Marxist Approaches to *The Turn of the Screw*

Overview

Marxist criticism was established by Karl Marx as early as the 1830’s. According to the Bedford Introduction to Literature, “Marxist critics focus on the ideological content of a work—its explicit and implicit assumptions and values about matters such as culture, race, class, and power” (2041).

When Henry James was growing up, class distinctions were large in England. The elite were looked at more of a caste than a class. The Poor Law forced many lower class citizens to seek charity, inconsistent work, and a lower social status. Between the 1840’s when James grew up and the 1890’s when the book was written, the rule of the upper class lessened and the classes had small room for advancement. Even though James was in the higher class, he was for class equality.

Henry James was born into an upper-class family. Most of his novels and plays failed, until he wrote *The Turn of the Screw*. It has servants corrupting the children, a middle-class teacher, and undercurrents financial trouble. This book shows how class interrelationships work.

The governess is put in a position between the employers and the employees. When she comes into contact with Mrs. Grose, the differences between the two shows through. Miss Jessel and Peter Quint had a forbidden love in which their class differences show through. It also parallels the love the governess has towards her employer.

Keywords

Marxist criticism: A criticism that focuses on the explicit and implicit assumptions about culture, race, class, and power.

Poor law: A social security set up by England in the 16th century that did a lot to divide the classes.

Status quo: the condition or state of affairs that currently exists
Discussion questions

1. There is a big discrepancy in characterizations between classes. Describe one wealthy character and one lower-class character and the differences between how they are characterized.

2. How is the governess similar to, and different than the former governess, Miss Jessel? Did she come from the same social class?

3. How does their class and economy compare to ours?

4. Does the characterization of the rich party guests at the beginning of the story guide your view of the upper class in the work?

Bibliography


Meyer, Michael, ed *The Bedford Introduction to Literature*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005

