



## ANALYZING THE MYSTERY AND FEAR IN HENRY JAMES'S *THE TURN OF THE SCREW*

**Ruby Goldaa Jenifer. J**

II MA English Literature, G. Venkataswamy Naidu College (Autonomous), Kovilpatti  
Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli  
E-mail: [rubygoldaa2203@gmail.com](mailto:rubygoldaa2203@gmail.com)

---

**Received:** April 18, 2024, **Accepted:** April 24, 2024, **Online Published:** June 15, 2024

---

### ABSTRACT

Death and all of its attendants, including destruction, immortality, and the afterlife, are subjects of Gothicism. Gothic literature explores our irrational anxieties, convictions, and superstitions around the unknown. Examples include putting on garlic to ward off demonic dangers and dusting salt on your threshold to keep ghosts away. The readers of Henry James's work *The Turn of the Screw* have been left perplexed, scared, and confused. Henry James gives the reader a story in *The Turn of the Screw* that seems just as real as the ghost recording that had such an impact on the book, but the reader doesn't start to question the author's veracity until he looks into it more. The backdrop, the narrator's confession, and the subliminal impact of the emerging bits make the governess an untrustworthy source. Instead of presenting *Turn of the Screw* for study, many individuals concentrate on the governess's tale. This paper focuses on the disturbing mystery and anxiety in Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*.

**Keywords:** Gothic, Death, Mystery, Fear, and Perplexing.

Unquestionably, James' most well-known and widely read tale is *The Turn of the Screw*. He enjoyed writing ghost stories.

Although he liked to refer to them as "bugaboo stories," every aspect of the genre suggested that the ghosts were a

contemporary take on the fairy tale. Instead, in *The Turn of the Screw*, he aimed to challenge the reader's conventional understanding of evil by taking them to a more abstract level and examining how common people act in general. *Turn of the Screw*, according to him, is a Freudian fantasy. He partly grounds his reasoning that Quint's spirit is perpetually present in the tower, and the governess' ghost is visible from the lake. Mr. Wilson suggests that the governess who is still alive and experiences these paranormal visits is a hysterical schizophrenic. This may be how James's subconscious imagined the tale.

The story has held us, round the fire, sufficiently breathless, but except the obvious remark that it was gruesome, as on Christmas Eve in an old house a strange tale should essentially be, I remember no comment uttered till someday happened to note it as the only case, he had met in which such a visitation had fallen on a child. (James, 315)

James adds to the intrigue by raising the possibility that the governess' mental health isn't entirely stable. As soon as she states that she likes to write scenarios and paint pictures, she obviously possesses a creative mind. When she visits Bly House for the first time, she envisions it as a castle of romance and conjures up a

charming story about how she will meet the master while exploring the grounds. Upon reaching the house, she imagines herself as a captain, leading a ship to safety.

The governess gets a letter from her employer before little Miles leaves for school. It has a letter from Miles's school's headmaster that hasn't been opened and a brief message from her employer asking her to read it and take care of everything. After reading the letter, the governess discovers Mrs. Grose and informs her that Miles has been expelled from his school. When she asks if little Miles is "really bad," Mrs. Grose assures her that despite his vivacious nature, little Miles cannot harm anyone.

The governess's initial error does not look into Miles's dismissal reasons. The governess can later accuse Miles of being dishonest because of the uncertainty surrounding this suspension. The governess's sincere desire to maintain total control over her charges and to see them only from her perspective accounts for her unwillingness to look into the matter further. James meticulously arranges the equipment so the governess can see the "ghosts" for the first time. She likes to take solitary walks during her spare time, which falls at dusk. In addition, she wants her employer to notice her when she walks



around and acknowledge the amazing job she's done with the children.

The postbag that evening – it came late contained a letter form which, however, in the hand of my employer, ... addressed to himself, with a seal still unbroken. "This I recognize, is from the headmaster, and the head matter's an awful bore. Read him, please; deal with him; but mind you don't report. Not a word. I'm off!" (James, 324)

This novella begins with a mystery surrounding a secret at Bly. The governess harbours a secret that grows on her until she notices the figure outside the window. Once more, the weather contributes to the appearance of mystery. The figure shows up on a gloomy, chilly day. One might approach Peter Quint's appearance in a few different ways. Some critics contend that the governess's perception of the ghost is purely imaginary and that she sees him at all because she has been dwelling on the matter for so long that her imagination conjures up the apparition. The governess's knowledge of her employer's wardrobe and her ongoing need for a different image of him provide credence to this point. In her imagination, she has created a handsome yet, as in nightmares, horrifyingly ugly person. This individual is

essentially the realization of a fantasy and only exists in the governess's mind.

