

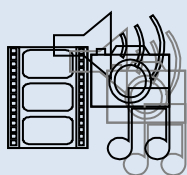
15. Education, women and governesses in the 19th century

Following on from the very simple search for gender terms in Activity 11 above, we can explore further and more specific aspects of gender roles in 19th century fiction using CLiC. Young, educated women could find respectable work in upper middle class and landowning households as governesses for the family's children. These positions occupied an uneasy location between being a servant and being part of the household, and as a consequence governesses were often isolated or in an ambivalent social position. These factors, of course, make the role an ideal one for literary fictional narrative.

Activity 15.1 The governess

1. Watch the British Library video "The Governess" on Youtube (or search for "British Library" and "governess").
2. Summarise how the video describes the life of a governess in 19th century British society and literature. Can you think of any novels with a governess among the characters?

British Library – "The Governess"



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tlOkWlxqqWs>

Examples of famous literary governesses include Rebecca Sharp in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, Jane Eyre in the novel by Charlotte Brontë, Agnes Grey in Anne Brontë's novel, Madame de la Rougierre in Le Fanu's *Uncle Silas*, the unnamed governess in Henry James *The Turn of the Screw*, Miss Wade in Dickens's *Little Dorrit*, Jane Fairfax in Jane Austen's *Emma*, and many others. Given her interest in the grand country house and estate as the setting for several novels, Jane Austen's writing features several instances of a governess as a significant character.

Activity 15.2 Austen's governesses

- Go to the CLiC Concordance tab (<http://clic.bham.ac.uk/concordance>).
- Select novels by Jane Austen in the "Search the Corpora" box. You can start typing "Austen" and CLiC will show all of Austen's novels which you then need to select one by one.
- Select the subset "All text".
- Under "Search for terms", type the word *governess*.

You should get a concordance that looks like this:

Showing 1 to 25 of 25 entries from 5 books

	Left	Node	Right	Book
1	Miss Taylor been in Mr. Woodhouse's family, less as a	governess	than a friend, very fond of both daughters, but particularly	emma
2	tion without steady and regular instruction, and nobody but a	governess	can give it.It is wonderful how many families I	pride
3	fit for a wife, but not at all for a	governess.	But you were preparing yourself to be an excellent wife	emma
4	it unnecessary, for they were under the care of a	governess,	with proper masters, and could want nothing more.As for	mansfield
5	left in Staffordshire to the care of servants, or a	governess	very little better, to prevent my believing what she says	ladysusan
6	certainly might.""Aye, no doubt; but that is what a	governess	will prevent, and if I had known your mother, I	pride
7	that possible?Five daughters brought up at home without a	governess!	I never heard of such a thing.Your mother must	pride
8	Then, who taught you? who attended to you?Without a	governess,	you must have been neglected.""Compared with some familie	pride
9	it seems, a Mrs. Younge, who was some time ago	governess	to Miss Darcy, and was dismissed from her charge on	pride
10	London.""Has your governess left you?""We never had any	governess.""	No governess!How was that possible?Five daughters brought	pride
11	What is all this?""She had engaged to go as	governess	to Mrs. Smallridge's children-- a dear friend of Mrs. Elton's	emma
12	Smallridge, too!Jane actually on the point of going as	governess!	What could he mean by such horrible indelicacy?To suffer	emma
13	made up his mind to Jane Fairfax's going out as	governess,	and could talk of it cheerfully, but Mr. Knightley's going	emma
14	her place had been supplied by an excellent woman as	governess,	who had fallen little short of a mother in affection	emma
15	a very different description.She had called on her former	governess,	and had heard from her of there being an old	persuasion
16	the mother's fault.Miss Augusta should have been with her	governess.	Such half-and-half doings never prosper.But now I must be	mansfield
17	your governess left you?""We never had any governess.""No	governess!	How was that possible?Five daughters brought up at home	pride
18	Miss Taylor had ceased to hold the nominal office of	governess,	the mildness of her temper had hardly allowed her to	emma
19	It is an insult to propose it.At Ecclesford the	governess	was to have done it.We all agreed that it	mansfield
20	and a little girl or two in the room, the	governess	being sick or run away, and the mother in and	mansfield
21	and I have too much reason to fear that the	governess	to whose care I consigned her was unequal to the	ladysusan
22	that Anne had known of her, till now that their	governess's	account brought her situation forward in a more decided but	persuasion
23	had no objection, but my father hates London.""Has your	governess	left you?""We never had any governess.""No governess!How	pride
24	her, that it wins upon one directly.She was your	governess,	I think?"Emma was almost too much astonished to answer	emma
25	against when they are learning a lesson.What would your	governess	and your uncle say to see them used for such	mansfield

Figure 1: All 25 instances of *governess* in Jane Austen's novels

This shows all instances of *governess* in Jane Austen's novels. Look closely at the concordance lines to get a swift overview of how governesses are described and

their position in society. Again, clicking on the "In bk." column to the right of a line will give you the full context of the line in its original passage.

