

Screwing It Up:
The Designation of Difference as Monstrosity in *The Turn of the Screw*

“The monster is the transgression of natural limits, the transgression of classifications, of the table, and of the law as table...there is monstrosity only when the confusion comes up against, overturns or disturbs civil, cannon, or religious law....[It] is the kind of irregularity that calls law into question and disables it.”

~Foucault, *Abnormal*, 63, 64

The Victorian culture that framed the creation of *The Turn of the Screw* by Henry James was one fascinated by the existence of the perverse. Ostensibly, Victorian society was indeed one where the prescription of “the normal” pervaded countless discourses (such as sexuality, psychology, and criminality) becoming the standard by which all acts were judged. The normal--being all those who were heterosexual, white, male, and classed-- were established as that which was natural and therefore that which was objectively right or intended. Any divergence from this white hetero-normative model then created a situation in which that individual (or group) seemed to be challenging the very intentions of nature—the person was different, abnormal, irregular, and thus amoral because of their “deliberate” difference. By labeling these “other Victorians”¹ as perverse and even monstrous, those citizens masquerading as normal effectively created distance between themselves and the abnormal with whom they were so interested. This label was part of a process of objectification through which Victorian society created an atmosphere of removed and almost scientific curiosity that eliminated any threat to the citizen of association with those people possessing monstrous qualities of difference. This allowed for Victorians to satiate their rather perverse fascination with the abomination while still maintaining their normatively respectable position in society. In this way, the persons of difference were made scientific and inhuman, merely the objects of study, in other words, monsters.

Through this understanding of monstrosity as the display of non-normative behavior in the Victorian era, the *Turn of the Screw* is quickly rewritten as a novel about nothing *but* the construction of a monster. The text becomes “a material product to be understood in broadly historical terms” (Murfin 318). Its work is to “enforce and reinforce the prevailing ideology [of the time]...to which the majority of people uncritically subscribe” (318). The governess, unlike any other character, exhibits unique

¹ This term was coined by Steve Marcus and used by Foucault in *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1* to refer to all those members of Victorian society who possessed “illegitimate sexualities”, see Part One: We “Other Victorians” (1-14).

measures of social difference and transgression in three dominant realms of normativity, thus opening her character up to various readings as the ultimate portrayal of a monster. In the case of *The Turn of the Screw*, her difference is her downfall, making her the object of horror and disgust for both readers and other characters. The three realms of traditionally normalized behavior that James addresses through his construction of the governess's monstrosity are sexuality, class, and psychology. The governess's fluid sexuality and questionable class transgressions along with her deeply rooted psychosis reveal her to be distinctly different from typical society and thus utterly monstrous.

“The monster is essentially a mixture...It is the mixture of two sexes: the person who is both male and female....”
~Foucault, *Abnormal*, 63

According to Foucault, homosexuality has been in existence as an identity taxonomy since the late 19th century². Prior to this time, while there were acts of sodomy, but there was no distinct separation between sexual orientations; self recognized identity labels such as homosexuality or heterosexuality, gay or straight did not exist. For Foucault, “homosexuality appeared... when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul” (HS 43)³. The homosexual as “a species” became a confusion of the feminine and the masculine, an inversion of sorts that claims physical allegiance to one sex while claiming psychological allegiance to the other (43). This confusion of the “natural” order of sexuality is the reason Victorian society termed the homosexual monstrous. S/he broke down binaries, crossed boundaries, transversed established structures, creating a chaos through h/is/er difference.

In *The Turn of the Screw* it is just this gender confusion that prompts many readers to identify the governess as being a monster in her own right. As the governess's story begins, narrated 10 years after her experiences by a man named Douglas, she is quickly characterized as a “fluttered anxious girl” whose “young untried” nature renders her susceptible to “the seduction exercised by the splendid young

² Foucault identifies the exact date of 1870 as the period when the category of homosexuality, as the term is used today, was invented. See page 43 in Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1.

