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Ambiguity in *The Turn of the Screw*

FAITH POYNOR

Henry James's novella *The Turn of the Screw* is a complex piece of literary art that has been the subject of much interpretive debate regarding many aspects of the story, including the very nature of the story itself. The numerous different readings of this tale are related to the ambiguous language and narration that James employs. The pervasive ambiguity of *The Turn of the Screw* invites a deconstructive reading that allows readers to accept the novella as both a ghost story and a psychological thriller, bringing into question the narrative reliability of a neurotic nineteenth-century governess.

Knowing the historical background, status, and role of Victorian governesses is necessary in understanding the motives, emotions, and thoughts of the governess protagonist. The society and economy of Victorian England was such that many women from the rising middle class were driven into the profession of governess out of the necessity to provide for their families. Middle-class women who did not marry had only the choice of becoming a governess to a wealthy, upper-class family in order to support themselves. The occupation of governess offered no rank or respectability, a condition that a contemporary of the time, Anna Jameson, found detestable: "The inferior position of the woman, and the inferior value of her services, as compared with the same classes in the other sex, is in no instance so obvious, so bitterly felt, so unspeakably unjust, as in this" (in Beidler 162). Governesses, who were often seen as below servants in the social hierarchy, were often mistreated by their employers but were resigned to suffer through their service, a job at least offering a home to stay in and a meagre salary on which to survive. The social and gender inequalities that the female governesses had to face are part of what

made “the position of a governess [the] hardest of all to bear” (Beidler 176). The demands placed on a governess were exceedingly unreasonable; a governess was expected to be sufficiently learned and intelligent to teach children well, to be socially cultured in order to interact with the upper class, and always to restrain and withhold her sexuality according to Victorian propriety. These expectations and qualifications made it very difficult for a governess to find a job and be able to keep it, resulting in an overcrowded, underpaid profession.

The Governesses’ Benevolent Institution was established at 66 Harley Street, London, in 1843 as a place of refuge where governesses could have a place to stay while searching for employment (Beidler 169). These women suffered through terrible poverty and isolation as a result of their profession. According to Jameson, “with the woman, ‘whose proper sphere is home,’ —the woman who either has no home, or is exiled from that which she has,—the occupation of governess is sought merely through necessity” (Beidler 162). This idea is exemplified by the difficult family circumstances which forced the governess of James’s story into her position: “As one of several children of a poor country parson, the new governess at Bly would have had few options. Without a dowry, her chances of marrying were slender, so the only profession open to her was that of governess” (Beidler 165). As Douglas explains in the prologue of the story, “But the salary offered much exceeded her modest measure, and on a second interview she faced the music, she engaged” (James 28). Thus, desperate for employment in a difficult job market where there was no choice but to take any job she could get, the governess agreed to the outrageous condition of the master of Bly: that she should never bother him.

This historical information shows how the instability of the profession of governess would have psychological consequences for the protagonist of the novella. Psychoanalytic interpretation

reveals the effects of these consequences. James's governess represents the limitations placed on women in Victorian society, particularly sexual limitations. Given her background as the daughter of a clergyman, as well as the expectation that, as a governess, she must inhibit any expression of her sexuality, sexual repression is an important psychological factor in the actions and thoughts of the governess. In the prologue, Douglas reveals the governess's sexual attraction to the master. She must repress these sexual urges due to societal expectations and the absence of the object of her desire. Her desire for his approval increases her anxiety over meeting the great expectations placed on her—an ambition that is countered by the reality of her circumstances. The governess “finds in the children's uncle a symbol of an imaginative order, the Lacanian ‘big Other,’ who offers psychic wholeness” (Zacharias 322). The master is the judge of all her actions, the one to whom she constantly seeks to conform.

The governess's fear of failure and her sexual repression are the sources of her desperation and fantasy. As Greg W. Zacharias argues, “her narrative [reads] as a confession—a representation of truth shaped by the unconscious—of a difficult period in her life” (Zacharias 320). The governess's truth is her perception of the ghosts. The part of her mind that is not aware, her unconscious, shapes her fantasy of the ghosts that allows her to deal with the demands and difficulties of her situation at Bly (Zacharias 321). Her anxiety is greatest just before her first ghost sighting. She thinks about her duties to the master and of her own pleasure at the thought of pleasing him: “I was giving pleasure—if he ever thought of it!—to the person to whose pressure I had yielded. What I was doing was what he had earnestly hoped and directly asked of me, and that I *could*, after all, do it proved even a greater joy than I had expected” (James 38). This language is loaded with sexual subtext, further indicating the repression of her sexual urges regarding the master. She desires to see the master again and to be accepted by

him, represented by her wish to encounter someone who approves of her while on her nightly stroll. Her wish soon comes true, and she sees an apparition standing at the top of the tower, staring down at her. Thus, the ghosts reflect projections of her own desires; they are the result of a fantasy about a romantic encounter combined with the effect of anxieties on the mind.

