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Clashes of Class and Prohibited Passion in *The Turn of the Screw*

In his preface to the 1908 edition of *The Turn of the Screw*, Henry James quotes a letter he wrote to a friend who questioned his characterization of the governess: "It constitutes no little of a character indeed, in such conditions, for a young person, as she says, 'privately bred,' that she is able to make her particular credible statement of such strange matters. She has 'authority,' which is a good deal to have given her, and I couldn't have arrived at so much had I clumsily tried for more" (23). This statement is rather remarkable, considering one of the central questions surrounding criticism about the novel is precisely the reliability (or unreliability) of the narrating governess. Seeing that she is the lens through which readers experience the story, one can either take her at her word or throw everything she says into question. For the purposes of this analysis we will accept that the governess believes all the events she describes were in fact real, in order to discuss why the governess might have started seeing her apparitions in the first place. Because, as far as the text is concerned, they are *her* ghosts. Since she is the only person to actually admit to seeing the ghosts, it stands to reason that they have very little to do with the children; instead, they are haunting manifestations of the governess's own fears about class transgression coming into contact with her budding attraction for her employer.

Historically speaking, Henry James would eventually find himself in a social position not unlike the governess of his story, making him able to see the individual, authority-

bound experience of people and thereby empathize with frustrations of class tension. Though a brilliant writer, he did not receive a standard education because most of his youth was spent traveling around Europe with his family. This early exposure to a European lifestyle led to James feeling like an exile both at home and abroad. As James's biographer Leon Edel wrote, "He knew himself to be a prince who had taken possession of his domains in Europe, and tasted the joys of personal freedom" (Edel, *Henry James* 37). After such an upbringing, the quaint American life that awaited him in his native land was no longer enough to satisfy his refined tastes. Still, James worried about ever being truly accepted into European society. He moved to Europe in 1869 and bounced between London and Paris with intermittent trips to America in the decade between 1870 and 1880 before finally settling in London for the rest of his life (Edel *Henry James* 16). In 1915—just one year before his death—he was given British citizenship, but until then he lived as an expatriate. An expatriate's position is strange, indeterminate ground for a society based rigidly on class like Britain's was during this era. As an outsider, James could never break into the hereditary aristocratic circle, but he was also not considered to be among the lowly peasants or factory workers either. Much like the governess in *Turn of the Screw*, James lived in a societal in-between space, which made him more sympathetic to the plight of the lower classes and those not satisfied with the system (Edel, *UoM Pamphlet* 26). Though his experiences did not necessarily make him an outright supporter of causes such as women's rights or drastic social change, his writings suggest that he had remarkable understanding of what it is like to live on the margins.

Just as Bly is left in the hands of a mistress instead of its usual master, James allows the governess to be in charge of the story instead of taking the reins himself. In his article

“The Ontology of *The Turn of the Screw*,” Edwin Fussell explains how the governess is an active character in the text, largely because the story is not simply *about* her, but is written *by* her. Henry James claims a small authorial role during the prologue in order to set it up, but he separates himself from the story by explaining that it is the governess’s manuscript that will be read. Once the actual story begins, she is both the author, narrator, and protagonist of tale—the story is completely in her control, or, as James put it, the governess has complete ‘authority’ over the text. Fussell then addresses the issue of how the governess is able to establish that authority with a simple answer: through her ability to write. Though she writes in past tense, she writes with an immediacy that feels present, almost as though the events are transpiring in real time. At the same time her writing is refined, not just notes jotted down during her spare time. Her story is well-crafted, “a literary masterpiece” that is at once reflective of James’s usual writing style and distinct in its own right (Fussell 123). Finally, and most importantly, Fussell addresses why James would choose to give the unnamed governess such power in the story: “The answer [. . .] is to be found in the actual economic situation of the governess, preponderantly a British type, in James’s day” (128). James is interested in the social position governesses held because, like his own position as an expatriate for much of his life, it is a liminal space; in the governess’s case, it is a liminal space between master and servant, educated and uneducated, upstairs and downstairs. It is exactly the governess’s authority that makes this story about class, because she is the author and class distinctions are an integral part of her world view.