³ See ‘Works Cited’ for the list of abbreviations used

man” who would later become her employer (TS 28, 26, 28). The governess’s innocence and femininity, established early in the novel, then become a source of confusion and contradiction as she assumes her rather patriarchal authorities as governess of Bly Manor (Walton 311). She must be at one time both male and female in her existence: “trying to supplant the male authority figure” as head of Bly Manor while still striving to maintain the traditional notions of femininity expected of her sex (Walton 312). This almost schizophrenic split in the governess’s gender identity makes her a distinctly unnatural and different member of Victorian society. She insists on simultaneously occupying two contradictory gender roles, mixing the two categories and (re)creating herself as “the person who is both male and female” (AB 63). In this way, the governess’s difference becomes her monstrosity. She challenges the normative understanding of the age and, because of the chaos and confusion she agitates, is labeled a monster in the process.

The governess’s difference, however, is not simply limited to her position. On numerous occasions throughout the novel, the governess’s rather fluid and somewhat perverse sexuality is highlighted as another arena for abnormality. After assuming her position at Bly, Douglas implies that the governess has developed a passionate romantic fascination with her employer, the master. As she settles into her position and becomes increasingly satisfied with her work, the governess begins to fantasize that (in a interestingly eroticized way) she is “giving pleasure” to the master by performing her tasks in the way that “he had earnestly hoped [for] and directly asked of her” (TS 38). This heterosexual desire is then complicated by the governess’s interactions with Mrs. Grose, the housekeeper of Bly. Like all of the sexual encounters at Bly, the relationship between the governess and Mrs. Grose is only hinted at with ambiguities and subtleties. However, as the paranormal occurrences witnessed by the governess become more frequent, the governess narrates an increasing closeness between herself and Mrs. Grose, divulging that Mrs. Grose “desired to cling to [the governess]” in moments of stress or fear and, far from being put off by these occasions of intimacy, the governess “lik[ed] to feel her close” (TS 51, 37). The intensity of the pair’s frequent kisses and embraces is only redoubled by the overtly sexualized way that

the governess describes these encounters, often recalling the “tight[ness]” of the hold or the prolonged nature of their touches (TS 76, 37). But what then do we make of the governess—is she heterosexual or homosexual? She describes erotic attractions to both genders which only blur the lines of her sexual identity. Not only does she express homosexual urges that belie the “interior androgyny” that many in Victorian society came to see as unnatural and monstrous, but she further aggravates this “unnatural” sexuality by also expressing heterosexual desires (HS 43). The governess’s abnormal fluidity of sexuality makes her more monstrous than even homosexuality would because her sexuality challenges and confuses *all* of the established categories. Her sexuality lies in the ambiguous world of “other” where her difference and individuality become the reasoning behind her monstrous designation.

“...*Class transgression immediately brands them...as evil spirits...*”
~Robbins, 338

“...*Supernatural evil cannot be readily distinguished from the ‘unnaturalness’ of servants stepping out of their place*”
~Robbins, 338

Just as a fluid sexuality that challenges the rigid structures of society prompts the label of “monster”, so does a permeable understanding of class status warrant a similar categorization. During the 19th century, social classes were supposed to be fixed, impermeable. A person was born into a set class and was expected to marry and live within that class for the rest of their life. Any move to transverse class distinctions or ignore social limits was viewed by society with a certain amount of horror and shock. For this society, class mobility was *unnatural*—it’s “irregularity” and difference called into question accepted social norms and laws and so, in reactionary fashion, society labeled these transgressors, these others, evil, amoral, and even monstrous because of the chaos and disorder they evoked.

Thus, even the governess’s most “normal” heterosexual desire for the master is tainted by an air of monstrosity. After accepting the master’s offer for the position of governess and vowing to “never trouble him” with any problems, the governess travels to Bly where her passionate fascination with him

only increases (TS 28). She frequently notes that her own thoughts often stray to the master in her desire to perform her duties in a manner that she assumes would please him (TS 38-39). The governess becomes so preoccupied with her longing for the master's approval that she imagines scenarios in which, on her daily walk around the property, she would stumble upon him and he would "stand before [her] and smile" upon the excellent quality of her service (TS 39). Even though the governess does not directly acknowledge the forbidden nature of her desires (and, in fact, does not even directly admit that her desire is sexualized or romanticized), her longing for the master is completely unacceptable for the time. The master is not only her employer, but also a member of the elite upper class, while the governess "is, after all, nothing but an upper servant" (Robbins 345). By longing for someone so far removed from her own social class, the governess is essentially trying to do something unnatural: she is trying to exercise social mobility. Her attraction leads her to want "nothing but the erotic transgression of class" and yet, at the same time, this eroticized transgression sets her apart from the strictly classed Victorian society in which she lives, painting her as monstrous because of her deliberately scandalous desires (345).

