A Twist of Two Turns: The Protagonist Who Almost Was

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The Turn of the Screw by Henry James has been adapted into several movies, inspired countless lesser works of horror, been debated by every school of criticism, and researched to no end. It is the story of an unlikely governess, who goes away to care for two young children in the countryside, completely on her own, and who begins to unravel under the pressure of having to manage not only the education of her charges but veiled supernatural threats against them. In its time the novella was sensational, scandalous, and chilling. As such, its place in the literary canon is secure. Even though it is part gothic tale and part female study, the fact that James wrote most of it in female first person sparks much feminist criticism today; likewise, gothic tales, which are studies in opposites, are rich in material for deconstructionists to draw from. The female protagonist is an ambiguous narrator reminiscent of past "madwomen in attics" due to her social position; she moves through her varying elevated stages of confusion and distress, considering the children as wholly innocent, beautiful beings and yet also as evil co-conspirators with the real (or imagined) ghosts that haunt Bly house.

Before even the mention of a ghost enters into her story, the governess herself is a mass of entanglements: she is a narrator moderated by another narrator as ultimately told by James. As elaborated by Priscilla L. Walton in "What Then on Earth Was I? Feminine Subjectivity and *The Turn of the Screw*," "Just as James 'eyed' and assessed the potential of the feminine tale that he later transformed into his literary text, so his unnamed narrator and Douglas 'eye' and assess the governess and her tale before they relate her narrative" (Walton 255). Walton further suggests that these actions serve to bury the female narrative twice, first by the author James and second by Douglas and his comrade within the tale itself (255). These frames within frames add

to the overall ambiguity of the story itself. The narrative perspective of the governess is therefore vague at times and often contradictory; as such, it is often possible to believe that her grasp of reality lacks the clarity of those around her.

James' governess is a faceless, nameless narrator, and as such it is never possible to gain any clarity about her psyche. In "The Remembered Future: Neuro-Cognitive Identity in Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*," Marilyn C. Wesley explains how James' use of plural narration, introduced in the prologue, further distances readers from the actual course of events. Spurred by someone else's ghost story, one narrator brings it up to the prologue's narrator, who encourages Douglas to share it with them all. However, it is a history of a story rather than a factual account. It was first oral, then written, and read aloud to the narrator and company. It was then transcribed yet again (Wesley 3). This prologue, Wesley furthers, "is important because it establishes the transmission of memory rather than the authenticity of origin as the real focus of the story, and it emphasizes this focus by elongating the episodic distance between source and rendition" (3). The fact that James never even bothers to give her a name is very telling. It never allows readers to establish a full connection with the protagonist. They never see her fully or develop full attachment to her because she is always just out of reach or behind a veil. She never describes what her old life was like or gives any true details of herself. Even when she says that the children ask a great many questions of her, the reader never gets to hear her responses. This distancing technique becomes trying as the plot unfolds and readers have no solid foundation of faith built upon her stability as a credible source. She narrates in a whimsical fashion that suggests she herself is not that concerned with complete events as they directly transpired, but rather how they left impressions on her and how she reacts to them in hindsight.

The moment she arrives at Bly house, she is smitten with it, as well as her charges; she is drawn to them as she is drawn to the house and its custodian Mrs. Grose, who will prove to be her confidante and ally. From the beginning the governess notices things that are off, but in her excitement she dismisses them: Mrs. Grose being so glad to meet her that she tries to hide it, strange sounds when she's alone like a baby crying or light footsteps (James 123). These occurrences happen before she sees any ghosts, meets the children, or fantasizes about any man, three events which many critics see as catalysts for her supposed unraveling. Although many critics argue that her sightings and trouble begin shortly after her fantasizing out loud about meeting a man and finding some romance, these signs or occurrences come before that shocking moment. The governess, in awe of her new situation and station, just dismisses these instances as flukes. She is also blinded by the unnatural beauty of the children, referring to the girl as "the most beautiful child I had ever seen" (123). As for the boy, when she later meets him, she is overcome: "Everything but a sort of passion and tenderness for him was swept away by his presence" (130).

