

Love Between the Classes: An Analysis of Social Status Violation in *The Turn of the Screw*

A Marxist reading of *The Turn of the Screw* by Henry James brings to light how social status differences and above all how the violation of these distinctions affect the story. The relationship between the governess and Miles is a clear example of this kind of transgression. As an unnamed character, the governess has an indefinite social status. She is neither an upper-class lady nor a simple servant. Moreover, in the Victorian context of the story, she is, as Millicent Bell writes, a “tabooed woman” (“Class” 95). Her role is to bring up and take care of the children without allowing herself to be a sexually active woman. As for Miles, he represents the idealised absent upper-class Master, to whom the governess feels attracted in Harley Street. However, the child is also associated with the socially and sexually transgressive Peter Quint and comes to symbolise the forbidden desire of the governess to marry her employer. The relationship between the governess and Miles demonstrates the tension between the duty of a professional and honourable governess and the desire of becoming an upper-class woman with a sexually active life. As an analysis of the scenes in which the governess and Miles are alone will show, this tension results in the governess’s violation of social status differences as she engages in a sexual relationship with Miles.

A governess in the Victorian period was faced with conflicting demands. Bell argues that a governess “had to be a lady to carry her role but was surely not ladylike in working for her living and no social equal of leisured ladies” (“Class” 94). In *The Turn of the Screw*, the governess clearly suffers from this “status incongruity” (“Class” 94). As soon as she enters Bly, this ambiguity and the fragility of her feelings concerning her social position are noticeable. She views Bly as a “castle of romance” (32), but such romance is incompatible with her status of a “tabooed woman.” Yet, the romantic image of Bly is reinforced by the governess’s confession that she came to the estate “to be carried away” (31).

The governess's first description of Miles gives the reader the sense that she immediately succumbs to his charm. The child inspires a "sort of passion of tenderness" (37) and "something divine" in her (37). At Bly, Miles is indeed the miniature of the Master, whose romantic and upper-class nature he mirrors. This is expressed in the way he is alternatively addressed as the "little gentleman" (31), "little grandee" (38), "prince of blood" (38) or "Master Miles" (109). The view of Miles as a gentleman is further supported by two factors. First, his appearance mirrors the Master, as he is dressed by "his uncle's tailor" (83), and secondly, his way of talking to the governess suggests the idea of a gentleman wooing a lady since, as she notes, "His 'my dear' was constantly on his lips for me" (83).

But Miles is not only a representative of his idealised uncle. He also reflects a socially and sexually corrupt master-figure represented by the ghost of Peter Quint, a "base menial" (62), who violated social status differences on two occasions. He not only slept with the former governess, Miss Jessel, but also spent time with Miles and was accused of being "too free with" (51) him. The knowledge of Quint's potential influence on Miles radically changes the governess's opinion of Miles. She goes from a complete rejection of the idea that Miles could be "*bad*" (34, 37) in any sense to an obsession with every word or action of his that might reveal that he has been corrupted by Quint. While Quint's violation of class boundaries is explicitly addressed and abhorred in the text (58), the monstrosity of his deeds is further increased by the text's implicit suggestion of the potentially homosexual nature of his relationship with Miles. Thus Miles is implicated both in Quint's social and sexual transgressions.

The relationship between Miles and the governess and their behaviour toward each other is highly ambiguous. When the governess sits on Miles's bed to question him after he has got caught outside in the middle of the night, for example, the discussion ends in the most bewildering way:

'Think me – for a change – *bad!*' I shall never forget the sweetness and gaiety with which he brought out the word, nor how on top of it, he bent forward to kiss me. It was practically the end of everything. I met his kiss and I had to make, while I folded him for a minute in my arms, the most stupendous effort not to cry. (75)

The text in this instance seems elliptical, specifying neither the exact nature of the kiss nor

explaining what the “everything” refers to and why the governess is on the verge of tears. Replaced in its social and historical context, however, the passage suggests the beginning of a sexual relationship between the governess and Miles. Studies on the Victorian period have demonstrated that “upper-class men were routinely ‘initiated’ by maids or governesses” (“The Turn” 226). Miles might have had a sexual relationship with Peter Quint and could be aware of this initiation rite, either from school or from Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, which would explain his forward behaviour as an implicit demand for sexual intimacy. By responding to Miles’s kiss with an embrace, the governess acts out her forbidden desire for the Master while her effort to keep herself from crying reflects her awareness that she is violating her professional duty. For the governess, this is the “end of everything,” as she, like Quint, becomes guilty of the ultimate social and sexual transgression, that is, in Bell’s words, “love between classes” (“The Turn” 225).

The further development of their behaviour supports the interpretation that the governess engages in a sexual relationship with Miles. When Miles orders the governess to enter his room during the night, he explicitly admits that he is thinking of her and of the “queer business of [theirs]” (92). This “queer business” not only refers to the way the governess brings him up but also to “all the rest” (92). These equivocal words, brought into a Victorian context, refer to the initiation to sex by the governess, which is reinforced by Miles’s pointing out that she “knows what a boy wants!” (93). The end of the scene demonstrates that she knows indeed what Miles means and that she yields to his desire: “The boy gave a loud high shriek which, lost in the rest of the shock of sound, might have seemed, indistinctly, though I was so close to him, a note either of jubilation or terror” (95). This sentence strongly suggests that Miles has had sexual intercourse with the governess. However, Miles’s shriek of “jubilation or terror” leaves the governess in a state of uncertainty about his reaction. Moreover, after Mrs Grose and Flora have left Bly, the two are faced with each other in an oppressive and silent atmosphere, and the governess can only passively ascertain the obvious, namely that they resemble “some young couple [...] on their wedding-journey” (113).

As Bruce Robbins points out, Henry James in *The Turn of the Screw* “clearly resists historical interpretation, which would fill in [the] blanks with knowledge of social group” (335). Yet, the present analysis of the relationship between Miles and the governess precisely shows the relevance of a historical and social reading of the story. Placing the governess’s narration into a socio-historic context reveals the conflict between her own desires and the demands she faces in her profession. It also provides a background for understanding Miles’s ambivalent character, as he is both representing the upper-class Master and associated with the social and sexual transgressions of Peter Quint. Finally, awareness of Victorian practices of sexual initiation allows readers to trace the development of the relationship between Miles and the governess as their roles transform from pupil and teacher to lover and mistress.

Works cited:

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