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Taylor Whittington
Georgia College & State University

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A PANOPTIC SYSTEM AND SOCIAL CONTROL'S INFLUENCE ON THE CHILDREN IN HENRY JAMES'S 'THE TURN OF THE SCREW'

Taylor Whittington

The Turn of The Screw is considered a Victorian era horror novella written by Henry James in 1898. The novella is unique compared to other novels written by James. Instead of centering on the upper-class The Turn of The Screw concentrates on a governess's experience. The novella is written from her perspective, and she describes taking a job at Bly manor to teach the young girl Flora though she soon finds out that the young boy Miles will also be joining them due to his expulsion from school. The governess encounters the ghosts of Quint, a previous servant, and Miss Jessel the old governess, and as the novel continues, she becomes increasingly paranoid about the ghosts. Her position, as a governess in the Victorian era, allowed her to increase her social status and she is given the chance at upward mobility. The position was available to educated women, providing them with an income and housing, but it also placed them into an isolated position in the household. This isolation occurred due to her in-between status in the household, she is an educated woman, placing her above the servants but below the family. The novel's governess faces these issues, but in a unique way – there is no family in Bly. Therefore, the governess is constantly reminded of her position by the ghosts of Quint and Miss Jessel, rather than by the family.

The governess remains unnamed throughout the novel, highlighting her status as a woman in a period where she was considered expendable. The novel's prologue contains a comment on Miss Jessel: "she was the most respectable person – till her death, the great awkwardness" (28). This statement represents a woman's lack of standing in the Victorian era, which perpetuates into the novel. Although Bly, the novel's setting, is removed from society, the social norms are reinforced by the characters interactions and the panoptic system present in the novel. A panopticon,

first coined by Jeremy Bentham, is explained by Michel Foucault as a "machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it", which reinforces the novel's social control (Foucault 201). Social control, created from a society's social norms, makes those in the social group conform to expected behavior, also known as social norms. The social control and the panoptic system integrate themselves into the Bly household and work alongside one another to reinforce the hierarchy. The characters in Henry James's The Turn of The Screw are subjects of a panoptic system and social control, resulting in Flora's loss of social status and Miles's death due to their lack of adherence to the social control.

The panoptic schema and social control operate together to dictate how the characters interact with their social group. A panoptic schema can be integrated into any function "without disappearing as such or losing any of its properties" (Foucault 207). Normally when a person interacts with a social group they change their interaction to conform to the expected behaviors, but the novel's society is a unique situation. The characters are functioning in a society governed by social control and a panoptic system, although a panoptic system is traditionally considered an "architectural apparatus" (Foucault 201) with a central tower where "one sees everything without ever being seen", it can be integrated into society (Foucault 202). In the Bly household, the panoptic system works alongside social control, which has the ability to manipulate and condition people into accepting forms of behavior that sustain and reinforce the social control. When the two systems work together, panoptic schema is integrated into their shared function which, when operating under social control, creates panoptic surveillance. The governess is a subject of this

surveillance, it motivates her to conform to the social control. Although the governess is at the center of the panoptic system and social control in *Bly*¹, each character is being manipulated by these systems. The children, Flora and Miles, do not actively use panoptic surveillance on the governess, unlike Quint, Miss Jessel, and Mrs. Grose. These three characters actively use panoptic surveillance to remind the governess of her social status; they have also had the most influence on the children's socialization and have allowed them to embrace negative deviant behaviors. Negative deviant behavior is any behavior that goes against social norms and are something the society wants to prevent. These two systems of control put the children into a unique position given their class expectations and the interactions they have with the ghosts of former servants Mr. Quint and Miss Jessel. These two characters did not enforce the children's class expectations, allowing them to form meaningful relationships with those considered below them.