The Victorian climate of the novel runs on a strict hierarchy of class. Relations between the classes, especially sexual relations, were both forbidden and feared because

they threatened the very structure of society itself. This is apparent in the narrative when the governess interrogates Mrs. Grose after first seeing Peter Quint. Since she initially sees him standing on one of the towers—a place physically above her—she assumes he must be socially above her. “Was he a gentleman?” is the first question the governess asks Mrs. Grose about him (James 46). When she responds in the negative, the governess begins to see the shocking truth. ““But if he isn’t a gentlemen—’ ‘What *is* he?’” Finished Mrs. Grose, “He’s a horror” (47). Up to this point in the story neither the governess nor the audience know that Peter Quint had an affair with Miss Jessel, nor is she yet aware that he is a ghost, but she believes his simply acting above his place is enough to brand him as a horror. When the governess learns Peter Quint is dead and so she must be seeing his ghost, she has already branded him as evil and never gives him the chance to be anything else.

In his article “Shooting Off James’s Blanks: Theory, Politics, and *The Turn of the Screw*,” Bruce Robbins makes the observation that “to occupy a gentleman's place without being a gentleman is sufficient to become a horror without further need of supernatural props or special effects” (Robbins 196). Peter Quint and Miss Jessel’s affair defiled them, but it is the nature of their divergent social classes that makes the act truly unforgivable in the governess’s eyes. Every interaction that the governess has with the ghosts is symbolic of how she understands them socially. When she first sees Peter Quint he is standing on a high tower and she mistakes him for a gentleman (James 39-40). The next times she sees him he is outside the window, and she immediately goes out and stands in the exact same place he stood. By following directly in his footsteps, the governess betrays her desire to be a part of a gentleman’s world, the class directly above hers. At Bly the governess has no one physically present who is socially above her, but she is still very aware of her in-

between social status and yearns for a chance at upward mobility. A short while later, after Mrs. Grose finds the governess standing where Peter Quint stood, she informs the governess of his servant status and the affair, and from then on out he is either seen outside the window looking in, or below her, as when she saw him at the bottom of the staircase.

The governess's third encounter with Peter Quint is markedly different from the first two. On this occasion she is wandering the house alone at night when the candle in her hand goes out, and in the darkness she suddenly becomes aware of Peter Quint. She sees him coming up the stairs below her, at which point they both stop to consider each other. "He was absolutely [. . .] a living detestable dangerous presence" wrote the governess of the experience, but in the moment, the "dread had unmistakably quitted [her] [. . .] there was nothing in [her] unable to meet and measure him" (James 67). Only two things have changed between the first two sightings and this one—the governess now knows that he is both a servant who had an affair with someone socially above him, and that he is a ghost. Considering the governess did not know she was encountering a ghost the first two times, it is curious that she feels less dread in this moment than when she thought she was dealing with a gentlemanly intruder. It is possible to come to the conclusion, then, that her dread was based on her social relationship with the intruder and his past relationship with someone above him instead of on his actual intruding.

Though the Peter Quint's ghostliness does not greatly impact the governess's reaction to him, his servant status surely does. She sees him below her, quite literally as a member of the "downstairs" community, and is able to "meet and measure him" (67). With the clear knowledge that he was a defiled servant in life, she holds onto her social and moral upper hand with pride. While their eyes are locked there is complete silence, and

throughout the whole interaction the governess does not even deign to speak to him. She later noted, "If I had met a murderer in such a place and at such an hour we still at least would have spoken" (68). He is not worth a word, and her silence forces him back to where he came from. "I definitely saw [Peter Quint] turn, as I might have seen the low wretch to which it had once belonged turn on receipt of an order, and pass, with my eyes on the villainous back that no hunch could have more disfigured, straight down the staircase and into the darkness in which the next bend was lost" (68). He descends into darkness because the governess associates the downstairs with darkness and evil, as well as with the sexual transgression he committed in life. It is as if Peter Quint's position as a sullied servant followed him beyond the grave and the governess's silent order to return to hell left him with no choice but to obey.

The final confrontation between the governess and Peter Quint is also immersed in class tension. In the last installment of the novel the governess sees Peter Quint outside the window while she is trying to get Miles to confess. She wrote that, "the glare of the face was again at the window, the scoundrel fixed as if to watch and wait" (117). This is the same window that the governess saw him through at his second appearance, but this time she does not run out to try and take his place. Now she knows he is an intruder looking in on their little meeting, just like he is a social outsider looking in on their higher lifestyle. He is outside because he is not worthy to be inside in her mind. The governess is fully aware of her hierarchical control of the situation and she exerts her force on little Miles, eventually resulting in his heart being "dispossessed" (120). Regardless of how one interprets this line, the governess won a clear victory over Peter Quint in her own mind. Miles is hers and hers alone, and no servant will be able to conspire with him on her watch.

