

Henry James and British Colonialism in

The Turn of the Screw (1898)*

Kazuhiro KITAOKA

ABSTRACT

In this essay, I consider Henry James's *Turn of the Screw* as a class allegory, and argue that the readers can reach to the center of the story's reflections on social hierarchy. By considering James's reference to India, I argue that by reading *Turn of the Screw* in the light of materialist and historical critique, we can find echoes of the British Empire resonating in the text, and insist that it is possible to read aspects of the novel as alluding to the existence of a British colonialist system.

In Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, almost all the relationships between the governess and the Master in London, and between the governess and Mrs. Grose, or even between the governess and the two children, incorporate the 'unequal' social class hierarchy prevalent in the nineteenth century. Bruce Robbins is right to say that "The hierarchical microcosm that James displays in the *The Turn of the Screw* is therefore full of socially produced gaps, lapses, ambiguities" (Robbins 337). In this essay, therefore, I will suggest that, by reading James's *Turn of the Screw* in the light of materialist and historical critique, we

can find echoes of the British Empire resonating in the text, and insist that it is possible to read aspects of the novel as alluding to the existence of a British colonialist system.

The aspects of the colonization of India can be represented in the story by the description of the house and its conditions at Bly. The house, in which two children, the governess, and other servants live together, is the master's country home, an old family place in Essex, called Bly (27). There are many servants in the house, namely, as James puts it, "a cook, a housemaid, a dairywoman, an old pony, and old groom and old gardener, all likewise thoroughly

香川高等専門学校高松キャンパス一般教育科

respectable” (28). As we can see from the order of humans and animals, “none of these servants”, as Robbins comments, “counts more than an animal. Servants, like ghosts, are something less than human beings” (Robbins 336). As is well known, this was a common attitude in the Victorian era. In *Practical Education*, originally published at the end of the eighteenth century, a time when governesses generally had not been considered as servants, the negative effects of the language and sexual vices of servants were made clear. For instance, Maria Edgeworth, who was a well known novelist in this century, writes “Children’s rooms should not be passage rooms for servants; they should ... be so situated, that servants cannot easily have access to them, and cannot on any pretense of business get in the habit of frequenting them” (Edgeworth 125). This image of servants had not disappeared in the nineteenth century; rather, James makes use of this conventional prejudice toward servants, creating ‘Ghosts’. In James’s notebook, which was written in 1895 according to his friend’s ghost story – this was the original memo on which the story of *The Turn of the Screw* was mostly based – he writes, “The servants, wicked and depraved, corrupt and deprave the children”(qtd. in

Beidler 15).

The position of the governess, however, was ambiguous, since, although there was a certain degree of prejudice toward governesses, she was somehow “at the helm” of the old house, Bly, and she was in supreme authorityⁱ⁾. The master, on the other hand, does nothing but pay money to her, as well as, possibly, to the other servants through his solicitor, and asks her to take the whole thing over and let him alone (28). At this point, the location in which the master lives and from which he exercises his dominant economic power over those servants, including the governess – the conditions of all servants are the same; if he or she does trouble the master, they have to say, in Mrs. Grose’s words, “I would leave, on the spot, both him and you” (78) – is of significance here. The servant/master relationship can be understood as a metaphor for the colonization of India, which was ruled from Britain. Furthermore, it expresses the interrelationship between the two countries. As one critic says:

...it is not just that the personnel who governed Indian were British, but the projects of state building in both countries – documentation,

legitimation, classification, and bounding ...often reflected theories, experiences, and practices worked out originally in India and then applied in Great Britain, as well as vice versa” (Cohn 3-4).

Around this era, the ultimate control of India was exercised from London by a Secretary of State for India. Note also that local knowledge of India was provided by the council of India, which was also located in London (Parry 11). In *Bly* too, knowledge is significant, as Robert Martin claims, “Throughout James’s tale, knowledge is power” (Martin 401-7). For instance, in the scene in which the governess passes the letter she received from the master to Mrs. Grose, the governess narrates:

...then I judged best simply to hand her my document – which ...had the effect of making her...simply put her hand behind her. She shook her head sadly. “Such things are not for me, Miss”. My counsellor could n’t (*sic*) read!(33-34)

For illiterate servants in *Bly*, the letter is not something to read, much less something

that tells them precious information: it is a *thing*. This perspective correlates clearly with James’s depiction of the servants. They are all ‘ponies’ as regards knowledge. This is why the governess “laid it (a letter) on the great hall-table” (98), a letter which can be read only by the governess and the children, who have access to knowledge. James depicts the servants, as do other novelists in this era, in such a way that there is an unmistakable gap between the upper-class, though the position of the governess is arguable, and the servants. It is not for nothing that the governess speaks of “several of the members of the household, of the half-dozen maids and men who were still of our small *colony*” (51, my emphasis). Thus, the role of the governess in *Bly* seems to correspond to the role of the British government officials who went India and worked there, and, though she might be considered as ‘lower-class’, she has to be faithful to the master whom she secretly yearns for, and try to “mark the high state I[*she*] cultivated” to other servants (111).