The two children, Miles and Flora, were exposed to social norms they traditionally would not have experienced through their understanding of Quint, a servant, and Miss Jessel, their governess's romantic relationship. The relationship between Quint and Miss Jessel displayed a type of social equality that opposed the novels social norms; causing the children to experience opposing social norm expectations. Mrs. Grose and the governess want the children to learn the social norms that are expected of them as upper-class children, but Quint and Miss Jessel's relationship taught them negative deviant behavior. This negative deviant behavior is centered on the interaction between classes. Quint and Miss Jessel's relationship was one that made it seem as though they are of equal standing; Miss Jessel was considered a lady; therefore, she should have had a relationship with a man of equal or higher social standing, but her decision to be with Quint, a servant, was socially unacceptable. The children learned from their interactions, as they would from anyone around them, but the type of socialization they received in this instance teaches them how to interact with different social groups. Although they are children they still partake in the social control and the panopticon. It may seem as though this is not possible, given their age, indoctrination into a society's social norms and later social control occurs

throughout a child's or persons life: socialization occurs whenever an individual joins a new social group, they learn the accepted and expected forms of behaving. The children actively partake in reminding those around them that negative deviant behaviors are not allowed; much like the children themselves had been taught. Those raising the children "enforce these rules of conduct" onto them who "start conforming from around their first birthdays" (Hardecker, Tomasello 237). Flora and Miles are certainly old enough to be enforcing social norms onto another person², which explains some of Flora's actions regarding the ghost of Miss Jessel which will be examined later in the paper.

The influence Quint has on Miles causes him to exhibit negative deviant behaviors. Miles goes against his class status by having a friendly relationship with Quint, he completely rejects the social hierarchy. Mrs. Grose calls Miles's behavior "bad" when she explains Quint and Miles relationship to the governess (62). She describes the two as having "been perpetually together" (61) and explains to the governess how Miles acted "as if Quint were his tutor – and a very grand one" (62). She continues by stating how "Miss Jessel didn't mind. She did n't forbid him" (62). The relationship between them is something that a governess should not have allowed, given Miles would have been socializing with a man that would teach how to behave in ways that went against his class expectations. Given Mrs. Grose's observations, Miles idealized Quint and therefore chose not to partake in the "willful blindness of his class" which would force the servants into "organized invisibility" (Robbins 385). Although Mrs. Grose wanted Miles to understand that Quint was "only a base menial" (62), he responds by reminding Mrs. Grose that she too is a base menial, which "the governess takes as a sign of his corruption" (Robbins 365). Although Mrs. Grose attempted to get Miss Jessel's help in her endeavor, Miss Jessel "with a very high manner about it, requested her to mind her business" (61-62). Miles was allowed to display negative deviant behaviors, he refused to follow the social norms his class dictates – limiting the influence the governess has over him. His actions represent the limit of socialization's influence, he has begun to act out the negative deviant behaviors. Miss Jessel, as the governess, should have been the one disciplining Miles and preventing him from

¹ For more on the social control in Victorian Britain see E.M.L Thompson's "Social Control in Victorian Britain"

² Children, around the age they begin to conform, will also begin to enforce the social norms onto those around them, as a type of "sympathetic concern" to prevent someone from harm (Hardecker, Tomasello 238).

forming overly close relationships with servants, but given her own relationship with Quint it is not surprising she allowed it. Preventing the governess from having the opportunity to correct Miles's behavior, he chooses to ignore certain behaviors required by his class status, because he had previously been allowed to act against the social control.

The other child in Bly manor is Flora, she is the first child the governess meets, and originally was the only child the governess was supposed to educate. Although Flora is not acting out negative deviant behaviors at the novel's beginning, her actions are being driven by the panoptic schema. The schema, as previously explained, dictates how characters interact within their social group. This affects how Flora interacts with the governess and Mrs. Grose, she must choose between two parental figures. Given that Flora was almost entirely raised by Mrs. Grose, and her previous governess Miss Jessel, it is not surprising that she wants to stay with Mrs. Grose when she has already lost one governess. Flora's behavior towards Mrs. Grose, her wish to be away from the governess, acts as a preventative to the possibility that the governess would follow in Miss Jessel's footsteps. Although Flora does not express a need to be separated from the governess until the end of the novel, "Take me away, take me away – oh take me away from her", throughout the novel Flora ensures she appears as an innocent party to Mrs. Grose (103). The governess's view of the children, when she first meets them, gives them a picture of innocence. She describes both children as having a "positive fragrance of purity" (37) who have a "gentleness... that kept them... almost impersonal and certainly quite unpunishable (43). The governess's view of the children as completely unable to do harm is reinforced by her description:

"I turned and saw Flora... presented herself to view at the open door... with a great childish light that seemed to offer it as a mere result of her affection she had conceived for my person... catching my pupil in my arms covered her with kisses to which there was a sob of atonement. (35).

