

## THE BIZARRE CHILD–PARENT RELATIONSHIP IN WATCH AND WARD BY HENRY JAMES

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### Abstract

Henry James, who lived in 1900s, is one of the distinctive authors in American Literature. *Watch and Ward* the author's first attempt to write novel, remains unsuccessful and tribulation for James and the novel is not regarded as his first novel by both the author himself and the critics. The novel starts with adopting a St. Louisian twelve-year-old girl Nora Lambert whose father suicides because of not taking money he asks from Roger. All Nora's training and education is related to how to be a good wife. In this context, some critics suppose that their connection with each other is immoral and far from ethics. Here, in this study, the relationship between child and parent will be discussed.

**Key Words:** Henry James, *Watch and Ward*, *The Child-Parent Relationship*, Roger Lawrence, Nora Lambert.

## HENRY JAMES'İN WATCH AND WARD ADLI ROMANINDA GARİP ÇOCUK-VASI İLİŞKİSİ

### Özet

Henry James 1900 yıllarda yaşamış Amerikan Edebiyatının önde gelen temsilcilerinden biridir. Yazarın ilk roman yazma girişimi olan *Watch and Ward* istediği başarıyı yakalayamamış hem kendisi tarafından hem de eleştirmenlerce ilk eseri olarak addedilmemiştir. Kendisinden para isteyen fakat umduğunu bulamayınca intihar eden St. Louis'li bir adamın kızını evlat edinmesiyle olaylar gelişmeye başlar. Nora'nın tüm eğitim ve öğretimi nasıl ideal bir eş olacağıyla ilgilidir. Bu bağlamda bazı eleştirmenler bu ilişkiyi ahlaksızlık ve edepsizlik olarak değerlendirmiştir. İşte bu çalışmada çocuk vasi ilişkisi üzerinde durulacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Henry James, *Watch and Ward*, *Çocuk-Vasi İlişkisi*, Roger Lawrence, Nora Lambert

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Henry James is one of the most distinctive authors of American Literature. His first novel, *Watch and Ward*, deals with young protagonist, Roger Lawrence, "whose recent marriage proposal to Miss Morton has just been rejected, meets and adopts an orphan, Nora Lambert, and raises her with the hope of making her his ideal wife" (Nelson, 1995: 375). Numerous critics cite that this first attempt at writing a short novel ended in disappointment and frustration for James. As Anesko notes, the novel is "clearly ruled out from the start" (1983: 364). Buitenhuis characterizes the novel in one word: "unfortunate" (1959: 210). Even, James himself admits the failure of his attempt and does not regard it as a true novel. Hence, it can be declared that *Watch and Ward*

disappoints its readers and the critics sharply criticize the novel. This study will examine the psychology of the relationship between the protagonist, Roger, and his adopted child and lover, Nora. The effects of American society on the relationship regarded as incestuous or pedophilia will also be argued.

### 2. THE BIZARRE CHILD–PARENT RELATIONSHIP

The plot depicted by James can be considered as carnal and amatory. In addition, some critics accuse James of depicting pedophilia, incest, and adultery; to illustrate: Traub harshly castigates James: "Henry James's first novel, *Watch and Ward*, has appeared gauche, bizarre, and unaccountable. With its overtones of incest and paedophilia, it is hard to imagine what James can have been thinking of" (1995: 365). Raising a twelve-year-old girl,

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Nora, for the express purpose of marrying her in the future, Roger Lawrence cannot be regarded as a sympathetic character. Moreover, the way he educates his nymphet is related to his fantasy. In this sense, James indicates Roger's fantasy in his novel.

Moreover, the novel possesses much unnecessary tragedies and dramas. At the beginning, we are introduced to these devices typical of the work, such as Nora's father's intimidation of Roger. Not knowing him at all, Nora's father threatens Roger to kill himself if he does not give the amount of money he needs: "Damn it, I don't know how to beg. Listen to me! If you don't give me what I ask, I shall cut my throat! Think of that! On your head be the penalty!" (James, 1983: 6). This effectively captures this type of unnecessary tragedy. "Full of implausible and melodramatic elements, *Watch and Ward* is still recognizably Jamesian" (McElderry, 1952: 457). The novel offers many such critical elements, at the expense of more realistic characterizations.