There is a discernible link between the governess's increasing desire to control her circumstances and her increasing certainty about the existence of the ghosts of Quint and Jessel. The harder she tries to keep control over her difficult situation, the more she becomes lost in the fantasy. The governess actually takes pleasure in the presence of the ghosts because they allow her to play the hero in the fantasy: "I was in these days literally able to find a joy in the extraordinary flight of heroism the occasion demanded of me" (James 53). A twisted sense of duty to the children and a desire to be approved by the master motivate her to take up the role of hero and defender of the children's innocence against the corruption of the supposedly wicked servants. The ironic pleasure she finds in such terrifying conditions is referred to as *jouissance*, a Lacanian notion that roughly means finding pleasure in pain (Zacharias 324). Power comes with the illusion of control, and the governess becomes obsessed with her ability to perceive the ghosts when no one else can. When it seems that she has lost her special power, she becomes anxious and fears that she will not be able to keep the children safe and therefore not be able to please the master and succeed at her job. The governess tells Mrs. Grose that "it would from that moment distress me much more to lose my power than to keep it" (James 80). She is convinced that the ghosts are still present around her, but she cannot see them. Believing that the apparitions are evil strengthens her fantasy, because "she can combat wickedness itself as the heroine of the scene. The Lacanian fantasy that she protects Bly against malevolent ghosts who seek to harm the children... is central to the governess's representation of

herself as the heroine of Bly" (Zacharias 328-329). The governess believes she has been called to carry out her brave mission of defending the children, a more noble pursuit that allows her to better fulfil the demands of the big Other, the master, and achieve greater psychic wholeness.

The various neuroses of the governess call into question her reliability as narrator of the tale. She is a naïve, impressionable, and, by her own admission, volatile character who jumps to conclusions and is distracted by physical beauty. Her attempt to deny her sexuality causes her to "[disavow] her attraction toward the uncle by conjuring a figure who is both repulsive and beneath her in class terms" (Teahan 398). In other words, her neurotic sexual repression leads her to displace her sexual feelings for the uncle onto a phantasmal being who is equally physically attractive, but even less sexually available to her. If the governess's tale is merely a fantasy of her own making, she is an unreliable narrator. However, her reliability remains in question due to the narrative structure of the novella.

There are three levels of narration in the story: the first person narrator, Douglas, and the governess. Multiple narrators acting as characters in the tale create stories within stories due to differences of perspectives, leaving readers struggling to find reality in layers of narrative. The prologue of the novella functions as the frame narrative that serves to establish the background and context of the story as well as the credibility of the governess narrator. According to Sheila Teahan, "the frame narrative that introduces *The Turn of the Screw* is a source of ambiguity as well as important background information" (Teahan 393). James uses the prologue to both ensure readers of the governess's reliability and to further obscure the truth. In convincing readers to fix meaning to ambiguous scenes without meaning, James manipulates readers' perception of certainty and reality. As Douglas assures his audience of the trustworthiness and respectability of the governess, the first

person narrator questions his objectivity, thereby inviting the reader to question both Douglas and the governess as reliable sources of information. Douglas has a personal history with the governess; he was romantically and sexually attracted to her, confounding his view of her as stable and sane. Douglas's certainty about the governess's story is suspicious, foreshadowing a theme of uncertainty in the rest of the story.

The governess discloses her tale in the manuscript that comprises the rest of the novella. The reader must decide whether or not to trust her. She seems to be gullible but honest, creating further tension and ambiguity about the reality of the events she describes. If readers accept that she believes in the truth of her tale, it is still impossible to determine if her truth is real, if the ghosts she sees truly exist. The ambiguous reliability of the governess intensifies the ambiguous nature of the tale, with the ghost story and psychological story playing off each other to create further unresolved tension. The presence of a prologue and the absence of an epilogue generates more ambiguity and tension. Without an epilogue, there is no stability, relief of tension, or explanation that could lead to a better understanding of the story. Thus, the complex narrative structure of *The Turn of the Screw* creates ambiguity about the nature of the story itself.

