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# Supernaturalism in Henry James' the Turn Of the Screw

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## **Abstract**

Henry James can be clubbed among those novelists who contributed a great deal to the development of modern fiction. He provided a new depth and gravity to English fiction. Among the major thematic concerns morality is the key note of his fictional works. *The Turn of the Screw* is one of the best work by James in which he has dealt with supernaturalism effectively. This novel can be hailed as one the successful novels written by him in which he has incorporated both supernaturalism and morality in a harmonious manner.

## **Paper**

Henry James, a great literary artist, is the most psychological of the novelists. In him, the intellectual faculty and the discriminating mind lived harmoniously with the creative

imagination. His works mirror the insistence on the fundamental truths of human natures not cheerful colouring to the readers. James's *The Turn of the Screw* was serialized in *Collier's* from January to April 1898. Nearly a century after its composition the tale is still generally agreed to be the greatest tale of terror written in English. Like Keats' *The Grecian Urn*, this tale raises more questions than it answers. There are two crucial features of the story. One is that it is great. Virtually no one has denied the power of *The Turn of the Screw* to grip, hold and move its readers. The other is that it evades interpretation. There is mystery at the centre of the tale.

Kenneth B. Murdock comments:

*"The Turn of the Screw is probably the best, and certainly the most celebrated of James's ghostly*

*fictions. The story was without doubt carefully contrived by a master of fictional technique, quite conscious of the devices he used; but its real quality came from the spell the theme upon him, its appeal to his sharp sense of the pervasive reality of evil."*

Many interpretations have been placed on *The Turn of the Screw*, indeed it is its very ambiguity which is a major source of its strength. Critical discussion of *The Turn of the Screw* has moved through many phases since 1898. At first, the tale was read as a literal ghost story. Then with the advent of psychoanalysis, many critics thought that they could discover and articulate "something" more in it. Then began a lively debate over whether the ghosts that appear in the tale were real or hallucinations of the governess.

In 1934, reading of *The Turn of the Screw* changed radically when Edmund Wilson published "The Ambiguity of Henry James". Wilson argues that the governess is disturbed, and this disturbance is of a sexual nature. The ghosts are hallucinations – the product of

being sexually repressed. She has fallen in love with the master and cannot act on it. Her whole story is a justification for why she did what she did at Bly. Though Wilson acknowledged that the tale could be read either as a ghost story or as the story of the governess's hallucinations, he insisted that the latter was James's intended meaning. Are the children really haunted by evil ghosts or are they victims of a neurotic governess who appropriates them to her own psychodrama? This question has remained at the centre of critical discussion of the tale since 1934. Psychoanalytic interpretations describe the governess as an unconscious murderess. Its central provocation is Miles's death.

The tale has two main parts: a short prologue by an unnamed narrator and an autobiographical narrative by an unnamed governess. The prologue describes events that place fifty years after the governess narrates. Douglas has a manuscript in which a governess describes the apparition of ghosts to a poor country parson. She has led a sheltered life. She accepts the

position of governess to a pair of two orphans, ten year old Miles and eight year old Flora. Their uncle and guardian, Douglas, places upon her the unusual condition that she handles all matters involving the children herself without bothering him. Harold C. Goddard comments:

*"She would never have accepted the place if it had not been for her new born passion : she could not bring herself to disappoint him when he seemed to beg compliance of her as*

*a*

*favour – to say nothing of severing her*

*only link with the man who had so powerfully attracted her."*

She wants to please the master but the problem is that she cannot talk to him, she has no outlet for her feelings for him. She is so young and inexperienced that she is unable to deal with the passion consciously, so she represses it hiding it from her consciousness. Her unconscious makes Peter Quint, the uncle's deceased valet and Miss Jessel, the former governess, into actors of its desires. Just as she projects her unconscious guilt upon the ghosts, she projects her innocence upon the

children. The external events, she "witness" are representations of internal events, her own psychological struggle to control sexual desire and achieve mental wholeness.

The governess begins her narrative in June, during the long English twilights, and ends it in the darkness of November, when the trees are stark and bare and Bly is alighted. During these months, she encounters Miss Jessel and Peter Quint only to learn that both the lovers are dead. She decides promptly that the ghosts have come to possess the children. She supposes that the children too are interested in communication with these ghosts. She sees herself as protecting the children from evil spirits. The children, however, do not see the phantoms and their actions suggest bewilderment at the governess's behaviour towards them. In June when she meets Flora, she believes she sees the perfection of childhood. But by the early autumn she is convinced that the children are possessed by evil spirits. This shift in the governess's point of view is crucial for it leads to

confrontations with the children that result in Flora's illness and Miles's death.