The governess makes the children seem as though they can do no wrong, neither child begins to act out negative deviant behaviors until later in the novel, when the governess is interacting with the ghosts of Quint and Miss Jessel more often. Although this section may appear to

be arguing that Flora is planning her actions to achieve a certain goal, I would remind the reader that Flora is a child and is simply attempting to maintain a status quo in the only way she sees possible.

The governess is often the subject of the panoptic gaze in this novella. Mrs. Grose and the ghosts of Quint and Miss Jessel use the panoptic gaze to remind the governess of her status in Bly. The governess is being reminded of her place in the social scale, she may be above the servants, but she will always be below the children in terms of social standing³. This reminder comes in the form of the ghosts. The governess's first sighting of Quint is him standing at the top of the tower, in a position of power, as though he is ruling over Bly; the governess describes him as standing "high up, beyond the lawn and at the very top of the tower" (39), and then later details his actions: "he slowly changed his place – passed, looking at me hard all the while" (41). The description explains Quint's placement as being physically above the governess while watching her from a distance. Quint's distance prevents the governess from attempting to speak with him: "we were too far apart to call to each other" (40). Soon after the tower scene the governess describes Quint watching her from close quarters, "became aware of a person of the other side of the window and looking straight in... his face was close to the glass... something, however, happened this time that had not happened before; his stare into my face" (44). This correlates to Foucault's explanation on a panoptic structure where he explains how the inmate "is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication: (Foucault 200). Although the viewer and subject can be in close quarters some distance is still maintained, distance that prevents communication. The governess, in this moment, has become a subject of the panopticon at the hands of the Quint, but she was already aware of the panopticon because of Mrs. Grose. Before exploring Mrs. Grose's involvement in the panoptic system, the ghost of Miss Jessel needs to be examined. Her behavior is slightly different from Quint's, she is never positioned above the governess but, similar to Quint, is always kept at a distance. The governess describes Miss Jessel as sitting "on one of the lower steps with her back presented to me... and her head, in an attitude of woe, in her hands" (70). Miss Jessel's position below the governess signifies her loss of status due to her relationship with

³ For more on a governess's social status see Leornore Davidoff: "Mastered for Life: Servant and Wife in Victorian and Edwardian England."

Quint, the description also makes it appear as though the governess is not being subjected to the panopticon, in this scene, but I would argue that she is. Although the governess is not being overtly watched, Miss Jessel acts as a reminder to the governess that her actions are being constantly observed by those around her. She acts as a warning to the governess on the dangers of going against the social control.

When the governess first arrived at Bly, she questions why Mrs. Grose tries to keep a distance between herself and the governess. She describes Mrs. Grose as being a “stout plain clean wholesome woman” who was “positively on her guard against showing it too much” (30). The governess, although she does not realize it in this scene, is later suspicious “upon reflexion”, because Mrs. Grose is subjecting the governess to the panopticon and the panoptic gaze to remind the governess of her social status⁴ (30). The moment Mrs. Grose meets the governess her aim is to prevent her from ending up like Miss Jessel – embracing negative deviant behavior. The panopticon requires an arrangement that induces the subject into “a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault 201) making the subject the “principle of his own subjection” (Foucault 203). The governess has become the subject of this system in Bly. She is aware that Mrs. Grose and the ghosts of Miss Jessel and Quint are constantly watching her for negative deviant behaviors, which forces her to conform to the expected behaviors, since she is unaware of when someone is observing her. Although the governess is aware of this, she still decides to trust Mrs. Grose. The governess informs Mrs. Grose about the ghost’s sighting’s and work together to try and correct the children’s behaviors; there are moments when their differences in social status causes some problems, but when considering its connection to the children it does not have much impact⁵.

