

Original Paper

Point of View in *The Turn of the Screw* —the pursuit of the inner reality—

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Abstract

Novelists in the nineteenth century were the first to write about a search for an inner reality. Before James' time, most fiction was written from the author's point-of-view. The author, as an omniscient narrator, described the character's actions and told the reader their significance and meaning. James' contribution to fiction included his work on point-of-view. Many of James' works are characterized by a central intelligence – that is, a character through whose eyes the reader can see the story. The reader, therefore, responds not as an objective viewer but as a participant in the story. Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* can be an incredibly frustrating and difficult story. It hints at much, but rarely states anything directly. To enhance the quality of suspense, James closes the novel without explaining the happenings or solving the mystery. We readers are to have an interest in not the ghosts themselves, but the character who asserts the presence of the ghosts. At this stage, in the novel, it seems to be turning itself from just a simple ghost story into more of a psychological type of fiction. Henry James tried to search for the possibility of reality in this novel, and furthermore, the possibility for a psychological fiction.

I

The novel opens with an anonymous man who narrates what is happening on Christmas Eve. He spends it around the fire in an old country house with a group of friends, entertaining themselves by relating exciting stories. A man named Griffin has just finished telling the story about a child possessed by a ghost. Then another member of the group, named Douglas, offers to narrate a more exciting story about two children haunted by ghosts. After hearing Griffin's ghost, Douglas suggests, "If the child gives the effect another turn of the screw (underline mine), what do you say to two children—?" (James 1) Thus this novel, *The Turn of the Screw*, attempts to turn, providing a ghostly story for the Christmas season.

The author's important device here is that Douglas himself is not the protagonist of this novel, that is, he is only a man who volunteers to relate a mysterious story about two children to the visitors of an inn. His role in the novel is just to introduce the governess, the real protagonist of the novel, to the readers by reading out her story. Henry James has set this story in the 'frame' of another narrative. The first outer frame is established in this prologue, that is, the presentation of the novel by Douglas. Then in this frame, Henry James prepares another second frame, another narrator, the Governess' world. As the

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protagonist-narrator, the governess dominates the novel with her presence. She not only narrates the story of her experience at Bly, but also portrays the characters and presents the situations as seen through her eyes. So the majority of the novel purports to be the manuscripts written by the governess and is thus written in the first-person from her limited point-of-view. In speaking of the manuscript in the framing section, rather than simply beginning with the governess' narrative, James emphasizes that it represents the perspective of a single person. This opening framing section notably sets itself apart from the story. As told from an objective authorial perspective, in which the unnamed narrator himself speaks about his own transcription of the manuscript into the book his reader holds in his/her hands, it seems at a glance to provide the reader with trustworthy background information necessary for the story. The author has used a parenthetical device of frame in this work. This double structure of frame gives a very important meaning to this novel. It is the governess who does all the seeing and all the supposing. The story we are finally given is hers, and it is told in the first person. And Douglas and the anonymous man disappear, never to return. The novel ends with the end of the governess story.

But before relating the story, Douglas has to wait for the manuscript of the story to arrive from home. Though his explanation of the manuscript, we get the information about the setting of the story.

This manuscript was written by a lady who served as a governess to two orphaned children. The inexperienced young woman, who had never left Hampshire, met with a gentleman on London's fashionable Harley Street. She was immediately impressed by his wealth, good looks, and bold manner, and, the narrator suggests, ultimately accepted the position because he made it appear as if he was doing her a favor by offering her the opportunity. The children lived at his lonely country house, Bly, in Essex, where a little girl, Flora, was currently looked after by the housekeeper, Mrs. Grose, and to which the little boy, Miles, who, though very young, had been sent away to school, would soon be coming home for holidays. The death of their previous governess, which the gentleman notes "the great awkwardness," (James 5) had necessitated this arrangement. He made the governess promise that she would never contact or trouble him, instead dealing with all problems herself and getting money from his solicitor.