The other viewpoint holds that if the governess had not truly seen the ghost, she would not have been able to provide such a precise account. According to this perspective, the governess is a kind and innocent person who looks out for the good of innocent kids. Hence, the ghost can represent the struggle that must be undertaken when evil approaches the innocent. Thus, James has allowed for multiple interpretations of the scenario by employing ambiguity. Some critics even go so far as to say that this story is only a terrifying ghost story with no deeper significance beyond this interpretation.

Was there a "secret" at Bly – a mystery of Udolpho or an insane, unmentionable relative kept in unsuspected confinement? I can't say how long I turned it over or how long, in a confusion of curiosity and dread, I remained where I had my collision; I only recall that when Ire entered the house, darkness had held quite close in. (James, 332)

James is completing his story with the arrival of Miss Jessel. The male ghost shows up for the boy, and for the small girl, the female ghost seems to return. The governess is caught amid everything. It should be noted that Miss Jessel's beauty is

not given as much weight in this area. Good Mrs Grose is even a little doubting herself. It seems the governess has been thinking about the matter a lot until she makes Miss Jessel appear. Mrs. Grose won't be able to identify the previous governess based on the description provided clearly, and practically any governess could fit the description. This adds another layer of meaning. The governess believes that the apparitions are coming back to either kidnap or corrupt the kids. She is prepared to battle bravely to defend the kids as long as she believes this. When she discovers that Miss Jessel and Peter Quint are immoral, her anxieties become even more apparent. She already worries that the kids might have been corrupted by these people's very existence in real life. They, therefore, wish to carry on the corruption that started in life through their spectral appearance.

The governess finds it most terrifying that the kids are aware of the ghosts' presence even if they act as if they are unaware of it. At this point, we have to start questioning whether the governess isn't letting her fantasies run wild. It is conceivable that little Flora missed the figure, even if the ghosts do show up—after all, it was quite a way away. Whether the ghosts are genuine or not, the governess has an unwavering commitment

to shielding her conscience from the terrible force. The whole story revolves around the struggle between good and evil, with the governess standing in for the forces of good and the so-called ghosts symbolising the evil aspects of the world that the governess tries to shield the kids from but cannot do so. The children's innocence is highlighted once more in this novella. The governess is maybe engaging in the most depraved and terrible perversion of all if the kids are, in fact, innocent. She is jeopardising the children's innocence by demanding that the ghosts truly appear. One of the most important discoveries is the governess's attitude toward her employer and her fear that he would think the whole story was a ruse to draw him in. Returning from the immediate situation, we must acknowledge that the governess would undoubtedly alert her master if the ghostly presence were real. Her hesitation to comply suggests that she is aware, if only in part, that the ghosts might be products of her deranged mind. If they were genuine, she should accept that she is powerless against them alone.

The governess makes a contradictory statement. The anxiety that Miles and Flora see more than she does is expressed when she first acknowledges that it's not yet conclusively proven that the kids are aware of the ghosts. In these



parts, the topic of the uncle's appearance is expanded upon. The first are the letters that the kids write but never mail. Miles then demands to speak with his uncle about his education. The governess is terrified that her employer could show up there, even though she wants him to be happy with her and visit Bly. The governess meets Miss Jessel's ghost once more, driven by Miles's demands and her subconscious need to see her boss. This time, the ghost appears in the schoolroom, which implies that Miles's desire for additional education and Miss Jessel's appearance there are related. The governess sees the apparition only when the house is abandoned. Consequently, she is the only one who sees the ghost once more. Moreover, she notices it when she is most consumed with challenging issues that she must resolve to honour her contract with her job. The governess believes that Miles is incredibly astute and is hinting at deeper and more menacing meaning because of the uncertainty in their discourse concerning his training. However, a close examination of the exchange reveals that the little boy's genuine wish to resume his regular education is the one element that remains unclear.