While Peter Quint's social position to the governess is abundantly clear, Miss Jessel's relation to the governess is more complicated. She was the former governess—meaning she started at the same in-between rank as the current governess—but by loving and being loved by someone “dreadfully below” her, she is also considered a fallen woman (James 58); she is both the current governess's equal and her inferior, and the interactions between the two reflect this ambiguous position. Multiple times Miss Jessel is seen out of doors, but it is always when the governess and children are out as well. While outside they are on the same level, with only distance separating them. The physical distance symbolizes Miss Jessel's place as an outcast—she was once worthy to be near the children, but now that her scarlet letter status is well known, the governess envisions her as a *persona non grata*.

When the governess sees her indoors for the first time Miss Jessel is at the bottom of the staircase, while she stands at the top (reminiscent of the staircase scene between Peter Quint and the governess). Miss Jessel has “her body half bowed and her head, in an attitude of woe, in her hands” as if she is grieving her mistakes, while the current governess watches from both the literal and moral high ground (James 70). Later, after the governess has begun to doubt her ability to save the children, she walks in on Miss Jessel in the school room, sitting at her desk and looking as if she is in the act of writing a letter. The governess recalls that “she had looked at me long enough to appear to say that her right to sit at my table was as good as mine to sit at hers” (88). The governess is uncomfortable with the similarities between herself and Miss Jessel, and her apparitions manifest her unease. These encounters confirm that the governess herself is undecided about how to handle

Miss Jessel's situation, likely because she sees parallels between herself and the former governess.

In every instance, the situations in which the governess sees the ghosts correspond to how she relates to them socially, making it apparent how important social class distinctions are in the novel and to the governess. Class differences are the foundation the governess is built upon, but her motivation—for taking the position in the first place and for seeing it through to the end—lies in her attraction to her employer. The master is described by Douglas in the prologue (presumably using the words of the governess, since he has never seen the man himself) as being “a gentleman, a bachelor in the prime of life, such a figure as had never risen, save in a dream or old novel, before a fluttered anxious girl out of a Hampshire village” (James 26). Still more descriptions label him as “handsome and bold and pleasant, offhand and gay and kind” and “gallant and splendid” (26). That is quite a list, considering the governess “saw him only twice” (28). Her admiration for this man was such that, even many years later and after all the terrible things that happened at Bly, her description of him to Douglas still rings of school-girl adoration. Only the kind of love-at-first-sight experience she describes could have made her overlook the obvious red flags about her position at Bly, such as the mysterious death of the previous governess and the master's mandate that “she should never trouble him [. . .] neither appeal nor complaining nor write about anything [. . .] take the whole thing over and let him alone” (28). Instead of being frightened by such conditions, she takes it as a challenge to prove her trustworthiness to the man she admires. Once she starts her position and the reality of the situation gets scarier and scarier, she continues to abide by his rules in the hope that she can impress him, with the implication that she could impress him into feeling as

passionately about her as she does about him. Irrational though it may seem, it is love for him that keeps her at Bly.

But how do these feelings fit into the class hierarchy of the time? Though she is unwilling to admit it to herself, she is in the same position poor Miss Jessel was, but in reverse. She desires a man *above* her station, making him unobtainable except by some Cinderella-like intervention on his part. And even if he did return her feelings, they would still have to combat a system that was rigged against them. In Bruce Robbins' article "'They don't much count, do they?': The Unfinished History of *The Turn of the Screw*," Robbins analyzes the scene in which the governess sees Miss Jessel in the school room and come to the conclusions that "some force—perhaps her unconscious, perhaps only James's text—is evidently pushing her [the governess] to ask what points of similarity there might be between her and the ghost" (James 383). If we consider Robbins' first hypothesis and assume it is her subconscious that is forcing her to see the manifestations of Miss Jessel and Peter Quint, then the undeniable similarities between the governess's situation and Miss Jessel's make sense. For someone so focused on enforcing class distinctions for those below her, these emotions and the subconscious recognition of her place play in the dichotomy are enough to drive the governess mad. Unreciprocated and unmentionable feelings are what haunt the governess before she starts seeing the ghosts, and it is not a stretch to argue that they are also the *reason* she sees the ghosts.

