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Literary Theory and Writing: Second Draft
11-2-19

Feminine Identity and Oppression in James' *The Turn of the Screw*

“The hope of many feminists is that once people are empowered and become accustomed to making their own life choices, their exploitation and exclusion will no longer be easy” (Nelson and Shanahan 229). Feminist theory highlights the fact that women are constantly forced to submit their own passions or identity for the sake of pleasing their patriarchal society. Women strive to create identities for themselves that are socially acceptable, such as a housewife or some other type of ‘feminine’ identity that serves men. In Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw*, the governess is continuously forced to create her identity based off of the perception of the others around her that submit to patriarchal institutions. However, there are certain instances in which the governess seeks to break through these barriers of female oppression. The patriarchal forces in Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* are responsible for crafting a shattered and mentally unstable female identity of the governess, rather than allowing the governess to discover her own autonomy and empowerment.

Despite the power that the governess is given through her job, her worth becomes valued only by her ability to succeed at her job. The governess is forced to keep her job as the main aspect of her own identity. Her value is evaluated in terms of her ability to take care of others around her, rather than being valued for her own power and autonomy. The main praise that Douglas has of the governess in the novel is that “She was the most agreeable woman I’ve ever known in her position” (James 8). Douglas only gives credit to the governess in terms of her job performance and not as an individual human being. In fact, she is only never named throughout the entire novel, thus only having the ability to be referred to as the governess. This identification

of the woman based only on her occupation gives all of her identity to her profession and not to her own individuality. The governess is evaluated and judged only by her ability to work, rather than as a holistic individual. Additionally, there is a sense of bias attached to the job of governess as well. “In caring for children, they did for pay what the middle-class wife and mother did for free, a fact that brought the governess perilously close to the figure of the prostitute” (Newman 51). The governess is forced to submit to the “mother-woman” archetype that society demands of her, and she is evaluated by the work that she can provide to a man, in this case being the uncle of the children that she is caring for.

Additionally, the governess is continuously sexualized by males in their descriptions of her in the novel, which prevents her character from being given an autonomous identity. Douglas refers to the fact that the governess must have been in love to be hired by the master. He assumes that the governess took the job from the master of the house of Bly through seduction, and “she succumbed to it” (James 9). This assumption of attraction paints the governess as a stereotypical woman who is blinded by love and attraction, unable to make her own decisions and instead seeking only to please the man of her affection. Additionally, the governess makes a comment later on in the novel that “he seems to like [the governesses] young and pretty” (James 19), showing the master’s sexism and apparent value of looks and sexuality over a woman’s competence of her job. Despite the fact that the beauty of the governess may have given her the position, the potential to use her beauty in order to gain power over man is shut down by the nineteenth century perspective of the governess job. The governess “was looked upon as a subordinate rather than as a prospective partner...indefinitely banished to the liminal space of spinsterhood” (Gilbert 459).

Despite the constraint that the governess job places on the woman to craft a real identity, the lack of male presence in the house of Bly allows the governess to think she is building leadership. The governess begins to find empowerment and autonomy in her identity when she is given the ability to lead the household of Bly. The master of the house, the uncle of Flora and Miles, is never around to lead the household, and this allows the governess to gain confidence in herself. The governess believes that she may have full autonomy of herself when she first begins her job at the house of Bly. She is surprised with the opportunities that she is given, and refers to the house of Bly as a ship where she is “strangely at the helm!” (James 15) Additionally, she feels empowered and states that she “fancied [her]self in short a remarkable young woman and took comfort in the faith that this would more publicly appear” (James 23). Given the time period, having this kind of autonomy belonging to women was uncommon, and the governess finds it empowering. Self-determination and empowerment are falsely promised to the governess in her adoption of the job, and she tries to craft her own identity now that she is somewhat given the freedom and power to do so. This so-called freedom proves itself to be false later in the novel.

Patriarchy’s efforts to hide women’s evidence of power is present in the novel, however. Even though the governess is given power, little to no other people are aware of it. The head of the house of Bly is aware of her authority of the children, but he is given the credit as the one in power. It is very easy to see why the patriarchy seeks to keep hidden the growth of female power, as they are afraid that “if the influence of feminist ideas increases, those who have previously benefitted from the domination of others will find it more difficult to reap the rewards of their domination” (Nelson and Shanahan 230). Patriarchy’s failure to grasp the true meaning of the feminist movement causes the fear that it must lose a sense of its power in order for

women to gain equality. The patriarchy seeks to keep its power by silencing the voices that they find threatening. The governess has been given power in the novel through the absence of the children's uncle, but this power is being silenced in order to keep male power from being decreased as a result. Mrs. Grose's character also reflects the silencing of female power, as the head of the house of Bly "had placed [her] at the head of their little establishment- but belowstairs only" (James 8). Mrs. Grose may have power, but it is kept a secret. The patriarchal values in the novel show that women are certainly capable of success and being empowered, but it is silenced in order to keep the men "safe". The women's success can be allowed as long as it does not come in the form of a threat to male domination.

Once the governess has her taste of power, another method of male oppression comes to stop her from gaining any more. The power that the governess begins to have marks her as a dangerous woman to the patriarchy, and her passion and autonomy needs to be stopped. The ghost of Mr. Quint represents another patriarchal force that keeps the governess from gaining a perception of herself that is empowered or liberated. Quint is the distraction from the governess's job that stops her ability to be successful at her profession. As the governess explains the power that she believes she has over Quint to Miles, she says "What will he *ever* matter? *I* have you... but he has lost you forever" (James 124). The governess is proud of herself and acknowledges the power she has as a woman in protecting Miles. This confidence she feels is undermined by Quint's attack of Miles, resulting in his death. Rather than just being the death of Miles, this act also serves as the loss of power in the governess because she has failed as his caretaker. "The problem of social identity compounds the more personal onslaughts to the governess' sense of self" (Newman 51). Quint causes her to "kill" Miles, and now she has failed to use her power effectively.

The results of the governess' failure have the potential to ruin her identity even more. Now that Miles is dead, who is to blame? Either the governess is labeled as an evil woman, or she is to blame because of delusions. There is something to be said for giving mental delusions the responsibility for Miles' death, but what does this imply about the governess as a woman? Is her identity as a caretaker disregarded as delusional or hysterical? This failure to succeed is not because the governess is incapable or delusional, however, it is because she is sabotaged by Quint, by the patriarchal powers that seek to keep her from succeeding as a woman. The fact that Quint is a ghost, however, allows the blame to be placed on the governess rather than on the man for perpetuating the shortcomings and oppression of women.

In trying to keep the children from the oppressive forces, the governess proceeds to fail at her own profession and instead endangers Flora, Miles, and herself. This failure highlights the continual suppression of the female voice of reason, despite its many efforts to defend itself. Women have searched for power and equality throughout all of history, yet still remain unequal. Even though the governess had tastes of equality, the oppressive male force snuffed this power out of her, and forced her own identity to shatter and place her beneath the rest of society yet again.

Works Cited

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