoil that are soon to take place with the pending wedding. Hannah, the housekeeper at Moor House, displays the same kind of attributes. When Jane desperately knocks on the door, it is Hannah who answers and turns her away. The housekeeper’s loyalty to the family causes her to distrust strangers and attempt to protect its interests. She refuses to allow Jane to speak to her mistresses, while Jane keeps claiming she will die if turned away.



According to Callie Martindale, servants in the text can also function as “monitors of truth”: their viewpoints develop beyond the prejudices of other characters and offer opinions of their “betters” that are often remarkably prophetic (1). These servants present suspicions of others that Jane already possesses, and their views “help solidify the authority and reliability of Jane as the novel’s narrator” (1). Martindale states that “Through the eyes of Bessie Lee, we find the social hierarchies of Gateshead overturned; through Mrs. Fairfax, Rochester’s dubious motives are hinted at; and through Grace Poole, Bertha Mason retains her humanity in the face of objectification by her spouse” (2).

Martindale argues that the novel is “filled with notable portraits of ‘the help’ who help shape Jane Eyre into the passionate, sensitive, independent woman that she is destined to become” (2–3). And servant characters not only often appear in “crucial moments when Jane needs advice or insight at a pivotal point in her coming-of-age journey,” but they play a much more distinct role that cements their importance in Brontë’s class-conscious society (3). Thus, Martindale concludes that servant characters in *Jane Eyre* prove themselves to be “clear-minded, observant individuals who are the only ones capable of viewing previously misunderstood upper-class characters for who they truly are.” They are utterly unclouded by motivations of wealth, romantic love, or social climbing (3).

On the other hand, for Judith Shulevitz, “Jane’s ambiguous role as quasi-equal in Thornfield Hall” makes her a very astute observer of both the upper and the serving classes. Through Lucy Snowe, the orphaned narrator of *Villette*, who teaches at a girls’ school in Belgium, we also learn “what it means to have a job turn toxic” when an employer begins to scheme against an employee. Shulevitz observes that both Jane and Lucy struggle to draw the line with superiors who behave as would-be seducers and persistently violate professional boundaries (2016).

*Wuthering Heights* is also unusual for its elaborate treatment of the relationship between masters and servants. Graeme Tytler (45) argues that although masters (and mistresses) ultimately have the upper hand, their servants exercise a lot of power within the sphere of domination to which they are subject (Heathcliff, Nelly). The tendency of servants to be insubordinate highlights, for Tytler (48), the problem of a hierarchical society while raising certain questions of moral interest. The fact that the author herself seems to call the system of masters and servants into doubt is hinted at throughout the narrative (namely through her presentation of Hareton and the younger Catherine).

In his sophisticated critical work, Bruce Robbins (1993) generally criticizes the feudal view of domestic service in Victorian fiction, stating that “servants are survivors from a pre-industrial world of mutual dependency and obligation” (x). He pertinently argues that “rather than grapple with the new and exotic industrial worker” or “take up the life of the domestic as a subject in its own right, the [bourgeois] novel turned back to literary tradition ... to the much-repeated master-servant tropes and devices” (xi). Though some of these tropes are still present in the novels of the Brontës, extreme feudal views regarding servants in the period tended gradually to disappear.

Feudal views are also less prominent in 19<sup>th</sup>-century American fiction, as Doyle highlights in her work on the differences between Charlotte Brontë and Louisa May Alcott in their literary treatment of female service and employment in general. Though, like Brontë, Alcott also makes use of occupations such as teacher and governess in her work, and her characters also have to execute menial tasks, like sweeping bedrooms and making shirts, they do not “suffer permanent damage to their psyches or reputations” (148). She thus suggests that American parameters of respectability tended to be much broader. Doyle concludes that, in her extensive revisions of Brontë, “Alcott typically gives more power of action to her heroines than does her English counterpart” (164).

Louisa May Alcott’s classic for adolescents *Little Women* (1868–1869) has served as “a valuable depiction of the private and public relationships of those who served and those who were served in ... Victorian homes” (Daniele 483). Daniele more generally argues that Alcott’s domestic fiction was part of a much larger movement in New England to valorize voluntary service by genteel women, to the detriment of low-waged proletarianized domestic work, especially that performed by Irish hands (484). This movement is important because it seems to correspond to the Victorian myth regarding the middle-class woman as the “angel in the house,” an idealized domestic figure within Anglo-Saxon culture.

As in Alcott’s famed novel, these were “networks of busy ‘little women’” (of WASP heritage)—“invisible circles of domestic solidarity”—not charity, which aimed to protect “the quintessential private and moral sphere” from becoming a “public workplace” (485). Daniele argues that Alcott’s work not just “embodied” but also actively “promoted this social type”—the “helper,” common in her utopian Concord community but about to disappear “under the social pressures of rapid urbanization” (486). Significantly, the Marches (in *Little Women*) incorporate a maid (Hannah), who is like a family member and has been with them for many years, which may suggest that she shared the family’s beliefs.

According to Bonnie Melton (1999), Alcott's other semi-autobiographical novel, *Work*, (1873) shows "the changes in women's work in the new industrial era, as well as the dilemmas, tensions, and the meaning of that work." Alcott takes her heroine, Christie Devon, through a variety of careers, "from the domestic to the dramatic to the depressing, until Christie finds the balance between public and private work and between work for her own profit and work for the profit of others." Melton argues that Alcott portrays work outside the home (which is fundamentally public) "as potentially dangerous to a woman's reputation, health, and identity ... [and] work inside the home (which is fundamentally private) as healing and regenerative, but ultimately unsatisfying to an ambitious woman like Christie."