The governess’s bias towards Quint as a lower-class servant, influences her lack of understanding towards Miles and Quint’s friendship. She describes a moment

where she encounters Quint: an “apparition...half-way up... it stopped short and fixed me exactly as it had from the tower and from the garden” (67). She describes him as a “living detestable dangerous presence”, and “the dead silence” of their “long gaze... its only note of the unnatural” (67). The description she gives Quint is made from her assumptions on the type of relationships Miles should be making as an upper-class child. The servants were there for the family’s convenience, they were there to work and not be seen⁶. The governess’s knowledge on Quint’s relationship with Miss Jessel further degraded her view of Quint, “he engaged in a forbidden relationship with a woman above him in rank” (Robbins 385). As the governess learns more about Quint and Miles’s relationship, she begins realizes that she is incapable of redirecting Miles negative deviant behavior. Miles and Flora’s socialization as upper-class children was thoroughly transformed, resulting in changes in their behavior that will affect their social status.

The governess’s role is one where she is both a parental and teacher figure, but given her unique position in the Bly, she has limited power due to her isolated position⁷. This created contradictions that determine how a governess should be treated “she is not a relation, not a guest, not a mistress, not a servant, - but something made up of all” (Peterson¹⁴). Creating confusion on how she should be viewed by society and treated by the family⁸. Normally in a panopticon and or social control someone would discipline those who go against expectations. A panopticon functions in such a way that “power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchical figure” (Foucault 197). The panopticon functions alongside the social control in Bly; therefore, one would assume the governess is the hierarchal figure over the children, but the Victorian class system places the children above her and Mrs. Grose. Meaning that the women are limited in how they can correct the children’s behavior. One governess described the children in her care as “more riotous, perverse, unmanageable cubs... as for correcting them... that was entirely out of the question: they do as they like (Gilbert 462). The quote signifies the governess’s

4 The governess is being reminded that the society’s social control is still functioning even in Bly. F. M. L. Thompson explains social control and its connection to social status in: “Social Control in Victorian Britain”.

5 For more on the social status difference between the governess and Mrs. Grose see my thesis: “Foucault’s Panopticon and Social Control in Henry James’s *The Turn of The Screw*”

6 For more on the servant’s lack of presence see Bruce Robbins “They don’t count, do they?": The Unfinished History of *The Turn of the Screw*”

7 The governess’s isolated position in the household and how this affected her see my thesis “Foucault’s Panopticon and Social Control in *The Turn of The Screw*”

8 Nora Gilberts “A Servitude of One’s Own: Isolation, and Authorship, and the Nineteenth- Century British Governess”. Explores a governess’s position in society and the household in which she works.

placement below the children in the household. The panopticon in Bly is there to remind the governess of her status, a status that limits her power and hinges on her actions. Her role was to help instill the social control and class expectations into the children, which would allow them to function in society. She was there “to watch, teach, ‘form’ little Flora” (31). She is meant to make Flora into a young lady suited for her upper-class status, much like how Miles’s school would mold him into an upper-class young man.

The children, although they take part in the social control, are unable to use the panoptic gaze. The children are never placed into a position where it appears as though they are watching the governess, rather it is the opposite, the governess is constantly observing their behavior. This is mostly due to her job as a governess, where “constant supervision of pupils” was a “common duty” (Peterson 12). Since the governess is working to teach the children how to function in society, the governess has become a commodity to the family⁹. This is true of any governess in the Victorian era; a governess was considered a source of “drawing room conversations” which “served to bring her into public ‘view’... Even complaining about a governess was a way of ‘showing her off’” (Peterson 9). In these circumstances it may seem that the children could easily subject the governess to the panoptic gaze, but it is not possible for the children to use the panoptic gaze because they are the “sum total” of the governesses “own labour” (Marx 435). The children’s status as a commodity prevents them from using the panoptic gaze. They are being taught how to function in society, therefore this entails them learning how to live in a panoptic system operating under social control. The children learned negative deviant behaviors from Quint and Miss Jessel, making them incapable of using the panoptic gaze on someone else since they do not follow the social norms, and are considered commodities. They cannot instill the norms into another preventing the children from being able to subject the governess to the panoptic gaze.

