

Sexism in the turn of the screw



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Central to *The Turn of the Screw* is the question of the governess' reliability. Analyses of the text from both 'apparitionist' and 'non-apparitionist' perspectives hinge upon a verdict passed by the critic on the trustworthiness, or conversely the 'hysterical, compulsive, sadomasochistic' nature as John Lydenberg put it, of the novella's twice-removed narrator. Although James was keen to defend the governess' sanity in his retrospective 1908 New York Preface, describing the story as 'her particular credible statement of such strange matters', he generates ambiguity about the protagonist's credibility consistently throughout the text. Intrinsic to a feminist reading of the novella is the question, as Peter Biedler puts it: 'would a male narrator of the story have been so easily moulded to fit so many different critical interpretations, and would he have been considered 'hysterical' in so many of them?' There is certainly structural and textual evidence to support the assertion that the governess' actions and her report of her actions are undermined by her gender, making her victim of what Biedler termed 'a subtle anti-feminism'. On the other hand, one can dispute this claim by suggesting that it is in fact a different determinant that causes the prevalent mistrust of the reader towards the ambiguous 'heroine': from a Marxist interpretation, this would be class. Both a feminist and a Marxist approach involve questioning whether Henry James himself was discriminating along the lines of gender and social status, or whether perhaps he was actually exposing the pervasive prejudices of his society, via the medium of his readers. Is *The Turn of the Screw* in itself misogynistic, or a divisive attack on the proletariat by an undoubtedly bourgeois writer, or does it offer a critique of those mindsets by exploring the contemporary stigma surrounding women and the 'lower orders' through the

unchallengeable form of James' ' fairytale pure and simple'? Of course, as James tirelessly maintains, there is always the option to read *The Turn of the Screw* simply as a ' pot-boiler', a ' jeu d'esprit', designed, as he implied to H. G. Wells, to attract funds and popularity at a time of career crisis (after the flop *Guy Domville*). This viewpoint suggests the governess is a reliable accessory to the cause of rousing ' that dear old sacred terror', not sidelined for any political purpose but rather, as the 1908 preface proposes, ' intelligently neglected', leaving space for James' ' effectual dealing' with the ' mystery... of Peter Quint, Miss Jessel and the hapless children.' Throughout the novella, there is evidence to suggest the governess is absurdly romantic and self-obsessed, succumbing to fits of fancy inspired in part by her repressed sexuality. Before the reader is permitted to hear the governess' account, the i-narrator describes her meeting with the master in Harley Street: ' such a figure as had never risen, save in a dream or an old novel, before a fluttered, anxious girl out of a Hampshire vicarage.' Already James implies that governess ' dreams' of attractive, single men, from which one can infer she possesses an active but internally contained sexual drive. Her gender is used to further destabilize her in the phrase ' fluttered, anxious girl.' For a woman of twenty, the appellation ' girl' intimates the governess still bears the immature and feminine characteristics of her youth, forcing the reader to question her abilities. Undoubtedly, had the central character been a man of twenty, he would not have been described as a ' fluttered, anxious boy.' James makes persistent use of a lexicon suggestive of Romantic notions and romantically unfounded assumptions when narrating as the governess. Her discourse is marked by phrases such as ' in which I had the fancy...', ' I absolutely believed...', ' I began to fancy...' and ' I felt sure...'.
<https://assignbuster.com/sexism-in-the-turn-of-the-screw/>