"In the formation of symptoms in paranoia the feature that earns the name projection is especially striking. An internal perception is suppressed and, by way of substitute, its content, having undergone a degree of distortion, is consciously registered as an external distortion."
 - Freud, *The Schreber Case*, 56

"...The world of madness was to become the world of exclusion...[composed of] a whole series of individuals who were highly different...in short, all those who, in relation to the order of reason, morality, and society, showed signs of 'derangement'."
 - Foucault, *Mental Illness and Psychology*, 67

Although the governess's sexuality and class dislocation provide a strong argument for an understanding of her character as abnormal and thus monstrous, the most convincing evidence for her monstrosity comes from the psychotic episodes she experiences which serve as the foundation for most of her story. The governess's particular form of psychosis is understood most clearly when viewed through the lens of a manifestation of sexual hysteria which was characterized as a "psychosexual disorder mainly afflicting women... caused by a profound conflict between their natural sexual impulses and the repression of sexuality required by society and exaggerated by Victorian idealism" (Renner 274).

By means of a strong repression and sublimation of socially unacceptable desires (such as those for her upper class master or for her female co-worker Mrs. Grose), the governess quite ironically exacerbates the “otherness” and difference she seeks to eliminate. She unintentionally turns herself into the epitome of Victorian monstrosity—that psychotic hysteric whose own difference is not even self-realized.

Within the governess, this psychotic hysteria is recognized by the reader through her delusional and paranoid projections of the “ghosts” of the former governess Miss Jessel and the former manservant Peter Quint. The first of these metaphysical encounters occurs during the middle of one of the governess’s fantastical daydreams about the master as she sights on a distant tower a figure that she initially interprets as her “imagination...turned real” (TS 39). Almost instantly, however, the governess realizes that the figure is not that of her master but of “an unknown man” whose presence on the property is inexplicable (TS 40). Shaken by the spooky experience, the governess excuses the man’s appearance as the result of an “intrusion” and moves on (TS 42). Days later, she sees the same man yet again, this time “looking straight in” from “the other side of the window” (TS 44). Upon this second visitation, the governess goes to Mrs. Grose, describing all that she has seen and together the pair identifies the “specter” as the form of Peter Quint, the master’s deceased manservant, who Mrs. Grose divulges “was defiantly and admittedly bad” because he was much “too free with everyone” around him, most especially one of the governess’s charges, Miles (TS 46-49, 51).

Determined to heroically defend the two children, Miles and Flora, from the “ghosts”, the governess actually does just the opposite, confronting the ghost of Miss Jessel while outside with Flora (TS 55). Flora does not acknowledge the apparition, a sure sign, in the governess’s mind, that the children are in league with the pair of ghosts whose relationship and personages Mrs. Grose describes as “a horror of horrors” (TS 56-57). In the subsequent weeks, the happenings at Bly only become more and more abnormal for the governess, who has numerous less intense visions of the two haunting—visions to which no other member of the household is privy (TS 67, 70, 88).

The continuation of these visitations makes the governess overly paranoid about the questionable relationship between the ghosts and her charges. As she has learned from Mrs. Grose, both Quint and Miss Jessel were the ultimate “infamous” pair: not only did they indulge in a personal relationship with one another that ignored class delineations (for Quint was a manservant while Miss Jessel was a “lady”), but they also forged inappropriate—and quite possibly homoerotic—connections with Miles and Flora respectively (TS 58). Together, Quint and Miss Jessel are the embodiment of every latent desire and repressed urge the governess has felt since her induction into the world of Bly. She refuses to acknowledge a forbidden attraction that transverses class lines, while they conducted a relationship that did just that. She refuses to recognize the existence of homo- and heterosexual desires, while they each freely exercised both urges (Renner 275). Logically, these two figures are the governess’s projections of every urge repressed, every unacceptable desire sublimated, and every difference denounced. Quint and Miss Jessel are, quite literally, the “ghosts” of the governess’s difference taken on a psychotic reality.