She often uses words of divinity to describe the children's beauty, implying that it is beyond this world, angelic or godlike. Coupled with their model behavior, she finds it an easy task to take them into her heart as perfectly exquisite. As such, she finds spending time with them, preparing their lessons-all of caring for them-extremely rewarding and enjoyable: "It was all the romance of the nursery and the poetry of the schoolroom. I don't mean by this of course that we studied only fiction and verse; I mean that I can express no otherwise the sort of interest my companions inspired. How can I describe that except by saying that instead of growing deadly used to them-and it's a marvel for a governess… I made constant fresh discoveries"

(136). The ingenuity and supposed intelligence of these two children indeed keep the governess in quite a state of ecstasy and serve to endear them even more so to her.

This blissful state of being cannot, of course, proceed indefinitely. All around signs continue that things might not be what they seem. For the sake of maintaining this blissful state, the governess for the most part ignores troubling signs. For instance, the telling expulsion from Miles' school that initially troubles her suddenly becomes no big deal when she is faced with his perfect form, so she ignores this vital clue that indicates that things may not be what they seem. For weeks the governess goes happily on with her charges, playing matron of the house, all the while steeped in their unnatural beauty, their unnatural goodness, and in their unnatural intelligence. The governess describes her feelings being around these beings:

> And then there was consideration-and consideration was sweet. Oh it was a trap--not designed, but deep--to my imagination, to my delicacy, perhaps to my vanity; to whatever in me, was most excitable. The best way to picture it all was is to say that I was off my guard. They gave me so little trouble--they were of a gentleness so extraordinary. I used to speculate--but even this with a dim disconnectedness--as to how the rough future (for all futures are rough!) would handle them and might bruise them. (131)

According to Nicole Burkholder-Moscow and Wendy Carse in "Wondrous Material to Play on: Children as Sites of Gothic Liminality in *The Turn of the Screw*, *The Innocents*, and *The Others,*" gothic fiction is often concerned with the space between life and death, what is real and what is not, the sane and insane. Because *The Turn of the Screw* walks these lines, deconstructing it and dismantling its binary oppositions is a matter of picking any of its elements (Moscow and Carse 1). Prevalent in the story is the presence/absence binary opposition in terms of memory. The governess is recounting her story, so it all becomes an exercise in cognitive

recall. Wesley explains that "mediating the presence and absence represented through the first two opposing expressions of memory--the storehouse of physical actuality and the ghost story of fanciful lack, the hidden treasure or the blanks of Bly--is the most important figure of the novella: that of transformative narrative process"(Wesley 3). The children, as innocents, are victimized by the governess, and yet hidden in this innocence is a possibility of guilt and corruption. Because their role in the story is ambiguous, they are also evil and fraudulent. Previous and continued contact with Quint and Miss Jessel has made them this way (Moscow and Carse 1).

It would therefore seem that the extreme purity and beauty of the children, their innocence and angelic nature, are all to a degree too pure, too innocent, and too angelic. Because of this privileged center's clear fallacy, the emergence of the children as actually tainted, horrid guilty, corrupt, and demonic in nature bubbles to the surface. James alludes several times in his description of the children to their true intent. Consider James' language: "It would have been impossible to carry a bad name with a greater sweetness of innocence…" (James 130). When James uses "bad" here seemingly fluidly with the text, it is to signify something sinister in regard to the children, specifically Miles in this instance. Although he uses the word "innocence" to directly describe Miles, James is actually stating that he is bad: "To gaze into the depths of blue of the child's eyes and pronounce their loveliness a trick of premature cunning was to be guilty of a cynicism in preference to which I naturally preferred to abjure my judgment" (154). Also, when James speaks of Flora and cunning, it is no accident. While apparently privileging the children's innocence and beauty, James is always leading readers to their evil and unsightly side. This clever and subtle dismantling of the text has been set up by James himself.