The implied unreliability of the governess arising from her tendency to 'fancy' is reinforced by James' use of Gothic tropes and devices of metafiction. For instance, the governess says of Bly: 'I had the view of a castle of romance, such a place as would somehow take all the colour out of storybooks and fairytales', which suggests that she is painting, and quite possibly embellishing, her role as a Gothic heroine. Bly's isolated setting with its 'machicolated square tower' is a Gothic trope. She also mentions in chapter IX that 'the book I had in my hand was Fielding's Amelia'; the intertextuality reveals her preoccupation with fictional young women, like Amelia, who are rewarded for their virtuosity with a fairytale husband. This indicates that due to her gender, the governess' telling of the story is clouded by delusions of glamour and grandeur. Critic Patricia N. Klingenberg proposes that the novella 'expels the female' since the governess' narrative is framed and reframed by two male narrators, the i-narrator and Douglas' prologue. One can certainly argue that the triple-frame narrative leads the reader to question the protagonist's reliability and independence, if her story has to be, in effect, chaperoned by male characters. The critic Edwin Fussell asks 'If a woman writes a novel as good as a man - the same novel as a man - why indeed should she be a governess?' This question exposes a contradiction within *The Turn of the Screw*: although James, as he says in his preface, allows his heroine to have "' authority", which is a good deal to have given her', he does not permit the reader to fully trust or respect her, partly because we are made to see her as a humble child minder, dead without notable achievements outside this field. Furthermore, the governess' narrative is not valuable in itself other than as a 'jeu d'esprit' to be related by Douglas, and in reality, James. Once again, it seems suspicious for James

to include the governess' thought: ' it would be as charming as a charming story suddenly to meet someone' just before her first sighting of Quint - since this musing does not bolster the tension of the ghost story, from a feminist angle one must conclude it proves that James seeks to undermine his protagonist's credibility by implying that, as a woman, her observations are made erroneous by her desperation for male attention. On the other hand, one could argue that James' portrayal of his heroine does not convey ' a subtle anti-feminism that refuses to trust women' but rather draws sharp attention towards the ' artificial' and ' anomalous' position of the governess in 19th century Britain. The way in which James' fictional governess is destabilized as a character and as a narrator by her gender perhaps mirrors the way in which the governess in reality ' blurred what was thought to be a stable distinction between domestic duty and labour for money', as Armstrong put it. And thus, because the public and domestic spheres were gendered, the governess destabilized a distinction ' on which the very notion of gender appeared to depend'. Where the Wilson-Goddard critics, from a feminist perspective, approach the text with misogyny by, as Paula Cohen says, treating the female narrator as ' a collection of symptoms - and hence excluding her point of view', it is possible to read the text alternatively as an assertive dramatization of the governess' anxieties about her status as a woman. The governess, on her second sighting of Quint, says she feels as if she ' had been looking at him for years and had known him always', from which one can infer that the ' erect' Quint is an externalization of the governess' distressing sexual desires, which have been consistently repressed by a misogynistic society: originally within the cultural confinement of her religious upbringing, and now in order to meet the ideal

of the 'sexless governess' whom critic Poovey notes is 'expected not to display wilfulness or desires herself. The governess is fixated on the sexually suspect transgressions of her 'vile predecessor' Miss Jessel, even when they are not founded on concrete evidence – she relentlessly presses Mrs. Grose to reveal Miss Jessel's misdemeanors: 'But I shall get it out of you yet! There was something in the boy that suggested to you that he covered and concealed their relation.' In her compulsion to find her predecessor as sexually deviant, the governess, as Sheila Teahan puts it, 'displaces onto Jessel her anxiety about the precarious discursive slippage between the working woman and the prostitute.' This is underlined at the end of chapter XV, after another sighting of Miss Jessel, when the governess says: 'Dishonoured and tragic, she was all before me.' Even from an apparitionist standpoint, believing the ghosts to be genuine, one can certainly read this line as the governess sublimating her crippling fear of become a 'fallen woman' onto the spirit of Miss Jessel. It is clear from the protagonist's almost obsessive reinforcement of her own 'discretion and general high propriety' that she has become trapped in a female dichotomy of vice versus virtue. 'Dishonoured and tragic' is an apt description of the life stretching 'all before' the governess if she released her sexual yearning from the fetters of patriarchy. By highlighting the literally haunting fate of any self-determining, unmarried woman who dared to express her sexuality in the repressive time at which the novella was written, James perhaps exposes rather than supports the more than 'subtle anti-feminism' of his day. Two aspects of the prologue operate ingeniously as looking glasses, perfectly reflecting the reader's prejudices. Firstly, as mentioned earlier, almost all critics assume the i-narrator to be male. One example is critic Anthony Mazella who states <https://assignbuster.com/sexism-in-the-turn-of-the-screw/>