However, it is important to note that all information provided about the governess comes not from the narrator but solely from Douglas, a man whom the characters themselves note was clearly in love with the governess. It is hinted that he admired the lady and hence could have been in love with her. He was in love with the governess as a young man, when she was his sister's governess. It is determinately important, for this fact may bias his description of her. We hear from Douglas – rather than see for ourselves – that the governess was a young innocent woman whose employer took advantage of her inexperience. Because of Douglas' emotional connection to the governess, we cannot be wholly certain about her innocence nor about the gentleman's conniving. We must separate James' intension from that of Douglas, for whom the explanation of ghosts rather than madness renders the governess innocent, and remember that a biased character, rather than an objective author, frames these events.

Thus the story begins in the way that Henry James states as follows: "The story won't tell, ... not in a any literal vulgar way." (James 3) Many things are left unexplained in the prologue. There is no clear identity of the main narrator who opens the novel. Neither is the role of Douglas unfolded. Readers are forced to guess as to what kind of relationship exists between Douglas and the writer of the manuscript. The manuscript has been kept in a locked drawer for twenty years, since the death of its writer. The employer of the governess is also a mysterious character as neither his name nor his profession is mentioned. Also, his desire to stay away from Bly and not interfere in the affairs seems strange.

There is no omniscient or at least objective narrator. The very structure of this novel colors the whole story with great ambiguity.

II

The real beginning of the story is when the governess begins her narration, after the prologue. It is thus in the first person and readers are given a description of the place through her eyes.

The governess arrives at Bly, where she met a beautiful little girl, eight-year-old Flora, and the housekeeper Mrs. Grose. The boy, ten-year-old Miles, will return from school in a few days. Then the governess receives a letter from the headmaster of his school refusing to allow Miles to return to school after the summer holidays. Mrs. Grose assures her that Miles is too good to have done anything to deserve expulsion. The governess finds Miles to be just as beautiful and angelic as his sister. In spite of this letter, that forecasts a shadow coming over Bly, the governess was very happy for a time.

One evening, as the governess strolls around the grounds, she falls into her own thoughts about the children's uncle, coming upon her and smiling his approval at her for succeeding at her job. At just that moment, the governess looks up and sees a man in one of the towers of the house. She at first thinks it is the uncle but then realizes it is a stranger. The man stares at her until she turns away. The governess is worried after this but guesses that it must have been a traveler who trespassed in the tower for the view it provided.

Who is the man in the tower? Many possibilities have been argued, the most common being that he is either the ghost of Peter Quint, of whom we shall hear presently, or the governess' hallucination. If we choose to see the man in the tower as a ghost, then his appearance marks an important turning point in the story. At the very least, he is a stranger, and his appearance marks the introduction of an unknown and potentially threatening element into the idyllic life at Bly. The governess herself notes that "an unknown man in a lonely place is a permitted object of fear to a young woman privately bred." (James 16) Victorian morality leads her to perceive a particularly sexual threat.

The nature of this threat is especially relevant to those critics who have described *The Turn of the Screw* as an allegory depicting the struggle between Good and Evil. In this reading, Bly is a sort of Paradise. The weeks of happiness, innocence, and beauty with the children, which the governess describes, are a sort of prelapsarian Eden. The vision of the man in the tower represents the introduction of Evil into this world. This curate's daughter, who might well recognize the sexual implications of the snake in the story of Adam and Eve, similarly sees the threat to her own Paradise as particularly sexual in nature.

Freudian psychology has been used to analyze the governess-narrator, concluding that there was no evil in the children at all, and even suggesting that Miles and Flora were the narrator's victims rather than the ghosts. Edmund Wilson's 1934 essay "The Ambiguity of Henry James" has been most influential of all. Drawing heavily on Freudian theory, Wilson argues that the governess' sexual repression leads her to neurotically imagine and interpret the ghosts. This type of criticism tends to view the appearances of the ghosts as hysterical or even psychotic episodes on the part of the governess, thus denying any basis for viewing the book as a ghost story. However, James himself did not seem to intend this reading. The governess is, in every way, portrayed as a woman of remarkable sense, and James does his best to keep her as objective and rational as one could possibly expect to be when confronted with such horrific supernatural events. The evil that the governess claims to perceive was deliberately, delicately, and very emphatically there.