The governess believes that someone else can see the ghosts, she refuses to accept that she alone is a subject to the panoptic gaze, which makes her suspicious of Flora’s behavior. The governess believes the ghosts are real, she

also believes that the other characters, specifically Flora, can see them. The governess begins to doubt Flora’s innocence when she describes “an alien object in view – a figure whose right of presence I instantly and passionately questioned” (54). Following this the governess intently watches Flora for an “innocent sign either of interest or of alarm” (55). It remains unclear whether Flora can see the ghost, but the governess tells Mrs. Grose: “They know – its too monstrous: they know, they know!... Two hours ago, in the garden... Flora saw!” (55). The governess believes that Flora saw the ghosts and refuses to tell her about them... “not a word – that’s the horror. She kept it to herself!... I was there – I saw with my eyes: saw she was perfectly aware” (56). The governess convinces herself, in this moment, that Flora can see the ghosts but only a few pages later she re-establishes Flora’s innocence: “to gaze into the depths... of blue of the child’s eyes and pronounce their loveliness a trick of premature cunning... I naturally preferred to abjure my judgement” (60). The foot note explains the governess’s choice to “recant her suspicions of Flora” since she cannot “imagine evil in one whose blue eyes seem to signal such innocence” (60). The governess is writing these events from her perspective; therefore, the recanting of her earlier decision is her denial that she is the only one able to see the ghosts. She does not want to be alone in her status as a subject of the panoptic gaze. The governess’s realization of this begins with this section of the novel, but is further reinforced when the governess asks Mrs. Grose: “has she said to you since yesterday... a single other word about Miss Jessel?” to which Mrs. Grose explains: “Not one, Miss... I took it from her by the lake that just then and there at least there was nobody” (106). Mrs. Grose wants to believe the governess, but she is also hearing Flora’s explanation on the matter, along with her own lack of ghost sightings, preventing her from understanding the governess’s need to have someone else see the ghosts¹⁰.

The negative deviant behavior Miles embraces prevents him from returning to the school. He is no longer considered a young man of the upper class, he has become no better than Quint, a man the governess has come to despise. As previously discussed, Quint influenced Miles’ behavior, which in turn caused his socialization to be constructed with two opposing viewpoints. On one side

⁹ For more on the governess’s status as a commodity through Marxist theory see my thesis “Foucault’s Panopticon and Social Control in Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw*”

¹⁰ The relationship between the governess and Mrs. Grose is explored in Helen Killoran “The Governess, Mrs. Grose and The Poison of an Influence in *The Turn of the Screw*.”

he is supposed to act like an upper-class young man, on the other he is expected to go against his class orientation much like Quint had. These opposing influences result in his expulsion from school and the lack of explanation on why:

“Certainly you must go back to school,” I said, “if it be that that troubles you. But not to the old place – we must find another, a better. How could I know it did trouble you, this question, when you never told me so, never spoke of it at all? (92)

The governess does not know the reasons behind his expulsion, although she received a letter from the school it did not give many details, she explains to Mrs. Grose: “They go into no particulars. They simply express their regret that it should be impossible to keep him” (34). The letter leaves his expulsion up to interpretation, but since the school’s purpose is to groom their charges into the next generations upper-class, the reason is dependent on Miles’ behavior. He was not fulfilling the role the school expected, and in turn what the social control expects. The governess was aware that he was not fully embodying the role he was meant to fulfil, given her statement “I don’t save or shield them! It’s worse than I dreamed. They’re lost!” (59). The statement is made about the ghosts of Quint and Miss Jessel, who have proven to have had influence on the socialization and therefore the behaviors of Miles and Flora. The governess has no way of fully undoing the influence the ghosts have had on the two children, she can only do her best to curb any negative deviant behaviors. If she is unable to do so their status as being upper-class children will be revoked.

The governess is hired to teach Flora and Miles how they are supposed to behave as upper-class children, but when she comes into the situation Miles is already showcasing negative deviant behaviors. This is not to say that he is participating in the panoptic schema like Quint’s ghost, rather Miles has come to have a “vision of social equality” which he learned from Miss Jessel and Quint; Miles’s vision goes against the social control and therefore his socialization (Robbins 368). Since Miles’ behavior goes against the social control, his status as being upper class has the possibility of being revoked, as previously mentioned. Miles’s school saw his negative deviant behaviors and may have attempted to correct them but were unable to do so; causing them to expel him

in an attempt keep their reputation. When this happens, the governess has almost no possibility of re-establishing his position; she can only do so if she is able to enroll him in a school that has the capability of redirecting his behaviors. Therefore, the governess states: “but not to the old place – we must find another, a better” (92). A better school may have the ability to correct his behaviors and groom Miles’s behavior into those expected of a young man of his class. Miles knows that his behavior is considered deviant, he knows how he is expected to act but chooses to ignore these expectations. A governess “normally occupied a class above servants but below family, and were often isolated and lonely as a result”, which Miles would have known (Killoran 14). Miles is aware of the governess’s limited power and control over his behaviors, given his understanding of Quint and Miss Jessel’s taboo relationship. Although he learned how one can function outside the social control, he is unaware of the danger in doing so. The governess attempts to correct his behaviors and remind him what is expected of him, but Miles has made the decision to go against his socialization. Therefore, he is attempting to escape society’s panopticon and social control.