It is true that this reading of the text does not consider the role of the children in the story in either the appearance of the ghosts or the sanity of the governess. They are indisputably creepy and occupy much of the governess's time and thought in the novel, even when she is not physically with them. Many scholars have considered the creepiness

of the children, like Eli Siegel does in his book *James and the Children*. From his perspective, the children are evil because they are presented as too good and too emotionally distant from everyone. Siegel believes the governess's story is James's narrative voice trying to convince his audience of their wickedness. In the chapter "The Governess as God's Spy," Siegel claims that "the governess acts as if she knew there was something going on in the world which is bad. Now, James was exactly like that. James felt there was something awful going on among people—he didn't know exactly what it was—and he couldn't stand it" (65). Siegel goes on to draw parallels between the governess and James, concluding that James is pushing his views through the character of the governess. While Siegel makes some valid points about overarching themes of good and evil in all of James's works, he does not consider the narrative perspective of the governess. As mentioned above, it is important to remember that Henry James himself stated that this is the unnamed governess's story. Since she is our guide, she would of course record a lot about the children because they are the reason she is at Bly, and she does think they are possessed by an evil force. However, it is up to the critical reader to decide how much of what she says is the children themselves and how much is her projecting her own problems onto them.

In attempting to process the events she experienced at Bly, the governess writes her own story, which offers a look into how her own passions conflict with the class hierarchy of the late Victorian era. Through ghostly manifestations, the governess is forced to confront her desires and prejudices by becoming acquainted with Peter Quint and Miss Jessel's story. Her feelings about social class are complex and conflicted; on one hand, she is entirely opposed to any kind of social mobility for those beneath her, like Peter Quint. She sees herself as not only his superior but also as judge and jury for his sins. On the other

hand, Miss Jessel's experience of loving someone socially unacceptable is too close for comfort for the governess. She looks down on Miss Jessel for her immorality, but unconsciously understands that there is little difference between her situation and the former governess's. The governess is placed between a rock and a hard place by her strict hierarchical conscience and her budding feelings for her employer. Though it is not explicitly stated in the narrative whether the governess is able to come to terms with her experiences at Bly, it is reasonable to assume her ghosts were apparitions created by her own conflicted class consciousness.

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Self-Assessment

I think my thesis is adequately specific for a ten-page paper—it might have been too broad for the shorter paper, but I think it works well in this context. I try to tie every section of my paper back to its thesis so that, by the end, the conclusion can summarize what was discussed in a way that directly responds to the thesis. This thesis statement started out broader (I was going to include sections on feminist interpretation) but I enjoyed researching about the Marxist reading and found more to write about it than I had originally hoped. From that point on I approached this paper as a Marxist reading of *The Turn of the Screw*, and ended up adding the sections on the governess's authority and her attraction to her employer in order to explain why I think she is credible and to give her a motive for staying at Bly.

As far as evidence goes, I summarize all the articles I reference while referencing them, except for the biography by Leon Edel. I figured a biography was pretty self-explanatory and, for time's sake, I only read the sections of it that directly applied to the years I was interested in anyway.

In this paper I try to push that idea that there is more class conflict going on than most scholars address. I think it's a key element to how the governess interprets the world and therefore should be given due consideration.

I revised the paper quite a few times and used my roommate as an editor. I always try to edit my own writing for clarity and then specifically mention the need to edit for clarity to anyone who looks over my essay.

Your comments on my last paper were really helpful in constructing this one. You pointed out areas where I knew my paper was weak (particularly how I didn't connect the authority argument to the Marxist reading) and you gave suggestions on how to better my acknowledgement and conclusion. I discussed with my roommate how the authority argument could support the rest of the paper and then tried to more explicitly state what I hoped it would achieve. I hope that it is now clear that, since it is the governess's story, she is the one making class an issue because it is something that is important to her. As far as the acknowledgement goes, I did more research on people who had studied the children in *The Turn of the Screw* so that I could more accurately quote and acknowledge their arguments. For the conclusion, I made sure that it concluded all the arguments in the paper, not just the argument of the paragraph before it.

Through this assignment I learned that it is easier for me to write short, focused arguments than it is to combine ideas in a larger paper. It was good practice though, and I am happy with how it turned out in the end.

If I were to start it over again I would remember to address the reverse fairy tale reading. I was originally planning on doing that in this paper, but I ended up focusing on a close reading of the interactions between the governess and Peter Quint and Miss Jessel and forgetting about it until the paper was nearly done. It's probably for the best, since I haven't yet figured out how to connect it to a Marxist reading, but it could be fun to try in another paper.

If it's not too much to ask, I would love your feedback on this paper. I like the idea enough that I might try to revisit it in the future. Thank you for a great semester! I've learned more than I expected to learn in Advanced Writing and I really enjoyed the process.