In a psychoanalytic reading of this text, the sexual connotations of the governess' encounter with the man in the tower are central. If the governess is a sexual hysteric, then this man is actually a hallucination caused by a "hysterical fit." Notably, the governess is imagining a handsome man, to whom she feels sexually attracted, when she first glimpses the figure in the tower. Indeed, she herself notes that it seems as if, at first, her fantasy of seeing her employer smiling approvingly at her has transformed into reality.

Thus, from the governess we are receiving her story and her interpretation of what she saw or imagined. Instead of directly discussing whether the ghost is real or not, we are to be drawn into the inner reality of the governess, that is, we are entirely in her mind.

III

The governess instead concentrates on the children, until one rainy afternoon when she goes into the dining room to look for her gloves. Outside the window, she is “aware of a person on the other side of the window and looking straight in.” (James 20)

On the spot there came to me the added shock of a certitude that it was not for me he had come there. He had come for someone else.

The flash of this knowledge—for it was knowledge in the midst of dread—produced in me the most extraordinary effects, started, as I stood there, a sudden vibration of duty and courage. (James 20–21)

And he had come for “someone else.” This is to say that at least this was her assumption. But the governess promptly appropriates it as “knowledge in the midst of dread.” It is “certitude.”

When she runs out of the house to confront him, he is gone. She describes the man – curly red hair, red whiskers, sharp eyes – to Mrs. Grose, and the housekeeper says that the man is Peter Quint, the uncle’s former valet. Quint, however, is dead.

The governess believes that Quint was not looking for her but for Miles and finds it odd that Miles has never mentioned him. Mrs. Grose tells her that Quint was “too free” (James 26) with Miles when he was at Bly and that the two spent a great deal of time together. The governess pledges that she will protect the children.

Mrs. Grose’s immediate recognition of Peter Quint from the governess’ description seems to offer affirmative evidence that the governess has seen a ghost. Thus, to those who wish to argue that the governess is mad, their reading now has run into a problem. The man’s ability to appear suddenly without barriers to his entrance or exit produces the possibility of misrecognition. This is the first time the governess considers the possibility of a ghost. So Mrs. Grose’s revelation that Quint is dead comes as a great shock to both the governess and readers. Here we readers are trapped in the point-of-view of the governess.

Then there follows the first vision of a woman, Miss Jessel, or a person the governess believes to be Miss Jessel. One afternoon, the governess sits with Flora as she plays by the lake. She becomes aware that someone else is present across the lake.

I became aware that, on the other side of the Sea of Azof, we had an interested spectator. The way this knowledge gathered in me was the strangest thing in the world—the strangest, that is, except the very much stranger in which it quickly merged itself. (James 29)

She had sat down with a piece of sewing on a stone and “I began to take in with certitude and yet without direct vision the presence, a good way off of a third person.” (James 29)

There was no ambiguity in anything; none whatever at least in the conviction I from one moment to another found myself forming as to what I should see straight before me and across the lake as a consequence of raising my eyes. (James 29)

Actually she does not raise her eyes, instead staring at her sewing and making up her mind what to do. Nevertheless, the governess has an abundance of “certitude.” She says that she knew “there was an alien

object in view” and she is convinced as follows:

That reminder had as little effect on my practical certitude as I conscious—still even without looking—of its having upon the character and attitude of our visitor. Nothing was more natural than that these things should be the other things they absolutely were not. (James 29–30)

She has already decided that it is an apparition. She rushes to tell Mrs. Grose what has happened. A woman appeared across the lake, and she is certain that Flora knew she was there but said nothing. The governess is convinced that the woman was Miss Jessel, the governess who died. Mrs. Grose tells her that Miss Jessel had an inappropriate relationship with Quint and then went away, though she does not know the exact circumstance of her death. The governess believes that the children will be lost to these ghosts in the future.

Anyway, the encounters with the ghosts happen in this way. And the horror slowly grows in Bly. James increasingly managed the point-of-view for maximum dramatic suspense. Thus, her obsession for protecting the children against the evil influences begins. However, the more she tries to ward off the evil, the less successful she is.