the pederastic relationship between Quint and Miles is 'attributable to the [homosexual] relationship between Douglas and the narrator.' In fact, James meticulously makes no reference to the gender of the i-narrator, demonstrating the unfounded and anti-feminist assumption made by his readers that if unstated, a reliable-sounding speaker must be male. The second aspect follows on from the first. Although the much of the endless commentary on *The Turn of the Screw* centers on 'the notorious question of the governess' reliability' as Teahan calls it, and critics are anxious to examine every word she utters for indications of subjectivity and delusion, the preamble to the story from the i-narrator who was neither at Bly nor ever met the governess, is not questioned. The i-narrator recounts, not verbatim, Douglas' 'touches,' which are essential for framing the story. He says 'the first of these touches conveyed that the written statement took up the tale at a point after it had, in a manner, begun' and goes on to describe the governess' trip to Harley Street, on which much of our opinion on her is based. Whilst it is common for critics to suggest the governess' subjectivity makes the events of the novella subject to interpretation, readers are, for the most part, willing to unquestioningly accept the anonymous i-narrator's undoubtedly subjective account of the heroine's character (it is by definition subjective since it has been re-phrased and thus re-interpreted) from which many Wilson-esque suspicions of 'neurotic' and 'sexually repressed' motivations arise. For example, it is from this passage that the protagonist's passion for the master is inferred: 'he struck her, inevitably, as gallant and splendid.' Does the reader regard the governess' sanity as fair game, but the i-narrator as unimpeachable because of the assumption that the former is female, the latter male? If so, James successfully exposes his reader's innate

misogyny. Alternately, perhaps one places trust in the i-narrator because, in a story mainly made up of second and third-hand accounts, this speaker seems most congruent with James himself, and thus one feels uncomfortable doubting the reliability of the omniscient writer. Either way, the use of the triple-frame structure offers up questions concerning gender-based assumptions, which James proves are still relevant in the liberal era of the 21st century. The female characters in *The Turn of the Screw* are all in some way prejudiced according to their gender: the Governess can be seen, like Wilson saw her, as 'a neurotic case of sex-repression; Miss Jessel was called by James' friend Frederic Myers 'a partially-materialized ghost of a harlot-governess'; Mrs. Grose is shown to be slow, having to 'suppress an intellectual creak'; and Flora is likened by the governess to 'a vulgarly pert little girl in the street'. However, a Marxist reading of the novella sees the tensions and anxieties of class drive the strange events at Bly. One can argue that James associates the lower orders with immorality; for instance, coupled with the way Quint is likened physiognomically to the devil, with archetypal 'whiskers that are as red as his hair', is his wearing 'no hat'. This is symbolic of the fact that, as the governess maintains, he is 'never - no, never! - a gentleman' - and thus James calls on class prejudices to heighten the evil of his 'abnormal agent.' Whilst the governess does in her preconceptions perpetuate the entrenched class system, describing Miles and Quint's relationship as horrific since Quint is a 'base menial', it is possible some of factors, which caused her to be 'viewed harshly' by the reader, are due to her fear of class relegation. Critics Armstrong and Poovey suggest the governess of the 19th century is a disruptive figure who challenges some of the major tenets of class ideology, and was 'commonly

<https://assignbuster.com/sexism-in-the-turn-of-the-screw/>

represented as a threat to the household' because she performed the mother's duties for money, blurring private and public spheres. James governess is an avid reader, and may well have read Mrs. Whatley's 1855 *The Roving Bee* in which it is warned that governesses should not be 'too pretty', otherwise they may, like Miss Jessel, become 'fallen women'. One could argue that when the governess notes that Jessel looked at her 'long enough to appear to say that her right to sit at my table was as good as mine to sit at hers', she is hallucinating a vision of her future social degradation, which will occur if her desire for the master loses her the 'only means by which a woman not born in the servile classes can earn the means of subsistence', as Jameson puts it. On this theme, it is possible that the plight of the governess - plagued by terrible ghosts who no one sees; isolated and unable to write to the irresponsible master who is without 'the right grain of patience' - represents what Edwin Fussell describes as her 'pattern of economic and social exploitation. She is a worker, she is poor, her security of employment is dubious, upward mobility is almost always denied her...'