The governess becomes the victim of insomnia. The very first night she fancies that she hears a light footstep outside her door and in the far distance the cry of a child. She deceives herself under the spell of her comparative success when she overlooks for a time the consequences of the way she has dealt with her first crisis, the letter announcing Miles's expulsion from school. She was unwilling to expose Miles to the unpleasantness of an enquiry and thereby break the delicious spell under which they lived together. The governess rather than laws governing ghosts determine the pattern of the appearances of ghosts. Each is preceded by a phase of self praise that includes a revealing wish. In June, caught up in the spell of her pleasant work she uses "her hour" to imagine a story in which during her walk she could meet the uncle, who would stand before her "and smile and approve". She is in this fantasy when she sees Quint and thinks at first that he is the master.

In the days before Jessel's first appearance the governess sees herself as the heroine who will be a shield between children and ghosts to save the youngsters absolutely. Harold C. Goddard comments:

*When a young person, especially a young woman, falls in love and circumstances forbid the normal growth and confession of the passion, the emotion, dammed up, overflows in a physical experience, a day dream, or interval drama which the mind creates in lieu of thwarted realisation in the objective world. In romantic natures this takes form of imagined deeds of extra ordinary heroism or self sacrifice done in behalf of the beloved object."*

*As the summer advances the children grow restless under the governess's protective and suspicious eyes. She watches them constantly and sees in their every innocent act conformation of her hypothesis Leon Edel points out:*

*"The governess of The Turn of the Screw is brave and splendid and*

*courageous  
and has great authority; but  
she is obsessed and haunted,  
sexually repressed, neurotic - in  
short stark staring mad"*

For the governess, the conflict originates in a letter addressed to the uncle but read by her, which announces Miles's expulsion from school. Miles has been expelled but the governess has not investigated the reasons for his expulsion and expects him to volunteer the information. She asks him to confide in her but he wants only to be left alone. The governess accuses Flora of seeking an encounter with the wraith of Miss Jessel.

Mrs. Grose rescues the child for this horrible scene. Psychoanalytic readers have argued that the children are disturbed by her odd behaviour, especially the intensity of the attention she gives to them. The children also study her as avidly as she studies them. Miles has gone so far as to steal the letter written by the governess addressed to Douglas only to learn what is on her mind. In the last tense final moments of her story, the governess forces Miles to confess

why he was expelled from the school and reveal his links with Peter Quint.

*"I seemed to myself for the instant  
to  
have mastered it, to see it all...He'll  
confess. If he confess, he's saved."*

The governess suffered from spiritual pride - "to know all". The boy confesses that he said "things" to the school fellows he liked. They repeated these to the masters and who repeated them to the headmaster. The headmaster read in these "things" a secret that was serious enough to cause him to expel. James is silent on the interpretation of the word. We can guess that he either cursed or swore or used blasphemy or obscene words. Her persistent questioning about his links with Peter Quint leaves Miles frightened and bewildered. At the end of the tale a horrifying event takes place – the death of Miles. The governess describes the event

*"We were alone with the quiet day,  
and his little heart dispossessed,  
had stopped."*

Her interpretation of this event is that she struggles with a demon over a human soul and is victorious; unfortunately the soul's earthly love is sacrificed in the battle.

Upon first reading the governess seems to be merely a stage prop used by James as a part of the machinery for telling a thrilling tale of terror. But as we come to the end of the tale, we realise we were not reading merely a thrilling tale of terror. A child has been killed, one presented as charming, talented and lovable. A governess who was professes deep love for that child was the only human agent present when he died. Leon Eel comments:

*“By not producing the usual stock in trade of ghost stories, his goal had been to make the reader “think evil”, make him think it for himself and you are released from weak specifications.”*

Miles died because he was unable to bear the persistent questioning of the governess and her aggressive behaviour.

There is a gap of fifty years between the actual events and the narration of those events by the governess.

She has an interpretation of these events to offer when she has seen it whole and found pattern of order. She frankly confesses the faults and errors as she sees them eq. Herself deception over the problem of Miles's school. One of her motives in telling her story is to tell the truth. She wants an objective authoritative portrait of herself, not necessarily as she sees herself from within but as really is, as a whole person. James presents in *The Turn of the Screw* his favourite subject – psychoanalytic study of a character, here a governess. Her desire to get the love of the master is so possessive that it leads her in fantasies and hallucinations. Her aggressive behaviour, her spiritual pride – “to know all” results in the death of Miles. It would not be wrong to say that it is she who is responsible for the death of Miles. The innocent children become victim of the governess's strange behaviour.



## **References**

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- 2) Harold C. Goddard, Critics on Henry James, ed. by J. Don Van (University of Cambridge: London, 1967) p.95
- 3) *Ibid. p98*