On the one hand, depictions and descriptions made for Roger indicate the conflicts and contradictions within American society during the period. On the other hand, the adjectives chosen are satirically both pejorative and complimentary, reflecting James's agitation on the society. "The eye was excellent; small, perhaps, and somewhat dull, but with a certain appealing depth, like the tender dumbness in the gaze of a dog. In response Lawrence may have looked stupid;" (James, 1983: 4). In this sense, some critics find James's word choices absurd and exaggerative. "...many violent and extravagant words" (Cox, 1977: 354) are used to depict characters. Such oxymoronic statements with Roger being described as excellent, dull, and stupid can make the reader dizzy. On the other hand, James uses exaggerated superlatives in Roger's dialogues, for example, moving "... James moving from the unqualified praise of Nora in *Watch and Ward* as 'perfect' to a critical examination of the conventional use of such superlatives, and thereby of Victorian ideals of perfection..." (Roberts; 1977: 153). James, a man of his own time, may have been trapped into employing characteristics of the Victorian age; hence, he may have been struggling to find his own style in his first novel.

Roger's style of clothing also demonstrates characteristics of peculiarity and awkwardness. This may be said to symbolize a type of societal failure, for instance: "On this occasion Roger dressed himself with unusual care and with a certain sober elegance. He debated for three minutes over two cravats" (James, 1983: 4). With this sentence, James prepares his readers for the characters' unfamiliarity. Concerning this peculiarity, one critic both summarizes the novel and attributes the situation to James's hometown's conservative propriety;

And his first short novel, *Watch and Ward* (1878), is the story of an effete Bostonian who wears lavender gloves and consoles himself for failure in love by adopting a 12-year-old girl. The title of the novel, which makes reference to the well-known reform society, alludes by doing so to Boston's stuffiness and rectitude. (Theroux, 1990: 160)

The author draws the protagonist Roger, as well as numerous other minor characters such as Miss Morton, who is loved by Roger, in a peculiar manner. Possibly in response to upper-class society's contradictions, James depicts them as living far outside the bounds of either normality or psychological health. "...she, on the other hand, was preeminently artificial. She was pretty, but not really so pretty as she seemed; clever, but not intelligent; amiable, but not generous" (James, 1983: 7). Furthermore, apart from her artificiality, her repeatedly declination turns into "an imbroglio of eros" (Henke, 1995: 265). Miss Morton's refusals mark the beginning of encountering his future lover and procuring the child, Nora. It also introduces readers to the next theme: death and rebirth. Miss Morton has an allegorical name because of her last name's meaning. Roger—Symbolically murdered by Miss Norton who refuses his proposal—is reborn from his ashes, at the moment he sees a nymphet in Miss Morton's house. Attention to the little girl very much is underlined by the author letting the readers in on what will happen next. When Roger sees the child, "there glimmered mistily in the young man's brain a vision of a home-scene in the future" (James, 1983: 9). One of the most striking scenes in the novel is Roger finding the love of his life, Nora, the daughter of the man asking him for money, just after leaving Miss Morton's house.

The way Nora enters Roger's life is peculiar as well. Roger, while unacquainted with the man asking him money, still would like to willingly adopt Nora only after the man kills himself. Yet, the confrontation with coming immediately after Miss Morton's rejection is depicted by Henke as "an odd supplement" (1995: 266). In this context, other critics think the same as Henke. Emphasizing the same idea, the other critic pointing out the encountering with Nora reflects the similar phrases: "the apparent oddness of some passages of *Watch and Ward* into perspective" (Traub, 1995: 368).

James's depictions cause the reader to feel disgusted and bewildered. Nora's lack of emotions also invites Roger's attention, making him think that she also may as well be physiologically ill. Furthermore, the upper-class societal disorder indicated in the novel is again emphasized by James. To illustrate, Nora's attempts at displaying happiness when Roger expresses his intention to adopt are overly exaggerated. "She was not exactly sad, but neither was she cheerful.... She seemed at times hopelessly, defiantly torpid" (James, 1983: 18). On the other hand, Roger's observation made 'surreptitiously' indicates his intentions regarding her being his prospective bride.

