

Wading Through Ambiguity in Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*
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Since its publication in 1898, Henry James' novella *The Turn of the Screw* has been a source of contest and debate for nearly 125 years. This debate centers around two main theories: on one side lies the belief that the the spirits of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel are merely hallucinations, while the other end of the spectrum believes the Governess, giving the ghosts authenticity and validity. Although the main argument is real versus hallucinatory, this essay will look at some of the arguments supporting both sides.

When parsing through different arguments, one can see how literary and even linguistic analyses can make James' novella more ambiguous than the text itself. Arguments range from the Governess suffering from hysteria to the spirits being manifestations of a repressed sexuality to her being evil. With so many varied hypotheses that have changed with the passage of time, one can see how the interpretation of not only the Governess' intentions are question, but also her sanity.

A large portion of of arguments are centered around a notion of duality, but John Allen's 1979 article in *The Henry James Review* argues the duality is actually a type of transference from James himself. Allen brings up this point by writing, "the 'I' is the 'real' James in fictional garb: he supplies the title within the frame, is perceptive, etc., and is an uninvolved observer" (Allen, 74). Through making this observation, Allen labels Douglas as the "implied James" fairly frequently throughout his essay, saying he (Douglas) can "legitimately be designated the implied James" (74). By inserting himself into his own work of fiction, Allen argues, the Governess is given validity on both her sanity and the reality of the ghosts of Quint and Miss Jessel. Allen examples this by writing, "one must conclude, then. That Douglas, who now carried the authority of the implied

James, take the governess's story literally. For him the ghosts are real" (75). Allen also attempts to validate the governess's story by pointing out that Douglas remained silent on the subject for forty years, which he (Allen) believes "fosters the assumption that he is reasonably detached and objective about the governess..." (76). In the same vein, Allen also uses his same theory of Douglas' silence as objectivity to validate the Governess as both sane and caring by saying, "he is reticent about the story and remembers her fondly" (76).

In another article for the *Henry James Review*, Albaraq Mahbbobah argues in 1996 that the Governess suffers from a strong and verifiable case of the outdated diagnosis of female hysteria. Mahbbobah's essay looks at feminist theory from a critical perspective, writing, "the readers who justify James's heroine's violence towards the two children, Miles and Flora, might be accused of committing an inequality similar to the one which they protest" (Mahbbobah, 149). The early half of Mahbbobah's article focuses on counterpointing works focusing on looking at *The Turn of the Screw* and the actions of the Governess through a feminist lens. Citing Paula Cohen's theory of the Governess's treatment of the two children as acts of abuse that indicate "her rejection of the traditional role to governesses in the Victorian social order" (149), also stating "Cohen here represents the violence of hysteria as a form of political protest and thus justifies it" (149).

Admittedly, the mental health or instability of the Governess is a strong point for those who argue the visits from the dead Quint and Miss Jessel are hallucinations, Mahbbobah's take is one that seems not only out of date, but out of touch as well. While the Freudian argument was one that could be made even up to the early half of the 20th century, Mahbbobah's take on the Governess suffering from hysteria comes sixteen years *after* hysteria was removed from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM). With Mahbbobah arguing the point the Governess suffered from an illness that is no longer diagnosed, one cannot help but wonder what

other points of his argument are ineffective. Mahbobah further puts Freudian masculine and feminine on the actions of the Governess, saying, “In James’s novella, the governess certainly plays an aggressively masculine role with Miles, to the extent of violently abusing him, sexually” (157). The notion that a woman either harshly or irrationally due to unmet or unrecognized sexual needs is asinine to the psyche and intelligence of women throughout the world, and the idea that some scholars can attempt to justify these theories near the dawn of the 21st century is nothing short of offensive.

The pattern of duality and self is one that is present in almost every scholarly work focusing on *The Turn of the Screw*. Andrea Gencheva also touches on the topic of dual identity when she argues Miss Jessel acts as the Governess’s repressed self. An evidentiary scene is one in which the Governess opens her bedroom door to see Miss Jessel’s ghost at her desk. Gencheva writes, “looking at her, the governess has the feeling she is looking into a fictional mirror and seeing her own reflection, given the fact that Miss Jessel acted led by her desires, while the governess is not allowed to do so” (Gencheva 78). The author further cements this point when implying the Governess acts as the metaphorical middle ground between “the motherly figure of Mrs. Grose and.. the condemned, sexualized figure of Miss Jessel, who is actually the governess herself, only having taken one step further” (78). This passage can lead readers to infer that the Governess is not necessarily suffering from any sort of mental health disorder outright, but is in the midst of an internal struggle between duty, morality, and sexuality.

Though a large portion of texts analyzing *The Turn of the Screw* focus on the mental status of the Governess and/or the fact versus reality argument of the presence of the ghosts of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, the roles and motives of the children of Bly Manor are also questioned. In their analysis, Nicole Burkholder-Mosco and Wendy Carse argue the role(s) Flora and Miles play

in the story, but also there role liminality plays. The pair states that, “the Bly estate abounds in thresholds both literal— doors, windows, mirrors, stairs, curtains, the lake’s edge, twilight and figurative, including the position of our unnamed governess, who is liminal in the social status Victorian culture assigned her but also in her particular position at Bly” (201). Many analyses of *The Turn of the Screw* center on the Governess and her purportedly sexual attraction to Miles, but Burkholder-Mosco and Carse argue the attraction is not of sensual means, but of a type of awestruck. The pair writes, “the governess is suspecting ‘the very things that delighted’ her: the children’s ‘more than earthly beauty’ is now a sure sign their ‘absolutely unnatural goodness’ is ‘a policy and a fraud’” (203). This leads the reader to believe the children are in fact malicious and deviant disguised in a shroud of natural beauty, manners, and status. This notion is further solidified in the paper when the pair writes that, “rather than passive vessels to be filled up with evil, Miles and Flora as overdetermined signifiers of innocence may well be capable of ‘playing’ on their own ‘wondrous material’ of angelic beauty and precocity and truly possessing the home in which their uncle shows as little interest as he does in them” (204). This theory would also support theories of the ghosts being fact to the governess rather than hallucination or a symptom of mental illness.

In an effort to put an end to the ambiguity of ghosts in *The Turn of the Screw* being real or figments of the Governess, Victor Makarenkov and Yael Segalovitz attempt to use a subset model of linguistics known as Natural Language Processing (NLP) to provide a definitive answer. Using this method in which, “disambiguation has always been the focus” (1), the authors hoped to put a scientific point of view on literature. The authors contest the difference between their method and standard literary analysis is that, “literary works often make use of the ambiguity of language in order to communicate complex ideas and manipulate textual forms, as well as to

challenge the reader or to draw the reader in” (1). When analyzing the text through the NLP method, the authors stated they built a “list of words for each of the two possible main interpretations of *The Turn of the Screw* and use two different metrics to quantify the dual interpretation of the text” (2). While breaking down different facets of the text, the authors prove “it is clear that the ambiguity is not concentrated in one particular chapter or installment. Not only does the ambiguity appear in all chapters/installments, but the level of each topic’s presence changes accordingly” (7). There is no definitive answer, but the authors state the graphs in which they include in their analysis “afford us a visual demonstration of what ambiguity looks like” (9).

In Henry James’s novella *The Turn of the Screw*, the ambiguity is so ambiguous that not even a scientific approach can provide a definitive answer. This is likely the reason the work remains a staple of literary academia almost 125 years after it was written.

Works Cited

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Makarenkov, Victor, and Yael Segalovitz. "Sensing Ambiguity in Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*." 2020.