Flora leaves with Mrs. Grose near the end of the novel, but Miles stays behind. The reason for Flora leaving is detailed in a conversation the governess she has with Mrs. Grose:

She shook her head with dignity. “I’ve heard -!”

“Heard?”

“From the child - horrors? There?” she sighed with tragic relief... “About you, Miss - since you must have it. It’s beyond everything for a young lady; and I can’t think wherever she must have picked up -”

“The appalling language she applies to me? I can then!” ...

“Well, perhaps I ought to also – since I’ve heard some of it before” (108).

The conversation explains the influence Quint and Miss Jessel had on Flora, an influence that, until this point, was thought to have only affected Miles. Flora and Miles were expected to speak a certain way, therefore when Mrs. Grose calls Flora’s language “appalling” it can be assumed that Quint and Miss Jessel were using language inappropriate for the children’s age and their status in society (108). If Flora is unable to correct her behavior, she will be unable to maintain her status in society, therefore Mrs. Grose leaving with Flora is a final attempt to try and

correct her negative deviant behaviors. Although Mrs. Grose wants to prevent Flora's negative deviant behaviors, the moment Mrs. Grose leaves with Flora signifies her loss in social status. Neither the governess nor Mrs. Grose can correct her behaviors; the social control aimed at producing "children, and thus adults, who would make well-behaved members of the community" (Thompson 192). Flora's exposure to Quint and Miss Jessel's behavior prevents her from being able to conform to the social control, this lack of conformity will cause her to be unable to regain her social status. This is represented in her leaving with Mrs. Grose a servant, rather than staying where there is a possibility for the behaviors to be corrected by the governess.

Miles was allowed to fully embrace negative deviant behaviors; he refused to follow the social norms his class dictates. Although the governess attempts to correct his behavior, Miles is unwilling to follow the social control, since he has embraced the previously mentioned "vision of social equality" he learned from Miss Jessel and Quint relationship (Robbins 368). The vision taught him that people with different social status, and therefore social groups, could have a close relationship. He did not have to follow the social norms his class status dictated; the only repercussion he experienced is his expulsion from school. Miles wants to interact and form relationships with those of any class level, rather than only socializing with those of a similar status – he is attempting to escape society's panopticon and social control, but because the governess has fully conformed to the social control, since she was placed under a panoptic gaze in the panoptic system. She is unable to understand how to behave outside the social

control. Since the society deems those who do not follow the social control as undesirable and unnecessary to the society the governess kills Miles. She does this to fulfil the society's expectations. Someone cannot exist outside the social control without dire consequences

The characters are subjects of a panoptic system and social control that integrated into Bly to reinforce the social hierarchy, which causes Flora's loss of social status and Miles's death due to their lack of adherence to the social control. The children's behavior was influenced by Miss Jessel and Quint, resulting in Miles' vision and Flora's lack of acceptable behavior. Flora leaves Bly with Mrs. Grose, as a final attempt to correct her behavior, but the act of her leaving with a servant rather than staying with the governess, someone who could provide an education, causes her to lose her upper-class status. Miles had already fully embraced negative deviant behaviors, making him act against the governess's understanding of the social control. Since she is unable to understand how someone can exist outside the social control, the governess kills Miles to resolve the conflict she is experiencing. This conflict is founded in the governess's status as a subject of the panopticon, which has ensured that she is constantly watched and reminded of her social status. Henry James's *The Turn of The Screw* showcases the possibility of a panopticon and social control to integrate into a society, where it changes how social classes interact. Although it is not represented in the novella, these two systems of control can easily go beyond regulating the social classes interactions, they can integrate themselves into any structure in a society.

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