As the governess’s case of psychotic sexual hysteria worsens and her conspiracy theories about the children’s involvement deepen, the other people at Bly (and, most especially, the removed listener and reader) become increasingly concerned for the governess’s mental stability. The governess, in her paranoid desire to try and save her charges from Quint and Miss Jessel, approaches each of the children repeatedly, trying as best she can to trick them into admitting to their devilish associations. The children, however, maintain an air of innocent naïveté with regard to governess’s sleuthing, actually reacting with considerable fright and concern as their governess’s hysteria worsens (TS 69, 75, 94, 101-102). Even Mrs. Grose, who has thus far been the most devoted follower of the governess’s speculations, begins to note the “change” in her companion (TS 76).

The narrative begins to climax as the governess, noting Flora’s absence one day, fanatically follows the child across the property in order to prove once and for all her knowledge of Miss Jessel’s existence (TS 100). Upon “seeing” the ghost with the girl, the governess directly confronts Flora about

it, demanding that she admit to the ghost's presence which the governess unwaveringly believes she is aware of (TS 101). Flora is shocked and horrified by the accusation and begs Mrs. Grose to take her away from the "cruel" governess's presence, insisting all the while that "[she] see[s] nobody" (TS 103). After being so aggressively pressed by the governess, Flora takes ill and to aid her recovery Mrs. Grose takes her to London, leaving Miles and the governess alone at Bly (TS 106). In their solitude, the governess again takes to questioning Miles, inquiring about the reason for his mysterious expulsion from school. Miles answers the governess by alluding to certain homoerotic comments that he directed at his peers as the reason he was expelled (TS 118-119). Just as he admits this, the governess sees the visage of Quint behind Miles and, passionately believing that Miles too is aware of Quint's presence, "press[es]" Miles to her and psychotically demands that he confess to his involvement in the whole affair. Miles desperately scans the room trying to see the ghost of Quint and unable to see anything "but the quiet of day", is "hurled [into the] abyss" of death, falling lifeless in the governess's arms (TS 120). Unwilling to consider the possibility that she is mistaken, the governess's hysterical psychosis (which only developed because of her strong desire to be "normal" and accepted) ironically leads to her ostracization. Her mental illness, caused by her suppression of non-normative urges, becomes the root of the monstrous designation Mrs. Grose and the children give her. Far more than her sexuality or class transgressions, the governess's mental illness is the realm in which the judgment of "monster" proves the most unavoidable.

This horrific ending works perfectly to deepen and solidify the governess's monstrous image—an image that is perceived (and reiterated) not only by the characters that surround her, but also by the readers and listeners hearing her story years later. She is the ultimate perversion of what was assumed to be normal; the ultimate divergence. Different in all of the wrong ways—sexually, socially, psychologically—Victorian society had no better way to separate and "other" her for the disgust and confusion she produced than by labeling her *a monster*. Existing in an age where normativity was the norm, the governess's difference was ultimately the locus of her monstrosity.

Abbreviations Used

AB—Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France*

HS—Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1

TS—*The Turn of the Screw*, Henry James

Works Cited

Freud, Sigmund. *The Schreber Case*. New York: Penguin Books, 2003.

Foucault, Michel. *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France 1974-1975*. New York: Picador Reading Group, 2003.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. New York: Random House Inc., 1980.

Foucault, Michel. *Mental Illness and Psychology*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987.

James, Henry. "The Turn of the Screw". *Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism: The Turn of the Screw*, 2nd ed. Ed. Peter G. Beidler. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004. 22-120.

Murfin, Ross C. "Marxist Criticism and *The Turn of the Screw*". *Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism: The Turn of the Screw*, 2nd ed. Ed. Peter G. Beidler. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004. 317-332.

Renner, Stanley. "'Red hair, very red, close-curling': Sexual Hysteria, Physiognomical Bogeymen, and the 'Ghosts' in *The Turn of the Screw*". *Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism: The Turn of the Screw*, 2nd ed. Ed. Peter G. Beidler. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004. 271-288.

Robbins, Bruce. "'They don't much count, do they?': The Unfinished History of *The Turn of the Screw*". *Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism: The Turn of the Screw*, 2nd ed. Ed. Peter G. Beidler. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004. 333-346.

Walton, Priscilla L. "'He took no notice of her; he looked at me': Subjectivities and Sexualities in *The Turn of the Screw*." *Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism: The Turn of the Screw*, 2nd ed. Ed. Peter G. Beidler. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004. 305-316.