IV

When the governess forces the children to acknowledge their association with the ghosts, they feel threatened and lose their hold on life. Flora falls seriously ill and has to be taken away to her uncle. Then the climax comes. In her conversation with Miles, she suddenly notices Peter Quint standing outside the window. She grasps Miles and holds him with his back to the window. Then Quint appears again behind the window. The governess screams “No more!” at him and Miles asks if “she” is here—which the governess takes to mean Miss Jessel. She screams that it’s not but tells him “it’s at the window.” (James 88) Miles does not seem to see anything and finally asks if it’s “he”—“Peter Quint—you devil,” he says when she asks who he means, and screams “Where?” The governess says it no longer matters—she has Miles and Quint has lost him. Miles jerks around and she catches him as he falls and cries out. She holds him for minute and realizes that they are alone and Miles drops down dead. This novel then ends in mystery with the sentence: “We were alone with the quiet day, and his little heart, dispossessed, had stopped.” (James 88)

Virginia Woolf’s comment about this novel straightforwardly shows the quietness of this story despite the horrible incidents:

Perhaps it is the silence that first impresses us. Everything at Bly is so profoundly quiet. The twitter of birds at dawn, the far-away cries of children, faint footsteps in the distance stir it but leave it unbroken. It accumulates; it weights us down; it makes us strangely apprehensive of noise. At last the house and garden die out beneath it. (Woolf 66)

V

Miles’ death at the end of the novel has been met with many interpretations. The understanding that the governess simply frightened him to death is the most superficial and simplest one. There are various other suggestions. They range from shock at the forced recognition of Quint’s evil, smothering in the governess’ grasp, and exorcism of the spirit possessing him, to homosexual panic, the governess’ invasion of another human heart, and loss of erotic freedom.

Finally, James ended the novel with a question mark rather than a full stop because, he felt that, as long as the events are veiled, the imagination will run riot and depict all sorts of horrors, but as soon as the veil is lifted, all mystery disappears. To enhance the quality of suspense, James closes the novel without explaining the happenings or solving the mystery. The readers are made to guess and form their opinions. We are compelled by Henry James to think and conjecture instead of accepting his conclusion blindly. Each reader feels the story differently and understands it in accordance with these feelings.

Can it be that we are afraid of this story? We can find the exact answer to this question in Virginia Woolf's statement as follows:

We are afraid of something unnamed, of something, perhaps, in ourselves. In short, we turn on the light. If by its beams we examine the story in safety, note how masterly the telling is, how each sentence is stretched, each image filled, how the inner world gains from the robustness of the outer, how beauty and obscenity twined together worm their way to the depths—still we must own that remains unaccounted for. We must admit that Henry James has conquered. That courtly, worldly, sentimental old gentleman can still make us afraid of the dark. (Woolf 72)

The governess as a biased character, rather than an objective author, frames the incidents in the novel and we are forced to face the subjective world by following the governess' experience. We experience the incidents, the inner reality, through her eyes, because her depiction is subjective and her views are biased. John J. Enck concludes as follows:

James increasingly, it less vigorously than sometimes assumed, managed the point of view for maximum dramatic suspense. With a first-person narrator especially, . . . he went to great lengths to prevent the subject from fusing loosely with the object. (Enck 261)

Her point-of-view plays an important role in how the reader observes the ghosts. We have here thus in reality two stories, and a method that foreshadows the problems of the stream-of-consciousness writer. One is the area of fact, the other area of fancy. Facts and Fancies exist in the ambiguity. Not only because critics seem to be able to find as much evidence as possible to prove their arguments but also the reliability of the account to the governess colors the whole story with the great ambiguity. That is to say, the mixture of fact with fancy makes the subjectivity. Her absolute subjectivity makes the absence of the author in the work. And as a result, the absence of the author makes it possible to exclude the objectivity. This gives the work the perfect subjectivity and establishes the subjectivity in the work. Wayne C. Booth states that "we must never forget that though the author can to some extent choose his disguises, he can never choose to disappear." (Booth 20) This challenging novel can be said to be the exception, widening the possibilities of the novel to include the psychological fiction of the twentieth century. As Leon Edel concludes, "*The Turn of the Screw* foreshadows the psychological fiction of our century" (Edel 73), this novel doubtlessly cuts the way to the possibility for it.

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