

# The turn of the screw: one of the most debated novels

[Literature](#), [Books](#)



## **Turn of the Screw: A Marxist Perspective: A Criticism**

The Turn of the Screw has been one of the most debated novels of all time because it leaves blank spaces in the text that Henry James intentionally left. Those blank spaces are being filled in with the readers' own background of history and literature. Marxist perspective is one of those backgrounds one needs to know of. This paper is written to critique Robbins' work considering the Turn of the Screw.

Robbins starts off by explaining Marxist theory: telling about historical context while having an effect on it, and accepting history as an infinite and unfinished thing (376-377). I agree to this at a point - that is, Marxist theory has to have the historical background to talk about the following things, events and problems. He says " The ghost-story genre has its own (literary) history. And then there is the social history of the literary marketplace, where ghost stories " sell" better than more " serious" fiction" (376). Considering love themed novels as " serious" fiction, I agree with this idea because considering the era the Turn of the Screw was written, people were seemingly religious; they were likely to be affected by " ghosts," rather than a fundamentally-blank love story. We know that the era consists of class differences in society, that is - upper class looked down upon working class. Since the book is set in a castle, there are, of course, servants, which we call the working class. Robbins says " When the social station of the person you are addressing is at stake, there are severe limits on what can be said" (380). I think it is not only because of their social station but Mrs. Grose also seems like she is hiding some information from the governess. I think the

way Mrs. Grose says “ she” (James 58) is like she is comparing Miss Jessel and the governess; even having a name, Miss Jessel is shown to be superior to the governess. So, I personally disagree with Robbins here, because language has no limits, it keeps changing constantly. Therefore, one can say anything excluding their social status if the language is well-used. Moreover, he says “ They [power and hierarchy] even determine what can be seen” (380), I do not agree with this, either. Ghosts are ghosts for each character if the narration is in the third person, if we have the ability to know what everyone thinks and experiences, but since the Turn of the Screw is written in the first person narrator, it may depend on the character’s background and psychology, if we are to say that they all have different consciousness. Mrs. Grose’s failure to see the ghost has nothing to do with social status, I think. If we compare Mrs. Grose to the governess, I do not see a difference between the two apart from their experiences, but it is rather unknown whether Mrs. Grose sees the ghosts or not.

Moving forward, Robbins says “ The former governess, like the present governess, has allowed her erotic desires to stray across class lines; the only difference is that the object of Miss Jessel’s feelings is someone below her on the social scale rather than someone above her” (381). I think we can interpret this in this way: if Miss Jessel is in love with someone who is socially below her, the governess may fall in love with, unfortunately, either Miles or, the Uncle. In either way, she addresses a male figure that is superior to her considering class differences, that is why she seeks a way to escape her reality of being a governess. At this point, I also would like to mention that

the name "Miles" may also refer to distance that he is the one she is never having a relationship with. No matter how hard she tries, he will always be distant to her. This is both applicable to Miles and the uncle, one is "mentally" distant, and one is "physically."

Additionally, Robbins says "In a society which routinely referred to class difference in terms of "upstairs" [...] and "downstairs" [...], these staircase scenes are heavily charged with the symbol of hierarchy" (381). I agree on this point with Robbins. Miss Jessel was seen "upstairs," whereas Peter Quint was "downstairs" in terms of the steps of the staircase. So it can be concluded from this quotation that the staircase may refer to social ranks and Robbins makes a good use of it.

Finally, the reader is being told that the governess "finds herself again in "the presence" of Miss Jessel's ghost. [...] Some force - perhaps her unconscious, perhaps only James's text - is evidently pushing her to ask what points of similarity there might be between her and the ghost" (382-383). I think we can relate this to Miles; he is only a child but she can choose neither Miles, nor the uncle. She seems to have a passion for both male characters - that is, thinking that Miles is possessed by Quint, she finds a piece of Miss Jessel in herself, as they had been lovers.

To sum up, Robbins makes good use of some claims that he talked about, but there are some other points that I disagree. Having said that, the Turn of the Screw is once again one of those novels that the readers should be aware of its time and surroundings and happenings also. Unlike other critics,

Robbins, I think, grasps the Marxist perspective in a better way than those of gender studies or psychology.