Activity 15.3 The social status of governesses in *Pride and Prejudice*

7. Following on from step 6 above, find the line that includes the sentence "Has your governess left you?" You will see to the right of the concordance line that this is from "pride" (*Pride and Prejudice*), chapter 29, paragraph 26, and it is sentence 71. Click on the "in bk." graphic to the right, and CLiC will open the passage concerned from the novel.
8. The short passage contains a wealth of evidence for the status of governesses and the attitudes of families towards them. What does it tell you about families who employed a governess and those that didn't?

Here is the passage.

"Has your governess left you?"

"We never had any governess."

"No governess! How was that possible? Five daughters brought up at home without a governess! I never heard of such a thing. Your mother must have been quite a slave to your education."

Elizabeth could hardly help smiling as she assured her that had not been the case.

"Then, who taught you? who attended to you? Without a governess, you must have been neglected."

"Compared with some families, I believe we were; but such of us as wished to learn never wanted the means. We were always encouraged to read, and had all the masters that were necessary. Those who chose to be idle, certainly might."

"Aye, no doubt; but that is what a governess will prevent, and if I had known your mother, I should have advised her most strenuously to engage one. I always say that nothing is to be done in education without steady and regular instruction, and nobody but a governess can give it. It is wonderful how many families I have been the means of supplying in that way. I am always glad to get a young person well placed out. ..."

(Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, Chapter 29)

Note that it is also important to frame these comments by noticing whose views are being expressed. In this passage, the character Lady Catherine is allowed almost to speak for herself: her speech is even largely free of the narrator adding reporting clauses like *she said*. Elsewhere in the novel, the narrator gives opinions about governesses directly, and sometimes a character's perspective is blended with or filtered through the narratorial content (as 'Free Indirect Discourse'). This happens in the narrated paragraph just above the passage excerpted here from Chapter 29. Go and read through it in the CLiC context page (you can find it from the CLiC table of contents at clic.bham.ac.uk under *Pride and Prejudice*). You can see Austen using her narrator to provide characterisation of Lady Catherine in the manner in which she is presented, before she speaks.

CLiC includes a section of corpora of "ChiLit – 19th Century Children's Literature", which you can find in the "Search the corpora" box. Scroll down to find individual novels, such as Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*.

Activity 15.4 Children's feelings about governesses

9. Start again by going to the CLiC Concordance tab (<http://clic.bham.ac.uk/concordance>).
10. Find "The Secret Garden" in the "Search the corpora" box, and select it.
11. Search in "All text" for the term governess.
12. You should find 8 examples.
13. Explore their contexts by clicking on the graphic "In bk." for each line.

The line containing the speech, "'I don't want a governess', said Mary sharply", occurs in the following passage.

"Why, our Dickon's eyes nearly started out o' his head, they got that round," answered Martha. "But mother, she was put out about your seemin' to be all by yourself like. She said, 'Hasn't Mr. Craven got no governess for her, nor no nurse?' and I said, 'No, he hasn't, though Mrs. Medlock says he will when he thinks of it, but she says he mayn't think of it for two or three years.'"

"I don't want a governess," said Mary sharply.

"But mother says you ought to be learnin' your book by this time an' you ought to have a woman to look after you, an' she says: 'Now, Martha, you just think how you'd feel yourself, in a big place like that, wanderin' about all alone, an' no mother. You do your best to cheer her up,' she says, an' I said I would."

(Frances Hodgson Burnett, *The Secret Garden*, Chapter 8)

What advantages do the adults see in getting a governess for Mary? And what does Mary think about it?

Activity 15.5 Broadening the exploration

14. Choose one of the following corpora in CLiC from the Concordance tab (<http://clic.bham.ac.uk/concordance>):
 - a. Dickens's Novels (DNov)
 - b. The 19th Century Reference Corpus (19C)
 - c. The 19th Century Children's Literature Corpus (ChiLit)

Search the corpora:	Search the corpora:	Search the corpora:
<input type="text"/> Selected subcorpora DNov - Dickens's Novels 19C - 19th Century Reference Corpus ChiLit - 19th Century Children's Literature Corpus ArTs - Additional Requested Texts	<input type="text"/> Selected subcorpora DNov - Dickens's Novels 19C - 19th Century Reference Corpus ChiLit - 19th Century Children's Literature Corpus ArTs - Additional Requested Texts	<input type="text"/> Selected subcorpora DNov - Dickens's Novels 19C - 19th Century Reference Corpus ChiLit - 19th Century Children's Literature Corpus ArTs - Additional Requested Texts

Figure 2: Choosing corpora

15. Run a concordance for *governess* in the chosen corpus.
16. Go through the concordance and try to find examples for at least one of the following questions:
 - a. What examples can you find for the points mentioned in the British Library video, in Activity 15.1 above, about the tension that a governess would have felt in the 19th century, being neither part of the family nor of the servants?
 - b. Which children do the governesses look after? What does this tell you about childhood in the 19th century?
 - c. What is the social background of the governesses? Why do they choose the job?

Further reading

"Orphans in fiction" – British Library

<https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/orphans-in-fiction>

This activity is just one example from the activities in our free activity book that you can download from our website:

Mahlberg, M., Stockwell, P., & Wiegand, V. (2017). CLiC – Corpus Linguistics in Context: An Activity Book Version 1. University of Birmingham.

<https://birmingham.ac.uk/clic-activity-book>

We welcome your feedback on our activities – please get in touch with comments, suggestions!