In this way, Roger announces his intention apparently to the twelve-year old Nora who is helpless and has no relatives to live with after her father's suicide. However, instead of assuming the role of father, Roger takes on the role of prospective husband. The intended relationship between guardian and daughter instead morphs into one of husband and wife later. The first dialogue between these characters seems innocent enough except the protagonist's question as to whether she is able to love him or not. Although their exchange seems quite innocuous at first glance, the able reader discerns Roger's intent. The following paragraph indicates the protagonist's predicaments;

Thus adjured, Roger turned to the child. "Nora," he said, "you know you're quite alone. You have no home." Her lips trembled, but her eyes were fixed and fascinated. "Do you think you could love me?" She flushed to the tender

roots of her tumbled hair. "Will you come and try?" Her range of expression of course was limited; she could only answer by another burst of tears. (James, 1983: 15)

After adopting Nora, Roger endeavors to rise up according to his indulgences and needs. Actually, he retrieves her from bigotry and corruption of the upper-class society in which they live. "Roger had no wish to cultivate in his young companion any expression of formal gratitude.... I undertake to tell no secrets, however" (James, 1983: 22). The protagonist attempts to educate his charge are not undertaken because he wishes her to gain a role in a society but because the society ascribes Roger to her after their marriage. Nora's distant family member Hubert's utterance, however, is challenging. He interrogates Roger, causing him to think more deeply about her education. "How far does the adoption go, and where does it stop? Your own proper daughter would be my cousin" (James, 1983: 24).

Most strikingly, Roger's idea of education is mutual. Thinking of educating Nora to be an ideal wife, Roger also expresses that he must educate himself for being an apotheosis of an American husband. "To be a good husband, one must first be a wise man; to educate her, he should first educate himself" (James, 1983: 28). This idea of perfection is a kind of obsession among the upper-classes, especially for Roger. Still, he will blame himself if he does not have the perfect wife as observed in sentences like "Perhaps, six years hence, she will be grateful enough not to refuse me as you did. ...I have begun at the beginning; it will be my own fault if I haven't a perfect wife" (James, 1983: 124). In this sense, the reader can view Roger's warped mindset as an example of a crippled upper-class society.

Numerous critics, however, find his influence on Nora absurd and a defect of the novel, because such pressure on a young girl would create psychological disorder and illness. Nelson notes; "The parent-child relationships in *Watch and Ward* illustrate the dynamics of an unhealthy enmeshment-the parent's motives, the child's defenses" (1995: 377). Moreover, he also is concerned about the girl's psychological state of mind.

Nora, feeling depressed and lonely, conceals her true feelings and imitates the others' behaviors and emotions. Hence, not only does Roger make Nora depressed and pained by creating a limited milieu "given Nora's powerless situation" (Henke, 1995: 268), but also he affects her destiny and inclination despite being her guardian.

It is too painful for the child to hold onto its own wishes and needs in this kind of environment with this kind of parent. The child will abandon its authentic true self-hide or repress it--and construct in its place a false self to meet the caretaker's needs and agenda. (Nelson, 1995: 375)

The transformation, however, cannot be seen as either a moral or ordinary incidence. "The mutation of a quasi-paternal relationship into a marital one is dangerous and immoral: it ridicules the attempt of a well-meaning man to prepare a girl for his personal use in wifehood" (Traub, 1995: 372). As aforementioned, while Roger's behavior is indecent, James is using as a way to show his own reaction against Boston's policy of censorship. The reaction to the bowdlerization done by James is too much for society to endure. Traub points out this grotesque relationship between Nora and Roger would end in sorrow (1995: 372). The critic approaches the novel from the transcendental perspective.

Roger's attitude to Nora vacillates. His primarily inclination to make Nora into perfect wife Nora becomes ambiguity in the novel. Sometimes, Roger changes his mind in the process of Nora's education when he encounters other attractive woman characters. For instance: "They seemed to grow and grow as he thought of them. In other words, he was in love with Teresa" (James, 1983: 30). Moreover, his feelings towards Nora fluctuate in accordance with in contact with Nora. "Assuredly he was not in love with her: you couldn't fall in love with a child. But if he had not a lover's love, he had at least a lover's jealousy" (James, 1983: 28). This indicates the protagonist's ill-psychology.