The governess is beside herself with her need to prove these children either evil or good, and, with her sightings pushing her along, she spirals out of control. Her already diluted narrative voice becomes more disorganized and hard to follow. The moment in which the governess first encounters Quint is the turning point of her refusing to acknowledge the strange inklings she has been having. It brings her to a full confrontation of her fears. As she is walking through the grounds and wishing for "some one [to] appear there at the turn of a path… stand there before [her] and smile and approve," she is seized with the impression of no longer being alone (132). Someone is indeed there, and she quickly realizes that this someone is the antithesis of her wish or desire. Quint manifests from the strength of her strong desire for acknowledgment. Her overflow of emotion draws him to show himself, draws him to the moment, and sets them on the course for the events that follow. Their interaction is intense and sparks seem to fly as she fears, questions, and racks her brain for any information that might explain the nature of this unexpected visitor. Throughout this scene, a fierce eye contact is maintained. It is apparent that Quint has an interest in her that is strong enough not only to draw him out but also to keep him there, although it is unclear for how long: "We were too far apart to call to each other, but there was a moment at which, at shorter range, some challenge between us breaking the hush, would have been the right result of our straight mutual stare" (134).

The governess's fear of Quint in this encounter is felt immediately after she spots him; as a woman suddenly faced with the ordeal of being intensely scrutinized by an unknown male, she succumbs to a female right to be frightened at this dangerous situation in which she suddenly finds herself. James' opinion of women, doubtless a reflection of his contemporary society's views, comes through in the arrogantly worded lines: "[a]n unknown man in a lonely place is a permitted object of fear to a young woman privately bred..." (James 133). It is the most blatant

example of James coddling his protagonist, revealing in his language, his belief that she is supposed to be easily frightened and confused, and not necessarily that she is. This view directly contradicts much of the character he builds around her in the rest of the story, where she appears to be ready to confront anything that may come her way and even searches trouble out. On another encounter with Quint for example, the governess states, "I reserve this distinction for quite another circumstance: the circumstance that dread had absolutely quitted me and there was nothing in me unable to meet and measure him" (162). The strength James gives the governess in scenes like these is in sharp contrast to the strength he seems to want to take from her when he couples her with all females of his society who have been taught a certain measure of fear out of breeding.

The governess' slow and steady rampage after her first encounter with Quint is a horror unto itself. Even if she does in fact see these ghosts, and even if she is just trying to get to the bottom of things, her behavior from that point on, although certainly at times heroic, borders on detrimental and obsessive. She begins to probe and question in earnest. She seeks out at all turns any instance of clues or sightings of the two figures and proof that they have corrupted her charges. This behavior causes Robert Weisbuch, in "James and the American Sacred" to question, "Is the governess the only ghoul at Bly?"(2). Weisbuch states further, "Typically in James a bookish notion of evil is replaced by a more intricate still hideous substitute: a swamping of personal boundaries by a blob-like selfhood" (2). For Weisbuch it is the feverish way in which the governess goes about seeking her answers that is truly an embodiment of evil, more so than anything she could fear or suspect (2). The fact that she is increasingly willing to push her way past the children's comfort zone shows her desperation in this quest for a connection between what she's been seeing and these children she professes to hold so dear.

Consider a scene with her and Miles in which she is gently interrogating him about his old school after finding him awake in bed. This is hardly the type of conversation a governess would have with one of her charges after finding him awake and restless, plagued with thoughts of his little life and family situation. She herself even admits, "It was extraordinary how my absolute conviction of an influence that I dared but half-phrase-made him, in spite of the faint breath of his inward trouble, appear as accessible as an older person, forced me to treat him as an intelligent equal" (188). This instance is just one of the many occasions in which the governess begins to make excuses for her overtly probing behavior in regard to the children whom she has formerly proclaimed to be willing to handle only with the gentlest of care. Even in this scene when his boyishness breaks through what she sees older qualities in him, it only makes her want to break him further; it is as if she must get into the core of him. She seeks answers in an almost vicious way out of these little beings when they are most vulnerable.