For Daniele, this novel is exemplary in showing "domestic service as the initial stage in the progress of the Christian heroine to salvation and independence." Christie "moves away from urban corruption to a safe community of women uncontaminated by the laws of profit" (487). "She finds shelter and relief ... in a circle of seamstresses: a female collective ... that rescues repentant prostitutes and delinquents, by teaching them skills and values such as discipline, docility, and punctuality" (487). She thus experiences service only as "the first step" in her professional growth to become a member of the middle-class. For Jelena Šesnić (2022), Alcott engaged in a variety of jobs, not all considered suitable for genteel women, translating into Christie's trials Emerson's belief in the spiritual and practical self-reliance of the individual.

The issue of working for a living was also always implicitly present in the Brontës' thinking about fictional worlds. But though Charlotte's heroines Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe (*Vilette*) both work to achieve independence and to support themselves, one doubts that Brontë would have them proclaim "I have been and mean to be a working-woman all my life," as Alcott's protagonist Christie Devon does. This Alcottian utilitarian purpose was far removed from Brontë's culture and time (such women's work was generally thought to be a mere necessity not a right), nor was it in accordance with the conventions of the Victorian novel. In this idealized fictional realm, access into a higher social class was generally obtained through marriage, not work (even of a respectable kind). Though both writers examined the hard struggles of independent young women, Alcott—writing in a later and very different context—already foresees her female characters making more egalitarian marriages, and choosing from a wider range of careers, thus seeming to display a more optimistic and democratic view.

## **Conclusion**

Domestic service in the Victorian period was a predominant menial activity that mostly engaged single, lower-class women workers, though middle-class women were not exempt from serving, being frequently occupied with several unwaged chores. In the particular context of some New England communities, domestic service that was performed voluntarily by genteel women was seen as collaborative and morally uplifting, whilst the service provided by (low) waged maids (especially of Irish origin) was not as highly regarded. Whereas across the Atlantic, within the Brontë household, servants played a very important role, not only as a precious help in raising the orphaned children but also as true friends in times of need, as well as being an undeniable (re)source for the creative works of the sisters. They were, thus, highly respected and loved by the Brontës, who were not only frequently compelled to perform domestic tasks themselves, but also to seek hired work outside the home.

This was also the case of Louisa May Alcott, though within a specific New England community context, where she herself was offered as a domestic helper and used that experience in her later writing. Alcott was keenly aware of the dilemmas faced by Charlotte Brontë in her own and her characters' serving experience: the need to find waged employment outside the home, as governesses or schoolmistresses—the only available alternatives. The two novelists thus shared the challenge of having to sacrifice their writing careers to these basic demands. In their novels, the Brontës and Alcott often deal with issues such as the importance for women of acquiring working skills, as well as the prejudice they are subject to in a highly patriarchal society. And they both make use of their experience to enrich their fiction, namely by showing how the figure of the servant is a “helper” in more than one sense: she can be strategic to the development of their plots. Serving was, consequently, both inevitable and indispensable in the Brontës' and Alcott's respective progress as women and as artists.

But substantial differences between the two have also been detected in this research: While the Brontës' heroines are usually more constrained in their respective choices when going out to service, Alcott's typically have more power of action. Another divergence is in relation to the notions of service as part of the concept of Victorian womanhood. In contrast with Brontë, Alcott valorized voluntary service by genteel women or “helpers,” which seemed to conform to an idealized notion of “the angel in the house.” And she was engaged herself in

private networks of domestic solidarity regarding service. Thus, while neither the more class-conscious Charlotte Brontë nor her heroines tolerate the performance of menial tasks when they went out to service, Alcott and her protagonists did not seem, as a rule, to find those tasks socially demeaning but rather morally uplifting. Alcott's "How I Went Out to Service," though, is an exception to this. She does find tasks demeaning, after several weeks; ultimately after her employer gives her his boots to polish, she refuses to do it. This autobiographical story offers a different perspective and thereby complicates Alcott's typical view. It needs to be noted, however, that Alcott's male employer gives her worse work to do only after she refuses to spend time alone with him, raising the issue of domestic service and sexual abuse.

In spite of important differences between Alcott and Brontë, regarding their respective experiences and attitudes to women's service, one senses that in both cases "going out to service" (whether in the role of maid or of governess) did not constitute—for themselves and their heroines—an end in itself or a priority in terms of career. For middle-class women, service was seen merely as a step to achieve the financial independence that would allow them to support their families or have access to a more privileged situation or status, namely—or especially—as married women. As good marriages were not usually readily available to lower middle-class women, like the Brontës, it would be their respective personal experiences in different types of service that, in the end, granted them success as women writers and, thus, access to that desired higher status.

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## About the Author

Paula Alexandra Guimarães is an Associate Professor at the School of Arts and Humanities of the University of Minho (Department of English and North-American Studies), and a Senior Researcher at CEHUM (NETCult – Transcultural Studies Group). Her MA dissertation was on Elizabeth Gaskell's social novel and her PhD thesis on the poetry of the Brontës. Her areas of interest include 19th-Century Studies, Poetry and Intercultural Poetics, Comparative Literature, Anglo-Portuguese and Women Studies. She was previously Course Director of European Languages and Literatures. She has published on several women poets, namely in *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* and in *Comparative Critical Studies*. Her most recent book is *Intercultural Poetics. Literary Representations of the Foreign Other* (CEHUM/ Húmus, 2019).



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