On the one hand, he sometimes utters to his prospective wife that surprise the reader: "Nora, Nora, these are not vulgar alms; I

expect a return. One of these days you must pay your debt. Guess my riddle! I love you less than you think,--and more! A word to the wise" (James, 1983: 33). On the other hand, Roger sometimes falls into despair and becoming desperate when he thinks of Nora. However, as a member of the upper class, Roger experiences the unnecessary anxiety and the absurdity of the society is again exemplified in the novel by such statements as, "She has seen me scratching my head, she has seen me counting on my fingers! Before she's seventeen she'll be mortally tired of me, and by the time she's twenty I shall be fatally familiar and incurably stale" (James, 1983: 38). In this sense, it is clear the protagonist is prone to indecision regarding his actions.

Although they are able to marry by the novel's end, it can be stated that Roger lacks the determination to carry out his original plan. The same situation can be witnessed by Nora's attitudes. Her words to her distant relative are an example of the circumstance created by James. "He has known me as a child," she continued, heedless of his sarcasm. "I shall always be a child, for him" (James, 1983: 52). The bizarre perfectionist traditions in upper-class society are herein again demonstrated.

Nora is the second most prominent character who is planned to be Roger's wife. Adopted at the age of twelve, Nora is brought up in accordance with his wishes, which means she is not free to choose what she wishes from life. Within the very limited milieu, however, Roger allows Nora to select her preferences. One critic captures the essence of her teenage years: "In *Watch and Ward* the virginal is negatively presented: for instance, Nora as virgin has no access to non-patriarchal discourse" (Rasmussen, 1990: 438). "non-patriarchal discourse" means a kind of slavery executed by her guardian who saves her for only himself. Her only role is to amuse her guardian, Roger. "She entertained him for a whole morning; she took him into her confidence" (James, 1983: 26). It is presented in a straightforward manner, enough that the readers can understand that Nora's psychological state is upside down and depressed even though she herself seems not to comprehend her circumstance.

The book Nora reads in the novel has a most distinctive title, *The Discreet Princess*, symbolizing both her temperament and her psychological state. "She came sidling shyly into the room, with a rent in her short-waisted frock, and the "Child's Own Book" in her hand, with her finger in the history of "The Discreet Princess" (James, 1983: 24). The juxtaposition of 'shy' and 'discreet' adjectives together is significant in the novel, offering a clue about Nora's mood. Yet, some critics discussing Nora's books believe Roger realizes his dreams by making her read these fairy tales. In indicating the fairy tales of "The Discreet Princess" one of tales of *The Arabian Nights*, Tintner expresses the idea as: "James furnishes his heroine's Oriental fantasies by way of a children's edition of fairy tales he had read as a youngster" (1983: 125). It is clear that Roger's way of education is via a kind of fantasy to be eventually fulfilled by himself as protagonist.

Roger prefers passivity in the novel although "he has already married her in his mind" (Nelson, 1995: 380). Instead of chasing his lover and indicating his masculinity towards to his Nora, Roger prefers wait her to choose him. Although Fenton and Hubert, the minor characters in the novel, criticize him for adjournment and virtual marriage, Roger believes he is giving Nora freedom by doing so. "Although James often accepts a conventional definition of masculinity that is dependent upon action, he also presents a contrasting consideration of the passive male" (Henke, 1995: 257). Roger's limited milieu does not mean the liberty for Nora to select the person who wants to marry. Henke continues, "In fact, perhaps nowhere is the doubling of masculinity more purely and insistently represented" (1995: 257). Still, Roger makes a hit with the humiliating of both his and her relatives. In this way, Roger's doing nothing noteworthy for Nora is wins her heart. This act is "a sign of the extent to which the novel defends passivity" (Habegger, 1985: 257). In this sense, James prefers the passivity of marriage which is a keystone of societies yet also reflects the bizarreness of the American upper class society.