Furthermore, though some critics view her position and meaning differently, I perceive Mrs. Grose to be a symbolization of the colonized Indian people.ⁱⁱ⁾ As I pointed out earlier, the social distinction between the

governess and Mrs. Grose is often made in the text; the governess never fails to show the status of her position to the readers. One example is that she considers Mrs. Grose to be “a magnificent monument of the blessing of a want of imagination” (72), and a person who “could see in our little charges nothing but their beauty and amiability” (72), and, “had I wished to mix a witch’s broth and proposed it with assurance, she would have held out a large clean saucepan” (73). Mrs. Grose, too, recognizes the governess’s superiority. We should note here that Mrs. Grose is the only servant in whom readers can find the general role of a ‘servant’ in the text because other servants, to use Miles’s words, “don’t much count” (113), and she is the symbol of the typical, obedient servant in the nineteenth century, which can be likened to the obedient colonized natives in India. This is exactly the way in which the British Empire wanted the people of India to behave, because during the British Raj, the Indian Mutiny in 1857, the peasant riots in the Deccan in 1876 and other revolts had been occurring intermittently.

According to the story, Quint and Jessel died for mysterious reasons, but it can be claimed that they died as a result of their forbidden

sexual relationship, which was strongly prohibited by society because it led to the corruption of social hierarchy. They died because they corrupted the social class order, and by their deaths the social hierarchy in Bly is reestablished. In fact, in British India, sexual contacts between British men and Indian women had been frequent in the eighteenth century, which was considered to be condoning an indigenous immorality. The Resident in Delhi, for instance, had a harem of thirteen concubines (L. James 222). For the British men who came to India to serve as detached administrators and commanders, frequent sexual intercourse could be seen as a form of ‘corruption’. The reduction of sexual contacts between the two was one of the ways to maintain the status quo in British India, although, as Lawrence James comments, despite there being “plenty of busybodies who did what they could to stamp out such indulgences...old habits proved resilient” (L. James 222). This aspect of British India seems to correspond with James’s story of the ‘corruption’ of two ghosts. By restraining and concealing human sexual desire and signs of corruption, the social order in Bly and in India is retained. Two ghosts, therefore, can be construed as metaphors for the corruption of

the status quo in both Bly and British India.

Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* can be variously interpreted, and so there can be many possible interpretations. As I have argued, in considering Henry James's text as a class allegory in the light of materialist and historical critique, it can be insisted that the readers can reach to the center of the story's reflections on social hierarchy and on the British Empire.

Notes

*This is a revised version of the paper presented at the conference entitled "Bodies and Things: Victorian Literature and the Matter of Culture" held at the University of Oxford, England, on the 27th of September, 2008.

ⁱ With respect to the arguments considering the position of the governess, Bill Millicent underlines the ambiguity of her status. He notes that the governess "was a 'lady' in the nineteenth century sense of the term, yet anomalously earning her own living...She had to be a lady to carry out her role but was surely not ladylike in working for her living and no social equal of leisured ladies."(Bell, Millicent. "Class, Sex, and the Victorian's governess: James's *The Turn of the Screw*"; in Pollak, Vivian R, ed. *New Essays on Daisy Miller and The Turn of the Screw*. Cambridge.Cambridge UP. 1993. p.91,p.94)

ⁱⁱ Eric Solomon, for instance, says in her well-known essay, that "The least obvious suspect, and the criminal, is the housekeeper, Mrs.Grose"(Solomon, Eric."The Return of the Screw", in *The Turn of the Screw: An authoritative text backgrounds and sources essays in criticism*, ed. Robert Kimbrough. New York, London: W.W.Norton,1966.p.238), as other critics ,on the other hand, consider Mrs.Grose as the "solid, kindly, housekeeper"(see Killoran, Helen. 'The Governess, Mrs. Grose and 'the Poison of an Influence' in *The Turn of the Screw*.").

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