During the day, when they are having lessons, the governess begins to suspect that the children, who she already thinks are in contact with Quint and Jessel, are meeting in secret with the ghosts. After a period of no contact or encounters with either ghost, the governess is sure that the children have been in contact and that their eyes are really open while her eyes have been sealed: "How can I retrace to-day the strange steps of my obsession? There were times of our being together when I would have been ready to swear that, literally, in my presence, but with my direct sense of it closed, they had visitors who were known and welcome" (175). Whether this surety is born of desperation for proof when there is a long period of inactivity for her or of her true inkling that something is going on is unclear. Nevertheless, what is clear is that the governess herself in hindsight is aware of her unhealthy fascination with these topics. She has an inability to let it rest. From there, she goes into her schizophrenic paranoia phase, suspecting the

children as conspirators with the ghosts one moment while shielding them the next. Is she going crazy because of the ghosts? Or was she crazy already and made the ghosts up? From her perspective she is not only sane, but by all accounts the children knew of the ghosts and her quandary: "It was not, I am as sure today as I was then, my infernal imagination: it was absolutely traceable that they were aware of my predicament and that his strange relation made, in a manner, for a long time, the air in which we moved" (173).

All these events culminate in several spasmodic breakdowns for the governess who cannot help but ask herself on several occasions if in fact the children are just children. Of course, the ramifications from that question are more monstrous than what she has been chasing in the whole story. Weisbuch explains:

> Just so, whenever the Governess has the frightening and potentially redemptive thought that perhaps the children are innocent--and if they were, "What on earth was I?"(87)—up pops a goblin. This particular freedom of thought, which dooms the character to solipsism, is unable in these cases to allow for self correction. And thus freedom in these tales is indeed a prison and a terror, leading the protagonists to impose meaning on a recalcitrant world that finally dissolves, like the people in it, into the bloated self. (5)

The governess never breaks herself out of her mental prison. The forcible severing of her proposed reality happens only as a result of Miles' death, which is also the break or severing of connection between the reader and the story.

The many chances for personal redemption that the governess has dismissed are varied but documented. She has many realizations within the narrative, including this quite telling exchange between her and Mrs. Grove:

"He [the children's uncle] ought to *be* here--he ought to help." I quickly rose and I think I must have shown her a queerer face than ever yet. "You see me asking him for a visit?" No, with her eyes on my face she evidently couldn't. Instead of it even--as a woman reads another--she could see what I myself saw: his derision, his amusement, his contempt for the breakdown of my resignation at being left alone and for the fine machinery I had set in motion to attract his attention to my slighted charms. She didn't know--no one knew--how proud I had been to serve him and to stick to his terms; yet she none the less took the measure, I think, of the warning I now gave her. "If you should so lose your head as to appeal to him for me…"

She was really frightened. "Yes, Miss?"

"I would leave on the spot, both him and you."(James 172-173).

The governess goes through many emotions in this dialogue with Mrs. Grose. She accepts that the joyful self reliance that she had upon first entering Bly might be coming to an end. She may also be realizing that her steps may have faltered more times than she realized. As such, the idea of this man—her employer in Harley Street on whom she has a crush—who had such "faith" in her actually seeing her in this soiled and less than savory light is too much for her to bear. She knows instantly that she would rather run away from Bly without another word to any of them than face her employer and see disappointment or disapproval in his face. She still has some fight in her, some desperation to try to right any wrongs she may have done and still prove herself capable of the shining talent she first thought she exhibited upon her arrival. James is a cunning author to play the governess this way because she will not get the chance, and it is still very much a "succession of flights and drops" (122).

From the moment she meets her employer, to her arrival at Bly; from her first meeting of the children to her first ghostly encounter, the governess is faced with a choice. Will she accept

this hazy job offering or realize that it has more possibility for a dodgy outcome than for success? Will she go back on her word and inform the uncle of his nephew's expulsion? Will the governess see the children as wholly innocent bystanders in spite of circumstantial evidence that is building up in her mind to convince her otherwise? Will she pursue her own means to the detriment of her charges or do what is best for those who have been placed in her care? The governess's choices are documented as she advances into territories unknown to her: a position that allows her to perform above her station as the head of a household, as an instructor for a boy who is suddenly thrown out of school, and as an investigator of things only she has stridently admitted to seeing. James' portrayal of the governess, vague, without a name, falsely portrayed as a hero and yet not quite a villain, seems at once to be both an indictment of the tenuous sanity of women and the frailty of human memory. Alternatively, maybe it is an indictment of his society, at a time when women were unable to be truly empowered as central characters.

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