Towards the novel's end, Nora feels a short period of renouncement after abandoning the protagonist Roger. While she would like

marry him, he now refuses to marry. Her sentences, such as "I'm to make you happy. That's simple enough. You have undertaken to bring me up, Roger; you must do your best, because now I'm here" (James, 1983: 36-7) and "I promise never, never, never to marry, but to be yours alone--yours alone!" (James, 1983: 42) express her love for him. Unfortunately, such pronouncements fail to satisfy the protagonist; he is determined to expect that she understands she "freely" chooses. In this sense, the critic glorifies the changing roles on marriage writing

Disillusioned by each man in turn, Nora recovers herself and begins to feel truly independent at last. When once again she meets Roger, now full of remorse for his self-indulgence and desperately trying to find her, they discover that they have shed their old, familial roles and decide to marry after all. (Traub, 1995: 366)

From the beginning, Nora has functioned as a sexual object for Roger on first encountering her. Because he cannot equalize the relationship between the two of them, however, "...he more perversely decides to marry her and then induces the required erotic fascination. Nonetheless, there are times when his feelings do seem to be most definitely sexual" (Henke, 1995: 267). Furthermore, some observe the story's pornographic tendencies, for example: "The work is interesting in its earnest of narrative things to come; but it is thematically overcrowded and contains passages which, if the intention were conscious, might almost be called sentimental pornography" (Lewis, 1984: 482). James is thus judged by the critics who think that the novel is a bit far from the morality and ethics.

The transformation of the connection between guardian and daughter is one of the novel's most important themes. Instead of drawing a typical father-daughter relationship, James chooses what Brown terms an "incest fantasy" which "is disconcerting, for it implies that incest is desired by its victims when in fact most father-daughter incest occurs as molestation or rape..." (1990: 503). As Lewis describes 'sentimental pornography', James aimed to attract women readers especially

who preferred sentimental novels that were popular during that period. Habegger dealing with the relationship claims that James worried about the sale outcomes related to penning popular novels, noting;

that [what] James did in this ungainly and immature work was to adopt the guardian-ward love story and transform the pleasing father-daughter incest-fantasy intended for women readers into a nice-guys-finish-first daydream for good guys. (1985: 248)

James's attempts, however, at rising in status in the American literary world are given the meaning of the disregard of the society by many critics. James's preference to write on such a plot makes his novel bad and unreadable according to some critics. For instance, "The incestuous implications of the story are disquieting to the twentieth-century reader. Yet the novel itself not only refuses to ignore them, it makes considerable play with them" (Traub, 1995: 367). To him, James seems both to ignore his readers. However, comparing himself with Nathaniel Hawthorne, James thinks that he "was an alien everywhere" (Buitenhuis, 1959: 219). His regarding himself as 'an alien' is his defense after he authors this fanciful novel. Also, another critic complains about James's perception of deserved criticism. Furthermore, both his sense of narrow-mindedness and his hubris insulate him. The author distances himself from unpleasant responses, being "generally content to accept the terms in which James himself declared his purposes. This is unfortunate, because, though it sometimes helps him in the elucidation of difficulties, it prevents him from asking the harder questions which James deserves" (Hewitt: 1970: 252). Such a manner of critical non-acceptance of criticism cannot be regarded as a normal attitude for Henry James, author, believed he would be one of the greatest American litterateurs

### 3. CONCLUSION

In sum, Henry James's first novel, *Watch and Ward* is "a comedy, it has a happy ending and James regarded it as ultimately a failure" (Traub, 1995: 378). Yet the chapters are filled with tragedy and drama, leaving the reader feeling depressed rather than amused. Krook agrees with the majority of critics who find the stories "for the most part weak, often jejeune, sometimes downright silly" (1983: 5). Thus, the criticism leveled against James is really against his use of thematic material. Both his characterizations and the plot's cause-and-effect relationship lack coherence and reasoning. McElderry encapsulates this in the following manner: "The changes are effective as far as they go, and they demonstrate a sharpening sense of style and workmanship, but they did not alter the fundamental situations or characterizations. What the novel lacked, no mere literary labor could supply" (1952: 461). In the end, what can be asserted is that James's first novel exhibits a particular defiant stance, both thematically and figuratively.

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