The ambiguity of the governess's narrative is apparent in the tension between doubt and certitude, subjectivity and objectivity, and knowledge and emotion in the novella. The governess repeatedly says that she is certain and has proof of the apparitions she sees. Vision is the primary method of determining certitude about the existence of something, yet she claims certitude based on a psychic sixth sense. While at the lake with Flora, the governess "[begins] to take in with certitude and yet without direct vision the presence, a good way off, of a third person" (James 54). The governess becomes convinced that Flora also sees the woman and claims that Flora's lack of response is proof of her recognition

of the ghost of Jessel. James uses such vague language as “I became aware,” “I would assure myself,” and “I found myself forming” to describe the governess’s perception of the apparitions. Ambiguity about apparitions is influenced by the governess’s confusing emotion and knowledge. She lets her fear control her rational thought, saying that she is certain of the presence of ghosts because she does not see them. This paradox shows she is so desperate to hold on to her power—her ability to see ghosts—that she convinces herself of her own certitude.

Perhaps the most ambiguous aspect of the story is that of Miles’s death. The manuscript, written in the first person, is the main narrative and reveals the governess as a self-conscious teller who locked away her story after having written it, as if ashamed of what she had divulged about herself. This revelation further determines the story to be the governess’s confession and self-justification for the tragic occurrences at Bly, culminating in the death of Miles. His death requires an explanation, one that the governess feels compelled to give in a manner similar to the Catholic practice of confession of sins. When speculating with Mrs. Grose about Miles’s transgression that caused him to be expelled from school, the governess says, “I’ll get it out of him. He’ll meet me. He’ll confess. If he confesses he’s saved. And if he’s saved—” (James 110). Mrs. Grose responds, saying, “Then *you* are?” (James 110). The governess sees confession as a means of salvation and believes that she needs to save Miles from possession by Quint to be saved herself. She becomes obsessed with her power and need to control, saying, “I was infatuated—I was blind with victory” (James 118). This admission could suggest that she murdered Miles out of a twisted sense of duty. It suggests that the corruption of the children is hers and that when Miles is “dispossessed,” it is of her, rather than the ghosts (James 120). The premature ending without an epilogue raises questions about the state of mind of the governess while writing about the death of Miles. Considering

ambiguity over whether or not she smothered him in the end, it is conceivable that in reliving the terrible event, she was shocked back to quietude at the reality of the situation and the possibility that it is her fault. She repeats the phrase “quiet day” several times in the final paragraphs, perhaps suggesting the stark realization of her own fantasy, leaving her with nothing else to say.

A reader’s impression and interpretation of the story depends on how the reader constructs meaning from ambiguity, just as the governess’s truth depends on how she constructs meaning out of the unusual situation at Bly. As Zacharias states, “the unconscious shapes the way each of us reads *The Turn of the Screw*, just as... the governess’s unconscious shapes in James’s tale the reading of her own history” (Zacharias 332). Because the ghosts are at once both absent and present, one can never know the full story. Determining that the ghosts are real to the governess still does not answer the question of the reality of the ghosts themselves. Christine Brooke-Rose suggests that readers should not seek an answer but instead should try to “preserve the total ambiguity” of the story because “there is no word or incident in the story that cannot be interpreted both ways” (Beidler 243). The ambiguity of James’s masterfully complex story should be seen as the end goal of the literary artwork itself.

These ideas support a deconstructive reading of the text. According to the literary theory of deconstruction, context defines meaning and perspective, and the reality in a text is constructed, just as reality itself is a construction of interpretation. Most importantly, deconstruction emphasizes finding multiple meanings and interpretations in literature as in life. There is not only one way of reading the world or a literary text. A deconstructive reading of *The Turn of the Screw* is one that accepts the novella as both ghost story and psychological thriller, rather than one or the other. Teahan believes the novella is an allegory of reading and that the governess “actually ‘writes’ or constructs” the

ghosts (Teahan 400). Quint and Jessel are not ghosts at all, but are constructed creations of the governess's fears, desires, and preconceptions. Her unconscious projects all this onto a form the governess can fight: demonic apparitions. Such projection allows her to deal with her difficult circumstances and to explain her frenzied actions. Teahan argues that "James's story is an allegory of (mis)reading because every reader, including the present one, is condemned to repeat the governess's impossible but necessary effort to master a text that can never be mastered" (Teahan 405). The best a reader can do is interpret the story as simultaneously a ghost story and a psychological story.

The deconstructive reading of *The Turn of the Screw* accepts the ambiguity of the story and the multiple interpretations it invites. The historical, cultural, social, and political setting of the novella helps explain the basis of neurosis in the governess, while issues of narrator unreliability and complex narrative structure are the main instruments in creating the great tension and ambiguity throughout Henry James's artfully crafted story.

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