The shock had, in truth, sunk into me still deeper than I knew on the night when looking out either for Quint or

for Miss Jessel under the stars, I had seen their boy over whose rest I watched and who had immediately brought in with him – had straightway there turned on me – the lovely upward look with which, from the battlements above us, the hideous apparition of Quint had played. (James, 370)

After a while, the governess persuades Mrs. Grose that Miles' dismissal must have been due to his wickedness, as he has no other shortcomings. It's now hers to utilise for her schemes. Little Miles' desire to escape becomes even more normal and amazing if the governess is engrossed in her strange scheme. He must recognise the oddity of his relationship with the governess, as he does emphasise. Following the in-room interview, he gets even more tense and sensitive about their unusual relationship. We need to realise that James is now setting up the eventual death of young Miles—a death brought on by the governess' strange actions—after the narrative.

The last chapters disclose information about the ghosts' appearance. The spirits used to show up only when the governess was alone, but now Miss Jessel shows up when Mrs Grose is around. However, the apparition is invisible to the nice housekeeper. As a result, it is

seriously questioned if the visitation exists outside of the governess's imagination. The question that emerges is whether she notices them at all. We know that the mind can persuade itself that such events occur. An alternative strategy would be to concede to the governess that a certain degree of perception is necessary to detect the existence of bad spirits. Accepting this perspective, however, necessitates acknowledging the children's superhuman cleverness and cunning. Observe how little Flora appears upset at the governess's charges. Mrs. Grose's conviction of Flora's evilness stems from the little girl's usage of foul language. The child's actions make perfect sense when we realise that Miles must have picked up some foul language at school and might have shared it with Flora. However, when the child speaks these words, the refined Mrs Grose—who is quite old—finds them repulsive and nasty, and she is prepared to accept the notion that the girl could only have learned them from an evil source based on this evidence. The illness of Little Flora serves as a way to hint and set up Miles's response in the concluding scenes. If Flora becomes unwell at the thought of a ghost appearing, the governess's actions in the next parts might be too much for the young boy to handle.

Miss Jissel stood before us on the opposite bank exactly as she had stood the other time, and I remember strangely..... She was there, so I was neither cruel nor mad. She was there for poor, scared Mrs. Grose, but she was there most for Flora. No moment of my monstrous time was perhaps as extraordinary as that I consciously throw out to her – with the sense that she would catch and understand it – an inarticulate message of gratitude, pale and ravenous demon as she was. (James, 390)

During the conversation with Miles, the governess believes she has seen Peter Quint outside the window. Miles asks her whether she sees Miss Jessel first. It appears that this inquiry confirms his innocence. Stated differently, he had to have discovered through Flora that the governess believed she had seen Miss Jessel. If not, the little child would not have assumed Miss Jessel was the apparition that the governess had seen. The young Miles connects the apparition with Peter Quint when it is mentioned that it is a masculine apparition. However, although little Flora had been unwell due to her fear of a ghost, little Miles died.

The final portion strongly supports the story's interpretation as a psychological analysis of the governess's psyche. The only way to explain Miles's death, if the



ghost existed at all or if he was communicating with it, is to acknowledge that the spirits and their wicked ways have taken control of the young kid. However, it would seem more plausible to believe that the governess was the only one who saw the ghost and that she just scared the young boy to death with her deranged imagination.

I caught him; yes, I held him—it may be imagined with a passion, but at the end of a minute, I began to feel what I truly held. We were alone with the quiet day, and his little heart, dispossessed, had stopped. (James, 409)

### Conclusion

Even though *The Turn of the Screw* was written decades after the Gothic timeline, it still contains aspects of the original Gothic story. The narrative of the story is in first person. This raises questions about everything because anyone can (intentionally or unintentionally) present a narrative through a lens influenced by various factors. James gives us hints to analyse rather than forcing many stories about what they could be down our throats. In addition to the physical seclusion, the governess is psychologically isolated since she has no one else to live with but her housekeeper,

Mrs Gross, at her new home, and she is not allowed to communicate with the master.

With the added twist of giving the reader only ambiguous information throughout the story, James uses the gothic form through these elements to explore the Governess's psyche through his proto-stream-of-consciousness narrative. This allows the reader to determine whether the phantoms are real or the result of delusion. Unlike Horror-Gothic, he is less concerned with what makes people frightened and more concerned with challenging reality—a point the original style omitted. This ghost story isn't like the others; it's more like a Gothic narrative.

### References

- James, Henry. *The Turn of The Screw, The Aspern Papers, and other stories*, published by Rupa & Co, 2000.
- Varughese, Jemima. Nested: Exploring the Mysteries in Henry James's 'The Turn of the Screw.' *A Closer Look at "The Turn of the Screw"*.
- Jacobs, Julian D. "Literary Criticism of Henry James' Turn of the Screw." *Medium*, 7 Aug. 2020.